

In Conversation: David Malouf and Ivor Indyk

The David Malouf Symposium was held at Australian Catholic University, North Sydney, on 31 May 2013 to celebrate the work of David Malouf. The program included a written tribute from Ihab Hassan, a discussion of Malouf's work via Skype between Colm Tóibín and Michael Griffith, and papers by Nicholas Jose, Stephen Mansfield, Brigid Rooney, Damien Barlow, James Marland, Kate Matthew, Yvonne Smith, and James Tulip. Malouf was present throughout and joined Ivor Indyk (Whitlam Professor in the Writing and Society Research Centre, University of Western Sydney) and the audience for a closing conversation on matters raised during the day.¹

Ivor Indyk [Reflecting on all that he has heard at the conference but also on the visual images of David projected on the screen.] I am beset by a proliferation of images of David, not only behind me, but in front of me as well. And in a way that's appropriate because for the last six or seven hours we've spoken about David Malouf, but apart from his reading he hasn't spoken himself. Indeed it is quite transgressive to have the subject of academic, of critical, discourse in the same place as the discourse itself, and that is my first question, to ask David really whether he felt he had to rescue himself from our conversations about him, whether he recognised himself in that conversation, or whether he thought there were things that had been missed altogether?

David Malouf Well, yes, it is a strange business to be a writer listening to talk about his writing, because that's not often how it happens. And one of the things that's odd about it is that in some ways the person who has done the writing always seems to me to be a quite different person from the person who walks and talks, and that person is fairly distant from me. One of the strange things is that you have to believe, if you are a writer, that a great deal of what gets into the writing, and a great deal of the writing as it gets done, is being done by somebody who is not quite the conscious you. So you feel protected, in a way. You end up finishing a book and letting it go, and mostly you never read the book again. So you know I am listening this morning and this afternoon to people talking about books and I keep thinking 'Oh yes, I remember that happened in that book.' I know the books much less well than some of the people here. You feel distanced from the book. So for you as a writer the book's *out there*. If people are talking about it they're not quite talking about you. They're talking about something that exists because it was done by a person that you've now lost touch with in many ways. You know 30 years ago, 40 years ago, 50 years ago. Or they're talking about something that was produced by somebody who, as I say, doesn't *seem* to be you and is mysterious to you.

I was grateful hearing today how often people took it for granted that the writing is not autobiographical, not directly about the person who's done the writing. That seemed to me to be accepted in quite a sophisticated way by *most* people. That was very gratifying. There was no attempt to shoot home to me—the person sitting there—total responsibility for being the person who was saying 'I' and saying 'this is what happened.' Because one of the things you realise once you start writing is that no matter how close you try to stay to the truth of what happened you will always be led astray, because what you need to write—if it's going to be interesting—is going to be changed, in terms of making a better story than what really happened. You're always aware that half of what you write as autobiographical is lies, because it's more attractive that way. So I felt distanced from all of that. There's a phrase in that last poem I read 'At Lerici':

History is made up
of nights such as this when little happens.

That goes back to almost the beginning of the session this morning, because somebody actually said ‘that you know a lot of the writing is about what didn’t happen or nothing much happened.’ So that seemed to me to round the whole thing out in a great way.

II Was there anything that annoyed or offended you, or that you felt was irrelevant or . . .

DM No, I don’t think so, because, writers are always surprised by almost anything that anybody says about the writing. I mean sometimes you say ‘Oh, I’m glad people saw that’ and other times you say ‘Ah, I see that you might say that.’ And that’s because the one thing that a writer has never done is read the book. It is impossible for the writer to read the book. The people who are the best readers of the book, know most about the book, are perceptive readers. A lot of what has got in there has got in, in an underhand kind of way. So almost anything that anyone has to say about the book is a surprise.

II Can I just throw some of the topics at you and see how you react, or whether you want to go further with them?

Colm Tóibín’s notion that for you character is the primary force in your novels. Would you agree with that?

DM Well, I think what he was talking about there was both the relationships between people and individual people’s perceptions or perplexities that lead to questions. Yeah! That is what’s there. Because I think all the writing begins for me, and I would think for most writers, with the fact that something strikes you and you say ‘Why that? Considering everything that’s going on out there, why did this thing that happened, or this thing that someone said, or this thing that I observed, why has *that* got hold of me so that I can’t let it go?’

