

ASPECTS OF METAMORPHOSIS
in the fiction of David Malouf

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Submitted for the Degree of Master of Arts
April, 2001 University of Tasmania

English, Journalism & European Language
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I, Vivienne M. Hamilton, am the author of the thesis entitled *Aspects of Metamorphosis in the Fiction of David Malouf* submitted for the degree of Master of Arts.

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Acknowledgements

Many have offered advice and encouragement along the way but I would like to thank particularly my supervisors: Dr Philip Mead, Dr C.A. Cranston and Dr Narelle Shaw for their contributions at various stages of the process. Special thanks must go to my father who inspired my love of literature and to my mother who always took pride (as only a parent can) in my modest academic achievements. Sadly, she died from cancer in the first year of this work. There are many friends to thank but patience awards should go to: Janet and Lance Patford, Jane and Rick Smith and Lesley Ralph who encouraged and supported me during the difficulties of my thesis journey.

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Abbreviations

<i>J</i>	<i>Johnno</i>
<i>IL</i>	<i>An Imaginary Life</i>
<i>FAP</i>	<i>Fly Away Peter</i>
<i>HHA</i>	<i>Harland's Half Acre</i>
<i>ES</i>	<i>12 Edmonstone Street</i>
<i>RB</i>	<i>Remembering Babylon</i>
<i>CCC</i>	<i>The Conversations at Curlow Creek</i>
<i>SP</i>	<i>A Spirit of Play</i>
<i>DS</i>	<i>Dream Stuff</i>

Introduction

Central to David Malouf's fiction is the importance of individual perception and interpretation in the determination of a reality which ultimately must be subjective and relative. Although his narratives include significant changes of place and circumstance it is through characters' psychological and spiritual development that transformation, or metamorphosis, is most apparent. In other words, external changes remain subordinate to the internal ones of individual growth of consciousness and altered perception. Malouf also focuses on transforming readers' perceptions through creating a new mythology. His is a mythology based on imaginative recreation of the past which is then synthesised with the present. It is these aspects of metamorphosis which will direct my analysis of Malouf's novels.

Diverse thematic levels in Malouf's fiction afford a variety of critical perspectives. A review of the extensive range of material written about Malouf reveals that three critics dominate the field: Amanda Nettelbeck, Ivor Indyk and Philip Neilsen. Nettelbeck's analysis of Malouf's fiction demonstrates her claim that 'the tendency to look for national definition is [...] being replaced by a more critical concern with the *processes* and effects of national myth-making.'¹ The significance of language and memory, defining aspects of Malouf's style, form the basis for her detailed study. The value of 'memory' was also intrinsic to the nineteenth-century Romantic vision and indeed Nettelbeck acknowledges a Romantic influence in Malouf's novels: 'Malouf's writing is imbued with both a romantic aesthetic (in its appeal to enduring universals and natural cycles) and a political consciousness (in its review of cultural history in general and Australia's cultural history in particular).'² Despite her claim that his work contains 'contradictions' Nettelbeck asserts that Malouf achieves a perpetual balance or compromise between these two opposing

critical perspectives: 'Malouf forges a tentative but persevering balance between potentially oppositional ways of viewing and of knowing the world' (iii).

Post-Romantic elements in Malouf's fiction are also noted by Philip Neilsen who published a revised edition of his 1990 critical volume *Imagined Lives*, in 1996. In this analysis of the binary oppositions underlying Malouf's writing, he also discusses the recurring themes of 'a yearning for self-transformation and for wholeness; [and] a post-Romantic deference to Nature and the imagination' which prevail in Malouf's writing (218-9).

Ivor Indyk, in *David Malouf*, provides a detailed analysis of post-Romantic aspects of Malouf's novels which include Malouf's portrayal of 'imagination as "the first principle of creation,"' the significance of the organic cycles of nature, and psychological and spiritual self-transformation from fragmentation to wholeness and a sense of continuity (27).

While I don't ignore the critical perspective of Nettelbeck which was, in fact, a major source of inspiration for this thesis, my analysis here emphasises the post-Romantic elements of Malouf's construction of individual metamorphoses. Although geographical, temporal and cultural issues play an important role, ultimately, my focus transcends national and contemporary aspects of identity. It is Malouf's fictional representation of the spiritual and emotional stages of life which direct my analysis. These 'stages' are exemplified by relationships with the natural world, experiences of loss and displacement, a coming to terms with one's own mortality and a search for spiritual meaning. It is these moments of inner metamorphosis, common to human development and regardless of culture or era, which create a universal dimension for Malouf's novels.

