

David Malouf and *Languages for Landscape: An Interview*

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DAVID MALOUF has written eight books of fiction, nine books of poetry, a play, and three libretti. At the centre of this broad corpus of writing are the image of the journey and the figure of exile, both in substantive and metaphorical modes. *Johnno* (1975), Malouf's first novel, focusses on the experience of self-imposed exile, a sort of Cavafian tale of escape from and repetition of the past that persists within everyday practices. This oscillation between departure and return resonates through the series of images that establish a relationship between the body, memories, maps, lines, and scars. In one passage, the protagonist, Johnno, tells the narrator, Dante, a fellow writer, that if after every six years the body replaces all the tissue then he has expelled Australia from his own body, he has excreted every archipelago and every little island. The body seemingly has been shed by exile; it constantly changes, yet scars and features are reproduced. The map of Australia has lines that trace the rivers rarely, if ever, filled. And at the end of the novel, one of these rivers raises itself to claim and drown Johnno.

An Imaginary Life (1978), Malouf's most acclaimed novel, is based on the banishment of Ovid from Rome to an austere frontier village. The sting in the punishment is not just the exclusion from home but also the necessity to define a different relationship to language. Ovid's crime is, after all, in his exorbitant and rather decadent use of language. Being sent to this remote outpost of the Roman world removes him from his context, thereby denying him an audience, but it also sentences him to a place where language is a sort of scarce commodity. Denied the opportunity to perform his sophistry and confined to

a level of subsistence communication, his tongue has been cut, metaphorically speaking. Ovid's response to this banishment is an ecstatic fusion with the landscape, which is mediated by a wild boy/guide who leads him further into nature. Like that of all exiles, Ovid's identity is re-ordered as much by the initial severance as it is by the projection of an imaginary salvation.

The publication of Malouf's latest novel, *Remembering Babylon* (1993) presented the occasion for this conversation at the Institute of Contemporary Art, London, England, in June 1993. *Remembering Babylon* is about the impact of the strange and of the categories and practices of which we try to make sense even though we are only partly familiar with them. It is a book about a young boy called Gemmy, who grows up as a streetchild in London, finds himself aboard a ship bound for Australia, and is cast overboard and rescued by an Aboriginal community. Eventually, he "returns" to a frontier white settlement in Northern Queensland; it is such a remote community that "even the Syrian pedlar did not trouble to come so far" (5). Through this encounter between Gemmy and the settlers Malouf explores the fears and hopes that crystallize around a stranger. *Remembering Babylon* is about the relationship between historical consciousness and the perception of space. It is about the stutters between language and silence. It is about the jump-cuts between possession and dispossession. These burning themes are dramatically staged by the historical words with which Gemmy greets the white settlers: "Do not shoot. . . . I am a B-b-british object" (3).

Could you describe the role of landscape in your fiction?

One of the things that goes back to something that I was interested in in *An Imaginary Life* is the idea of landscape itself. When we see landscapes we mostly see landscapes that have been made over a very long period of time. Landscapes have been shaped either to our practical uses or they've been shaped to our recreational uses. Landscapes reflect back and tell us how human we are and how powerful we are because we have made them.

When those early European settlers came to confront the Australian landscape, it wasn't the hostility of extreme drought and rain that was most frightening to them, rather it was the

sense that the landscape reflected nothing back of their own humanity. They would look at it and it would remain something quite separate. It had not been shaped by them and so they could not see their humanity in it. That in itself is a very frightening thing, to be faced with an entirely unmade landscape when the very notion we have of landscape is of something made.

What the settlers in this book can't see is that the continent had already been completely humanized by the people who lived there. The indigenous peoples had created a culture which read that landscape and filled it with meanings, but we couldn't see the meanings so what we saw was a landscape that was completely meaningless and we saw people living there who were incapable of placing meaning on the landscape. We have changed our idea of that now; we understand that Australia already had a culture; it didn't need us to come along to bring human culture; it already had one, but it was one we couldn't recognize.

In *Remembering Babylon*, I wanted to face the conflict between the white settlers and the black communities from the perspective of somebody who has gone into that black world, who has entered that landscape, has been reborn into that landscape, and reshaped by it. My story begins with the return of this person to the white community and their perception that he has been changed in some kind of way. He represents a kind of pioneer spirit of what that landscape and that continent might do to you if you really and completely committed yourself to it. So he is a figure that they know as white but they can't smell him as white and they can't even feel him as white, and that element of undecidability throws up to them the dubious quality of their own whiteness. When it is said in the book, "what if you can lose it?" [40] what is meant is not losing the language, for what he seems to have lost is his Europeaness, his whiteness. This is what they are afraid of.