All the writing begins with that kind of perplexity. And I think in that way writers are like children in as much as when we’re very young everything is a mystery to us. You know we look at our parents and we say ‘Why are they doing that? Why did they say that? Who are these people?’ And the only way of solving that is to eavesdrop or to be very very sharp in your observations and then ask questions. And I think at a certain point most people begin to feel ‘OK! I understand all of this now.’ I think writers are the people who say ‘I have never understood any single little bit of it, and I still don’t.’ And that that’s what the writing comes from, that sense of everything being a mystery, everything being perplexing.

I think character yes, but it’s the way characters are faced with those questions or perplexities that’s the beginning of the book.

II Yes, Colm suggested vulnerability, strangeness, you know the unfolding of motives for the character themselves they had been barely aware of—some kind of opening, opening up of the character.

DM I don’t say all writers are interested in vulnerability, but I think I am. And I think he’s accurate about that: that 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.

II Another idea that has been brought up in the conference is that of patrimony. Your books are full of families and, in the case of *Ransom*, of fatherhood, the idea of fatherhood. Do you want to say anything about the importance of families?

DM I think in almost any literature you look at one of the central, primitive relationships is that of father and son. You know it's not just that we have numbers of books that have that in their title, whether it's Turgenev or stories by De Maupassant. Over and over again, if you go to American literature for example, the relationship between fathers and sons—whether it's in Faulkner or Bellow—it's everywhere. And in the same way I might say fathers and daughters. If you think of somebody like Verdi, the operas are just obsessed over and over again with fathers and daughters; it's either one or the other. So I think that's always a subject and I think partly it's about generations, the difference between generations. It's about the way sons almost always—because they are young and weak at the beginning—always feel that the father is stronger and it's the question of 'Will I ever be as strong as that? Will I ever be able to take on the obligation of a family, a household, all of those things?' Fathers have done certain things in the world, like go to a war and sons are always saying 'Will I be able to do that?' I think there's an enormous amount of burden laid on sons to become grown men and fathers themselves. So it's always going to be interesting. In my particular case—if you mean that—I think the fact that my father was the son of immigrants and had turned himself (at what kind of cost I don't know) into an absolutely straight up-and-down Australian, as people of his generation—in a time when what you were asked to do was to assimilate completely and quickly—would do. I can see how that freed me in lots of ways to not have to do that myself. But it also raised the question of what had got lost in that? What had I been spared, that he had gone through? All of those things are interesting. All those questions came up in a very interesting way for me.

II There were two papers on 'queer theory'. What was your attitude to these? I know you don't like the word 'gay' particularly. I suspect you probably like the word 'queer' even less, but . . .

DM Well, first of all in academic terms, I got out of academia before most of these things came in. So a whole lot of things puzzle me, whether it's 'queer theory' or 'post-colonial.' But I was very interested there by the fact that 'queer' is being extended to take in nothing narrow at all, but just whatever is in some way not mainstream, that was all. And the thing I like about that is that I'm not very interested in any kind of essentialism, whether it's about sexuality, or gender, or race or ethnicity. All of those things bore me and I don't want to come in under any of these banners. So it's good to see that happening.

II I wanted to draw a comparison with Patrick White for example, because in his autobiography *Flaws in the Glass* he brought his homosexuality right to the forefront. Indeed he developed a kind of aesthetic of the multiplicity of selves using Shakespeare as the . . .

DM You thought that that had something to do with his sexuality?

II Well he says that, yes, 'the many characters of which I am composed.' And so I just wondered, because you were in a way offered the possibility of an aesthetic based on 'queer theory'—which is that of openness—whether you would consider White's claim, about the multiplicity of identifications, which is not deterministic at all, in fact it is the antithesis.

