

DAVID MALOUF: THE LONG BREATH OF THE YOUNG WRITER

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In Malouf's poem, set in Venice, 'Ode: Stravinsky's Grave,' the poet speaks of

. . . how

we put out crumbs to catch
birds and such scraps
of sky as are filled with
a singing; and what like Love

is not to be caught
by intent, the longer breath
of late works.

(*First Things Last* 58)

But is there another 'long breath,' I am asking, which is also 'not to be caught by intent'? I mean that early breath that comes to the young writer, in Malouf's case, turning his eyes from the printed page that captivates the young reader to the blank page that invites the young writer to take up his pen, to place his fingers on the keys of a typewriter, because he feels that he might make something new there? And sensing, too, as Anthony Uhlman has argued about ways of thinking in literature, that the power of words, for some people, can 'open possibilities,' invite moments of understanding, so that the writer values 'getting *beyond* words *through* words, by making use of signs—such as the music of language or powerful images' [my italics] (12). How might this early breath, if felt keenly, shape the kind of work that the young writer will try? Might it still be discerned in the works of his mature hand?

To investigate these questions, I have been studying three short stories Malouf wrote as an adolescent and two he published as a young adult. I will focus briefly on each story and, in doing so, venture back to that early time in his career before looking forward from that vantage point to later works. I realise I am seeking a creature to be found now only in traces: it is the bird of Malouf's young writing self who flew away long ago. Perhaps my small crumbs may attract him back here, and better inform my research-in-progress.

Something of the lively, curious, observant boy can be glimpsed in his poetry—'Nostalgie,' 'Early Discoveries' and 'The Year of the Foxes' to name just a few poems about his childhood in Brisbane collected in the first section of *Revolving Days*—and in his autobiographical work *12 Edmondstone Street*. But these are recollections of an adult and we do not see anyone writing in these works. Those years when Malouf was first learning the craft and discipline of writing seem hidden, except as hints in later stories, as when Charlie Dowd, in his early twenties, in 'War Baby,' has a vivid memory of his younger self 'urgently, solemnly setting down his thoughts. Looking up. Biting the end of his pen. Writing again. . . . Impossible now [Charlie surmises] to get back into that boy's head' (*Every Move You Make* 124). It is a timely warning, but makes me more curious and wanting to press on. To catch a

glimpse, Judith Rodriguez's recollection offers enticing evidence. She writes of a moment early in 1950 in Brisbane when she visited her school friend, Jill Malouf, who had moved from South Brisbane to a new house built just after the war. She writes:

One day when I was 13 . . . I was invited to the [family's] three-storey brick house . . . On the way up the carpeted stairs from the living room, Jill opened the door and said: 'This is my brother and he's writing a novel.'

And so he was—a boy with dark curly hair and large dark eyes, working at a large typewriter and undoubtedly writing a novel. The room was full of bookcases, squads of maroon classics. [Malouf was 15 at the time.] ('Away in the Sixties' 8)

Christine Alexander in *The Child Writer from Austen to Woolf* observes of the origins of juvenilia that 'children learn largely by imitation, their early writings represent a microcosm of the larger adult world, disclosing its concerns, ideologies, and values' (11). Extending the concept of imitation, Paul John Eakin in *How Our Lives Become Stories* follows Jerome Bruner in regarding the family as the 'vicar of culture' for the child writer, establishing 'genres of life-accounting' that influence the kinds of narrative a child will form as the autobiographical self (117, quoting 'Invention' 32). He adds that 'we can think of the child's sense of self as emerging interactively within a crucible of family stories and cultural scripts' (117).

Malouf's earliest models of life-accounting and of stories—varied as they were in the two large extended immigrant families (Lebanese and English) from which his parents came—showed that time was a shifting thing, that past lives and places flowed into the present; they still determined so much—tones of voice, small details of daily living, what was best to eat, which personal manners had adult approval, the ornaments evoking an earlier life that decorated the plate rail around the walls of a best room. The present, too, as World War II commenced when he was only five, was uncertain, dangerous and the future for Australia might be darker still. Richly imaginative art forms such as fiction and poetry, then film and the performing arts, came to matter so much to Malouf by his late teens perhaps because they offered complex forms of life-accounting—even means of redress—to a boy who found his familiar world puzzling, and shaded by dilemmas of identity and history.

