

A WORLD OF FEELING: DAVID MALOUF AND THE PUBLIC CONVERSATION

KAY FERRES
Griffith University

In 2001, the National Library published a collection of essays, *David Malouf: A Celebration*. It contained tributes from friends and colleagues who knew Malouf well, and who inhabited a familiar world of literary culture. Readers of Malouf's fiction and poetry share in that familiarity; his close observation of the details of place and of inner life draws them into this circle. Introducing the collection, Ivor Indyk observed that Malouf's 'public reputation rests on the most private grounds of all, the achievement of intimacy' (Indyk 1). This year, a selection of Malouf's public writing about Australian life has been published as *A First Place*. Its 'Author's Note' differentiates works of the imagination from writings that belong to 'the world of . . . analysis, and open opinion and discourse.' Though they have different purposes, and come from different sources, Malouf suggests, both 'are shaped by the same temperament and come to the reader in something like the same voice' (Malouf, *Place* x). The familiar, conversational voice that his readers recognise also underwrites his cultural authority in the wider public realm.

This essay describes Malouf's engagement with the public conversation and his emergence as a trusted commentator on contemporary life. His Boyer lectures made a case for the value of civility and the place of literature and theatre as important institutions in civil society. His public writing and broadcasting also demonstrate an understanding of the critical role that emotion plays in public debate. Commenting on 'The People's Judgement' in the failed referendum on an Australian republic, he observes: 'We live in feelings as well as conditions and events' (Malouf, *Place* 230). The discussion which follows draws on recent explorations of civility and trust, fragile ideals that have been revived and scrutinised as part of a new interest in civil society, and on work that highlights how emotion as well as reason shapes the public realm. There is now a growing literature on this subject, but this account of Malouf's presence in the world of 'open opinion and discourse' takes up the work of cultural historian Stefan Collini, philosopher of politics and art Mark Kingwell, and psychoanalyst and literary critic Adam Phillips, which describes the contours of an ever diversifying public realm where contending voices and interests struggle to be heard.

Though Malouf claims that imaginative works 'have nothing to do with the world of opinion' and that their public life is 'in the hands of readers' (Malouf, *Place* ix), questions of voice and rhetoric are at the heart of *Ransom* (2009). This meditation on war and mortality makes use of the conventions of lament, and also reflects on the uses of speech in a 'prattling world' (Malouf, *Ransom* 126). Setting out to redeem Hector's body, Priam recalls how the power of speech has figured in his personal history. As Podarces, son of a vanquished king, he had cowered among the 'rabble of slave children,' knowing that his cultivated voice would betray him (Malouf, *Ransom* 68). Ransomed and renamed Priam, in time he took his father's place. Then, silence confirmed his power: his herald became his mouthpiece. Now, Priam understands that to honour his son, he must find a new voice for his appeal. When he goes to meet Achilles, he leaves the herald behind. Idaeus's place is taken by the carter Somax, whose mouth is unstopable:

What he had to say, if you regarded it strictly, was unnecessary. It had no point or use. The wonder, given this, was that it did so little harm—none at all in fact—to the fellow’s dignity. There was something here, Priam thought, that he needed to think about. (Malouf, *Ransom* 125-26)

The carter talks to be sociable; the point is to confirm his membership of a community. Through his chatter, he reveals himself and his sorrow at the loss of his own son, and the ways of his world. Waiting for darkness to fall before they approach the Greek stockade, Priam realises that the no man’s land outside the city walls is a wild, humming, rustling place, where ‘each thing’s presence was as much the sound it made as its shape’ (Malouf, *Ransom* 127). Here the grieving king considers how he will bring ‘something new’ into being, how he will cut the knots of convention and hostility in his appeal to Achilles. His demeanour, gesture and speech will be critical to bridging the gulf between them. To succeed, he must change them both. Achilles will be freed from ‘. . . the obligation of being always the hero, as I am expected always to be the king. To take on the lighter bond of being simply a man. Perhaps that is the real gift I have to bring him. Perhaps that is the ransom’ (Malouf, *Ransom* 59-60). Thus *Ransom* gives its readers something to think about: present conflicts as well as ancient ones; our own prattling world, where power is mediated through spin; and the way that feeling, as well as reason, permeates exchanges in the public realm.