DM What I think is that Patrick's generation was very odd about all that. He hated the word 'gay.' He hated the Gay Mardi Gras. I remember once going up to the top of that house and into Patrick's study and then he took me through to another room which was the bedroom and it looked right down into the show grounds and I said 'Oh Patrick you must have such an amazing view of the Gay Mardi Gras procession when it arrives' and he said 'I *don't look!* I *don't look!*' [much laughter]

But the thing is that he grew up in a very very different world. He basically belonged to that homosexual London world of piss-elegance and campness, and I think there was a generation after that that looked on all that as if it belonged to the world of pantomime. You know, you're not bound by any of that. It's interesting. I mean *Johnno* is an interesting book to me now. I can remember when, I think it was Frank Moorhouse said of that book at some point, 'Oh this is a Clayton's gay novel. It's the gay novel you're reading when you're not reading a gay novel.' What was said today is that *Johnno* isn't a gay novel and in a way it isn't, because in the generation I grew up in—and I think it's true of both the characters in that book—they would have been absolutely shocked if anybody had said to them 'this relationship between you is a homo-erotic or homosexual relationship.' That's not what they thought of it as, and you know that's an in-between generation where that question really didn't come up. When I was writing that book I took a long time to write it. I think all the early drafts of it exist in the National Library somewhere and if you look at those they are *painfully* self-conscious and *painfully* literary and one of the things that all that self-consciousness and literariness and game playing was about was the fact that I did not want to face up to any of the questions that that book brought up, largely about guilt.

II In relation to what?

DM In relation to the Johnno character's suicide. I was doing everything I possibly could to avoid having to face all of that. It was only when I went away on a sabbatical and sat down and wrote the book—really playing none of those games at all, ironic as the prose is—and simply said to myself 'what if I wrote this book in the language of say, and in exactly the same tone of voice as, "The Year of the Foxes"? What would happen then?' And that's what I sat down and did. And I wrote that first paragraph about my father's heart attack and you know it reverses itself completely from the beginning of the little paragraph to the end. Recently somebody wrote to me and pointed out that she had looked at the University of Queensland Press—and I see Craig Munro is here who did the editing of that—and there was a previous paragraph to where it begins now and she said, 'why did you remove this paragraph?' And I looked at it: I had completely forgotten that that had happened. That paragraph was the last paragraph left from previous drafts and I couldn't let it go because I thought it was such a great piece of writing. [laughter] But it was about exactly that: it was about the play of 'what is the narrator doing here?' and I thought 'that has got to go.' I didn't want to start the book with a question about the problem of the narrator, and so that paragraph went. And it begins with a small ironical paragraph about my father having a heart examination and on the morning of death the letter turning up saying he was A1 in all respects. That's the beginning of that book then.

II What about suburbia and your attitude to it? It seems to me because you're very social, you're probably the most social of contemporary writers, not only in your accessibility and your willingness . . .

DM It's a great mask! It's a great mask!

II But it does seem as if the objects in the social realm do have for you a kind of magical quality. But I suspect that they draw that quality not from the social itself, but from the primitive, or from some kind of other realm that they are actually channeling in some ways.

DM Yeah. I was interested in all the things that Brigid [Rooney] was saying about that. I was playing a very writerly game there. Right at the beginning when that [*Johnno*] book came out, I used to go to schools and I eventually developed what seemed to me to be utterly truthful answers.

The first question was ‘Did everything in this book really happen?’ and my answer to that was ‘Yes, most of it at the time of writing.’ [much laughter] And that’s absolutely true. The other is ‘Are you the central character of this book?’ And I said ‘If you mean am I Johnno? Yes.’ And that’s partly true too because you know the interest of the relationship for me was always that when we were together I played the part that Johnno wanted me to play. Which was the nice well-brought-up, quiet, conforming person, which allowed him to be the wild one, and in the same way we reversed those roles. All I can say about that is that there was something of both those characters in each of us and so it’s not as simple as it seems in that kind of way. The other way—and again this came out in Brigid’s paper—is when the narrator says ‘Brisbane must be the most boring place in the world.’ I knew that as a writer I had been doomed, because *I* got Brisbane and nothing can ever be made of it. And of course what the whole book is doing is *making* something of Brisbane. You know the London that we get in Dickens or the St Petersburg we get in Dostoevsky or the Paris we get in Balzac, they are as much imagined places and created places as they are real places on a map, and so if you could do that with Paris and St Petersburg, why not with Brisbane? And you know again what I am saying there is that a lot of what is in that book is accurate to places, really accurate to places and streets and everything in Brisbane, but the view of the place is imagined.