Stories and storytellers were all around him, engaging him: aunts, uncles, neighbours, visitors, people who dropped in hard on their luck and looking for work, damaged by the Depression or the Great War. These people interested him greatly as he talked with them. What might the young listener make of all those elaborate, passionate family accounts his mother told about her early life in London, or the domestic romances read out on long, warm afternoons? Or tales of how her parents and family travelled to Australia on the *Orsova* in 1913? To imagine people and events so intensely that they became 'real' again was a quality Malouf experienced in the life narratives he heard at home:

. . . I knew my mother's parents only through the stories she told, but she told them so often, and with so many vivid appeals to what she knew would impress and excite us, that these middle-class English grandparents, who had left a house in New Cross with servants' bells in every room for a tent on the goldfields of Mount Morgan, though I had never seen them in the flesh, were more real to me

than my father's people who lived two doors away and whom I saw every day of the week. ('As Happy as This' 99)

Adventures came into his own hands as he became an avid reader, with tales from Shakespeare and the leather-bound classic novels of Dumas, Dickens and the Brontes, gifts from his practical father. He heard his grandfather's tuneful tales, although not in English; Malouf recalls, those stories were 'like poems, full of repeated figures and odd rhetorical questions . . . I would get so lost [as a child] in the telling that I almost understood: not the words but the tune' (12 *Edmondstone Street* 5). The war-time newspapers and cinema newsreels especially impacted a boy who was becoming aware of what difference might mean, who, though brought up in the Catholic faith, realised by the time he was eight or nine (1942–43), that his mother and her family were Jewish. At just this time the Nazi extermination of large numbers of Jews in Europe was being reported in Australia and internationally, leading the Australian Government to endorse the joint statement of condemnation made by governments in London, Washington and Moscow in 1942 (Turnbull 8). As well as becoming aware of what discrimination and difference might mean, the young Malouf knew there were secrets and deep sources of conflict within and between families. His stories, early and late, notably explore the term 'happiness,' suggesting that he wondered whether any place could be safe now and whether a happy life, however defined, could be achieved. I will follow this line in his work in more detail shortly.

The received viewpoint in studies of his work to date—that Malouf is essentially a poet first who came later to fiction—is immediately challenged as we turn to the earliest extant juvenilia as well as Judith Rodriguez' observation: here are exciting, well-crafted short stories and an adolescent who was already keenly writing novels in his spare time and holidays. Malouf's early works show his love of narrative, of ways a story could attract and hold a reader, as he had been held so many times by the worlds opened by words.

In September 1948, when he was fourteen, three stories by D. Malouf of Form IV A were published in *The School Window*, the students' magazine of Brisbane Grammar School. They include a courtroom drama, 'The Longest Hour,' about an accused man awaiting the jury's verdict, a story for which he won the inaugural Thomas Thatcher Memorial Prize, his first literary award. An apparently related tale features a mother's grief when her family name is so tainted that her housekeeper walks out of her employment. Titled (after *Julius Caesar*) 'Et Tu Brute,' this short piece mentions the public disgracing of the son as the cause of the mother's anguish. A third story, 'Dream Journey,' evokes similar intensity of feeling but takes the form of an allegory that is full of disturbing visions and prophecies. Malouf recalls that the stories were ones he made up—not pieces resulting from any teacher-assigned topics—and were probably influenced by films he saw at the time (Interview 2013). They show that, as an adolescent, he first thought he needed to imagine everything he wrote, a contrast with the stories from 1955 which draw strongly on his memories and life experience.