This is the challenge of Australia, for if you stay there long enough your very nature as a migrant, your very consciousness, might in the end be changed. Australians can't believe that the European notions of culture are either essential or universal because they have to live side by side with people who do it in a completely different way. And you know, once you've admitted

that's a human way and not a primitive way, then you have to admit the way you do things is one way but not the only way. That qualifies the wholeheartedness with which we can ever be doing, acting, as Western people. And you know, we've been changed by that.

Having accepted, in principle at least, that the continent wasn't simply a tabula rasa that simply awaited for the Europeans to inscribe meaning onto it, the task that lies before us is to shift from a recognition to an engagement with the prior forms of meaning and understanding. Your novel illustrates this challenge as it evokes the potential for a dynamic, or, as you put it, an electric interconnection between land, myth, and survival (68). Gemmy is a witness to this potential, the others hover in ambivalence.

If you don't see the world you're moving through as being full of meaning, then you make no connection with that land. Yet, if you are moving through a place that is absolutely alive with meaning, and that meaning may begin with your knowledge of its plants and animals, which includes a sacred sense of what those things mean in terms larger than just nature, then at every point your body and your consciousness are in friction with it and that's what that creates: the kind of light that Gemmy feels around himself. Whereas the other whites are, like the clergyman Mr. Frazer, going through it blind. When Mr. Frazer and Gemmy go out botanizing, Gemmy deliberately illuminates some parts of that landscape and out of a kind of a religious sense of what is proper keeps other parts of it dark. When Gemmy moves through the landscape, something happens; Mr. Frazer moves through it and nothing happens. There is no interconnection yet, but there may be, and gradually what that man is doing is building up some kind of knowledge that will make those interconnections possible.

The botanizing scenes can be contrasted with another scene where the relationship to place is saturated with meaning. On one occasion the dread of the infinite void is confronted within the closed space of a room. Here the opposition between nature and culture, or the foreign and the familiar, is marked in terms of the difference between shelter and home.

This book is not about a purely Australian experience. It is about an experience of landscape or a relationship to the world that is clearer in a place like Australia, or in these people's situations, because all the other kinds of explanations and comforts are taken away from them. This absence makes them ask the question: what is man's place in the world? Whereas, if you live in a little village in England or Ireland or Scotland, where you know the name of every field, where every part of the landscape has events and a story related to it, where you know every steeple on the horizon, where the churchyard has all your forebears in it going back a thousand years, then you can comfortably tell yourself that you absolutely belong in that landscape and there is no problem, there is no metaphysical problem. Take the same people out and put them somewhere where all of those things are gone, and then, yes, they are in a kind of void. This opens up the question of what it is we need as humans to place ourselves in the world and how difficult it is to achieve that.

These people really are real pioneers, not just of another country, but pioneers of the human state. These people are not adventurers; they have gone there because they were poor and uneducated—because they had no power at home. But they are the people who have to go out and confront that metaphysical question. I am interested in their struggle.

In relationship to the construction of in-between spaces the role played by Mrs. Hutchence is particularly fascinating. She is a woman who has considerable cultural and economic capital and yet she shows little regard for the conventions that would be associated with her position. She somehow captures another sort of ambivalence, another sort of outsider-ness, not in the sense that she's been rejected or that she is rejecting anyone, for somehow she has by-passed the norms of sociability and thereby lives outside the immediate boundary of the community. It is also worth noting that when the community felt most threatened by Gemmy, it is the women who decided to send him to her house, as if it were safe-house for all.

Well, I see her as a person who has the capacity for making a kind of social place that all sorts of people who can't speak elsewhere in the novel or make contact elsewhere in the novel can come to. Her house becomes a kind of meeting place. And the people who

go there see things about other people that they wouldn't see elsewhere and see things about themselves that they wouldn't see elsewhere. So I wanted that as a sort of an alternative kind of social world to the community, and she does that it seems to me in a very easy kind of way by not imposing it on anybody at all, but just it being there. She creates an atmosphere of acceptance, and that is a sort of magic quality.

Is the novel's perspectival structure particularly conducive to the representation of experiences which are riven with ambivalence and an understanding of place that is surrounded by foreignness?

If you have a little society as this is, it's a little settlement of 15 families—all in the same place, all facing the same dangers, trying to make the land produce food—then they are drawn together into something that looks like a community. But all communities are extremely fragile. I wanted to introduce into such a community a kind of catalyst.

Gemmy is this catalyst because they see him as a reflection of what they fear. They are afraid, for example, that he might be in contact with the blacks, and that he may be a kind of spy, an infiltrator that they've allowed into the community. Other people don't fear that, but they find him a very disturbing presence anyway because of what he tells them about the shakiness of their own securities, their very small power, which resides in their whiteness and their Europeanness. Then there are other people like the young schoolmaster who find him repulsive at first and then begin to admire his capacity to endure. The clergyman who knows that Gemmy, simply because he has lived with the Aborigines for a long time, has acquired this extraordinary knowledge of the land, and therefore sees him as somebody who has made the crossing to a completely different culture, and in that sense he has done something that it might take the rest of them generations to do. But there are other people there, like the children, who see him as a messenger of something else. They still believe that the world is about to reveal something miraculous to them although they don't know what that might be. It takes these two characters, Lachlan and Janet, who we follow throughout the whole of their lives, to find out what that is.

