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Picking Every Heartbeat. A Silence Approaching Music. An Imaginary Interview with David Malouf

Yes, all is set, ready for our interview! Finally, after having known each other and being friends for about forty years – David and I had met before 1985 in Europe, at a conference on Australian Literature (neither of us remembers where), we decided that *yes*, it was a good moment for me to interview him, while visiting him, right after his birthday and planning to celebrate mine *together*. My cell phone is *on* and I have tapped the right button for video recording, after having briefly tested it myself. We delve into our interview with the seriousness and enthusiasm of an Aries with a Sagittarius rising and a Pisces, cusp with Aries, which make both of us fiery, movable, sometimes electric and impatient, but always loving, caring and kind-hearted friends. Long time ago, with great generosity and charm, David let me enter his world, offering his gift of friendship, full of empathy, understanding, love, laughter and care. I am very grateful and truly happy for his long-lasting and bountiful gift.

The fact is also that, across the years, David's work has been a very significant and central focus of many of my critical studies, first and foremost as a student, reading and writing in order to learn something about his poetic and imaginative word as it manifests in all forms of art and life. This to me is the utmost goal of scholarship and the arts, in spite or beyond all the theoretical gear that too often now encumbers our critical analyses.

As it happens, in the past year and a half, I have been also writing a book on him, which is almost ready for press. Actually, I am reading the proofs while jetlag strikes my sleep patterns (but helps opening further my creative and imaginative avenues) on the 28th floor of David's flat with a magnificent view on the beach and the Pacific Ocean on the Gold Coast, the so-called 'Surfers' Paradise'. The roaring ocean resounding underneath (and within) us is a perfect reminder of our vulnerability as human beings, and the necessity for partnering with one another with love, kindness, and laughter, a lot of laughter and playful teasing ...

The constant sound of waves can feel intimidating at first, almost scary, but once you tune in to that vastness, which is in the end small, if compared to the immensity of the starry heavens above, with the Southern Cross reminding us of a *different* sky, remote from Italy, from 'home', or if we think even further, to the interconnected tapestry of galaxies which cross time and space ... These quiet musings put us humans into our appropriate place. This magnificent web of life also speaks of our transience, of our smallness, while, at the same time, reminding us that, as David has his character Clem in "Great Day" (Malouf 2000) say, *all* heartbeats on the planet are honoured as important and recorded forever in what, according to a Hindu vision, recently confirmed by many scientific studies (Laszlo 2009) we might call *Akashic* memory:

Out there – out there in space, I mean – there’s a kind of receiver. Very precise it is, very subtle – refined. What it picks up, it’s made that way, is heartbeats, just that. Every heartbeat on the planet, it doesn’t miss a single one, not one is missed (Malouf 2000: 179).

While time passed, our heartbeats were steadily ticking (and tickling) with intense and joyous focus on the different topics we were touching. In our enthusiasm enthralling us both in what we were touching upon, neither of us thought that, maybe, I should check if all was going well with my cell video-recording.

Thus, when we finally paused to take breath and have a glass of water, I had a look and realised, to my utmost terror, that *nothing* had been recorded, apart from a very brief beginning. Oh what a terrible disaster! We must do this again, I will have to look through my notes, what can we do?

We were both frustrated and at the same time amused at the irony of the whole thing. Let’s go for a walk on the beach, we said, and pick some seashells and small stones for our personal secret/sacred collections, let’s follow the little white ‘ghost’ crabs¹, as they swiftly try to hide from our steps into their sandy homes at our passage, let’s walk in the shallow ocean water, where it has less pulling power and is calmer and warmer to the feel of our naked and happy feet. Then, to celebrate our *missed* interview, we decide to go out for dinner at the Persian’s Restaurant *Shiraz*, just round the corner, for some good salmon, spicy rice and veggies, and maybe cheer to our adventure with a good beer. So, we said, let’s sleep over this terrible technological misdeed, and see what we could do about it all tomorrow, the next day.