Considered together, the *School Window* stories reveal a young writer experimenting with prose that blends precise, descriptive details with highly imagined, psychological drama. He crafts carefully what he wants his readers to notice, positioning close-up and then wider angles of perception and using, as in films, contrasts of light and shade to heighten the mood. While much of the student writing in the 1948 edition offers accomplished essays and poems that engage in lively ways with the English and European literary canon the students were studying, Malouf takes another tack: his stories work to grab the reader through pace, atmosphere and character rather than erudition. Each story values the inner life of its main

character and blends interior and exterior views in a way that anticipates the importance of such balancing in Malouf's works. This brief quote from 'The Longest Hour' gives the flavour:

An air of tension came over the large, crowded courtroom. As the jury filed out through the door of their box, all eyes turned from them to the unfortunate prisoner who stood firm in the dock. To the callous spectators, as they settled back to wait for the verdict, he seemed perfectly controlled and unmoved. But what were his real feelings?

[The man becomes tense and anxious.]

The jury was to decide his fate, life or death . . .

Suddenly his self control gave way. His clammy hands clenched the rail of the dock as his nails dug deep into the soft wood, while the two words, 'Life-Death,' echoed through his brain. His eyes were opened wide, his lips trembled convulsively, his hand shook . . . The regular fast beats of his heart grew louder and louder. The ticking of the clock over his head kept time with his heart beats. The Life-Death words of his brain joined the strange chorus . . . until the whole room seemed to be swaying in time with the words. He uttered a cry, swayed, grasped the nothingness of the air, and fell. ('The Longest Hour')

The main character, Thomas Jones, is an intense, isolated individual, who longs for freedom, idealised as a release into nature: he could 'pause and listen to the song of the birds' or 'climb to the top of the hill and feel the wind in his face and hair.' He clings to the slim hope of an 'innocent' verdict 'as a man adrift on the boiling seas will cling to a frail log.' He suffers 'the longest hour of his life'—a compressed time that leads to a verdict of . . . [suspense is held tight to the very last word of the story]—'guilty': the harsh sound of the word predicts the prisoner's grim future.

In this story an important trope appears: the passionate, solitary character who faces his society's judgement, and believes all happiness could be lost. The trope continues across Malouf's mature works, re-appearing three decades later, for instance, in the predicament of Ovid, sentenced by the Emperor Augustus for a vague crime and exiled from Rome, in *An Imaginary Life* (1978). That story, commencing after Ovid has been found guilty and the sentence carried out, almost seems to take up where 'The Longest Hour' leaves off. Ovid, at first, feels hopeless. Then unexpectedly he has a transforming experience that leaves him 'immeasurably, unbearably happy' (152). Three decades further again, and the conclusion of the essay *The Happy Life* (2011) comes into view with its praise of Solzhenitsyn's *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, the story of a political prisoner who endures his sentence by purposely noticing incidents that, day by day, bring him a sense of hope in the most abject setting. At a midway point in that more than sixty year period since 1948, we hear it in the voice of Frank Harland when he insists that suffering, though terrible, can obscure the harder struggle for happiness (96-97). *Harland's Half Acre* (1984) offers a variation on the trope of the passionate outsider: the visionary artist who is happiest creating at a self-imposed distance from society contrasts with the lawyer Phil Vernon who learns to be happy that he is *not* alone, even as he deals, as Frank does, with the essential yet conflicted influence of family.

In a further modulation, *The Conversations at Curlow Creek* (1996) explores the prisoner–executioner relationship as the police officer Michael Adair converses through the night with the condemned outlaw Daniel Carney. Adair has been sent to supervise Carney’s hanging the following morning. Their conversations, reminiscences and dreams turn each man towards new realisations, tentative yet hopeful, of what it means to be free and happy, even when death is inevitable. By this point in his career, Malouf has moved his youthful concern with a crisis for the accused into an extended, complex narrative that questions the nature of justice. By balancing a character’s awareness of the body as the centre of life with metaphysical concerns about fate, grace and forgiveness, he opens transitional spaces where story-telling can weave new possibilities, such as the folktales that grow in the colony of Sydney about an outlaw who was saved from execution by an Irishman named ‘O’Dare.’

