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Lords of Peace, Lords of War: the Master and the Terrorist in *Child's Play* by David Malouf

Abstract I: Questo saggio intende dimostrare come il terrorista incarni un paradigma dominatore, che esalta e giustifica il ricorso alla violenza, mentre la capacità del Maestro di creare attraverso la scrittura è in sintonia con il paradigma di *partnership*. La narrazione in prima persona del terrorista, paranoica, lucida e arida, e la descrizione dei suoi preparativi meticolosi (quasi religiosi) dell'omicidio vengono giustapposte alla creatività intensamente poetica del Maestro, che dà voce alla bellezza e alla poesia della vita. Questo dialogo fra due modi diversi di percepire e filtrare la realtà si costruisce intorno alla metafora dei bambini che giocano. In una "volontaria sospensione dell'incredulità", il Maestro, come un bambino, costruisce la sua realtà immaginando i mondi che sono condivisi dai suoi lettori. Il terrorista, invece, cerca di imitare e mimare il suo *Maestro* pur essendo perfettamente consapevole della sua incapacità di *creare* come lui. La realizzazione della violenza a lungo elucubrata, che può solo annullare e distruggere ed è priva di potere, è il suo tentativo fallito di controbilanciare la sua mancanza di vera *immaginazione*, creativa e dialogica.

Abstract II: This paper argues that the terrorist embodies a dominator paradigm, exalting and justifying violence, while the Master's capacity to create through his narratives is attuned to a partnership paradigm. The terrorist's paranoid, lucid, and terse first person narration of his meticulous (almost religious) preparations for the assassination is set against the intensely poetical creativity of the Master, underlining the beauty and poetry of life. This dialogue between two different modes of perceiving and filtering reality is built around the metaphor of children playing. In a willing suspension of disbelief, the Master, like a child, constructs his own reality in imagining worlds his readers share. The terrorist tries to imitate and mimic his *Master*, perfectly aware that he is unable to *create* like him. The actualisation of his long-imagined violence, which can only annihilate and destroy and is powerless, is his failed attempt at counterbalancing his lack of true creative and dialogic *imagination*.

This essay focuses on how Malouf's novella *Child's Play* (1982) shows a profound desire on the part of the author to unveil the absurdities and uselessness of violence, and instead foster and implement a culture of peace as a creative model for transformation. This analysis is based on the work of the anthropologist and macro-historian Riane Eisler¹ that the international Partnership Studies Group (PSG)² applies to the study of world literatures, languages and education. In this essay I employ the terms *partnership* and *dominator* according to Eisler's *Cultural Transformation Theory* (Eisler 1987: xvii ff.), an interdisciplinary theory which examines cultural differences, gender relationships and, more extensively, creative processes and storytelling, in order to show how our cultural paradigms are constructed, not only in literature and in art, but also in our everyday reality by what 'stories' we are told and how these shape our frame of mind, culture and belief-systems (Eisler 1987: 75-77). According to Eisler, a "dominator model is what is popularly termed either patriarchy or matriarchy – the *ranking* of one half of humanity over the other" (Eisler 1987: xvii) and is characterised by "technologies designed to destroy and dominate", symbolised by the *Blade* (Eisler 1987: xx). In a partnership paradigm, represented by the *Chalice*, instead, "social relations are primarily based on the principle of *linking* rather than ranking", and "beginning with the most fundamental difference in our species, between male and female – diversity is not equated with either inferiority or superiority" (Eisler 1987: xvii); 'difference' therefore is positive, creative and fruitful rather than problematic and is an opening towards manifold different stories.

Similarly, Raimon Panikkar highlights the predicament of contemporary hyper-technological western societies, dominated by the *scientific term*³, which limits our

¹ Riane Eisler is a social scientist and author whose work on cultural transformation has inspired scholars and social activists. Her research has impacted many fields, including history, economics, anthropology, psychology, sociology and education. She has been a leader in the movement for peace, sustainability and economic equity, and her pioneering work in human rights has expanded the focus of international organisations to include the rights of women and children. Eisler is known for her 1987 bestseller *The Chalice and the Blade: Our History, Our Future*, now in 23 foreign editions. See: <http://www.rianeeisler.com/> and <http://www.partnershipway.org/>. The third Italian edition, with a new special epilogue by Eisler and a glossary on partnership language by Stefano Mercanti, was issued by Forum University Press, Udine. She is also famous for her second book *Sacred Pleasure. Sex, Myth and the Politics of the Body* (1995) and *The Real Wealth of Nations* (2007) also reissued by Forum University Press, <http://www.forumeditrice.it/percorsi/lingua-e-letteratura/all>.

