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**‘The Dimension of the Symbolic’: Environmental Issues in David Malouf’s “Jacko’s Reach”**

**Abstract I:** Nelle opere di David Malouf il paesaggio naturale ricopre spesso un ruolo cruciale: lungi dall’essere un semplice sfondo narrativo, esso diventa il vero e proprio protagonista della sua indagine del rapporto tra l’uomo e la natura. Nella presente analisi di “Jacko’s Reach”, il più breve dei racconti contenuti nell’antologia *Dream Stuff*, ci si concentra in particolare su due preoccupazioni ambientali che emergono da una lettura approfondita dell’opera: il rapporto tra spazio e identità (e il passaggio dalla dimensione fisica a quella simbolica) e il problema della deprivazione territoriale quale politica neocoloniale e delle sue possibili soluzioni.

**Abstract II:** In David Malouf’s works natural landscape often plays a crucial role: rather than being a simple narrative background, it becomes the main protagonist in his exploration of the relationship between man and nature. In my analysis of “Jacko’s Reach”, the shortest story in the *Dream Stuff* collection, I will focus on two different environmental concerns that emerge from a close reading of this work: the question of space and identity (and the passage from the physical landscape to the ‘dimension of the symbolic’) and the issue of territorial deprivation as a neo-colonial policy with its possible solutions.

Don’t it always seem to go that you don’t know what you’ve got ‘til it’s gone?  
They paved paradise, and put up a parking lot.  
*Joni Mitchell (1970)*

David Malouf has been successfully defined as a “landscape artist” (Kellaway 2000): in his works, be they verse or prose, and in particular in the collection of short stories *Dream Stuff*, “the setting is at least as important as characters and plot” (Aykroyd), since “[h]is characters exist in a landscape that is bigger than they are, against a horizon that seems to go on forever” (Kellaway 2000). In this particular aspect, he is a faithful representative of his homeland’s literature, since natural landscape tends to play a crucial role in Australian poetry and narrative. In their search for identity and “quest to belong to [the] country” (Leane 2014: 2), settler authors such as Malouf “continually play on the motifs of boundaries, borders, frontiers, fringes, edges, unknowns and ‘unsettled places’” (*ibid.*); the main point, in their works, is “man’s place in relation to nature itself, but also other things like the phenomena of nature [...] are very basic and ancient questions”, as stated by the author himself (Autero 2004: 17). In exploring this relationship between man and nature, one peculiar en-

vironment looms against the blue Australian sky: the bush, a vast and uncharted wasteland which often assumes a symbolic dimension, since “Australians live and work in cities, but [their] ‘spiritual home’ is still the bush, or what lies beyond it in that unpopulated and once unimaginable terrain which used to be called the Never Never” (Conrad 2000: 7).

Following Sharrad’s statement that “[i]t is perhaps in [Malouf’s] shorter prose that the real experiment and the directness of ideas can be found” (2000: 759), I am here analysing the representation of landscape in Malouf’s short story “Jacko’s Reach” both as a physical space and as the “dimension of the symbolic” (Malouf 2000: 125). In this analysis, I shall focus on two environmental issues that arise from a close reading of this work: on the one hand, the question of space and identity, which takes the shape of a collective sense of belonging that derives from the common experiences and memories of the narrator’s generation and is destined to survive the physical existence of the place itself; on the other hand, the issue of territorial deprivation in the light of neo-colonialism and globalisation, alongside a possible resistance to these phenomenon as expressed by Malouf himself.

### 1. Space and identity, from landscape to mindscape

On a physical level, Jacko’s Reach is characterised in Malouf’s description by an element that often recurs in the depiction of the bush, i.e. a sense of overwhelming vastness. Although the Reach is precisely limited in space through the specification of the area it covers, “four and a half acres” (Malouf 2000: 118, 119, 122, 126). Through the eyes of the narrator as a child it becomes a somehow immense, almost unconceivable space:

It seemed enormous. Just crossing it from the main road to the river gave you the idea, at the back of your knees, of the three hundred million square miles and of Burke and Wills (Malouf 2000: 121).

The spatial dimension of the Reach shifts here towards the symbolic, becoming “the space of the country (or colony) as a whole”, while “[t]he boy’s entry into the bush play-space becomes the foolish explorer’s entry into the wilderness” (Noske 2013: 7). The idea of exploration is further highlighted by the author in his reference to the precolonial past of the Reach and “the few local Aborigines who claim an affinity with the place that may or may not be mystical” (Malouf 2000: 118). In addition, this excerpt lays the foundation for a postcolonialist analysis of this work by creating a parallel between the colonial past and the present, in the sense that we can consider the new occupation of this specific portion of land, i.e. the construction of a shopping mall, as a form of neo-colonialism, carrying on the same “desire to create and control opportunities to generate wealth and control international markets” (McLeod 2010: 8) that brought the colonisers to settle in Australia.