Another of the *School Window* stories, ‘Et Tu, Brute,’ is apparently a sequel to ‘The Longest Hour.’ The mother of a son found guilty of an unnamed offence sits ‘destitute and alone,’ thankful that at least she still has one faithful supporter, Mary, her housekeeper and companion, who addresses her formally as ‘Mrs Rolands.’ Fearful that she will lose her good name in society, Mary enters the room to tell the shocked mother that she is leaving; Mary can no longer withstand the gossip arising from the son’s conviction. The pacing of the narrative shows the young Malouf’s growing confidence with structure, as it invites a reader’s immediate attention by foregrounding a mother’s turmoil:

She sat alone. The meanly furnished and dusty room was lit only by a small lamp which threw a pale shadow over her haggard face, with its silvery tangled hair, deep-sunken eyes and thin, bitter lips.

In the final paragraph, the movement of the wind evokes the desolation Mrs Rolands feels as her housekeeper walks out:

The door banged in the wind, as it was blown to and fro. The outer door slammed. Mary was gone. The wind rustled the papers on the floor, ruffled the ragged curtains. It wisped about the tangled silver hair of the still woman in the chair. Even Mary had deserted her. She was alone and uncared for, destitute and alone. (‘Et Tu, Brute’)

The young writer’s attention to carefully reinforcing sounds and meanings is evident, creating a kind of background music that heightens the scene’s cinematic quality. The forceful consonants (‘banged,’ ‘blown,’ ‘slammed’) and alliteration (‘rustled,’ ‘ruffled,’ ‘ragged’) give rhythmic force to Mary’s departure, while the verb ‘wisped’ subtly links the remnant of the wind’s force with the one who sits alone. Her ‘silver hair,’ in turn, is accented by ‘still,’ while the rhyme of ‘hair’ and ‘chair’ introduces a brief coda for the tableau-like scene. Two shorter, final sentences show the woman’s mind paused in shock, as ‘alone’ is repeated. Similar to ‘The Longest Hour,’ the closing word in each case (‘guilty,’ ‘alone’) has a force that condenses and heightens the emotive intent of the narrative.

In the third of the *School Window* stories titled ‘Dream Journey’ the young Malouf offers his vision of the present and future, influenced by Joseph Addison’s ‘Vision of Mirza.’ The piece was available to children at the margins of empire over two hundred years after its appearance in London in *The Spectator* in 1711 thanks to editors who included it in Grade VII of the Queensland School Reader, a series Malouf relished in his early school years (‘Old School Readers’). If ‘The Longest Hour’ anticipates what may be called the interior/exterior dynamic

in Malouf's story-telling, 'Dream Journey' points towards the intuitive, mythopoetic, idealist strand that is also a signature in his works.

In 'Dream Journey,' the reader is prepared for a nightmare rather than a comforting vision:

I awoke! Whether it was night or day I could not tell, as it seemed to be that hour when all sense of time is lost. My room appeared to be filled with the sound of some strange music which caused me to rise and open the window, seeking whence this weird music came. As the window opened the eerie strains grew louder of a sudden, and screamed about in the air like the chorus of a thousand shrill violins as it was wafted to and fro on the wind, now loud as thunder, now soft as the whispering wind itself. ('Dream Journey')

The narrator's voice, in a cinematic as much as a literary style, speaks over the action in an elaborate idiom, purposely using archaic words that evoke a fable or legend, and invoking a soundscape of 'weird music.' The boy who is both awake and dreaming understands from a sage-like guide that his life will face difficulties, a warning reinforced as they travel together through dark woods, up precipitous mountain paths and across desert plains.

The young dreamer sees visions of the Forest of Fate, as well as the Mount of Arts (described as 'one of the greatest forces of good'), while the Mount of Science, by contrast, 'although now man's greatest aid, will some day, when he has reached the summit, destroy all life,' a chilling post-World War II view that makes 'Dream Journey' much darker than Addison's vision. The narrator desires happiness but finds it to be a mirage:

'And that?' I asked, pointing to a group of towers and buildings some distance away in the centre of the desert.