Having established his literary reputation, Malouf now has a presence in the world of analysis and opinion as a ‘commentator on Australian values’ (Indyk 1) which was confirmed by the invitation to deliver the Boyer lectures in 1998. The pieces now collected in *A First Place* show how his distinct perspective has been shaped by a wartime childhood in Brisbane, by growing up in a family with diverse linguistic, cultural and religious affiliations, and by a Queensland state school education in the 1940s. In ‘Made in England,’ that autobiography intersects with Australia’s changing place in the world and an evolving sense of what Australia is or could become:

This venture we call ‘Australia’ was always an experiment. It has taken us a long time to see it in this light, and even longer to accept the lightness, the freedom, the possibility that offers as a way of being. It keeps us on our toes, as curious observers of ourself. . . . It ought to make us sceptical of conclusions, of any belief that where we are now is more than a moment on the way. (Malouf, *Place* 332-333)

Stefan Collini has observed that ‘cultures, like individuals, can become imprisoned in images of themselves, lulled by the sheer repetition of a few pat phrases into believing that they have identified their distinctive nature’ (Collini 2-3). For Collini, the duty of the public intellectual is to use their cultural capital to extend the social imaginary and to counteract the complacency of ‘pat phrases.’ While Malouf’s fiction and poetry has vividly refracted aspects of our ‘distinctive nature,’ his public writing urges us to be ‘sceptical of conclusions.’ In his measured and sometimes playful voice, Malouf encourages us to be generous and just rather than harshly judgmental. While he continues to be an advocate for Australian artists and writers, he also speaks and writes about the ideas underpinning our cultural and social life—ideas of belonging, freedom and equality, reaching out to what Collini calls ‘true publics.’

In the Boyer lectures, *A Spirit of Play*, Malouf’s imaginative engagement with cultural objects—plays, poems, landscapes, architecture—and with everyday life, illustrates how its citizens have created a community and responded to Australia’s ‘complex fate’ as a nation. He

describes the shifting worlds of feeling in which an Australian consciousness and sense of belonging have come into being. More than a decade later, *The Happy Life* (2011) offers a wide-ranging discussion of the pursuit of happiness and personal freedom in the contemporary world. In the broadcast lectures, Malouf's democratic voice addresses its listeners as neighbours, whose tolerance of diversity rests on

The capacity to make a distinction between what belongs, in the way of loyalty, to clan or sect or family, and what to the demands of neighbourliness; what belongs to our individual and personal lives and what we owe to *res publica* or Commonwealth, the life we share with others, even those who may differ from us in the most fundamental way. . . . It is the capacity to make and honour these distinctions, out of a common concern for the right we have, each one of us, to pursue our own interests, that is essential to the life of cities, and beyond that, to their more precarious extension as states. (Malouf, *Place* 222-223)

Writing in the context of Canadian multiculturalism, Mark Kingwell argues that the 'civil tongue' is characterised by a familiarity that nevertheless preserves distance and privacy. Civility is more than mere politeness, though politeness can make social interaction easier. The civility necessary to the negotiation of differences in the social and political realm is the product of an expansive ethical imagination that engages with the past and with the demands of contemporary pluralism. This imagination is at work in Malouf's lectures, and just as Kingwell is concerned to register the sounds and cadences of civil speech, so too Malouf is sensitive to the significance of 'tone': 'There is something to be said for mildness. It leaves people the breathing space, and the energy, to get on with more important things' (Malouf, *Place* 223).

'Important things,' such as ideas about privacy and personal freedom, about community, exit and belonging, about the value of culture, are too often talked about in uncivil tongues. Malouf's tolerance might seem to have unlikely origins in Queensland, a place often caricatured as 'red-necked' and parochial. In 'A first place,' the 1984 Herbert Blaiklock Memorial Lecture that gives the recent volume its title, Malouf describes the influence of topography on attitudes and dispositions. Growing up in Brisbane, whose hilly streets offer changing views of the horizon, and whose houses order space up and under, inside and out, produced his awareness that habits of mind are anchored in the body and in its dwelling places. It takes effort to climb Brisbane's hills; cresting them, the eye moves restlessly across the unfolding horizon. This experience encourages 'a kind of intellectual play, a delight in new and shifting views' (Malouf, *Place* 5-6). Open, 'unsealable' houses foster an awareness of other bodies:

You learn in such houses to listen. . . . You also learn what not to hear, what is not-to-be-heard; because it is a condition of such houses that everything *can* be heard. Strict conventions exist about what should be listened to and these soon become habits of not-listening, not-hearing. So too, habits grow up of not-seeing. (Malouf, *Place* 10)

Kerryn Goldsworthy, commenting on this essay, says that this knowledge of place 'from the body outwards' is an accretion of bodily memory, a knowledge more vivid than knowledge gleaned from documents or maps (Goldsworthy 7-8). The body is the foundation of Malouf's thinking, feeling and judging, capacities that he identifies as essential to citizenship in his Boyer lectures.