Another recurring element of bush depiction is represented by its darkness: an unknown and untamed shadowy presence seems to be in ambush amidst the stark vegetation of this plot of land, “a chilling sense of primeval mystery” (Aykroyd) that inflames people’s instincts, awakens their animal impulses, and provokes emotional turmoil. To convey such a feeling, the narration of the story of the Reach is imbued with figurative isotopies of darkness, haunting and nightmares:

The wilderness that by fits and starts, in patches here and great swathes of *darkness* there, still lies like a *shadow* over even the most settled land, a pocket of the *dark unmanageable*, that *troubles the sleep* of citizens by offering a point of re-entry to memories they have no more use for – to *unruly and unsettling dreams* (Malouf 2000: 118-119; my emphasis).

Following Taylor, I am here arguing that these excerpts show us how nature becomes landscape only in relation to a human factor, since “[l]andscape [...] is what results when that lack within the apparent completeness of nature is in this way fulfilled – a fulfillment which, needless to say, is also a human one” (Taylor 2000: 716). Concepts such as vastness and darkness, though apparently intrinsic in nature itself, become meaningful only thanks to human perception, and thus the boundary between proper landscape and mindscape seems to be very difficult to be drawn. Furthermore, this dependence of landscape on human perception is what makes the ultimate occupation and dispossession of the land, in a certain way, inescapably destined to failure: when it is destroyed, Jacko’s Reach “will enter at last into what a century and more has already prepared it for, the dimension of the symbolic” (Malouf 2000: 125). In fact, through the narrator’s voice, the physical landscape transmogrifies into a totally ethereal and symbolic mindscape: it contributes to the foundation of a community, composed by people of his generation and older, and to the fixation of its collective identity. Only local people seem to fully understand the true nature of the Reach, since – in Malouf’s own words – “local experience has to be interpreted in terms of a sort of deep performance of things” (Autero 2004: 16):

It is a place you have to have seen and been into if you are to have any grasp of it. Most of all, you have to have lived with it as the one area of disorder and difference in a town that prides itself on being typical [...] Or you have to have been hearing, for as long as you can recall, the local stories about the place, not all of them fit to be told [...] Or you have to have lost something there [...] Or you have to have stumbled there on something no one had warned you of (Malouf 2000: 120).

The word choice in this passage is, in my opinion, very accurate and meaningful: the unfitness of the stories told, the loss, and the unforeseen discovery of a generic ‘something’ can indeed be related to a fully individual (and at the same time common) experience – the passage from childhood to adolescence, from innocent games to the loss of innocence, that becomes collective in that it is narrated as a kind of rite of passage, or initiation.

When I was seven or eight years old we used to play Cops and Robbers there. [...] Later it became the place for less innocent games, than later again of games that were once again innocent, though some people did not think so (Malouf 2000: 121).

On the one hand, rites of such kind usually concern “[i]nitiation into knowledge of sex and into sexual desire” (Marcus 1960: 224): with the turn of puberty, Jacko’s Reach would become “a place, enticing, unentered, for which the old name, to remain appropriate, had to be interpreted in a new way, as if it had belonged all the time to another and secret lan-

guage" (Malouf 2000: 122). Even this utterly personal experience is represented as a collective ritual shared by a whole generation, when in the heat of the summer the Reach, "dark under the moon on even the starriest night" (*ibid.*), became the place where one could cross "the boundary of something too vague for the moment to be named" (Malouf 2000: 123). As a place of sexual initiation, Jacko's Reach is characterised by a halo of secrecy and mystery, with its name becoming "a code-word for something as secret as what you had in your pants" (Malouf 2000: 121), and by a heat that, despite its totally earthly objectiveness – "the heat of Christmas and the months towards Easter" (Malouf 2000: 122) – reflects the vehemence of the most deep sexual fantasies and desires.

On the other hand, initiation presents itself as the discovery of evil, or death, with its permanent effects (Marcus 1960: 222-223); that is the case of a quarrel between two teamsters (or 'bullockies', as Malouf defines them) which happened in a not-so-remote past. As a result, the first teamster was "found, the next day, with his skull smashed", while the second one, at first at large, was found "two days later, [...] hanging by his belt from a bloodwood" (Malouf 2000: 120) by a local boy named Jimmy Dickens. The matter, in this particular episode, is not really the event itself, but the reaction to it: "it was the awe of that dumbstruck eight-year-old as he continued to look out, in a ghostly way, through the eyes of the gaunt old-timer, that was the real story" (Malouf 2000: 121). In fact the experience of the eight-year-old Jimmy represents a passage from childhood to maturity, literally through the discovery of death, which becomes in a certain sense collective: "That particular patch of Jacko's, that tree, had been changed for ever, and become, for all of us who knew the story, the site of something you could touch (Malouf 2000: 121)".