II The concept of metamorphosis which Nick [Jose] brought up and which he saw as working from the base, from the earthly, all the way up to the visionary—it is a generative principle. What do you think of this claim, how do you respond to it?

DM I think metamorphosis is about imagination. And I think, as it’s laid out in *Imaginary Life*, each creature on the—what we used to call the Great Chain of Being—imagines itself into the next stage.

II Into a higher stage.

DM Yeah. And I think that imagination is the magic formula, it’s the elixir. And you can do anything with it. To accept the thing without using imagination, and using what is inherent in it to imagine it as something else, is to walk around blindfold and deaf and dumb and with no sense of feeling.

II So can I ask you about ‘wonder.’ The poem that Jim [Tulip] talked about had ‘wonder’ as its first word I think didn’t it, or led very early with it? ‘Wonder’ very close to ‘imagination.’ It is that quality, isn’t it, when imagination transforms something that’s ordinary into something that’s remarkable?

DM I think ‘wonder’ comes before imagination has done its work for you. You look at things and if your vision is actually really clear, everything is exotic, everything is

mysterious. Not just people, but things in themselves, every natural phenomenon. And I think it's out of that sense of 'wonder' at how things can be more than you can see, there comes the notion that you can *imagine*, use the imagination to make them more again.

II Ihab Hassan talked about your sense of openness to the glimmers and tremors of existence which I think is close to 'wonder' as well. But if you see it in terms of the imagination, that's a secular power, that kind of perception. Are you happy to rest on the secular or do you want to take it further?

DM Well we call it secular because we don't . . .

II The imagination.

DM No look, I actually think that that has something to do with the sacred, but I think the sacred is *entirely* in this world and you know I had a long argument with my friend Jim Tulip about this—if it is an argument—and that is that *I* can't, 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.

II And hidden?

DM No not hidden. That's what wonder is about.

II Shall we open it to the floor? Would you like to ask a question?

DM Yes. Lots of questions. Good questions. Good to have questions.

Woman David I wondered if there may be another book or novel still in you? I know you're talking about poems, more poems next year. And if there isn't, where does your energy then go? How do you just stop writing if there are not going to be any more books?

DM Oh I don't think writers ever stop. I think writers love going to the desk and sitting there and fiddling. And I think most writers find writing addictive. And they don't stop. I wouldn't advise any writer to stop writing, but I would ask them to really consider whether they need to publish. [much laughter] I think of the writing as a body of work and I won't add to that unless I see something that needs to be there in the way of fiction and something that will in some way amplify the other books. Just having a book there, hanging there like an appendage, is just not for me.

Man David you mentioned that there's so much out there to write about. Why did you write *Ransom*? That's B.C. You went all through the various histories and you went all the way back to *Ransom*. And the second question is 'is that a bookend?'

DM Sorry?

Man Is that a bookend? There was a discussion today about *Ransom* being a bookend?

DM I'll tell you what I've always thought. When I talk about this body of work, what I mean is the books *I* can write that I think of as being books that are necessary to me, but also necessary to one another. I've never thought of any of that as being chronological. The great difficulty for a writer is his second book. That's really the difficult moment, and the third book is even worse. [much laughter] I think what I did—and what I've I always said what I did—was done by accident. I wrote *Johnno* and then, instead of writing my second book, I wrote my last book: that was *An Imaginary Life*. That's a book that stands way over there from *Johnno* and what I've thought of myself as doing since is filling in the space between. In fact *An Imaginary Life* was written when I was, whatever it was, forty or something. And as Ihab Hassan pointed out to me recently it's not really an old man's book. *Ransom* in some ways was going back to *An Imaginary Life*, in a way that allowed me to write another last book.

II Can I ask you, because you are writing poetry now, what's your attitude to writing fiction as opposed to writing poetry? And is it significant that you're dedicating yourself apparently to poetry now rather than to fiction?