Their subject is ‘the making of Australian consciousness.’ The shape and focus of Malouf’s discussion recalls Henry James’s comment in a letter to Charles Eliot Norton in 1872: ‘It’s a complex fate, being an American, & one of the responsibilities it entails is fighting against a superstitious valuation of Europe’ (Gorra 33). Malouf’s account of how ‘we latecomers,’ who arrived as convicts, migrants and refugees, have confronted ‘a complex fate’ also calls ‘a superstitious valuation of Europe’ into question. The lectures map a history of how migrant feelings of insecurity and adventurousness have played out, a history framed by two vignettes that illustrate his contention that Australian consciousness is marked by a ‘spirit of play’—inventiveness and delight in the imagination.

The first lecture recalls a dramatic entertainment got up by convicts aboard one of the ships in the first fleet, the ‘Scarborough’:

So, smuggled in on one of those eleven little ships, along with their cargo of criminal rejects, and all the necessary objects for settling a new place . . . was this spirit of make-believe, of theatre, of play. And along with it, an audience’s delight, and practiced skill no doubt, in watching and listening. (Malouf, *Place* 136-37)

The English culture of the late Enlightenment was carried here in methods of farming, ideas about authority and industry, and experiments in reform. Convicts’ craft skills were used in the construction of public buildings, among them a playhouse, established in 1796. In April 1800, *Henry IV Part 1* was staged, a play about rebellion that ‘must have had a special appeal, a special relevance for this audience.’ It was a dangerous play in such a place, and not surprisingly, the theatre was soon closed (Malouf, *Place* 141-42).

Malouf returns to that early theatre in his final lecture, ‘A Spirit of Play.’ There he links the exuberance and mockery of Shakespeare’s characters with the contemporary carnival of the Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras. He sees in these performances examples of the freedoms that underpin democratic societies, a connection that has been elaborated by the sociologist Richard Sennett in his classic book, *The Fall of Public Man*. The single occasion of a performance enables people to recognise themselves as a single entity, to realise that unity is possible:

An audience comes together of its own volition, unlike a rally for example, where there is always some element of compulsion, if only a moral one of commitment or duty. . . . They have no reason for being there other than interest, curiosity, pleasure, and they are an audience, not simply a crowd; an audience that has been created and shaped by the society it is drawn from, and in which the faculty of watching, listening and judging has been to an extraordinary degree sharpened

As for the actors in this street theatre—could anyone have guessed, back then, that it would be just this group that would call a popular audience into being? (Malouf, *Place* 225-26)

It is not conflict or war that has created this successful, tolerant community, Malouf argues, but carnival: ‘It recovers for us, within the complexities and the divisiveness of modern living, a sense of wholeness’ (Malouf, *Place* 228). Carnival embodies the ‘spirit of play,’ dispelling

stifling conformity, and offering a space for the marginal, the vulgar and the vernacular to be heard and seen.

Australia has emerged from a past marked by sectarianism and suspicion of strangers—the past of Malouf’s youth in the 40s and 50s—to become a more open, cosmopolitan place. He sees the evidence of that change in a new, easy acceptance of the body:

. . . consider how far these ordinary Australians have come from that old distrust of the body and its pleasures that might have seemed bred in the bone in the Australians we were even thirty years ago.

These people have changed, not just their minds but their psyches, and have discovered, along the way, a new body. They have slipped so quickly and so easily into this other style of being that they might have been living this way, deep in a tradition of physical ease, a comfortable accommodation between body and soul, for as long as grapes have grown on vines or olives on trees. (Malouf, *Place* 217)

That change had been under way since the time of Malouf’s boyhood, when the beach and the public baths emerged as congregant spaces.