The discovery of a more generic evil, or better still of that fear which is the most spontaneous reaction to evil, is well-represented by another traumatic event occurred in the Reach, i.e. the disappearance of the thirteen-year-old Valmay Mitchell, whose story retraces a recurring *topos* in Australian literature and art, that of the child lost in the bush, "with its powerful and poignant memento mori message" (Taylor 2000: 716):

Every fellow of my generation knows Valmay's name. If she were to come back here, to take a last look at Jacko's for instance before it goes under for ever, she would be astonished at her fame (Malouf 2000: 123).

Valmay, we are informed, was an ordinary girl, perhaps too eager to please other people, "the sort of girl that acts of violence, which haunt the streets like ghosts on the lookout for a body they can fill, are deeply drawn to" (Malouf 2000: 123). When she went missing one night in the Reach, everyone began to expect the worst; in a sort of choral action, underlined by the repetition of generic subjects such as 'people' and 'we all', they participated with dedication in the fruitless search for the poor girl. Luckily enough, Valmay was actually somewhere else, safe and sound, but this event left a deep mark in all those who had lived it, as the narrator confesses:

They are middle-aged now, my generation. One is our local baker, another a real-estate agent, another a circuit judge. Our lives these days barely cross. One of them does

odd jobs out at the golf course and we exchange a few words now and then. *Not about Valmay* (Malouf 2000: 124; my emphasis).

Both these events became collective turning points in the life of local people: the initiation of Jimmy Dickens affected the approach everyone had to that particular spot, whereas Valmay Mitchell's disappearance gave rise to a new awareness and a choral sense of belonging, that is well-represented in the collective actions performed by the people in order to solve this mystery. To put it in Malouf's words, "it's an older fellowship we share than ones we belong to now, Rotary, or the Lions, or the BMA; and in a ghostly, dreamy area of ourselves, some of us are still willing to acknowledge it" (Malouf 2000: 124-125). In addition, the two episodes exemplify a recurring initiation theme of the *Dream Stuff* collection, the acknowledgment of "a world view in which violence is one of the elementary structures of experience" (Scheckter 2000: 743).

## 2. The threat of globalisation, and how to resist it

So it is settled. Jacko's Reach, our last pocket of scrub, has been won for progress. It is to be cleared and built on. Eighteen months from now, after the usual period of mud pies and mechanical shovels and cranes, we will have a new shopping mall (Malouf 2000: 118).

From this excerpt, the very beginning of the story, the transformation of the local landscape into the most trivial symbol of contemporary global society, i.e. the mall, clearly points out some issues which are nowadays pivotal in postcolonial studies: "the neo-colonial operations of globalisation, cultural transformation, and the necessity and challenge of resistance in the face of a new form of international power" (McLeod 2010: 304). The new colonisers, in the name of an alleged progress, are desperately trying to tame the untameable, to control the darkness and vastness of nature by pouring concrete all over this plot of land and reshaping it in their image. Yet, to paraphrase Milton, what though the Reach be lost?

As Sharrad noted, "Jacko's Reach" is "a meditation on the significance of what is lost and the retentive power of memory when the local council turns a wasteland into a shopping mall" (2000: 762). Such terms of loss and retention, "[t]he concept of gap – together with slight variants like discontinuity, disjunction, severance, and lack" (Buckridge 1986: 49) and the "notion of substitution" (Buckridge 1986: 51), considered as leading motifs in Buckridge's analysis of Malouf's prose, surface between the lines. The sense of loss drawn forth by territorial deprivation is intensified by the symbolic meaning of the Reach, by its dark and mysterious stories, like Jimmy Dickens's and Valmay Mitchell's, by the common experiences that everyone seems to have lived there, like the discovery of sexuality and of evil: "[i]t is this, all this, that will go under the bars of neon lights and the crowded shelves and trolleys of the supermarket, the wheels of skateboards, the bitumen walks and solid, poured-concrete ramps" (Malouf 2000: 125). Yet the policies of neo-colonialism and globalisation *can* be overwhelmed, and loss overcome, in two different ways: by transcending at last in a fully-symbolic dimension, or by appropriating of what will have been built by the new colonisers.

The first solution is possible especially for those who experienced Jacko's Reach, i.e. most notably the people belonging to narrator's generation. The Reach is indeed destined to finally go beyond its physical limits and become "a hyper-reality, no longer dependant on physicality to exist. The space is them, they are of the space, and hence it cannot be destroyed" (Noske 2013: 8).

So it will be gone and it won't be. Like everything else.

Under.

Where its darkness will never quite be dispelled, however many mushroom-lights they install in the parking lot (Malouf 2000: 126).

If there is only one wild acre somewhere we will make that the place. If they take it away we will preserve it in our head. If there is no such place we will invent it. That's the way we are (*ibid.*).