So here you have a little society in which people are different, stand in different positions in the world, and see things differently. I deliberately didn't want a single point of view, because that is the opposite of what the truth of this situation would be. You could only get to the truth of the situation by seeing it from a lot of different and contradictory points of view that are in some ways in conflict.

Gemmy's status does oscillate between the internal stranger and the external enemy. In one passage, the narrator lucidly identifies the difficulty that one of the characters is experiencing: "Gemmy, just by being there, opened a gate on to things, things Barney couldn't specify" (99). This shifting perception of his true identity is particularly evident in his relationship with Lachlan. In what ways does this extend a persistent theme in your writing: the bonding between male characters?

I would have thought that that was not quite true here. Gemmy is very alert to the fact that because Lachlan is a male he sees the world of action as his sphere. He makes use of Gemmy when it suits him, and then drops Gemmy when it appears to be of any kind of danger to him. Gemmy sees very clearly that Lachlan is not to be trusted. Gemmy also notices that Lachlan is always watching to see what the other people in the settlement think about him. Lachlan has a very weak sense of himself and turns to virtues that are already reinforced by that community. While Lachlan always needs a witness to his own being, Janet needs no witness to her being. Janet is the person with which Gemmy shares an immediate relationship, the person who sees him as he really is. Janet has the ability of looking right into him, and Gemmy recognizes that she shares the faculty that his world is based on.

By the end of the novel, have not Lachlan and Janet found a similar reconciliation with Gemmy?

What Lachlan is trying to reconcile is some kind of guilt in which he feels he has betrayed Gemmy and that is perfectly true. Janet has never betrayed Gemmy. At the very end of the novel, she offers a word that Lachlan could never say to himself, for when she says to him "we loved Gemmy," he is able to feel that weight of

guilt fall away [194]. "Love" is a word that belongs to her vocabulary and not to his. I leave this word till the end of the novel because I mean it to come as a kind of shock.

"Love" is a word I hardly ever use because it covers too many kinds of feelings, and I'm interested in charting those feelings which are very complex. "Love" is not a very good word to describe all the kinds of affection that exist between people. It does turn up again and it's meant to be the shocking four-letter word in the letter that Johnno sent to Dante after his death. People often focus on the word "fuck," but the word "love" is a much more shocking word. It is a word that calls into question what kind of words we have for those feelings. This brings us to the broader question of language.

Yes, the question of language is often represented in your work through the boundary situation. For the boundary both separates and unites distinct fields. In this case, the frontier settlement is a place where the act of translation is most acute. One of the interesting inversions that happened in the novel is the fact that those whom we traditionally associate with the power of language aren't necessarily the ones who actually have it. Namely, the clergyman and the teacher are in a position where their guardianship of knowledge is limited; they are seen, at best as the scribes to Gemmy's knowledge. The two real determining moments in the novel are the first encounter between Gemmy and Lachlan and when the roustabout Andy sees a group of Aborigines approaching and talking to Gemmy. Now these two moments are framed as encounters with a potential threat. Lachlan and Andy both seize upon the community's fear of the Other and present themselves as witnesses and interpreters of the unknown. In this situation, where authority cannot be grounded on historical experience, the power of language is given to those who can either translate the signs of the unknown or construct narratives to explain the possibility of danger.

The two situations you point to are quite interesting ones because the stories reveal more about the reporter's concern for power than the truth they purport to tell. The stories they have to tell are false stories.

One of the things I am interested in is the different forms of language. It's not just the forms of actual speech: dialect language, the five or seven Aboriginal languages that Gemmy

speaks, which we never hear. But there is another kind of language which is the one I'm more interested in, and that is the language of gesture or the language of silence that doesn't require words. Often in my books, and I suppose especially in this one, when most is happening nothing is actually being said, or not in words anyway. There are the moments in this novel in which characters break through to some kind of understanding. As a writer I have to find words to articulate this kind of sense, this reaching for understanding which doesn't come mediated through language except through the language that the writer finds for them. For example, there is the father of the children who thinks of himself as a very conventional person and whose safety, as far as he is concerned, is the fact that he is a conventional person. One of the things that happens to him progressively through the novel is that because he finds himself, at first unwillingly, as the protector of Gemmy, he finds that some of the strangeness that people see in Gemmy has rubbed off on him. He doesn't like the idea that these people who have always been his mates now see him as odd in some kind of way. But at the moment when he is finally forced to recognize that oddness, what he discovers is a capacity in himself to be alone, to actually see things and open himself up to things, including landscape, in a way that he could never have opened himself up to while he was hiding in the world of the sociable.