The new visibility of bodies in public space and our diverse ways of inhabiting them are central to Malouf’s ideas about ‘the happy life,’ a topic that has been much discussed in recent times. *The Happy Life* is a more ambitious and risky foray into the ‘world of open opinion and discourse,’ first published in the Quarterly Essay series in 2011. The Quarterly Essay format was conceived as way of stimulating debate on public issues, as each essay was accompanied by a range of critical responses. That format was preserved when Malouf’s essay was reissued in 2012. In keeping with Collini’s notion of a ‘true public,’ Robert Dessaix is the only respondent from the familiar world of literary culture.

In the essay, Malouf sets out to pin down a notoriously elusive idea in a conventional way, calling on the aid of classical sources, Enlightenment philosophy and the work of writers and artists to examine two dimensions of happiness, the hedonic and the eudemonic—joy and contentment. Joy is a euphoric, uplifting experience that does not last. Contentment is a more settled state, difficult to achieve and to sustain. It is linked to human flourishing, to creativity and a sense of completeness.

Pleasure can be experienced even in dire circumstances. Malouf goes to Alexander Solzhenitsyn’s gulag to find an example. He might instead have turned to his own work to illustrate the stoicism he finds so admirable—to Jim Saddler who, during a brief respite from battle, anticipates the pleasures of bread, butter and the ‘thick, golden-green sweetness’ of melon and lemon jam in the very moment that his mate Clancy, some ten yards off, is blown to smithereens (Malouf, *Fly Away* 82). As it was, his choice dismayed one of his respondents, Robert Lagerberg, a Russian specialist from Melbourne University. Lagerberg objects that Malouf’s reading of *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, a book that was widely read in the 1960s and after Solzhenitsyn was expelled from the Soviet Union in 1974, is ‘simplistic’ and that it ignores the politics that produced the gulags (Malouf, *Happy Life* 110). Malouf’s point is that there is something in humans that finds ways to transcend even the most awful circumstances. This does not mean that injustice, cruelty and suffering should be ignored.

Rather, resilience in the face of suffering reinforces the notion of dignity that underpins claims of natural rights.

Contentment is a more elusive goal. Pondering whether a human nature disposed to restlessness, and perhaps always already lacking, can achieve this end, Malouf recalls Plato's account of the creation in *Protagoras*, where Zeus delegates the business of differentiating species to Prometheus and his brother Epimetheus. Regrettably, after these two have distributed the attributes that will protect each creature and allow its kind to flourish, they realise that one has missed out. There are no gifts left for Man—the naked creature whose needs 'are more difficult to satisfy than the rest' (Malouf, *Happy Life* 28). There is nothing for it but to steal from the gods their powers of invention and imagination, so that humans can shape their own environment. As Malouf comments, 'this version of the creation myth sets Man in a heroic light. . . . He is to be the self-sufficient custodian and creator of his own nature, his own history and fate' (Malouf, *Happy Life* 30).

Malouf's own take on happiness also starts from this point: the fate of the vulnerable and needy human body. In our own times, this body has become a 'good place.' We no longer feel guilty about it, or associate it with sin or shame. As the twentieth century progressed, (most) people living in the developed world have had their material needs met by prosperity and abundance, and advances in medical science have seen an end to hazards such as death in childbirth and the ravages of disease. Care of the body is now a pleasurable, aesthetic practice.

Malouf illustrates this by discussing two portraits depicting scenes of private, domestic life. These portraits play with the same ideas of what can be seen and not-seen and not-heard that Brisbane's 'unsealable' suburban houses evoke. The first, by Rubens, depicts his young wife Helena Fourment in a 'corridor moment,' covering her nakedness in a thick fur wrap. This voluptuous beauty coolly regards the painter and the viewer. Her gaze is intimate, as is the connection with the painter. He is not in the picture, but his presence is signified by the texture of the brushstrokes that give life to her flesh. The second portrait, by Rembrandt, shows the painter and his young wife got up as the prodigal son and a whore. The artist is smiling, his eyes glinting as he raises a glass, while his wife looks at us knowingly from her perch on his lap.

Privacy is a key trope in Malouf's account of happiness. These portraits mark a beginning to a modern appreciation of domesticity, and detail the interior spaces designed to create a space for intimacy. In our own times, the appeal of this space, and the impulse to withdraw to it, arises from a need to retreat from an increasingly incomprehensible world, a world where forces like 'the economy' bear down and threaten our sense of security. Malouf does not explicitly address how such privacy should be protected, though his extended discussion of Jefferson's formulation of 'life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness' provides an opportunity to think on this. His recreation of how Jefferson's 'surge of rhetoric' overpowered a simpler, narrower and more useful idea returns us to the question of public language and feeling.