² *The Partnership Studies Group* (http://all.uniud.it/?page_id=195) applies Riane Eisler's partnership model to literary texts of world literatures. By analysing the works of authors writing in the varieties of English including those of indigenous populations, the group explores the way these authors use the coloniser's word to transform the dominator values of colonisation and globalisation into cooperative and partnership codes, where often the dynamics at work are caring and sharing rather than exploiting and dominating (http://all.uniud.it/?page_id=198).

³ Raimon Panikkar was a leading scholar in interreligious and intercultural dialogue in world cultures throughout the second half of the twentieth century; his many publications were translated into French, German, Chinese, Portuguese, Czech, Dutch, Tamil and many other languages. See: <http://www.raimon->

creativity to only one aspect of our human mind – *Logos*, rather than taking into consideration the wholeness of our imaginative potential, involving also the *creative word* and *dialogic dialogue*, founded on the symbolic, poetic, epiphanic and spiritual power of language.

The intercultural, dialogic and partnership perspectives of Panikkar and Eisler are the philosophical and critical background of this essay. I aim at showing how Malouf, through the intensity of his poetic gaze upon reality, can describe everyday events and their impact on his characters' lives while giving voice to a *dialogic dialogue* fostering peace and transmuting plain objects into tools for introspection and meditation. I will show how simple elements such as *birdcages*, *clocks*, *piazas* become threads of a creative network aiming at a *partnership* dimension of life, where, going beyond the violence of the *dominator* model, one can recreate a paradigm characterised by creativity, peace, joy and care for every sentient and non-sentient being.

This essay argues that in *Child's Play* the terrorist embodies a *dominator* paradigm, exalting and justifying violence as a means to control others at a personal, social and political levels, while the Master's capacity to create through his narratives is more attuned to a *partnership* paradigm of peace and harmony, since *Child's Play* is also the title of the Master's 'Work in Progress'. The terrorist's paranoid, lucid, and terse first person narration of his meticulous, fanatical and almost *religious* preparations for the assassination, is set against the intensely poetical creativity of the Master, underlining the beauty and poetry of life, where language is connected to the physical and emotional expression of the body: a sort of *embodied* sacredness and spirituality that we often find in Malouf's work (Riem 2014)⁴. This dialogue between two different modes of perceiving and filtering reality is built around the metaphor of children playing; however, this turns out to be a deadly game, no childish make-believe.

panikkar.org/english/laudatio.html. Scientism is sometimes synonymous with positivism, however, while positivism may be used in a neutral way, scientism often has a negative connotation as it commonly identifies an exaggerated form of scientific thought that becomes unscientific in its exclusion a priori of all that cannot be (yet) demonstrated. This explains why Panikkar chooses 'scientific term' rather than using the more common adjective 'scientific' (Panikkar 2007: 96-125). Panikkar appreciated science but not its degeneration. Being very concerned about language(s) and its manifold shades of meaning, he created neologisms which his proof-readers sometimes tried to correct and normalise. Panikkar stresses the distinction between creative word and scientific term, where the creative, analogical and mythological function of the word is juxtaposed to the scientific term of the *Logos*, which is devoid of symbolic echoes and of positive creative complexities. The scientific term restrains and separates, pinning and limiting things to a specific and often univocal meaning that circumscribes and confines life into stereotypical patterns rather than opening up it to worlds of interconnected and dialogic significances. For a further analysis of this theme see Riem *et al.* 2013.

⁴ A similar way of finding the sacred in everyday objects is found in Patrick White: "its presence in the simple proximate reality of material things, and the persistent inability of language to fully apprehend it" (Ashcroft 2010: 96).

In a willing suspension of disbelief, the Master, like a child, imagines and constructs his own reality and the worlds his readers share and love, not knowing that his writing and actions are followed and mimicked by an anonymous young man, dominated by an absurd, unmotivated and inexplicable envy and hate against him. The terrorist vainly tries to imitate his *Master*, perfectly aware that he is unable to *create* like him; this increases his frustration, blind resentment and impassionate anger, which is a sort of cold and dead mental abstraction, empty of any feelings. It is as if only in fantasising and describing in his journal with detached 'scientific terms' the other's death, the terrorist can fill his inner emptiness and immense fear of living, typical of the dominator paradigm. At the end of the novella, the actualisation of his long-imagined violence, which can only annihilate and destroy another life, (together with his own)⁵, clearly demonstrates, even to the terrorist himself, his inner emptiness and creative powerlessness, proving how he totally lacks true creative and dialogic *imagination*. He fails in his attempt at counterbalancing his incapacity of building a positive interpersonal affective or even political *discourse*; this proves the absolute failure of his so-called and never clearly explained *ideals*. In this sense, the terrorist represents the typical dominator perspective, where power is understood as a hierarchical *power over* someone/something, expressed through the idealisation and exaltation of violence, supremacy and dominion as means of controlling reality and others, rather than a partnership *power to* do something together, within a community aiming at positively creating and sharing what is *good*⁶.