The next day, after some (uncertain and tentative) propositions of doing the interview again, we both decided that *no*, we wouldn’t do anything, we would go with the flow, follow the rhythm, be faithful to the music orchestrated by the universe for us. We would take this as a sign of destiny, as an admonishment, as a joke our trickster natures had played on both of us ... Indeed a Magician’s trick!

On my flight back to Italy, however, some other illuminations came to me. I still need to write a sort of “Imaginary Interview”, I thought, picking up some of the topics we touched upon and sharing them of the pages of this ‘poetics’ of mine, for our online journal *Le Simplegadi*. And certainly I can draw upon some ‘real’, printed interviews of David, and some of my ideas and meditations on his work.

Shall we talk, for example, of the importance of everyday actions in David’s work? Of the fact that these apparently simple moments always carry with them a deeper meaning, for they touch upon some kind of revelation illumining for us the whole story? As David says:

The reason I’m particularly interested in those things – like shelling peas and all the rest of it – is because the body in a way discovers itself in doing certain things, and so does the mind. Often people in my books are not saying anything to one another –

¹ <https://www.natura-pacific.com/ghosts-in-the-sand/> (consulted on 19/4/2024).

they are communicating by doing something together ... Ironically, as a writer, I am quite interested in non-verbal communication. Our bodies are sort of thinking things out a lot of the time or thinking themselves out through activity, and that is one of the reasons I am interested in those things (Turcotte 1990: 58).

Malouf's language is often solid and pragmatic, realistic one would say, describing everyday little acts, *realia* and realities, minutiae, small details, which however prepare the scene for sudden revelations, for silent understanding and mystical experience: "these most ordinary of moments, through Malouf's crafting, become extraordinary epiphanies" (Brennan 2011: 2).

In-between these grand reflections, we certainly as usual 'communicated by doing something together', while I prepared a good Italian slow-cooked traditional tomato sauce for our pasta, and David expressed his culinary art in a typical Maloufian *salade niçoise*, made with fresh tuna fish and very *al dente* green beans, plus eggs, cheese, tomatoes and anything else we might feel inspired to add.

Our 'Imaginary Interview' continued; we had talked of Italy and the *anni di piombo* period, especially in his novella *Child's Play* (1982), where an anonymous terrorist and the writer/professor he has to kill confront each other across the page, in the world of imagination and creativity, where, in the end, in spite of the fact that he will be assassinated, it is the writer who actually survives and *wins*, while the terrorist is absolutely powerless in his lack of true creative and dialogic *imagination*. As Neilsen says:

the narrator-terrorist begins to discover, near the end of his assignment, that since language determines how we construct the world, we are in turn constructed by those who control language, in his case, by the famous author who is his intended victim, and by the media, who will report his act of terror. The terrorist's struggle is thus ultimately with language – the printed word (Neilsen 1996: 67).

The terrorist tries to imitate and mimic his *Master*, perfectly aware that he is unable to *create* like him:

The terrorist's failure to find or make a valid place of being in language is tellingly revealed by the fact that the narrative of *Child's Play* completes itself after the death of its narrator. Language endures, it continues its work of unending articulation, in the absence of any given speaker (Randall 2007: 68).

This interaction between two male characters/protagonists takes me to my first topic of scholarly study, the theme of the double, back at the University of Queensland, while doing my Master in 1985. The terrorist and the writer, like all the other doubles who appear in David's work, represent a sort of inner dialogue between different aspects of the Self. Central to Malouf's narrative quest are his famous doubles: Johnno and Dante in *Johnno* (1975); Ovid and the Child, but also Ovid and Ryzak in *An Imaginary Life* (1978), the terrorist and the writer in *Child's Play* (1982); Jim and Ashley in *Fly Away Peter* (1985); Digger and