Malouf begins with a vivid image of Jefferson at his desk, working on his draft declaration, drawing on the resources of Enlightenment and classical thought—'the harmonizing sentiments of the day'—and having at hand George Mason's preamble to the Virginian Constitution. Jefferson's seven words distil Mason's more discursive statement: 'All men are created equally free and independent and have certain inherent and natural rights . . . among which are the enjoyment of life and liberty, with the means of acquiring and possessing

property, and pursuing and obtaining happiness and safety' (Malouf, *Happy Life* 17). By dispensing with the terms 'property' and 'safety,' and elevating 'happiness' to an equal prominence with 'life' and 'liberty,' Malouf argues, Jefferson set a time bomb ticking. The kind of guarantee implicit in Mason's document is limited, because it defines happiness narrowly, as subject to accident and contingency. But Jefferson's omission of 'property' and 'safety'—words that invoke an external, material context—realigns the meaning of 'happiness,' connecting it to the 'inner world of feeling' (Malouf, *Happy Life* 19). Malouf gives us the scene of Jefferson with his pen to suggest that, in this case, his rhetorical flourish dislodged political judgment. The formulation is 'a language act rather than a considered political one' (Malouf, *Happy Life* 25).

The disconnected senses of happiness have drawn even further apart in the present. Malouf sees this mirrored in the tendency to separate the good life and the happy life:

The advanced and highly managed societies we live in today tend to assume that the good life, which can to a large extent be provided for, is at least a step on the way to the happy life, in that it removes so many of the conditions that might work against it. But the good life and the happy life, as I suggested earlier, belong to separate and in some ways unconnected meanings of happy; one refers to material fortune, which can be objectively measured, and the other to an interior state that cannot. (Malouf, *Happy Life* 80)

This distinction relies on a narrow idea of the 'good.' Limiting conceptions of the good life to material wellbeing, as Elizabeth Farrelly argues, ignores the costs of 'Happiness as a vast global industry' (Malouf, *Happy Life* 120). It also sidesteps the increasingly contentious issue of how, in pluralist societies, moral communities and their competing ideas of the good life can be accommodated.

In the opening chapter of *The Happy Life*, Malouf lays out his materials much as he imagines Jefferson doing. And just as he focussed on Jefferson's appropriation of Mason's words, I want to highlight his discussion of Montaigne. Malouf's attention here is directed to the achievement of 'happiness of a more settled kind'—contentment, a condition that he calls 'a luxury' (Malouf, *Happy Life* 5). In 'On Solitude,' Montaigne argues that contentment is a condition of the soul: 'We must reserve a room at the back of the shop, entirely ours, entirely free, in which to establish our true liberty and our principal retreat and solitude.' Montaigne goes on: 'Here our ordinary conversation must be between us and ourselves, and so private, that no outside association or communication can find a place' (Green 91). Montaigne's translator, Felicity Green, comments that his 'quarrel is not with society as such, but only with its capacity to enslave us.' Malouf contracts Montaigne's sentence to a metaphor, "'the little back-shop" of domestic retirement' and recasts its meaning, suggesting that this understanding of the good life has little traction in today's world, with its suspicion of élites and uneasiness about virtue: 'the notion of Virtue barely exists for us' (Malouf, *Happy Life* 11).

In emphasising the metaphor of a private, interior space, Malouf loses Montaigne's sense of the meaning of 'our true liberty' and its connection with Virtue. Another reader of Montaigne, the psychoanalyst Anthony Storr, has elaborated this psychological reading. He argues that the capacity to be alone and to know ourselves is fundamental to human happiness:

Being able to get in touch with one's deepest thought and feelings, and providing time for them to regroup themselves into new formations and

combinations, are important aspects of the creative process, as well as a way of relieving tension and promoting mental health.

It appears, therefore, that some development of the capacity to be alone is necessary if the brain is to function at its best, and if the individual is to fulfil his highest potential. Human beings easily become alienated from their own deepest needs and feelings. Learning, thinking, innovation, and maintaining contact with one's own inner world are all facilitated by solitude. (Storr 28)

Malouf quotes Montaigne's powerful statement of this idea: 'The greatest thing in the world is to know how to belong to yourself' (Malouf, *Happy Life* 6), and like Storr, sees this in terms of psychological health. But Montaigne's purpose is spiritual. The point of 'shak[ing] off those violent holdfasts that engage us elsewhere and estrange us from ourselves' (Malouf, *Happy Life* 6) is to prepare for a good death. In Montaigne's thinking, that good death brings the individual to God. In this secular world, happiness has been completely disconnected from dying; the common understanding of a dignified death is one removed from suffering, not one that brings us to God. In this sense, Malouf is right: virtue has little purchase on contemporary thinking about the end of life, yet it surely continues to figure in thinking about the ends of human existence.