DM The thing is that writing a novel takes an enormous amount of energy and I don't think people past a certain age have that kind of energy any more, and if you look at the books that people as old as I am have been writing in these last years, you see that. I mean I don't think anybody would think that the last three, four books (which he's written in rapid sequence) of Philip Roth have anything like the same kind of energy or density as earlier books. And I think that one of the things about getting old and past a certain kind of energy is that it's very hard to believe in the kind of finicky detail that you need in a novel that will give it the density of reality. You become impatient about that kind of detail. And so not writing another book would be to save myself from writing a book which is thin. I mean thin in quality. Because you don't have the same energy, you don't have the same curiosity, you don't have the same patience with detail that the novel demands. And the novel is *that*. The thing that is so wonderful about the novel is what Priam [in *Ransom*] discovers, that everything out there is interesting and has its own interest although it may be strictly irrelevant. And you know Nabokov has that wonderful phrase about the 'lovely irrelevancies' of the novel. I think it's that that you lose your patience with, and savor for, when you get to a certain age.

II But the attraction of poetry now is simply that it offers the economy of means.

DM *No*, it is that it allows for a contemplative and musical form.

Woman David everything that you've said this afternoon seemed to comply with Jim's version of you as in that Romantic stream of writers. Did you mention Wordsworth and Coleridge, Jim? Certainly went through Sylvia Plath and John Berryman, and you mentioned Nabokov just then. And you're talking about imagination and wonder, so do you see yourself—I'm sure you're quite happy to see yourself with those writers—but there's a sort of Romantic individualism that you're holding out for? And I wondered, because so much of literary theory is trying to appropriate writers into politics of some kind . . . I know you do have personal politics and sometimes in the novels there is a politics that one can read there. Could you comment about how you feel about the politics that might be kind of encroaching on writers?

DM I think I agree with Henry James. He talks about the novel and says that there is only one demand that you can put on the writer as far as the novel is concerned, there's only one

thing that the novel needs have, and it is *interest*—and he would reject everything else, every kind of moral, every kind of social thing. All that a novel needs to be is *interesting*. And I would say that I'm interested myself only in what I can feel personally about. Sometimes that is about something social. But if I don't feel it strongly personally I know that I can't write about it in a way that will make it real and immediate to the reader. So there's no point in doing it. It might happen that something you say is meant to do good. That would be fine. Better than that it should do evil. But it's not something I would ever think about at the moment of writing. Is that Romantic? [laughter]

I've always been interested in Tolstoy who, having written the great novels, you know *Anna Karenina*, *War and Peace*, spent nearly 30 years of his life writing moral tales, reformist and educational and all the rest of it, and then right at the end went back and wrote *Hadji Murad*, which is one of the most wonderful things anybody ever wrote. Between 70 and 80 he wrote that book and he knew that all it was was another piece of storytelling, and he knew that it was purely self-indulgent and he said himself that he went back to it each day like a greedy school boy going back for another slice of pudding. [laughter] But you know that's where he ended up after 30 years of doing good: all he wanted to do was to write a pure story that had no moral. . . .

II And lots of blood.

DM Ah it's a wonderful piece!

II That's not strictly true in your case, because, I mean being apolitical, because your books are carefully aligned with key moments in Australian history, not *Ransom* necessarily, but in earlier fiction the First World War, the Second World War, the period of white settlement. So the books are, in a sense, interventions into the interpretation of Australian history, particularly in relation to masculinity I would have thought. I don't remember who said—I don't think it was me—that in fact you provided a kind of revision of Australian masculinity in those works.

DM Well I'd written a good deal that's got to do with the workings of society in Australia, or a notion of what Australia is and not just in fiction, but in lectures and in other ways. It's not that I don't feel strongly about those. But I think fiction is something other than that. When it comes to *Fly Away Peter* or *The Great World* or even *Remembering Babylon*, I think I fell into those books because something interested me there, and if they became books about moments in Australian history, or moments in the growth of Australian society or culture or whatever, that followed on in some way, but *my* interest was somewhere else.

