

'IT'S ALL LIES!' DAVID MALOUF'S *JOHNNO* AND AUTOBIOGRAPHY

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AUTOBIOGRAPHY has seized the critical imagination in recent years. Although the *bios*—the actual life—seems to have become increasingly irrelevant, much has been made of the multiplicity of the *autos*—the selves—and the slipperiness of the *graphia*—the text. Autobiography also has an important place in the post-colonial project, although exactly what place this is has not yet sufficiently defined. But if post-colonial writing is about grappling with some sort of national identity, the link between that and the grappling with some sort of personal identity is clear enough. Culture constructs the ideology of identity that lies at the heart of autobiography, and it is culture that is under the post-colonial microscope.

But for all the critical heat generated by the deconstruction of the normative autobiography—and by that I mean a more or less coherent and chronological rendering of the writer's life—nevertheless this type of autobiography remains just that: normative. Similarly, Australian autobiography has tended to differ from its European prototype largely in terms of content—vegemite instead of marmite—rather in more fundamental matters of form and structure. So when Philip Lejeune, the first modern theorist of autobiography, argued that the 'deep subject' of autobiography is the 'proper name' of the author (12–41), for many autobiographies this seems to be the case.

But this isn't necessarily always so, and I'd like to investigate some issues that can arise when an autobiography is read within a post-colonial context. The text I am using to do this is David Malouf's *Johnno*, and I am drawn to it because I don't think it succeeds as a traditional autobiography and I want to know why. Many critics agree with Malouf that this is the most autobiographical of all his fictional works. Certainly a comparison with *12 Edmondstone Street* reveals points of reference between the depicted lives—such as the Lebanese grandfather or the aunts going through the mailman's bag—and these ground *Johnno* in the Brisbane of Malouf's youth. But if the deep subject of *Johnno* is the revelation of the proper name of Malouf, then it fails. The two protagonists are symptomatic of the confusion. The first response might be, if this is Malouf's life-story, which one is Malouf? Nor is the problem solved by a simple equation of 'Dante plus Johnno equals Malouf' because the two protagonists aren't just two halves of some sort of authorial whole. Rather, the lack of a subject comes about because what is emphasised in the text is not its subjects but its strategies of expression. The 'basic abstraction is not 'character' but "narrative voice"' (Leer 14). If the subject of traditional autobiography is the proper name, quite deliberately Malouf has given us nicknames. This economy of characterisation that makes Dante and Johnno appear distant and obscure makes for a corresponding limitation within the work in terms of a normative autobiography. Even when expected tropes do appear—such as a sense of aloneness or isolation of the protagonist, or a family with an element of emotional imbalance—they remain as circumscribed and lacking in plenitude as the two characters.

This results in *Johnno*'s slightly clinical tone, but I think that this is deliberate. Because having read this autobiography and failed to discover the 'proper name' of David Malouf, I then tried to work out what I *had* discovered. And so whilst I think that *Johnno*

does not fully succeed as a traditional autobiography, I think that's the point. Because where *it does* succeed is on the level of meta-autobiography. By this term I mean an autobiography that actively interrogates the whole notion of autobiography, and then more specifically in this context, a text that confronts and challenges the issues raised when an autobiographical norm is transported from Europe to Australia. The questions provoked by *Johnno* are 'what is autobiography' and 'what autobiography is possible in a post-colonial context?' Dante, as a boy, questions whether 'discipline was character-building'; Malouf, as an author, also questions just what is required for character-building in the post-colonial context, and whether it can be done within the received norms of autobiography.

The first indication that *Johnno* raises questions about the nature of autobiography comes from the framing device of prologue and epilogue. Dante arrives in Brisbane on the sudden death of his father to 'gather all the cheque butts, bills, invoices, receipts that covered his [father's] dealings over the past seven years and [to] get them into order for the solicitor' (2). As Dante collects, recollects, and recreates his father's life he is presented with the many forces that make up a life and the many ways that a life might be told. Dante's simple, authoritative and ultimately reductive idea of his father with a glowing gold tooth and 'the fact that he had never, as far as I knew, read a book' (5), is soon contrasted with 'evidence of a life I had failed to take account of' (6). This evidence is all paper-work: birthday cards, lists, postcards, newspapers, and even a tombstone receipt. In the prologue there is a web of various discourses that together try to capture the life of Dante's father. Not only is there the subject's own life-writing in the postcards, the painted bed-cover, and the hand-made Valentine Day card, but also Dante's childhood memories, and even such historical evidence as dimensions of room sizes, a list of paintings and furniture in an art collection, and the weight of the ship on which Dante's mother came out to Australia. The importance lies not so much in the father's character but in the knowledge that any one of these types of life-writing is incomplete and reductive by itself: a city can be reduced to a population size; a boxing career to newspaper clippings; death to a tombstone receipt; and experience itself has become 'crumbling cardboard' (6). They all have their own validity, and they all certainly tell a story, but they do not tell the *whole* story; and it is this knowledge that reflects back on to the consideration of the more traditional forms of life-writing.

Exploring his father's life quickly leads Dante into exploring his own. What I want to concentrate on at this point is two things. First of all I want to show the inter-textuality of *Johnno*. Then I want to examine how that reflects on the post-colonial project, which is not to reject but to appropriate the discourses of the colonial masters, and in appropriating them to be able to rework them in ways that may reflect more accurately the post-colonial experience.