The shift in the father's character from a stoic member to a critical observer has a price: he can no longer trust his own community; his relations with others are poisoned with suspicion and an increasing awareness of hypocrisy. Given the violent history of ethnocide and dispossession of the Aborigines, how do you imagine a dialogue that will reconcile the past? The Aboriginal perspective of this encounter is relatively unrepresented. For instance, you privilege Gemmy's re-entry into the English-speaking world rather than his introduction into the Aboriginal world. Is there any way that you could strike a balance between these worlds?

I did not want to deal directly in the novel with the predicament of indigenous people, partly because I don't have the knowledge to do that, and I don't think anyone has the knowledge to do that, except those people themselves who perhaps don't have the

voice or the words to do it. We can learn a certain amount from anthropology and from other things, but that still doesn't seem to be the authentic thing. I wanted to tell the story of an in-between character who would have been in contact with that culture and would be able to stand for that but wouldn't be speaking directly for it. His silence in the novel is their silence. He stands as an emblematic figure.

Are you suggesting that in the absence of satisfactory lines of communication we have to re-think the whole basis of communication?

Yes, for example, *Harland's Half Acre* [1984] is a book about how you actually possess things, and how you possess that land. In the end, the artist in this novel realizes that he can possess the land not just by becoming it, but by taking it all into his imagination, by making it continuous with his consciousness. But in some ways, that is the way in which Aborigines possess that land. I mean, they don't own anything, what they do is understand it. The key word in that novel is the word "possession."

In some of the semi-autobiographical essays in your book 12 Edmondstone Street [1985], you have also tackled the relationship between language and dispossession, and there is also the short story in your collection Antipodes [1985] which is called "The Only Speaker of His Tongue," which traces the enormity of the destruction of Aboriginal culture through the reflection of one man who has been left alone, mute in a language which no one speaks. There is a very moving passage in this story which highlights the centrality of language in connecting everything, from the visceral to the cosmological: "When I think of my tongue being no longer alive in the mouths of men a chill goes over me that is deeper than my own death, since it is the gathered death of all my kind. . . . O the holy dread of it! Of having under your tongue the first and last words of all those generations down there in your blood, down there in the earth, for whom these syllables were the magic once for calling the whole of creation to come striding, swaying, singing towards them" (70).

What is lost is not just the fact that he is mute; what is lost also is the whole world as it existed in that language. The world exists in all the names in all the languages that we give it. That particular world in that language with those particular names is in his head

and nowhere else, and when he's gone it will disappear forever. We know the world by naming it. We know the world through the language we name it. The Aborigines, who spoke over 300 different sets of language, gave different names for things and lay them down over the same pieces of landscape. Each of those languages represents a different world. Language is the shape of the world as we know it.

In this book, Gemmy, as a streetchild in London, had the vocabulary in English that he needed for dealing with the daily world as he knows it. It was a limited vocabulary. Yet when the objects of that world disappear the words for them disappear, and when the words and the objects disappear he has no longer any memory. His whole experiences disappear with the loss of language. When he comes back into an English-speaking world, the language begins to come back, the objects of the world he has lost and the emotions and the actions that were associated with those objects come back painfully with the words. His retrieval of his past has to do with his retrieval, by piecemeal, of the language. But, you know, this is a person who now has in his head five, six, or seven Aboriginal languages so that he knows when he sees a plant or something like that, that this exists in seven different worlds in his head, and he has to know, he has to ask himself which of those worlds he's going to let Mr. Frazer glimpse by giving him the name of the plant.

If I could extrapolate a little bit from the scene that you have just described and if we could take Fellini's rather careless statement on the ambiguous relationship between creativity and experience, which said "everything and nothing that I do is autobiographical," could we draw any affinities between the multiple modes of naming and the forgetting that occur within this novel and your own history where there has also been a break with the Arabic past of your forebears?

Well there might be affinities, but I don't feel them strongly. I grew up in a household where nothing but English was spoken, and there was no reason why any other language should be spoken because my father spoke English and, as far as I understand, no other language. Since he was the eldest son and since his mother spoke very little English, I assume that he understood

Arabic, but I never heard him speak a word of it or give any indication that he understood it. That was part of the painful process of turning himself into the complete Australian, so that I didn't have to do it. He did everything that an Australian should do; he was a super-Australian.

I don't feel very strongly the break of language except that I would have noticed perhaps as a small child something that you might not otherwise notice. My grandmother used different words for some common objects from the ones I used, which at least introduced me to the fact that the word I had for the object and the object itself were not absolutely related. That I suppose is a big experience.

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