And this is the thing about a writer, he has absolutely no idea where the book is going to end up or what's going to get into the book. If I think of something like *Remembering Babylon*, I know *absolutely* what made me want to write that book because I wrote a very short two-page story first. I was writing a series of very short pieces—the stories that went into *Untold Tales* were among them—and there were a couple of Australian ones. One was about Gemmy Morrell, which was a story I knew from Queensland from my childhood, it's almost a folk story up there. And the attraction of it was the moment when the two people put the gun on him and he leaps up onto the top of the fence. It was that image of a man standing up on that fence and saying 'Do not shoot, I am a Bbbbritish object' and it was the *joke* of that, which must be one of the *best* things anyone has said in the whole of Australian history [laughter] you know, as a quotable quote: 'Do not shoot, I am a British object'. It was that

difference between subject and object that is the beginning of that book. So all the things that get into it which are social, historical, Australian, really come from what a novel demands in the way of background and density and detail and reality, but the thing that drove me to it was something quite different.

Woman David it was interesting to hear a discussion of your play today because there haven't been many plays. Of course you have written librettos and also your comments about the energy required for writing novels reminded me of similar remarks by Patrick White in his latter years and the fact that he then went on to write plays and film scripts and so on. So I was just wondering whether you—two things I s'pose—whether you'd ever thought about writing more for the theatre? And also what you'd felt at the time of the production of *Blood Relations* because I know I've been wondering since the paper: there have been such wonderful new productions of Patrick White's plays now by a number of the new directors and whether you would be open to somebody putting on the play again, and perhaps a totally different interpretation from the first time?

DM Almost all the work that I've ever done in theatre has been done because somebody asked me to do it. I didn't ever initiate any of those projects myself. *Voss* I did because the Australian Opera wanted to commission someone to do that work. Patrick [White] suggested I might like to write the libretto. Richard [Meale] wanted a second work so I did *Mer de Glace*. Michael Berkeley is the husband of my London agent and he said he wanted to write an opera on *The Jungle Book* and I said 'bad idea' and then came back afterwards and said to him 'look there's a wonderful Kipling story and one could use some of *The Jungle Book*'—that's how that one happened. *Blood Relations* came because Jim [Sharman] said to me 'I want to do a production of *The Tempest* but I'd like a kind of contemporary frame for it. And then we would do *The Tempest* within that frame,' and I said 'I don't think I could manage that, but maybe we could do something like what Davenant did with it in 'The Fairy Queen.' *Hippolytus* I did because John Bell asked me if I could do a version of a Greek play for him. I would not have chosen to do those.

The operas are most satisfactory to me because it's a collaboration and about 90% of the responsibility for it falls on the composer. I actually found the theatre terrifying and for this reason, I went and sat in the audience every single night of *Blood Relations* and the thing that absolutely scared me as a writer was that if you're a novelist you know you're always dealing with one person, the reader, and you feel in great control because you hope that to the extent to which you can manipulate the writing you know you can do it all yourself. One of the things I discovered in the theatre was that every single night the play was different. Not only were all the actors and the chemistry between all the actors different, but every audience was different. And I can't deal with this, [much laughter] it was like wrestling with a jellyfish. [much laughter] As somebody who'd only been a novelist I found that impossible to deal with, so I doubt whether I'd be tempted back.

Man David you've talked about the Romantics and the imagination in ways that have set my imagination racing. But at the time when you were getting around to write *Johnno* there was a Queensland writer who was really at the height of her powers and who was very conscious of the fact that she was writing within that Romantic tradition. Did Judith Wright mean anything to you? Or was she just on another line entirely as far as your development went.

DM When I was growing up—especially in my first years at University when Judith was still around up in Tambourine and there was Val Vallis in the English Department then who

was very close to her—Judith was, and the work was, absolutely in the forefront of the mind of anybody who was writing poetry. I was just talking about her in these last days with a teacher who was teaching Judith Wright. He mentioned ‘Woman to Man’ and ‘Woman to Child’ and I said to him ‘You realise that these poems were written in 1947/48’ and he simply had never thought of that. To the extent to which those poems are about women’s business and that absolutely no women poets were writing like that—nobody, none of the American women poets, none of the English women poets—that poetry was quite extraordinary. But I did see absolutely that Judith’s huge strength was that she was writing as a woman and that meant that she was doing things that I might have to do in a different way. It is extraordinary that those poems don’t appear for example in the Lehmann and Gray anthology—and I think there’s even some slighting remark about them. But they are the poems that at that time were extraordinary because they were about a whole range of experience that till then we’d never really heard a poetic voice of.