With the exceptions of *Johnno* and *The Conversations at Curlow Creek* (Chapter 1), the central relationships explored in this thesis are with characters' sensual, spiritual and imaginative interaction with the natural world rather than their relationships with each other. This is a major point of departure between my approach and that of Indyk. While Indyk does not deny the significance of human interaction with the natural world it is merely one of several influences on human metamorphoses which he explores. Much of his discussion focuses on the effects of social and familial bonds, specifically: father/son relationships, 'understated [...] homosexual romance' between Malouf's characters, and the social power of the feminine in terms of procreation and destruction (7). In contrast my analysis is primarily concerned with Malouf's representation of the broader planes of existential experience and the organic cycles of birth, growth, decay and death that subsume humanity into the world of nature. Furthermore, while Indyk interprets many of the 'primitive unities' in Malouf's work from the sensual dimension, as metaphors for human, often homosexual eroticism, my analysis focuses on the transcendent aspect of spiritual metamorphosis, achieved through this reconnection with primitive origins. At times I draw analogies between Malouf's fiction and Buddhist philosophy but generally the term 'spirituality' in this thesis refers to its broadest sense, transcending specific religious tenets.

In order to clarify the thematic focus for this thesis, 'aspects of metamorphosis,' I will explain some of the basic elements informing my concept of metamorphosis as it relates to Malouf's fiction. The concept of metamorphosis or transformation has interested humankind for centuries and much has been written about it from many perspectives. Theories of evolution and transformation have yielded valuable links to the past that have inspired fear and fascination throughout history. Changing form or substance, changing

circumstances and changing attitudes, paradoxically remain constant elements of human experience from which we can trace our development. The idea of evolutionary connection between nature, animals and humankind remains a focus for both spiritual and biological arguments. In many pre-industrial societies including the indigenous Australian ones, the ancient Egyptians, and some American Indian tribes like the Zuni and Pawnee, mythology teaches that all life forms are interconnected. In a discussion of myth and folklore Joseph Campbell says:

No consistent, clearly separating line between the nature of man and beast, such as we find, for example, in Genesis 1:26-30, was ever drawn in these mythologies [of hunting and agriculture]; for the two were experienced as part of one life which informs all things. (9)

These pre-industrial societies did not regard themselves as separate entities but rather they interacted with the landscape and other living species, in a harmonious and ecologically balanced way. Ernst Cassirer, in a discussion of the development of mythical consciousness explains that a literal sense of unity was enhanced by a belief in a magical element of connection:

Long before man had knowledge of himself as a separate species [...] he knew himself to be a link in the chain of life as a whole, within which each individual creature and thing is magically connected with the whole, so that a continuous transition, a metamorphosis of one being into another, appears not only as a possible but as necessary, as the 'natural' form of life itself. (Vol 2, 194)

In this early world view the differentiation of the I (the subject), from the surrounding environment (the object), involves a gradual process of transformation which Cassirer states 'is the unmistakable symptom of spiritual transformation, of a crisis in the development of the human self-consciousness' (Vol 2, 195).

Advances in knowledge and the development of language (which has the power to create the world symbolically) intensifies the process of separation of the subject (self), from the object (other). Where these intellectual and social changes occur, the primitive (in

the sense of original) belief of unity has been transformed, often to feelings of alienation. Thus, despite a sophisticated ecological understanding of our environment there remains for many people, a spiritual longing, often unconscious, for a mythical re-connection with the natural world.

Many would agree that contemporary western society demonstrates improved socio-economic conditions for a significant proportion of the population. Yet, ironically, its people exhibit increasing levels of psychological fragmentation, spiritual *ennui* and general neurosis. As early as the 1930s Bertrand Russell wrote about 'the day-to-day unhappiness from which most people in civilised countries suffer' (13).³ Russell asserts that since humans have been divorced from the rhythmic processes of nature a basic organic need remains unfulfilled:

I do not like mystical language, and yet I hardly know how to express what I mean without employing phrases that sound poetic rather than scientific. Whatever we may wish to think, we are creatures of Earth; our life is part of the life of the Earth, and we draw our nourishment from it just as the plants and animals do. (42)

More recently, in the 1990s, this 'unhappiness' is popularly depicted in movie characters like Woody Allen's Harry Lipton in *Manhattan Murder Mystery* and Ally McBeal in the popular soap opera of the same name. There are many sociological and psychological explanations postulated for this dissatisfaction with contemporary life, including the cult of materialism (in the sense of consumerism), the deterioration of family life, and an overall break away from traditional religions. Other analyses however, like those of Cassirer, Campbell and Russell, suggest that a loss of organic connection with the natural world has alienated people, first, from their spiritual 'roots' and second, from a sensual appreciation of the earth.