⁵ The terrorist did not have the same good fortune as the murderer Angulimal who was initiated by Gautam Buddha; he did not fully understand the message of peace and compassion in the Master's writing, letting it permeate his whole being. Here is the story: Angulimal had taken a vow that he would kill one thousand people; from each person he would take one finger to make a garland of fingers. Now he had nine hundred and ninety-nine fingers, only one was missing. Buddha came very close to him, and Angulimal's hands were trembling. This man was so beautiful, so innocent, so childlike. Angulimal had already fallen in love. He had killed so many people. He had never felt this weakness; he had never known what love is. For the first time he was full of love. So there was a contradiction: the hand was holding the sword to kill the person, and his heart was saying, "Put the sword back in the sheath". Buddha asked Angulimal to grant him a small desire before killing him. "Just cut from the tree a branch which is full of flowers". So Angulimal did and Buddha said, "This was only half the desire; the other half is, please put the branch back on the tree". Angulimal said, "Now this is the craziest desire. How can I put this branch back?" Buddha said, "If you cannot create, you have no right to destroy. If you cannot give life, you don't have the right to give death to any living thing". A moment of silence, a moment of transformation...the sword fell down from his hands and Angulimal fell down at the feet of Gautam Buddha, and said: "I don't know who you are, but whoever you are, take me to the same space in which you are; initiate me" (Buswel *et al.* 2013: 46-47).

⁶ Eisler calls this 'actualization power', "the power to nurture, to support, to create and to accomplish things together (*power with*) as opposed to the power to dominate, to inflict pain and destroy (*power over*) within the dominator model" (Mercanti 2014: 3). While the power against is a form of dominator power, "the power to destroy and dominate as symbolized by the Blade (the power to take life, power over/disempowering and coercive) in contrast to the power to sustain and enhance life represented by the Chalice (power to and power with/empowering and nurturing). To maintain domination and submission, the dominator power

My focus here is to investigate how the terrorist and Master's different use of language contributes in defining their way of thinking, writing and living, and how their different narrative *style* symbolically marks the cultural paradigm they belong to: *dominator* (the terrorist) and *partnership* (the Master), and therefore how far literature can be an instrument for nurturing peace:

His vision is epic, and it is an epic strength that he brings to its depiction; yet no one has written more delicately, or with greater compassion and tact, of life's ordinary occasions, of first love, first tears, or the taste of that first mouthful of bread a boy pays with his own earnings [...] (Malouf 1983: 40).

On the occasion of his eightieth birthday celebrations, Malouf, in conversation with Ivor Indyk, underlines the importance of the sacred in the world:

I don't like any of the views of the world which place the sacred outside this one. And so I don't see this world as fallen or as less than sacred. I think to do that is to enter a very very dangerous area where you think that the world and people in it are not sacred and the sacred is somewhere else. That's what seems to me to allow evil into the world. I think that this world is the only world and it is utterly sacred. But the sacred, whatever that is, is absolutely in it (Indyk 2014: 3).

This worldly, matter-of-fact, simple and immanent sacredness is embodied in every-day objects that fill our homes and lives as simulacra of our souls. This is how the terrorist describes the Master's vision, which has the same intertwining of delicacy, intensity, compassion and strength we find in Malouf's writing itself. Violence is part of it, with all its absurdity, as a reminder that life is to be celebrated for its simple beauty and sacredness.

The terrorist hates everything can insinuate doubts into his steely indoctrinated mind; he is fascinated but at the same times repelled by the Master's *style*, since he feels inadequate and unable to express life with such fullness and intensity:

There are times when simply to expose oneself to the hypnotic beauties of his style, to enter the labyrinthine sentences with their tortuous flashings and flarings, is to run the risk of a special sort of corruption, the corruption of the moral. I have come to distrust his high-toned achievements at the very moment when I am deeply moved by them (Malouf 1983: 54).

ranks humanity by relying on pain and violence instead of pleasure and love, thus suppressing and/or distorting caring and empathic relationships" (Mercanti 2014: 9).