Woman David you spoke of that wonderful image that sparked *Remembering Babylon* and I wondered if that often happens with your work, that it comes from a strong visual image, or if it’s a phrase, or if other images have conjured up the work?

DM That’s a really, really good question.

I would say that almost all of the novels of mine have really begun with a visual image. I know that, for example, *An Imaginary Life* actually began with—and it was the first thing I wrote, before I had any idea of what the book was about—that passage about Ovid and the poppy, right at the beginning, near the beginning of the book. That was the first thing I wrote, and I did not know what it was for. I just wrote the section and I thought it’s a little prose poem or it’s a little prose sketch. I had no idea what it was about, and it was only afterwards that I thought actually this is an episode from a novel about Ovid in exile. It’s like the war books. *Fly Away Peter* started off with the birds and with the idea of the bird sanctuary and it was only after I had that, that I thought ‘Oh maybe what will happen to this guy is that he will go to the First World War.’ And in fact only a few weeks before that I remember writing a letter to Tom Shapcott and saying I could not imagine anybody wanting to write a book about the First World War. [laughter] And again, with *The Great World*, I had conceived the idea of the Digger and Vic characters and written a whole lot of it, and I thought ‘Oh no, these people are going to go and become prisoners of war of the Japanese. How am I going to do *that*?’ That was not where I had started. Somewhere along the way of the book, the book demanded that that happen so you have, as the writer, to follow.

The other thing I would just say is what I said to Yvonne [Smith], that those pieces from *The School Window* had not come out of the world of experience of a 13 or 14 year old boy, and if you said to yourself: so where did it come from, and where does he think you go and look for material, if you think you’re a writer?—what those pieces tell you is ‘the movies,’ because all of that stuff comes out of the movies.

Woman David you recently slightly revised *Harland’s Half Acre* for publication and when we were talking earlier today you said you’d read one of your works for the first time in 35 years to prepare for this. I forget which one it was. I just wondered what you find when you’re re-reading your work. What do you think? Is it good? [laughter]

DM Oh I think first of all you can’t think your way back into the skin of the person who wrote it. And so that younger person—sometimes very much younger person—is always a

person who is doing things that you couldn't do now. I think most writers would say that: they look at something and they say, 'Oh, actually I couldn't do that now.' So, you could, I mean what you do now would be different. But whether it would be as good as that or not you can't say. When you go back you often are surprised. And what surprises me most often is saying to myself 'Oh that's an idea I thought I had for the first time last Saturday.' [much laughter] And there it is, you know, 25 years ago. That happens a lot. The last time you, the writer, ever read the book (except it's not reading the way a reader reads) is when you do the proofs, and that is such an appalling kind of trudge through this stuff that you can't wait to get to the end of it and you say 'I never want to read any of this ever again.' So mostly you don't, unless somebody calls you up to read a passage. That happens to you sometimes. Absolutely the worst time that that ever happened to me was at the Adelaide Festival. I went out to a school and the kids wanted to talk about *Johnno*. And then somebody said would you read some of it for us. And somebody said could you read from page 192 or whatever it was, and I started to read from page 192 and I turned the page and what there was, was that last letter, and I just knew I couldn't read it. It was just absolutely the worst thing that's ever happened. Even at this moment I sort of . . .

II Why?

DM I just couldn't read it.

II But that contradicts what you said before, if it had been written by someone else—if it was as if it had been written by someone else, then you wouldn't balk at reading it.

DM But it's not, I mean it was just *that*. No, there are certain things there that move you a great deal. And I've always had difficulty about reading those things out loud. And I'd usually not put myself in the position of ever having to do it. But this was an occasion where I just forgot that when I turned the page what there would be would be that letter. And I simply could not read it.

II I don't think it's for me to offer the final tribute, but personally to thank you very much for answering these questions in such a full and open manner. We've had a number of public conversations over the years. You've always been wonderful in your graciousness and your generosity in talking to people and in offering your ideas—and the same generosity is in the books as well, obviously.

DM I'd just say thank you to all the people who gave papers. That was great. Thank you to all the people who are here who did that. They were all very generous and I was very happy to hear them.

[Applause]

ⁱ This transcript has been edited by Michael Griffith, Elaine Lindsay, Ivor Indyk and David Malouf.