

Lorenzo Autero

Interview with David Malouf.

Abstract I: This interview is part of the work I collected and brought to an end, during the long period I spent in Australia, in the year 2002, when I completed the research for my dissertation thesis in Foreign Languages and Literatures, studying the theme of the double in David Malouf's novels. In the months of August and September I was given the chance to meet the writer more than once, in his house in Sydney. During the writing of my thesis, *Itinerari del Doppio nella Narrativa di David Malouf*, I kept in contact with the Australian writer. I wish to thank him once again for his great helpfulness and collaboration.

Abstract II: L'intervista che segue è parte del mio lavoro di tesi, dal titolo *Itinerari Del Doppio Nella Narrativa Di David Malouf*, frutto delle ricerche e degli studi a me compiuti in Australia tra i mesi di agosto e novembre del 2002. Colgo questa occasione per ringraziare nuovamente lo scrittore David Malouf. I giorni trascorsi insieme a Sydney resteranno un ricordo indelebile nella mia vita di studente e ricercatore.

Interviewer: According to your long and rich experience, what is the meaning of being a writer nowadays here in Australia? Can you tell us something about the genesis of your works and your own process of writing?

Malouf: I think writing, in my case anyway, attempts to talk about an inner world as well as the world's events. You write for yourself. And you write for the readers who need whatever it is you have to say. When I say you write for yourself, you write to make things clear to yourself, to ask yourself certain kinds of questions, to follow up things that puzzle you, disturb you, hunt you. Then you think that there are other people out there who share the same kind of puzzlement and the same kind of doubts, anxieties, the same questions. You simply assume that if you write for yourself, you are also writing for some other people, and they will discover the book themselves. Of course society is changing all the time, so whatever has been written in the past about Europe may no longer be true of what Europe now is. In a place like Europe writers tend to feel that almost

everything about the aspirations of that society or the dreams of that society has already been said. But in a place like Australia not much has been said, and so here a writer is really at the beginning of asking all of those questions, and you are at the beginning of trying to turn that real experience into the kind of mythological experience that will allow people to understand it, but also at the beginning of the exploration of it.

Interviewer: What do you mean for mythological experience?

Malouf: I think that we can never really deal with the world experience. We always turn that into a shape that we can deal with. And that shape must have to do with the shape of our minds, the shape of our culture. We are always turning it into stories or into myths that deal with the way we read life: some of those are specific to the culture, and in our case it is Western culture, or they may have to do with some kind of form of thinking that all humans do. That allows me to make sense of experience, especially the experience of the relationship to the natural world and the world of animals, but also to that shape of life, which means that people get born and die. There are ways in which local experience has to be interpreted in terms of a sort of deep performance of things. And I think that is part of the business, always, of writing.

Interviewer: How did you discover this talent for writing?

Malouf: I started mostly writing poetry. I wrote poetry for a long time, and really, when I came to write fiction, I think I just did in a different kind of way that I discovered, what I have been doing in poetry. I do not know how other fiction writers begin, but if they begin with plots, then I do not begin with plot. I begin with something interesting, which I have been dealing with in my poems, by looking for what is associated with, or what the metaphor suggests it could be explored. So the writing process comes much more from an interior process, it is more natural.

Interviewer: You write very different things: poems, librettos, and novels. How can you feel so comfortable with each one of these genres?

Malouf: They each have their different demands to me. I mean poetry is very different from writing fiction. When you are writing a libretto, you always have to think that it is going to have its real and final form in music, and so you have to keep all that in your mind.

Interviewer: Can you tell us something about your opera librettos? How do you manage the combination of words and music?

Malouf: I have been lucky because I have always worked with composers who gave me absolutely free hand, and so they wanted to receive from me a libretto, which was already finished, rather than one that was negotiated. That

means that I made a lot of decisions in each of those works about the musical texture of the finished work, because I was the person who was deciding when two people would sing, when three people would sing, when there would be an ensemble and so on. Those are decisions that in some cases the composer might want to make, but the composer always trusted me to do that. But then I do also know a lot about music and about opera to know how necessary it is to have that kind of variety, and so I felt really free hand in doing that. I was imagining of course what the music would be like, but of course music can be very different, so I was always thinking of what the composer would be doing in terms of possible music. And I have always been concerned that creating a libretto must demand music for its phonals, not simply tolerate music, you know that. There must be something in that libretto which is not expressed by words, and which is actually music to express, connections that music can make. Then of course when you are dealing with the words, you try to make them clear and simple enough to be heard, and leave what is going to be complex in the work to the music. I mean if you have any sense, you know that automatically the place, the drama, the emotion of the work is all about to be in music. What you are doing is simply making it possible for that music to exist.

Interviewer: This sounds beautiful. As you know, I come from Italy; can you tell me briefly about your relationship with the country I come from? I know you came to Italy many times and you also lived there. Why did you choose Italy?