Cassirer's 'development crisis' and Russell's 'unhappiness' are reflected in the history of Western literature: in pastoral poetry from classical times onwards; in Romantic

poetry that demonstrates a revival of the primitivist yearning and in the work of more recent writers including T.S. Eliot, D.H. Lawrence, Patrick White and David Malouf. Sometimes romantic idealism spills over into sentimentalism but all are derived from the strong belief that there was a 'golden age' in history when harmony and unity with the natural world did exist.

One definition for the word 'metamorphosis' is 'the action or *process* of changing in form, shape or substance,' and another definition is a 'complete change in appearance, circumstances, condition or character' (1756) (*OED*). It is the former definition, based on *process*, which will be significant for my reading of Malouf's fiction. According to the *OED*, the word 'process' refers to the action or fact of going on or being carried on; progress, course – the course of becoming, as opposed to being (2364). When interviewed by Ray Willbanks in 1992 David Malouf emphasised the process of metamorphosis in *An Imaginary Life*: 'A lot of *An Imaginary Life* is about a kind of mystical process in which you see everything as continually evolving and moving and yourself as part of a process rather than as an entity' (149). The *process* of becoming is understood eventually by the character Ovid as he develops an awareness of his own spiritual transformation:

We have some power in us that knows its own ends. It is that that drives us on to what we must finally become. We have only to conceive of the possibility and somehow the spirit works in us to make it actual. This is the true meaning of transformation. This is the real metamorphosis. Our further selves are contained within us, as the leaves and blossoms are in the tree. We have only to find the spring and release it. (*IL* 64)

In this passage, Malouf, who has acknowledged the presence of Eastern values in his fiction, creates a remarkably accurate reflection of Buddhist philosophy whose pivotal teachings rest on a belief in humankind's power to self-transform from ignorance to Enlightenment:⁴

[Man] is not ready made: he is continually in the process of becoming, always changing. And it is in this characteristic of change that his future lies, because it means that it is possible for him to mould his character and destiny through the choice of his actions, speech and thoughts.⁵

Eastern elements of spirituality, as they relate to Malouf's fiction, particularly in terms of metamorphosis and the *process* of death, will also be explored in this study. In *An Imaginary Life*, Ovid's metamorphosis leads to his *nibanna*. He achieves a sensual and spiritual reconnection with his origins and develops an understanding of the 'necessary correspondence between things,' a key element in my reading:

What is beautiful is the way one thing is fitted perfectly to another, and our ingenuity is also beautiful in finding the necessary correspondence between things. It is a kind of poetry, all this business with nets and hooks, these old analogies.
(*IL* 64)

Imaginative reconnection with the past is a vital element of Malouf's vision for spiritual wholeness and a sense of cosmic unity. The passage below is an expansion of this point, essential to understanding Malouf's approach to fiction:

There is something in us, I mean, that wants not to destroy the past but take it deep into ourselves and, by transmuting it into something necessary and personal, carry it forward; and this is not an indulgence but a need.

One reason for this is that the past over the last century and a half has become so strongly internalised in us, and in many forms. Darwin made the bodies we walk in a living history, individually realised, of an evolutionary process going back into the *primaeval* sea.⁶

Chapter One, '*Bildungsroman*,' is a comparison of Malouf's construction of the metamorphosis of the protagonists Johnno and Dante (from *Johnno*, his apprentice novel) with the metamorphosis of Adair from *The Conversations at Curlow Creek* (his most recent novel). Unlike the other chapters of this thesis spiritual connection with the natural world is not a focus. Elements of 'place' are significant in my analysis of these novels primarily in terms of the effect of voluntary exiles, (Johnno and Dante to Europe, Adair to the Antipodes). This chapter however, focuses on the characters' major relationships as

catalysts for change. The construction of character in both novels represents human relationships as a vital power in the process of attitude formation and emotional development. In addition Malouf subverts traditional expectations of Europe as *the* place for 'spiritual growth' and depicts Adair's journey to the 'underworld,' or wilderness, as a metaphor for existential experience. Finally, it is the differing degrees of inner metamorphosis achieved by the characters' journeys to opposite hemispheres which is evaluated.