'That is the City of Happiness,' replied the old man.

'I should like to go there,' I said, stepping forward quickly, only to have the vision disappear as I moved. I turned to my guide in amazement.

'No, my son, you cannot visit that city now. The path to Happiness is hidden, and is found by very few . . . ' ('Dream Journey')

As dreams are powerful messengers in Malouf's works, it is notable that one of his earliest stories concerns a visionary dream. It points to poems like 'Twelve Night Pieces' (*Poems 1975–76*) and to the kind of story-telling that shapes Frank Harland's encounter with a dream spirit domain in *Harland's Half Acre*. We can look ahead, as well, to stories such as 'Southern Skies,' 'Out of the Stream' and 'A Medium' in the *Antipodes* collection (1985)—all featuring adolescents who experience life with a mixture of acceptance and intensity, open to visions that can be glimpsed only if the gaze of the young person is sufficiently loyal to the 'real' as well as the imaginary. In later works such a balance of sensibilities informs special moments of consciousness, as for young trooper Ben Langhurst who experiences a 'strangeness, now that he was alone with the shivering of the leaves, a sense of spaces, beyond the trees, that he could not see into' (*The Conversations at Curlow Creek* 193).

As part of the Thomas Thatcher Memorial Prize in 1948, Malouf received a book published that year titled *The Short Story* by the Irish writer Sean O'Faolain. Over the next decade, the

young writer found that this book became extremely important to him: it was ‘like a bible, a writing-school’ through which he discovered the stories and narrative techniques of masters such as Chekhov, Maupassant, Hemingway and Joyce (Interview 2013). He took to heart the book’s epigraph from Flaubert’s *Letters*: ‘One is not at all free to write this or that . . . The secret of masterpieces lies in the concordance between the subject and the temperament of the author.’ To write in a way that was ‘true’ for him became an important compass point for Malouf as he was seeking themes and characters with which he felt an affinity and which would touch those inner ‘struggles’ that were part of his becoming a writer. Earlier in life he had supposed he would become a musician and composer, taking up the piano and violin and playing in amateur orchestras in his youth. As he studied *The Short Story* and read widely in his adolescence and early adulthood, the appeal of writing grew stronger. O’Faolain instructs prospective writers that it is necessary, first, that they value their ‘interior world,’ maintaining a crucial balance between their circumstances and temperament (19). Fancifully making things up would never do, in his view; rather the writer would produce good work through ‘personal struggle’ as was the case, for example, in Anton Chekov’s life. How a beginning writer might make use of such advice becomes evident, in Malouf’s case, in the stories of his early twenties to which I will refer shortly and in his early poems titled ‘Interiors’ (*Four Poets* 1962) which explore troubling perspectives of childhood memory and mortality.

Around sixteen years of age, Malouf’s writing, he recalls, began to focus more on realistic themes, with writers discussed in *The Short Story* (Maupassant, Chekhov and Hemingway in particular) as influences. He came to favour a simpler vocabulary and more subtle ways of conveying feelings, often through the hand of a character touching an object. Learning to observe people closely as he matured, he would follow his curiosity into what he felt was the mystery of their lives, imagining details about their personalities and actions, and combining these in characters he created (Interview 2012).

Achieving academic success in his senior high school years, he decided to continue his studies in English, French and Latin at the University of Queensland. He would often read at the State Library and the WEA Trades Library in the city of Brisbane, which had an exhaustive range of English and American poets, novels of the thirties and forties, as well as social and psychological studies by authors such as Carl Jung, Georg Groddeck and Havelock Ellis. Having first encountered Tolstoy’s *Anna Karenina* in a French edition at school, he was pleased to find on the library shelves more Russian authors such as Gogol, Dostoevsky and Turgenev, as well as Balzac’s novels of ‘la comédie humaine.’ Such authors could bring their own places and times alive for a young reader, while showing how their characters struggled to find happiness (or often failed to do so). Through them, Malouf’s personal ‘writing school’ continued, as O’Faolain’s book was showing him how he might discern the ‘technical struggle’ of an author with conventions of expression, with subject, narrative construction and language, following the motto ‘solvitur scribendo’: it is by writing that the problems of writing are solved (*The Short Story* 135-205).