Victor in *The Great World* (1990); the lexicographer and the Aboriginal “Only Speaker of his Tongue” in the homonymous short story, in the collection *Antipodes* (1986) reissued in *The Complete Stories* (2007); Adair with Carney, and before that with Fergus and Virgilia in *The Conversations at Curlow Creek* (1996); Priam with Somax and then with Achilles; Achilles with Patroclus, and then with Priam and Hector (even if after Hector’s death) in *Ransom* (2009) and many others. “In each of those stories what I’m interested in is a quality of relationship between those two characters, which can be worked out in terms of possibilities, which is free” (Davidson 1983: 277). Actually, in most of his novels, poems and stories, there is almost an obsession with the double. In his own words:

For myself the interest of there being other male figures is really that they’re all one character. That’s the essential part of it. It’s obviously a way of externalizing a dialogue or a series of revelations (Davidson 1983: 277).

Malouf’s language makes us feel the poetic energy that gives shape to sound, interspersed with eloquent silence (Haskell 2014), where our bodies think themselves out through activity. Malouf comments thus on the musical and metaphorical qualities of his work:

Musical, I think that’s certainly true. But I think that’s true of the way all my books are shaped. I don’t usually think of the forward drive of the book as having to do with plot, but with exploration of things which are announced first, sometimes almost like metaphors in a poem, say. You then explore both ends of the metaphor and let those spawn other oppositions, other comparisons, and then explore those. I think that’s the way almost all my books work, and I think I learned really to shape a novel the way I’d learned to shape a poem. I sometimes referred in the past to the books therefore having a kind of poetical structure in that kind of way, or musical, if one wanted to say that (Daniel 1996).

Malouf is a *rhapsodos*, a singer of ‘woven words’ interlacing life and light (Brennan 2011: 15)². The aim of his singing, resounding and weaving of words is that of telling stories (in both poetry and prose), of inviting us into his imaginative journey, in order to experience aesthetic beauty and find deeper meanings for our lives, and the two are always conjoined:

I stand and listen.
Silence
approaches. A silence approaching music
(Malouf 2007: 22, ll. 18-20).

It is a language where “every syllable is a gesture of reconciliation. We knew that language once. I spoke it in my childhood. We must discover it again” (Malouf 1978: 98).

It is a kind of “lyric comprehensiveness, a boundaryless state in which the distinction

² See also: <https://classics-at.chs.harvard.edu/classics3-egbert-j-bakker-rhapsodes-bards-and-bricoleurs-homerizing-literary-theory/> (consulted on 19/04/2024).

between subject and object, between the I and the not-I, is joyously dissolved" (Taylor 2000: 715). The joy of self-dissolution into the lyric meeting with the other is, I believe, one of the central aspirations in Malouf's work. This is found in his constant intent to *mythologise* the other in order to create a 'dialogical dialogue' (Panikkar 2007) with otherness and difference, to reach "new clarity of understanding, more integrated vision, a new sense of self and the world one inhabits" (Randall 2007: 9). As Malouf states in an interview:

We have to find a way – I call it mythological – to bring out the link between us and our landscape, us and our cities, us and the lives we live. To do that, you have to give people, in books, something like a mythology that they can have, and you have to make it for them – it's not ready made – it has to be imagined (Copeland 1982, qtd. in Neilsen 1990: 2).

Behind Malouf's imagined mythology of *linking* in a partnership *Relation Self and Other*, his choice of words, describing inner and outer dimensions of life, the physical and spiritual worlds of his characters, there is a constant quest for a creativity that encourages the reader to perceive grandeur, concord, and peace, also in the face of grief, loss and disorder. There is an unceasing aspiration towards the highest ethical elements of humanity, in order to inspire and *teach* that is typically romantic.

