

## Religion as Discourse: David Malouf's *The Conversations at Curlow Creek*

James Tulip

At the end of David Malouf's *The Conversations at Curlow Creek* (1996), the central character Michael Adair, the officer who had been sent by the New South Wales colonial authorities to supervise the hanging of Carney, the bushranger, is about to embark by ship from Sydney to Ireland, but finds himself listening to a bizarre account of what was supposed to have happened to himself and Carney. It was an account based on rumour and spread abroad in New South Wales through the popular mind. Carney the bushranger, according to this account, did not die but was rescued at the eleventh hour and whisked away across an inland sea to 'a settlement of disaffected ticket-of-leave men and runaway convicts'. Adair himself, now known in this developing myth or legend as O'Dare, is said to have assisted in Carney's escape. He has become 'the hero of the hour, a true embodiment of the spirit of Irish resourcefulness and derring-do, and Daniel Carney a martyr miraculously resurrected' (p. 207).

It is a strange Epilogue that Malouf has written, one which distorts the central narrative but one which seems essential in the writing of the book. The Epilogue emphasises the importance and place of *interpretation*; of how things are perceived and reported; from what vantage point, by whom and to whom; according to what motive or what end; and how they correspond to the dominant mind set and ideology of the day. The Epilogue highlights Malouf's method of presentation in his novel as *discourse*. The term 'conversations' in the title indicates the attention being given to what is being said between two men, and how this is being interpreted by them, by the author, and by ourselves as readers. The novel may stay within the limits of literature and fiction; yet, I believe, it resonates religiously in the seriousness with which Malouf seeks to understand human lives and social realities at a moment of crisis.

Specifically, Malouf in *The Conversations at Curlow Creek* has in mind how the bushranger phenomenon has come to hold such sway in the popular and artistic Australian imagination. How Irish strength and Irish suffering have constructed for themselves such a presence in the Australian psyche. Behind the bushranger figures of Carney and his companions there are for Malouf the Sydney

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Nolan images of Ned Kelly. And behind Captain Adair for Malouf in a more complex way there is Patrick White's figure of Voss, the foreigner coming to terms with Australia. Malouf is building his interpretation on, or in relation to, others' interpretations.

The central situation in *The Conversations at Curlow Creek* is a surprisingly simple one, but one which readers of Malouf's novels such as *Johnno*, *Child's Play* and *An Imaginary Life* will soon recognise. A man is about to die, Carney is to be hanged at dawn. Adair is the supervising officer. Together they talk throughout the night. It is this sharing of minds before an impending death that is the subject of the book. But Adair has also come with a special purpose in mind, to find out more from Carney about the 'dead' leader of the bushrangers - a man called Dolan - and to probe a possible link between the activities of the bushrangers and the more general threat of Irish rebellion in the colony. Why Adair is so interested personally in Dolan, the Australian name of the bushrangers' leader, is because Dolan was, in fact, his own brother, Fergus, or foster-brother from Ireland. Adair has a powerful personal interest in confirming the death of Fergus both for his own sake and for the sake of Virgilia, the girl and now woman, who had with Michael Adair and Fergus shared an intensely close relationship while growing up in Ireland.

The book has a basic double movement. While moving forward fatefully towards Carney's hanging, the actual presentation goes backwards into the individual recollections by the two men of their lives in Ireland. This doubleness - a kind of soft dualism - is a feature of *The Conversations at Curlow Creek*. Malouf seems not to be able to posit someone's identity without positing a contrasting identity. Things often come in opposites in Malouf's fiction, and there are a dozen pairings of this dialectical kind in this latest novel. Yet *The Conversations at Curlow Creek* has, as I have said, a generally softer tone to it, an attitude and point of view closer to meditation and unified reflectiveness than anything previous in Malouf's writing. It is this unity of tone and how it is achieved, that I wish to consider here.

Three things stand out for me in Malouf's writing in this novel. First is the style itself, how the point of view slides in empathy from third person narration to first person narration and back again. There is remarkable flexibility in the way Malouf sees his subject subjectively and objectively. Second is the ideological commitment Malouf has to an idealist perception of reality whilst remaining realistic, that is to say how highly he values not only events but the interpretation of events as being part of what is real. And third, how

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Malouf is at the edge of seeing *The Conversations at Curlow Creek* as a crucifixion and resurrection story, and of there being a religious logic to the historical presentation of Australian experience.