Malouf: I chose Italy because I had been there a lot in the Sixties and of course I am very interested in how people are, in painting and in sculpture, architecture stuff, and I was interested also in the Italian landscape, but that was not what made me go and live there. I have a house there. It was really that I knew enough about the place to be able to handle it. I have friends there who had helped me in getting through the business to buy that house. Basically what I wanted to do after I had written two novels, was to get away from a place where people already were beginning to tell me too much about my own writing. I wanted to escape from the literary scene, and I wanted to go to a place where I would not have to listen to people telling me those things or to imagine them over my shoulder. I have been in a place where I could just be alone with whatever I had to say. And, you know, I love myself having a house there! I think I have read only four or five books in the last four-five years. That was very good because I was completely isolated from the literary scene in Australia. I could have gone to England, but I deliberately chose not to go to a place where I would fall into another literary scene.

Interviewer: In a globalizing world how important is the importance of the cultural identity? Can you mention some characteristics of Australian culture, which distinguish it from other cultures? I think that finding our own identity nowadays is very important. Is there a way through which you can show me some aspects of Australian culture that make it peculiar?

Malouf: I think the land itself makes it very peculiar. I mean if you live in Europe, you are living in a landscape, which has been made by two thousand years of farming, and people might think that the landscape is nature, but it is not. It is made! It is entirely made. And wherever you look at the landscape in Europe, what it tells you in a very comfortable way, is that man belongs in nature. Australia really is not like that. When you look at nature in Australia, what it tells you is that man can be there, but basically nature has no need of man, and that any mark you leave on it is a very impermanent one. And so the kind of existential questions are the questions that come up in any sort of discussion between man and nature in Australia, and the ones that Europe has not had to ask itself for very long time, it seems to me; whereas we do have to ask us all them as I said, almost all the time. When people say that they find nature in Australia hostile, I do not think that is quite true. I think what people might find is that nature is indifferent, and so the vital question is man's place in relation to nature itself, but also other things like the phenomena of nature, like weather, are very basic and ancient questions in Australia.

Now of course Aborigines answered that questions in one way; we answered the question in a different way. There is another thing to say: if you live in Europe you could assume that the way people have always done things in Europe, that is Western culture, is the only natural human way of doing it. If you live in a country where people have found a very, very different way of thinking about these things, you may not accept their way of doing those things or thinking about those things, or reading the world, or interpreting nature, but at least you can see that your way of doing it is not the only human way. There are very basic ways in which looking at the world in Australia is different from looking at the world in Europe, and I think we have a particular kind of history. I mean this is a settler society, and we have always had to ask us also what we are doing here; it is not a colonial society, not at all. I think that is a mistake that a lot of the post-colonial sort of writing makes, because we were never a colony, in the sense that African colonies were colonies, or India was a colony. What we are is colony in that old Greek-Latin sense: that is a transplanted piece of the mother land, and what was meant to happen was that the mother land would be reproduced here completely, but this would be a reproduction of the mother land society which would be better because it is fresh at heart; and that has also been a problem for us, because that is our culture, that is the society we made; we have to be proud of ourselves in a very different part of the world. You know the whole questions are whether we belong to Europe or we belong to Asia itself. I mean it is a question of really what is most important: culture and history, or geography.

Interviewer: How would you define the relationship between Australia and Aboriginal culture on the one side, and Europe and Australia on the other side?

Malouf: Australian culture is derived from European culture, and one that has changed in all sorts of ways, and those changes have been affected by our geographical place in the world that would define us also, and that is quite

natural here, and also by our contact with Aboriginal people. On the whole, until quite recently, we ignored Aboriginal culture. Over the last twenty, thirty years we have opened our souls to its influence, I think, and that will change how we see things. It has already had an effect because we have learned that they know things about this place that we do not know. Especially, they know things about the nature of a place, the weather patterns of the place which we do not know. We have just begun to listen. As you know, if you know anything about Aboriginal culture, it has also recently opened itself to be enchained to the modern ways by us. Aboriginal painting, for example, is at the moment a kind of strange hybrid of Aboriginal vision and western technology: it is on canvas, on mouse-pads, and again Aboriginal painting very very much influences painting by Australians. So I think there are a lot of ways in which there is now a cross-fertilization.

Interviewer: This is true and it is what I perceived visiting Sydney's Aboriginal Galleries. Now, thinking about some of your novels like *Johnno* and *An Imaginary Life*, or *The Conversations At Curlow Creek*, I noticed that the opposition between two main characters is the key to finding ourselves. Would you explain the value of diversity as a way to find our identity? Do you think the contrast between two different cultures, two different languages and two different people can be a way of accepting others? Isn't this the idea of the double?

Malouf: I think it is always very interesting if there are two poles in any thing, because that allows for conflict, for drama, or movement of the mind. You have to keep moving to the other pole to look back, and not only do you see that pole differently, but also you see all the space between it in that way. I discovered quite early really, in writing the first book *Johnno*, how useful it was to divide into two what you know or what you are interested in, or what you are moved by. The argument goes between the two. I do not say it anymore, but frequently, when I used to go to visit school kids, said to you: "Is *Johnno* autobiographical?" I used to say: "Oh, if you mean the mind of *Johnno's* character: yes." Because they would expect you to say that you were the other character, and in fact it's not true that you are either, in fact you are both. That is how the dialectical thing works. And I have done it over and over again, it seems to me, also in other books.