Chapter Two, '*Künstlerroman*,' is an analysis of Malouf's construction of the artistic development of the protagonist in *Harland's Half Acre*. Elements which contribute specifically to Frank's metamorphosis – childhood 'spots of time,' a murder suicide and his life on the island (which serves as a metaphor for artistic maturity), are the focus of this analysis. The discussion is underpinned by an acknowledgement of the Romantic ideology apparent in Malouf's construction of Frank. This is evident in the depiction of Frank as an 'artist-hero' figure, in his relationship with the organic processes of nature and in the significance of his reconnection with the past. Post-colonial and Romantic ideology (the fusion of the subject with the object) intersect as Frank imaginatively integrates with the landscape and begins to understand the power of spiritual and historical 'possession' of the land. Ultimately it is Frank's developing affinity with the landscape, the main factor contributing to his artistic metamorphosis, which is the focus for Chapter Two.

Chapter Three, 'Reshaping Ovid' analyses the spiritual metamorphosis of Malouf's fictional character, Ovid, in *An Imaginary Life*. This novel also demonstrates strong filiations to Romantic ideology primarily through an emphasis on the power of the imagination to transform perceptions. The metamorphosis of Ovid, inspired by geographical and 'linguistic' exile is manifested through a developing sensual and spiritual

affinity with the landscape. Adaptation to his new environment leads Ovid to spiritual rebirth and an imaginative reconnection with a psychologically fragmented past. An awareness of 'the necessary correspondence between things,' in other words, a feeling of cosmic unity, coupled with a relationship with a feral child transform Ovid's perceptions (*IL* 64). I argue that Malouf's 'Eastern values' are most apparent in *An Imaginary Life* particularly in the idea of identity as a *process* of becoming rather than as a fixed entity. Malouf's portrayal of death itself as merely a stage in human metamorphosis analogous to nature's organic cycle of birth, decay, death and regeneration is also explored. This chapter analyses the methods Malouf uses to emphasise the role of the imagination in human metamorphosis. Memories, fantasy and dreams reconnect Ovid to his childhood self, creating a renewed sense of mythological unity with nature which culminates in spiritual maturity.

The final chapter, 'Re-reading the Australian Landscape' is an analysis of *Remembering Babylon* and two short stories, 'Blacksoil Country' and 'Jacko's Reach' from Malouf's most recent publication *Dream Stuff*. Here, I also draw on relevant comments from Malouf's non-fiction publication, *A Spirit of Play* (based on the Boyer lectures for 1998). The thematic focus for this chapter is the re-shaping and re-reading of the Australian landscape and of our national mythology. My analysis centres on the methods Malouf uses to demonstrate how changing perceptions of landscape influence the *process* of characters' metamorphoses. Discussion of indigenous relationships with the land focus on Malouf's poetic expression of imaginative and spiritual connections and remain apolitical.

This last chapter also discusses Malouf's use of 'hybrid' figures, figures that can accommodate and synthesise indigenous and European perspectives of the land into a

holistic vision. In a recent essay entitled 'How Australian Is It?' Ihab Hassan suggests that hybridity is our destiny. Hassan also notes that the Australian bush alters with the times: 'It mutates in the artistic twilight zone.'⁷ In view of Hassan's comments Malouf's fictional representation of our changing relationship with the landscape and of hybridity is both topical and profound. I argue that Malouf's fiction illustrates the multi-layered, metamorphic qualities of history and that this theme is encapsulated by the short story 'Jacko's Reach' which serves as a synopsis of Australia's past. I further argue that the national focus of the texts in question remain underpinned, and in the final analysis, subsumed by, the universal elements of human metamorphosis.

Ultimately the pivotal theme of this thesis is Malouf's portrayal of the power of the imagination to transform perceptions and, consequently, 'reality.' It is this altered perception which is a vital part of the *process* of metamorphosis for Malouf's characters and also for contemporary mythology.