Throughout his career, Malouf's focus has always been to experiment in different genres, in order to see how he could *fine-tune* the English language of the colonisers to Australia as a new/ancient land, which was not the home of certain metaphors created elsewhere, in another climate, another place, another socio-historical and cultural situation. This mythological quest led him to a constant exploration and testing of the limits of the English language to describe Australia, in order to create a new mythology, in a different English, which could respond to the language and its metamorphoses in *relation to place*, with a deep consciousness that Australia had already been mythologised by Aboriginal Dreaming, Songlines and story-lines:

We have always read [Australia], or misread it, in terms of the landscape we carry in our heads and of the language we brought, a language that did not grow out of what was here. [...] What we had was a highly developed language and names for everything, and a reality in front of us that did not fit. [...] I have been fascinated, in all the books I've written, by that business of naming, of making the thing by speaking its name. But here we spoke the name, and what appeared was something entirely unexpected. The gap between our language and our landscape fascinates me, [...] that mystery of naming things is central to my notion of language (Kavanagh 1986: 185).

The construction of his fictional realities in these terms is, in my opinion, one of the best qualities of Malouf's creation – poetic correspondences, analogies, metaphors, symbolisms full of rhythm and sound. It gives substance and authenticity to what happens in his texts and characters. At the same time, in the echoes and ripples of meaning he creates, he makes us understand and *feel* things at the deepest level of our being human. His narratives put us in a partnership *relation* and dialogical dialogue with text and characters which is

compassionate, sympathetic, caring and open. He evokes and inspires the best in us, even when presenting the more conflictual and violent aspects of ourselves and the world.

In his narratives, Malouf constantly crosses thresholds, bridges gaps, and reconciles opposites, intertwines the earthly grounding of the physical body and the high flight of the soul, giving them resonance and meaning, as a form of poetic, personal, political, cultural and social healing.

While reflecting on friendship and its poetic resonances, I also took some time to honour Stan Mellick, dearest professor, mentor and friend, and Ray(*mond*) Woods first guide of mine in the Australian bush, in my Australian first life, as a fragrant taste of true and loving sharing *mateship*. They are now abiding in that other realm of life, beyond the threshold, where they can see us and guide us in our dreams, in our sudden sideways visions, in their whispering breaths into our ears, telling always about love and beauty. Physical death and therefore *absence* of cherished and beloved family members and friends are certainly hard stepping stones we all must face, bridges we need to cross, abysses we need to go through. The pain of missing the body, the smile, the sound of beloved voices full of good advice and laughter, is tempered (only a little) by the loving memories, full of our good old times of togetherness, while discussing a book, or ritually watching *Star Wars* together (the first archetypal series, not the subsequent videogames) for the *umpteenth* time. The same is true of other friendships, temporarily lost on the surface of things, in the fragmentation of our mundane lives, sometimes smeared by hurtful empty gossip, *lost in translation* between the language of love and that of the judgemental and ungracious mind.

However, nothing, as Clem says, is ever lost, every sound and word and heartbeat is treasured in our precious Memory and Archives, ready to materialise again at the right time. David often underlines this very ethical concern in relationships, this attention to beauty, harmony, wellbeing. This is present, explicitly or in a more subtle way, in all his oeuvre, and, as he states in *The Happy Life* (2011) it has to do with the human perennial quest for happiness, in all its possible declinations. So it is intimacy, affective relationship, closeness, openness to the other which shapes language and gives depth and meaning, special colour and glow to our *word* and world.

David's word is always delicate and radiant: its pulse, beat, rhythm, and sound are in tune and attune you with the slow/fast active/meditative throb, pulsation, *heartbeat* of life, in its awesome magnificence and beauty ... The poetical voice is always astounded by the beauty of life, intensely involved, interested, carefully observing and noting every *breath* (a recurring word and image), every tic, small gesture, mid-air pulsating movement, a fragment of eternity in the flux of time. It is easy to fine-tune to Malouf's imagination, not because of any special capacity of the reader, but thanks to the usual poise, grace, elegance, modesty and intensity of his work, thanks to *his* gift and facility to let you into his words, resounding and reverberating worlds.

Thus the roaring Ocean below David's flat, the welcoming place that hosts us with good food, jokes, music and talk, picks our every heartbeat. It takes form and echoes into the mind and heart, for a long time after the sound of the voice has softened into dreaming. A Silence Approaching Music.

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