Interviewer: Can it also be a way to find out inside us things that we do not pay attention to, in general? I mean that is what happens when you speak with someone.

Malouf: Sure. They draw out of you something that is part of your sympathy with them; you are understanding them because it is a side of your soul that has been drawn out.

Interviewer: The theme of the journey. For many of your characters like Digger and Vic in *The Great World* or Johnno and Dante in *Johnno*, the journey means not only physical movement, but also an intimate discovery. Is that true?

Malouf: You do not need to read my writings to know that. That is how lot of stories get told. You can go right back to the first journey story of that kind, probably it is not the first, the *Odyssey*. I think the idea of the journey, and the journey as a process of discovery, is part of every sort of folk myth.

Interviewer: What would you say to the new generations of writers?

Malouf: The main thing to say is that you see a lot of people who has a talent for writing and I think I knew in my time when I was a student, people who might have had more talent than I had for writing. What they did not have talent for was solitude and discipline. And you need both of those if you are going to be a writer. You need a talent for solitude and a talent for discipline. What I see mostly is first of all people expect to discover themselves as writers too quickly. Much people come at twenty-six, and if they have not done something they give up. If you do that, you will never discover what you had to say at forty-six, and it may take that long. So I think people just give up too early. They expect their talent to declare itself, because they want to be famous or whatever it is they want. If it does not happen when they are twenty-six, they become clerks or bankers. You don't have to give up until you discover what it is you have to say. As I said it might be at forty-five or even later. If you do not wait that long you are never going to find out.

Interviewer: How do you manage with your popularity? I mean, you are famous almost all over the world, but at the same time you told me you need solitude. How can you reconcile these two things?

Malouf: What I always said, it is difficult to say it these days because the world of publishing is different, that is: there is a very big problem around here. People write one book and they get taken up and read. Then they find very difficult to write the second book because so much pressure is put on them, and even more difficult to write the third. I used to say that you are very very lucky as a writer if you can get three or four books under your belt before anyone knows you are there. Because once they do know you are there, there are all kinds of other pressures on your time and people's demands on you, which makes it increasingly difficult for you to keep writing. These days I spent a huge amount of my time saying no to people, which means writing a letter, or finding that I do things that in the end got nothing to do with writing, but which as a writer I couldn't avoid doing.

Interviewer: Do you feel free or under pressure now?

Malouf: I feel pressured. I feel pressured and I think all writers will tell you that. It is very bad and I think we are all guilty. We all feel guilty, and we all feel a kind of duty to do things. I think one of the writer's end up thing is a kind of slavery to duty, because one of the things they always wanted to achieve was attention.

Interviewer: I think that popularity could also be seen as a natural consequence of your profession. What about the life of a writer? What do you do in general during a normal day except writing?

Malouf: I see friends, and I go out for dinner or I have people to dinner, but I also go to concerts, to the operas. You are lucky if there is one night when you do not have to go out. This week for example I am very busy. It is like that. So if I go away to Italy, is also to get rest and see nobody. And that is quite good.

Interviewer: Are you working on something now?

Malouf: Really at the moment I am working on some short stories; when I had the last book put together, there were still a lot of stories that I had not got together or finished, and I am working on that. So there will be another book of stories. I have just written a couple of poems, and I have also started a couple of short librettos.

Interviewer: Why did you decide to come to Sydney? Is this city the place you have always wanted to live in?

Malouf: I went to England from Brisbane when I was twenty-four, and spent nearly ten years there, and then I got a job at University in Sydney, so I worked at Sydney University for ten years. Then I went away to Italy, and then again after five, six years I came back to Australia. I think it is over sixteen years or something. Sydney is the city where I have always wanted to live. I mean Brisbane is great, is very good, but I would never live there. It is absolutely different from the Brisbane I lived in. It is a very interesting town because it is more like an American city than anywhere else in Australia. It is a good place, beautiful. But Sydney is the city where I want to live now.

Interviewer: Lorenzo Autero. Sydney, 17 and 27 August 2002.

Lorenzo Autero si diploma presso il liceo scientifico Copernico di Udine, nel 1996, e si laurea in Lingue e Letterature presso l'Ateneo di Udine con Lode. La sua tesi di laurea dal titolo *Itinerari del doppio nella narrativa di David Malouf* analizza, dopo un rapido excursus storico-critico, la presenza del doppio all'interno di sei romanzi dell'autore australiano, in ambiti e situazioni differenti: l'amicizia, l'antagonismo e la guerra. Recentemente il dott. Autero ha lavorato presso il dipartimento culturale del Consolato Generale d'Italia a Sydney, l'Italian Institute of Culture, collaborando alla realizzazione dei principali eventi a sostegno della

cultura italiana all'estero. Tra i suoi progetti futuri, il desiderio di approfondire il filone della cosiddetta *Environmental Imagination*, analizzando e confrontando il modo in cui l'ambiente, la natura, il "sense of place" permeano alcune tra le più significative opere di narrativa di alcuni scrittori contemporanei di Africa, Australia e Nord America.