Jacko's Reach will live forever in their memories and thoughts, and its life will be perpetuated through their tales, which will create a sort of new local mythology. In his interview with Autero, Malouf stated that "[w]e are always turning [the world experience] into stories or into myths that deal with the way we read life" (2004: 15). That is what the anonymous narrator is doing with the Reach, transforming it into a national myth, imbuing the place "with legend – of how one bullocky killed another and then hanged himself; of a girl who went missing, titillating all with the thought of murder until she turned up in Sydney having a baby; of nocturnal trysts and unruly imaginings" (Pierce 2000: 753).

As regards future generations, they will instead choose the way of re-appropriation and "reinvent the urbanized emptiness of poured-concrete ramps as their own site of adventure and raffishness and conflict with civic regulation" (Sharrad 2000: 762), thus re-taking possession of the place and making it their own, making it once again a symbol of group identity rather than of global homogenisation. In this sense, Malouf seems to compare the new colonisation with the previous one, which tried in vain to "damag[e] if not dissolv[e] relations built up over thousands of years between the land and its Aboriginal inhabitants and impos[e] on it a model developed elsewhere" (Brady 2010: 16). Driving from his awareness that "the words we speak, the feelings and ideas they express, have a significant impact on the way we imagine and then actualise what we call reality" (Riem Natale 2014: 24), Malouf notes how the very name of the Reach underlines the failure of the white-man's colonisation:

Jacko's Reach: once known, and so marked on older maps, as Jago's. How, and at what point, by what slip of tongue or consonantal drift, did the name lurch backwards into an earlier, not-quite-forgotten history, so that the white man's name became a black one and the place reverted if only in speech, to its original owner's? Jacko's (Malouf 2000: 119).

Just like the black have figuratively re-gained possession of their land, at least in its name, the descendants of the narrator and his generation will re-take possession of the place, creating their own rites of initiation, making it once again – just like Jacko's Reach was – "a code-word for something so intimate it can never be revealed" (Malouf 2000: 126).

As a consequence, neo-colonisation will never be ultimately achieved, and Jacko's Reach will survive, either in its physical or symbolic dimension, reinventing itself and becoming anew a place of old and new memories and initiation. Drawing on Buckridge's aforementioned analysis, I would argue that, while territorial deprivation is clearly an example of 'gap', each possible solution represents a peculiar form of the 'substitution' motif, which (like in other works by Malouf) "is ambivalent in its effect; it is at once a deterioration, and an enabling condition of creativity" (Buckridge 1986: 51). As for the first form of substitution, which I would label as 'transcendence', it is deterioration since the land will be lost forever, but it is clearly creativity at its highest peak, since the Reach will become sheer imagination; as for the second, which can be considered a form of 'metamorphosis', although the replacement by cold and sterile concrete is an instance of deterioration and loss of the once arid yet flourishing nature, it will also be a spark for human creativity, as new generations will have to reinvent its symbolic value.

At the end of the story, we are reminded that we are nothing but transient beings, and that traces left by humanity are only ephemeral. Even though the damage caused by overbuilding is tangible, there seems to be no point in hiding the undomesticated, the wild, and the dark. Jacko's Reach "will go on pushing up under the concrete, reaching for the wilderness further out than its four and a half acres have always belonged to and which no documents of survey or deeds of ownership or council ordinances have ever had the power to cancel" (Malouf 2000: 126).

### 3. Conclusions

In "Jacko's Reach", "[u]nder the pressure of Malouf's imagination, a dismal tract of land becomes a parable of possession and dispossession, a zone of vital secrets, a microcosm of Australian history and, ultimately, of the human condition" (Hassan 2000: 39). Throughout the story, Malouf remarks "the significance of such a play-space to the development of a young person [...] in a manner which brings home heavily the nature of the place as wild, dangerous, incontrollable" (Noske 2013: 3). Far from being an ordinary plot of land, the Reach is first of all a symbolic mindscape, the importance of which lies in the peculiar meaning it has acquired for the local community even more than in its natural dimension. It is the place of rituals of initiation and common memories, and in a certain sense a place of myth, too. Now the Reach is threatened by the dangers of globalisation and doomed to become a shopping mall, a fate which is shared by many other beautiful and meaningful landscapes in the contemporary world. Yet, by reading Malouf's exquisite and highly lyrical lines, one is left with a sense of hope: the hope that, despite physical destruction, global and neo-colonial policies are never destined to win since a community will always find a way to resist and preserve its own symbolic dimension. This can be achieved by carving out a new landscape/mindscape (be it tangible or more ethereal), or by occupying what the new colonisers will build on the ruins of what they will have destroyed. As for nature itself, it really does not matter: whatever men may do, it will always struggle (and manage to) survive.

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