The terrorist describes the qualities that he both appreciates and fears in the Master's writing, which he distrusts in the very moment he feels moved by them, since they may tempt him into another vision of things and life. He is afraid they might seduce him into a more poetic, sensitive, peaceful and warm approach that would make him feel compassion, understanding, sympathy, empathy for the other – feelings that he willingly excludes from his life to keep his steely violent purpose firm. The inevitable dominator win/lose outcome could be reversed with a partnership win/win resolution. When the terrorist finds himself described and understood in one of the Master's works, he feels naked and revealed, comprehended and therefore, to a dominator mind used to be in control, annihilated, 'written off':

reading his dark analysis, his infernal speculations about the origins of violence in our age, I feel myself first hot, then cold, as if a hand had been laid upon me in the silence and I might be recognized by any passer-by in the street. I feel anger as well. As if all things I have so painfully discovered and fought for in my life, were, after all, quite common and ordinary – predicted, described, made public a decade before my birth. [...] *His superiority is insufferable [...] because in comprehending me he has also written me off* (Malouf 1983: 55-56, my italic).

This poignant description shows how the terrorist fails to maintain his dominator control over the dissolution of his *identity*, purpose and reality accomplished by the Master's partnership capability of imagining him. The terrorist's sense of inferiority, emotional distance, suffering, anger, resentment, fear and envy are all negative feelings characteristic of a dominator society, which trains one to be *ranked* either above or below another, rather than being *linked* in the common circle of shared humanity. As a result of this mental conditioning the terrorist can only position/define the Master as *enemy*, someone the terrorist must fight, eliminate, destroy, for the Master is a mirror that can enable the terrorist to perceive too much of himself, even the shadows of genuine humanity he does not want to see. Understanding his inner flaws would mean imagining a different future for himself and the Master, a destiny that would diverge from his static and immovable idea of how things should or should not be. I agree with Hassan's statement: "What luxury, we want to cry, what corruption of the intellect in affluent societies! That boy has read too much!" (Malouf 1983: 3). Reading too much, through the filter of his rational mind only, means that the terrorist's psyche is corrupted by a cold dominator intellectualism; he is hyper-rational, uses only *Logos* – the scientific term, not interlaced and in dialogic dialogue with *Mythos* – the creative word. He is thus unable to feel compassion (which he can perceive only cerebrally, like a temporary *frisson*) and despises vulnerability, which is one of Malouf's focal points: "I don't say all writers are interested in vulnerability, but I think I am. [...] it's where people are weak in relation to a situation so that it involves your sympathy in some kind of way. That often engages me" (Indyk

2014: 3). Understanding the other's vulnerability is an act of acknowledgment of one's shared humanity, and this is the first step to create a *partnership* society/vision. In the story of the Zen Master Hakuin, anger brings the samurai to the desire to kill Hakuin – the gates of Hell – while understanding and being conscious of the sacredness of all life opens the gates of Heaven⁷. Malouf's Master seems to echo this ancient Zen wisdom. Through his feeling for the other's vulnerability the Master can fully give voice to his creative imagination, reaching "the savage and beautiful intensity, the impersonal truthfulness, of a child at play" (Malouf 1983: 90). Through his feeling for the other's vulnerability the Master can fully give voice to his creative imagination, reaching "the savage and beautiful intensity, the impersonal truthfulness, of a child at play" (Malouf 1983: 90). This intensity is savage, that is unsophisticated, natural, wild, and beautiful, for it expresses the Beauty and Truth of a child's profound feeling for the sacredness of life, and that "is all ye need to know on earth" (Keats, "Ode on a Grecian Urn").

The terrorist is also aware of the assassination as a linguistic act; it exists because he discusses and plans about it through language and will exist after it is committed because the press and media will *report* about it:

The crime will achieve its final reality at a point long past the moment of its occurrence either in his life or mine; the point, I mean, when it is reported. The true location of its happening in the real world is not the Piazza Sant'Agostino at P., but the mind of some million readers, and its true form not flesh, blood, bullets, but words: *assassination, brutal murder, infamous crime, mindless violence, anarchy*. Its needing a famous victim and a perpetrator are merely the necessary conditions for its achieving the headlines and attracting the words: we are instrumental for the transmitting of a message whose final content we do not effect. The crime becomes real because it is reported [...] because it breaks into the mind of the reader as a set of explosive syllables. These are language murders we are committing (Malouf 1983: 91, italic in the text).