In 1955, he submitted two entries to the university paper *Semper Floreat* for a short story competition, under the pseudonym of ‘Marius.’ These works mark an early appearance of a character (in this instance named ‘Terry’) based on his friend John Milliner, who is partly represented in the ‘Johnno’ character of Malouf’s first published novel (1975). Both stories reveal a concern with the nature of friendship and trust, as well as the tentative nature of happiness.

‘A Very Simple Story’ relates how Terry and the first person narrator have a conversation at a local bar. Terry offers views on the difficult relationships of parents and children, particularly speaking of not being close to his father, a returned World War II veteran, despite his father’s efforts. The narrator is wary of Terry’s complaining tone, while Terry, in turn, increasingly senses his friend’s unease. As Terry is going overseas, he has bought a silver wristwatch for his father, as a token of reconciliation. The story concludes with both friends looking at the watch and agreeing that it will please Terry’s father. The passive, questioning role of the narrator and the more emotionally free, lamenting voice of Terry play against each other to suggest the strain not only in Terry’s relationship with his father, but also the distrust that has entered the friendship. The equivocation in the narrator’s mind is expressed by a subtle shift in gaze (‘He looked at me but this time our eyes did not meet’) and by the digressive strategy of a small play of his finger on the surface of the bar, an analogy of his discomfort as Terry winds up his complaint:

I said nothing, but trailed my forefinger in a long wet line across the polished top of the bar and made a circle that would not close. The last drop, where my finger closed the circle, always slid back, leaving just a scrawl of wet lines.
(*Semper Floreat*, 15 April 1955: 5)

Exploring a theme of inter-generational tensions suits Malouf’s young adult audience, many of whose parents had gone to war. It is the difficulty in the peer friendship, however, which stands out, a problem of communication and trust. Malouf experiments with focalising the nature of the relationship through understatement, pauses in conversations, references to body language and emphasis on key objects such as the bar top and the wristwatch, all strategies that develop greater subtlety in his subsequent fiction. By introducing such strategies the title ‘A Very Simple Story’ assumes an ironic tone.

The other story in *Semper Floreat* in April 1955, titled ‘Happiness,’ features an emotionally reticent narrator who recalls wandering with Terry around Stradbroke Island. Nothing much happens outwardly as the two young men walk up from the beach and climb about an abandoned mining site one hot, blustery afternoon. The action unfolds in the narrator’s inner view and the story offers a landscape that he invites the reader to enter:

You walk up the island about seven miles by the beach, then turn inland, and the mine is just beyond the second line of dunes, between the sea and a low range of sparsely-wooded hills. . . .

The sea was blowing white, and except for the banks and swirling gutters between, it broke in a long white line down the beach as far as we could see.
(*Semper Floreat*, 1 April 1955: 4)

Compared with the *School Window* stories, this one has abandoned exaggerated drama, entering instead a world of more subtle near and far views, as Malouf starts to blend memory and fiction to shape his familiar realm of Brisbane and the coast. The earlier quick-changing angles of perception have moved towards a more evocative style that blends sound and vision in longer, lyrical phrases. The long view of the last rhythmic sentence with its continuous action (‘The sea was blowing white,’ ‘swirling’), repeated placing of plosive consonants to sketch the sea’s energy, its ‘white’ turbulence emphasised, together with the energetic complication of ‘swirling gutters between,’ is immediately recognisable as Malouf’s maturing hand. Writing about the movement of waves on an ocean shoreline (in the opening of *Ransom*

[2009], for example, or the final chapter of *Fly Away Peter* [1982]) becomes part of his signature and a trope of transitional places that afford his characters moments of reflection in which inner and outer worlds interweave in complex ways.