Elizabeth Farrelly hears wistfulness in Malouf's tone as he discusses contentment and the good life. She argues that the pursuit of happiness is dangerous because it distracts from what should be our real purpose, to make our lives mean something:

I recognise that this puts me wholly out of step with popular opinion. Whereas the struggle to be 'good,' as it was once conceived, unavoidably linked the individual with both God (as moral origin) and other beings, happiness, seen so often to inhere in the perfect body or the biggest pile, prefers an entirely egocentric cosmology. (Malouf, *Happy Life* 122)

In his fiction, it might be argued, some sense of 'the spiritual' inheres in the moment of being, the feeling of what happens. In this essay, though, it is elusive. Malouf ends his chapter on 'The Character of Happiness' by reframing his question. Instead of asking 'how should we live,' he asks why happiness eludes us: 'What is it in us, or in the world we have created, that continues to hold us back?' (Malouf, *Happy Life* 14). Restlessness, materialism, and fear of the impersonal forces that shape our lives make up the elements of his answer. In the absence of the disciplines that trained the ancient Greeks and Romans in the care of the self, we have substituted stimulus and sensation and reduced freedom to personal choice.

In this affluent world, contentment is rarely achieved. Instead, like the naked creatures that Prometheus and Epimetheus overlooked, we often feel we are 'missing out,' a feeling that is expressed in the pervasive discourse of choice. Around us we see the signs of frustration, of people not getting what they want, of the failure to be satisfied. The key to a happy life may be, as Adam Phillips has said, getting our appetites to 'more or less work for us':

As we know more now than ever before about the kinds of lives it is possible to live—and affluence has allowed more people than ever before to think of their lives in terms of choices and options—we are always haunted by the myth of our potential, of what we might have it in ourselves to be or do. So when we are not thinking, like the character in Randall Jarrell's poem, that 'The way we miss our

lives is life', we are grieving or regretting or resenting our failure to be ourselves as we imagine we could be. We share our lives with the people we have failed to be. (Phillips xii)

In *Missing Out* (2013), Phillips begins with the problem of frustration and explores the obstacles that we put in our way to satisfaction: 'there is no satisfaction without an initiating frustration' (Phillips 167). Writing in the psychoanalytic tradition, Phillips' subject is desire. This is not a subject that Malouf directly addresses in *The Happy Life*, but it is one that he takes up in his recent introduction to, and public promotion of, the Text Classics reissue of Kenneth Mackenzie's 1937 novel, *The Young Desire It*. This novel is an example of Australian modernism that displays some of the same lyricism as Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, published two decades earlier. Malouf recommends it to a new generation of readers as 'a hymn to youth, to life, to sexual freedom and moral independence, written in full awareness . . . of the cost, both to others and oneself' (Malouf, *The Young Desire It* xviii).

The novel's preface is an epigraph from Michael Paul's *The Anatomy of Failure*: 'To be free to choose is not enough. Though the young desire it, they cannot use that freedom, but must be forced into the decision of choice by good or evil circumstances which while they can perceive them they cannot control.' The narrative follows fifteen-year-old Charles Fox in his first year at boarding school in Perth. He has come from the vast property where he lives alone with his mother, to an enclosed masculine world that bewilders and frightens him. At the school, disordered masculinity is unleashed in the boys who are provoked by Charles's angelic, feminine beauty: within hours of his arrival, he is subjected to a vicious sexual assault. Though he is tormented by his peers, and lonely, Charles does well at school, because his talent is recognised by a headmaster who takes steps to encourage and protect him. His classics master, the young Cambridge graduate Christopher Penworth, becomes a mentor and friend. But like Charles, Penworth is unhappy at the school, and is not at home in this new and 'uncivilised' country. His interest in the boy is at once intellectual and erotic. Though Mackenzie in later life saw himself as a gullible victim of practised seducers, in the novel he recreates both the anguish Charles feels and the teacher's lack of self-knowledge.