Being unable to create his own 'story', one where he could express the fullness of his being, the terrorist needs somebody else, the press, the media, some million readers, to give reality to himself through *words*, "I am the perpetrator of the infamous crime"

⁷ A Zen story: Hakuin, the fiery and intensely dynamic Zen master, was once visited by a samurai warrior. "I want to know about heaven and hell", said the samurai. "Do they really exist?" he asked Hakuin. Hakuin looked at the soldier and asked, "Who are you?" "I am a samurai", announced the proud warrior. "Ha!" exclaimed Hakuin. "What makes you think you can understand such insightful things? You are merely a callous, brutish soldier! Go away and do not waste my time with your foolish questions", Hakuin said, waving his hand to drive away the samurai. The enraged samurai couldn't take Hakuin's insults. He drew his sword, readied for the kill, when Hakuin calmly retorted, "This is hell". The soldier was taken aback. His face softened. Humbled by the wisdom of Hakuin, he put away his sword and bowed before the Zen Master. "And this is heaven", Hakuin stated, just as calmly" (Yampolsky 1971).

(Malouf 1983: 91), otherwise he doesn't really exist, he feels as a character in one of the Master's fictions: "I am fitting myself to become at last one of his characters" (Malouf 1983: 92). If you do not have the capacity to create it is very easy to destroy. This inner lack obliges the terrorist to anchor himself to *reality*, the outside world, the painters on his "corner palazzo" (Malouf 1983: 93), the old neighbour who got lost and her extravagant collection of birdcages, with stuffed exotic birds inside, and of clocks (Malouf 1983: 103) that seem "profoundly crazy" (Malouf 1983: 104). At the same time, he feels threatened by the proximity of these elements of *real life* to his own plain cell, because it throws into the scene an element of the unpredictable that may also disrupt his obsessively thought and mentally re-enacted *plot*. Until this encounter with the elderly lady, his dream-life had been almost non-existent, but through the irruption of *realia*, living people and objects, his sense of security is disrupted. This gives rise to a flow of dreams: now he is in touch with his unconscious life again and his imagination thrives. Something he must keep at bay like a dangerous infection for his dominator mind:

An element of the unpredictable, that for weeks now I have kept deeply submerged, has forced its way to the surface. I am unwilling at times to lie down, turn off the light and expose myself to the vagaries, sometimes savage, sometimes I suspect merely ridiculous, of my own imagination.

I begin to understand a little what the Master calls 'The anti-Works' (Malouf 1983: 106-107).

The anti-Works are those creations the Master feels are not coherent within his great 'Work in Progress' and may lead him astray; in the same way the terrorist does not want distractions from his fixed goal.

The whole section sixteen of the novella deals with a dream the terrorist is unable to decipher, because he cannot understand the poetic and symbolic language of the creative word speaking in dreams, for once again he tries to analyse and vivisection the product of imagination only through his rational mind. Rather than telling his dream, though, the terrorist tries to recapture its "mood" describing in detail an old photograph he found in a book. It is a photograph of the early twenties, with five "figures" who are waiting for a boat, at sunset, "on the rocks of a little cove" (Malouf 1983: 108). They are of different ages, showing different moods or expectations, they look at their surroundings differently, they seem dressed for different seasons - the older man with a cloak, the girls in summery clothes, a casual young man, the young peasant in his heavy work attire - "They might be present at different events" (Malouf 1983: 109).

For the terrorist, they certainly embody his own experience of life, his total and absolute isolation and separation even from the other terrorists who for a short time share the flat with him and then go ahead towards their different destinies and stories. This photo and his dream fill the terrorist with "immense sadness" (Malouf 1983: 111), because,

like the old lady's stuffed birds in the cage, he is imprisoned in a dominator frame of mind. He cannot reconcile with the other, he is unable to perceive and project his life in a different direction, within another vision; everything for him is set and done, immutable and static like the old photo. He is unable to cross the inner threshold separating him from compassion; he cannot transform his frame of mind, opening to the imaginative perceptions that the dream and the photo are creating in him that could lead him to true imagination and a partnership sharing of feeling and love that leads to peace of body, mind and spirit. Like in *Macbeth*, the "deed" is already "done" in his mind and it "cannot be undone". He is unable to open to a broader vision, transcending and explaining the ordinary. He fears the Master's respect for peace and harmony resonating with the beauty and sacredness of life. He will therefore kill and possibly die because he cannot be like the Master, who still and always finds "the spring in himself that is in touch with the flow, the change, the renewed *life* of things" (Malouf 1983: 90).

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