Dante's world, as his name suggests, is deeply meshed in the notion of story-telling. His home life is shaped by his mother who reads aloud 'the old-fashioned novels' and tries to bring 'the world of those novels and our own slow moving world . . . very close' (35). His fondest childhood memories are 'at home under the tent flaps reading my favourite Dumas and dreaming myself back into . . . History,' and this most immediate history is the Second World War and is to be found on 'enormous wallmaps,' posters of 'silhouettes of war planes and battleships,' and even 'a plaster mask of Winston Churchill complete with detachable cigar' (20). These, it seems, are slightly different versions of the tombstone receipt.

But whereas Dante is satisfied to hide in the tent and read his books, his companion Johnno has a very different approach to texts. He scorns Dante who 'winces every time

a spine cracks on a book'(87). Indeed, Johnno spends a large part of the novel disposing of books, either in bins, in swamps, or letting them rot in Greece. But Johnno also recognises the importance of literature. He devours texts and foists them onto a range of other characters, such as his mother, Dante and Binkie. In this way Johnno embodies the post-colonial endeavour. He is trying to break the spines of books. He wants to access the knowledge, but he also wants to challenge the rigid literary norms which these hardbacks seem to represent, and he wants the knowledge held on those leaves to scatter and to mix. He is, to adopt Helen Tiffin's words, 'inevitably hybridised, involving a dialectic relationship between European ontology and epistemology and the impulse to create or recreate independent local identity' (17). By showing this need both to absorb *and* to overthrow, Malouf is pointing to the importance of works of first-world fiction in the telling of colonial lives. The autobiographical act is quarried from the resources of the culture that surrounds it. The New World is generating new, but also second-hand, lives. *Johnno* is filled with European literary references, Tolstoi, Goethe, Dostoievski, and in a more profound way *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. The sense of attraction and exclusion between the centre and its post-colonial margin is strikingly symbolised by Dante and Johnno 'peering into bookshop windows' (11), their faces mirrored in the window and thus superimposed on the books inside. (And with this image I can't help but think of David Malouf reading in Tilly's on Wednesday night, along with his double on the mirrored wall).

Johnno also comments on life-writing. He scorns the reduction of life into 'realistic, objective' writing and he mocks Dante for leading a life that will end up as 'a paragraph in the *Courier-Mail*' (84). Johnno himself leads a life of excess, and it is a life that constantly exceeds Dante's attempts to explain it. Johnno always seems to be the iconoclast. In the photograph of the lifesaving team he breaks up the symmetry of the regimented dozen by becoming the unlucky thirteenth, and he stares diagonally out of the frame of the photograph through frames of glasses that themselves are empty. His own life seems to reveal a series of unconnected selves: the class clown; the athlete; the shaggy-headed, big-boned Rogozin, the aesthete of Paris; and finally 'enormous. Larger than life' (146). His is a life that at once constantly refuses to be captured, and at the same time a life that can bear 'an uncanny resemblance to what the rest of us call literature' (84). His job as a geologist points to the necessity of examining the stories that lie as the foundations of our world, but his own story is as mutable as the sea.

Dante sets out to explore back through his own life, but what he seems to find instead is the character of Johnno raising the question of what makes up a life-story, and the possibility that the received European autobiographical norm might be unable to capture the complex and contemporary Australian identity. Johnno accuses Dante of being 'a romantic' (84), and by that he might mean being obsessed by the dominant, post-Romantic, 'I'. His plea is for Dante to be open to life-stories other than those 'funny stories' he seems to favour.

It would seem ironic then that almost all we hear of Johnno is mediated through Dante. Can it be that Johnno's story is to be swallowed up, after all, in a monolithic biography just as he appears to have been swallowed up by Australia? He drowns in the Condamine, a river of text whose 'fictitious course' (151) he traced in blue ink years ago in Mr Campbell's geography lesson. His unofficial membership of the Stillwater Lifesaving Team doesn't appear to be enough to save him drowning nor to be neatly wrapped up as a caricature in one of Dante's funny stories: his life is reduced, after all, to a paragraph in the *Courier-Mail*. His eulogy is in a church he has probably tried to burn down. But Johnno does transcend Dante's story. His final and posthumous letter with

its ragged and pathetic words cuts across the smooth prose. It also throws the prose into relief and with the revelation of a proper name at last— Edward Athol Johnson — gives a hint of another, untold life.

By hearing at last the voice of Edward Athol Johnson, Dante seems to gain the impetus to 'defect from the dogma' (38). He can start to doubt some of 'the rituals by which my own life was governed' (37); and surely one of these rituals is how he tells his life. The story ends with Dante asking whether or not 'the hundred possibilities a situation contains may be more significant than the occurrence of any one of them' (164). An important part of *Johnno* is that by challenging the colonialist norms of autobiography some of these possibilities are acknowledged. It at once opens up different ways of telling a life-story, whilst acknowledging the debt to the colonialist culture that surrounds it.

I started this talk by mentioning the prologue and epilogue. Within that framing device is another one, Johnno's opening and closing words, 'it's all lies!' (11, 170). The first leaves Dante red-faced and spluttering but the second leaves him thoughtfully trying to explain. Malouf in *Johnno* abandons the possibility of autobiography as an absolute as impossible, life-denying and simplistic. It is a notion of autobiography that cannot last, just as Dante's simple image of his father cannot and does not last and this comparison between the autobiographical norm and a father is a telling one. What Malouf in *Johnno* reveals may not be his 'proper name,' but rather that new truths — and by this I mean the complexity and uniqueness of Australian selves — may be forged out of old crucibles, overthrowing traditional patterns in a fusion of our European cultural heritage and of our Australian experience.

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