The story foregrounds the perplexity of both characters as they look at a dead seagull whose mutilated remains unsettle their memories of vigorous birds in flight:

I remembered keenly the swift white birds we had driven before us along the beach when coming upon them as they settled like a cloud on the glassy bank, each facing the wind, we had watched them rise one after another and circle in the air above us, the underside of their wings turning from blue to white as they veered and floated . . . I remembered vividly now what I hardly noticed before—their cruel, golden eyes.

Seeing the dead bird, its eye now ‘ragged, bloody,’ seems to prompt feelings of uncertainty in the two young men, above all their ambivalence about the nature of happiness and of love:

‘Are you happy, Terry?’ I asked. . . .

Terry held up a handful of sand and let it trickle through his fingers. . . .

‘Yes sometimes, I think. I can’t remember. . . . But it’s not like in books. You never say “Now I am happy.” What you say is “I was happy then and didn’t know it.” Like when you’re in love. Books always lie about things like that.’

The influence of the double edge of modernism, holding in tension belief and scepticism about texts and within texts, is evident here in Terry’s view of books. It continues in the puzzled tone of the ending, as the narrator recalls, sometime later, Terry’s closing question to him ‘What’s happiness anyway?’ The final sentences, interestingly, valorise memory and the vivid imagining of past moments, such as those Malouf had often heard in the forms of life-accounting prevalent in his early home life. Here it becomes important in the narrator’s representation of his autobiographical self—his interior life; the young adult’s quest to understand what happiness might be looks back and forward across Malouf’s work in a way that invites further study. It suggests that he sees such a quest as important in the role of the artist in society, as well as featuring in the kinds of struggles that nurture creative expression:

That was all a long time ago. And now I remember that as one of the happiest days of my life. Whatever it was, the tree when the five crows flew away, or the flock of white seagulls . . . or the empty mess-room or just talking in the sun; that was happiness. I had it then. But how can I describe it, when I, myself, do not understand? (*Semper Floreat*, 1 April 1955: 4)

The companionship that so many of Malouf’s leading characters look for, sometimes with little satisfaction and with people quite different in nature from themselves, finds an early model in the narrator-Terry friendship.

As the longer breath of his later works has shown, Malouf has come to understand and to write a great deal on the mystery of ‘happiness,’ even as he leads his characters towards a deeper sympathy with others and with things-in-the-world. His earliest narratives, composed just after World War II and read now in their historical context, reveal his awareness, from

youth onwards, that an individual, a society or a culture can face a 'longest hour,' of their own or others making.

In this way, Malouf's work illuminates the light and shade and beauty of what is common to all, what he terms 'the is-ness of things' in 'A Poet Among Others' (*Neighbours in a Thicket* 46) and the unique presence of each life in *Fly Away Peter*. In that novel, he has Imogen Harcourt reflect:

That is what life meant, a unique presence, and it was essential in every creature. To set anything above it, birth, position, talent even, was to deny to all but a few among the infinite millions what was common and real, and what was also, in the end, most moving. (132)

While keenly aware of difference, Malouf's work has become universal in this regard, or 'transnational' in moving from the local to the general realm of human feeling. It can best be placed, I would argue, not just in a context of national narrative, important as that facet of his work may be regarded, but among the high achievements of those artists, in any medium, whose ways of perceiving and representing grapple with complex dilemmas of the 'real' yet persist in hope. To his readers, Malouf's diverse body of work has become a treasured gift, the result of an ongoing quest to balance his temperament and times, as O'Faolain recommended, and creating his unique witness in and through writing of great imaginative integrity. From 'The Longest Hour' through to *Ransom*, and his latest works in poetry and prose, his curiosity, insight and narrative artistry have been powered by the long breath which started with the young writer and still shows its vigour to-day. It is a privilege to honour the work of David Malouf in this his eightieth year.

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