These three elements comprise a subtle and sophisticated meditation on life under the aspect of death. It is in this sense that Malouf's novel is 'religion as discourse', a profound set of reflections finding verbal expression in a way that is open and accessible to a modern reader. The book has real depth and meaning, yet a conversational or confiding ambience to it.

There is clearly an objectifying tenor to Malouf's style but not in a way that makes him into a realistic or descriptive writer. Consider the following passage from Chapter 2 of *The Conversations at Curlow Creek* where we are being given an analysis of Adair's character, ostensibly by Adair himself.

It was true that there was something in his nature that was grave and admired restraint. But restraint did not come naturally to him. What he saw when he looked into himself was laxity, a tendency to dreamy confusion and a pleasure too in giving himself up to it, a dampness of soul for which he had a hopeless scorn and which he feared might after all be part of his operatic inheritance. He had grasped at an early age that few things are as simple as they appear or as we might wish them to be, and people never. He had a high regard for the incomprehensible. Perplexity, he thought, was the most natural consequence of one's being in the world - which did not mean that one should yield to it, or to the disorder which, unless one took a firm hand, was its unhappy consequence. He had a horror of disorder, and when he had a horror of a thing it was usually, he found, because he had discovered it so plainly in himself (p. 35).

The point of view, however, from which the discourse is being given is in the third person. It follows a pattern of 'He ... He ...He ...'. It could be a seventeenth century character study, analytical almost satirical. But this distance and detachment comes with a strangely instinctive empathy on the writer's part. It is as if Malouf, as author, is inside the character. The effect is, therefore, of a first person narrator speaking of himself but from a vantage point outside himself. This transformation in stance from distance to closeness is a vital and general part of the Malouf discourse.

We note, too, the sustained, run-on manner of Malouf's analysis. Elsewhere in *The Conversations at Curlow Creek* this manner takes

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on baroque dimensions. Malouf's prose often takes on the form of a baroque church, its ceiling of ideas clear and strong, but the interest lying in the convoluted decorativeness around the pillars, windows and altar. There are, indeed, many analogies for Malouf's artistry as a master of prose, which he is so clearly in this novel. Music, poetry, painting are all called to mind by his handling of the medium of prose here.

Given the simple starting point of the night time conversations of Adair and Carney, Malouf's writing moves with a freedom of association and analysis backwards into the Irish past of the two men. Yet this freedom has a strange order to it, and not merely the order of Malouf's remarkable neatness. There is an ideological dimension to his imagination which values highly the ideas and beliefs of the common or popular mind. The novel is valuing the way the people and their culture shape the beliefs they hold and their attitudes to history. This preference for the simple, even the primitive, is something that seems to express the authorial mind in a subtle, if cautious, way.

There is a good deal of emphasis on the characters being aware of the other characters having special powers and presences. Garrety, one of the soldiers who will eventually himself become a bushranger, has gifts as a tracker with an instinctive feel for the Australian bush.

They were always moving into unknown country.

It was as if some shadow of him had detached itself and been sent ahead, while he was still there in the saddle beside them, riding with that easy slouch he had of his long torso, and with that sharp smell of sweat on him that was unmistakable, so that you knew at any time just where he was, to this side or the other of you, or before or behind.

....Garrety's knowledge came from a source he did not care to recognize. He would let nothing that Garrety had prepared pass his lips and touch nothing he had laid a hand on. (p. 23)

Fergus in Ireland, growing up as a child, impresses the impressionable maid servants as having supernatural powers. It is a quality which also attaches Michael Adair to Fergus; and it is this charismatic quality that makes Fergus (as well as his six feet six inches in height) a leader among the bushrangers. Malouf builds up around these figures a sensuous shadowy feeling of presence.

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Even when the figures themselves are absent or lost or dead, their presence remains tangible. It carries overtones of a resurrection presence.

Adair, who is a figure of eighteenth century rationalism and common sense, finds himself in a triad of personalities and social forces - himself, Virgilia and Fergus. His commonsense is tested against their different romanticisms. Malouf allows this set of exchanges and web of relationships to function freely. There is no resolution of realism over and against romance.