When the novel was reissued in 2013, the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse had just begun its work. The 'disturbing and potentially sensational material' contained in the novel resonated with the testimony of witnesses at the Commission's hearings, which were widely publicised. Malouf's introduction to the book calls attention to the way its narration manages 'a perilous tension':

What interests [Mackenzie] is not what happens in the world of events but what happens in Charles Fox's erotically charged sensory world, where he is confronted at every turn with situations for which he has no precedent. It is Mackenzie's determination to stick with the interior view, and the bewilderments of young Charles Fox, that make *The Young Desire It* perhaps the earliest novel in Australia to deal with the inner life in a consistently modernist way. (Malouf, *The Young Desire It* x)

Here again we are immersed in 'the world of feeling,' rather than 'the world of events.' Malouf focuses on how Mackenzie allows the reader an insight into the 'uneasy territory' of Penworth's desire, and the conduct that the teacher himself recognises as cruel. Penworth is out of place, his emotional life cramped by his devotion to Reason, his passions only dimly understood.

In *Absent Minds*, an extended and careful account of the public appearances of twentieth-century intellectuals, Collini suggests that recognition of their cultural authority depends on an intersecting set of conditions or relations. They should have achieved distinction in ‘an activity which is esteemed for the non-instrumental, creative, analytical or scholarly capacities it involves’; have access to media which reach publics other than those they have connected with already; and express ideas and views on topics or themes that are of concern to those other publics:

A figure of acknowledged cultural standing who communicates with a true public on, let us say, the question of the meaning of life and death or on ideals of love and sex is neither acting as a member of a group nor ‘intervening’ in politics: but that figure may quite properly be described as acting in the role of ‘an intellectual’. (Collini 62)

Collini argues that conventional ideas of the intellectual’s status either as an ‘outsider’ or as a member of an élite political class are mistaken. For him, the key factor is influence, and the ability to reach a ‘true public,’ an audience beyond their original sphere of insiders and familiars.

Malouf has found such a public through his essays, broadcasts and public appearances. His contributions to the public conversation remind us of the value of the arts and culture at the same time as they engage with the big questions of contemporary life: how we can live together, how individuals can flourish. These questions take him beyond an old politics of identity. As a writer of fiction, he brings ‘mental and imaginative capacities beyond the ordinary’ (Collini 54) to the public conversation. Those capacities underscore his fiction’s facility ‘for smuggling us into another skin and allowing us to live a new life there’ (Malouf, *Happy Life* 87), and they underwrite his cultural authority. As a public commentator, transferring that facility to the world of analysis and opinion, Malouf redescribes the public realm as a world of feeling as well as of reason.

WORKS CITED

- Collini, Stefan. *Absent Minds: Intellectuals in Britain*, Oxford: Oxford UP, 2007.
- Goldsworthy, Kerry. *Adelaide*, Sydney: NewSouth, 2011.
- Gorra, Michael. *Portrait of a Novel: Henry James and the Making of an American Masterpiece*, New York: Liveright Publishing, 2012.
- Green, Felicity. *Montaigne and the Life of Freedom*, New York: Cambridge UP, 2012.
- Indyk, Ivor. ‘Introduction’. *David Malouf: a celebration*. Ed. Ivor Indyk. Canberra: National Library of Australia, 2001. 1-4.
- Kingwell, Mark. *A Civil Tongue: Justice, Dialogue, and the Politics of Pluralism*. University Park: Penn State UP, 1995.
- Malouf, David. *Fly Away Peter*. Ringwood: Penguin, 1983.
- _____. *A Spirit of Play: the making of an Australian Consciousness*. Boyer Lectures. ABC Radio National. 15 November to 20 December 1998. Reprinted in *A First Place*. 124-228.
- _____. *Ransom*. Sydney: Random House, 2009.
- _____. *The Happy Life: The Search for Contentment in the Modern World*. Melbourne: Black Inc, 2011.
- _____. ‘A Perilous Tension’. Introduction to Kenneth Mackenzie, *The Young Desire It* (1937). Melbourne: Text Classics, 2013. vii-xviii.

_____. *A First Place*. Sydney: Knopf, 2014.

Phillips, Adam. *Missing Out: In Praise of the Unlived Life*. London: Penguin, 2013.

Sennett, Richard. *The Fall of Public Man*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1977.

Storr, Anthony. *Solitude*. London: Harper Collins, 1997 (1st pub 1989).