Typical of this is the way Malouf anticipates the legend of Carney, Fergus and Adair himself becoming folk heroes. The Epilogue, as noted earlier, sceptically recounts the way popular legend has Carney carried off over the inland sea. Yet Malouf, in Chapter 9, has Adair dream a dream of the inland sea and of a boat coming towards him. Unlike the later popular myth, Adair's dream ends with a kind of an ascension effect with things being sucked up into the sky.

It is real, he breathed. It is a door in the darkness, a way out. His heart lifted at the thought and there came a clatter, far out, an explosion of wings, and he saw that in the midst of the commotion was a boat, a long dug-out driven by many rowers; far out but rapidly approaching. He stepped forward to call to them. But the moment his breath flew out there was an answering upheaval, as if a sudden wind had struck the lake. Its surface rippled like silk, and the whole weight and light of it was sucked upwards in a single movement that took his breath away; a single, shiningly transparent sack, it was being hauled upwards, as in a theatre, by invisible hands. He tried to shout but was breathless. He reached up, with a terrible tightening of his chest, to pluck it back.

It was moving fast now, like an air-balloon, soaring aloft till it was just a distant, spherical drop, rather milky; then, as the sun struck it, a brilliant speck. Gone, with all its vision, of light, birds, fish, men, rescue. He was choking. At the end of his breath. But the presence at his side was still there, breath labouring, pumping.

He woke, and had the uneasy feeling of having stepped from one dream into another that was even more remote. He laboured to catch his breath. Daniel Carney's one eye was fixed upon him with a savage watchfulness.

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'I must have dozed off,' he said. It was half a question.

'Yes sir, you did sleep for a bit.'

'How long?'

'A minute or two. Maybe less.' (pp. 176-177)

Adair, the man of reason, is susceptible, as seen here, to the impact of fantasy; and, more persuasively, to the power of personalities such as in *Virgilia* and *Fergus*. Malouf is speculating here in a way that could lead to mere fantasy. However he balances this ascension effect against its opposites and surrounds it with realistic contexts.

At times this idealist trait to his imagination leads him towards a sacramentalism which invests physical details with a transcendental effect. Carney, the bushranger, just before his hanging asks permission to wash himself in the stream close by. Malouf makes a good deal of this issue, having prepared for it by another of the soldiers, Kersey, enjoying himself fishing in these same waters just before. And even earlier in the novel, in Chapter 3, in Carney's one powerful and happy memory of Ireland, he had been taken as a common working man, cleaned up and dressed by some gentry, to allow a blind girl or woman to feel him as if he were someone else, someone she had once loved. Carney's bathing on that occasion held something of the same sacramental power as does his bathing before his execution in Australia. It had been his one experience of love in life, a brief baptism into grace.

Malouf makes strong use of personal presence and symbolism to underline his meanings in these ways. He also uses absence effectively. The hanging of Carney is not shown. There has been, admittedly, a clear anticipation of Carney's death in the way the soldiers, Langhurst and Garrety, dig the grave. Garrety, almost too obviously, since he will die as a bushranger, lies down in the grave as if to test it for size. But Carney is not actually shown in Malouf's novel as being hanged or buried. And as the soldiers watch Adair looking at Carney washing himself, they wonder if Adair really wants Carney dead. It all adds up to a state of mind which gets finally articulated in the Epilogue when the people's belief that Carney is not dead is a major point on which the novel ends.

To suggest that Malouf is feeling for the logic of the Christian crucifixion and resurrection themes may be an extreme and unnecessary idea to entertain. Yet while Malouf shows little interest in the doctrinal aspects of these beliefs, he draws upon them for his

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more limited and historical approach to suggest the way myths arise in a modern society like Australia. The feeling for Carney and Fergus (or Dolan) seems to be similar to the way the Australian culture has responded to the Ned Kelly figure. Once hanged, Ned Kelly has lived on in the popular mind.

*The Conversations at Curlow Creek* takes seriously the apparently secular tradition of Australia. But it presses the secular to the point where it becomes the spiritual. Were the bushrangers martyrs? Rebels? Prophetic presences? The dominant character in Malouf's novel is that of Adair, a figure who resists any such extreme notions. Yet the degree to which the secular Adair is sympathetic and susceptible to an alternative point of view regarding beliefs and values is the impressive ground which Malouf moves onto in this novel. His discussion of these matters expresses a fine religious intelligence, regardless of any formal affiliations.