Notes

¹ In *Provisional Maps: Critical Essays on David Malouf*, Nettelbeck focuses on the significance of place in the construction of identity and on the specific post-colonial issues of eurocentricism, displacement and the gap between an 'inherited' language and a new landscape (i). I have italicised the word '*processes*' to indicate it is a significant concept for this thesis.

² Nettelbeck discusses the Romantic and post-colonial 'contradictions' in Malouf's fiction in *Reading David Malouf* (60).

³ Russell's assertion regarding 'the ordinary day-to-day unhappiness from which most people in civilized countries suffer,' excludes circumstances of material deprivation or 'great catastrophes, such as loss of all one's children, or public disgrace.' The kind of unhappiness to which Russell refers has no obvious external cause but is 'very largely due to mistaken views of the world, mistaken ethics, mistaken habits of life, leading to destruction of that natural zest and appetite for possible things upon which all happiness, whether of men or animals, ultimately depends' (13). Russell also argues that people must be able to endure boredom – that the rhythm of Earth life is slow; autumn and winter are as essential to it as spring and summer, and rest is as essential as motion. To the child, even more than to the man, it is necessary to preserve some contact with the ebb and flow of terrestrial life. The human body has been adapted through the ages to this rhythm' (42).

⁴ Ray Willbanks asks Malouf if the Eastern aspects of his fiction are the result of Eastern reading and Malouf replies 'No. It comes out of temperament. I believe people are their temperament' (152).

⁵ K. Sri Dhammananda provides a comprehensive introductory text, *What Buddhists Believe*, that includes an explanation of the path to *nibanna* (the highest bliss, eternal happiness) (134).

⁶ Malouf's article, 'Uses of the past' (14). While Malouf shares with the Romantics an appreciation for the wisdom gained through retrospection he does not generally lament or idealise the past as Romantics tend to do. He explains that it is not a Romantic aspect of nostalgia which interests him but rather 'a wish to revive and revisit' events from the past imaginatively in order to deepen our understanding of ourselves (4).

⁷ In an essay exploring issues of identity with specific reference to Australian culture Hassan comments on Malouf's contribution. Hassan asserts that the bush 'can become an aspect of myth, opera, sexuality, colonialism, the uncanny, or the human condition. How Australian is that?' Hassan's breadth of vision encompasses the universal elements in Malouf's fiction (33).

1: *Bildungsroman*

I might grow old in Brisbane but I would never grow up.
(Malouf, J 144)

he wants at last to appear before her [...] in his own form, [...] the new self [...] a self that has journeyed into the underworld and come back both more surely itself and changed.
(Malouf, CCC 211-2)

This chapter is a comparative analysis of David Malouf's first novel, *Johnno* and his most recent novel, *The Conversations at Curlow Creek*. While my analysis focuses on Malouf's construction of the inner transformation, or metamorphosis, of his protagonists I also explore aspects of the 'implied author's' metamorphosis.¹ My discussion concentrates on pivotal relationships and 'voluntary exile' as catalysts for change. In turn, I read the idea of change in terms of psychological and spiritual growth. My analysis also highlights elements of Romantic ideology evident in the first novel and expanded in the latest one.

David Malouf's apprentice novel, *Johnno* (1975) heralds a pattern of interconnecting ideas sustained throughout his fiction. The novel introduces complex themes involving contrasting elements of chaos and order, discord and harmony. These themes are introduced in *Johnno* primarily through the antithetical temperaments of its protagonists, Johnno and Dante. *Johnno* is also Malouf's first representation of issues of cultural and personal identity and reveals an embryonically Romantic emphasis on the power of the human imagination and memory to transform perceptions.

Malouf's most recent novel *The Conversations at Curlow Creek* written twenty years after *Johnno*, continues to explore these elements of chaos and order at several thematic levels and essentially through the protagonist Michael Adair. Initially characterised as a repressed spirit Adair eventually escapes conformity to be released into another dimension of himself. Emphasis on the power of the imagination to effect change and the use of landscape as a metaphor for human emotions in *The Conversations at*

Curlow Creek reflect a continuing Romantic influence. Robert Gray encapsulates the underlying ideology of the novel:

it is about the dialogue or quarrel, between the classic and the romantic, between Apollo and Dionysus, in each individual. The classic is the attitude of restraint; the romantic, that of sensationalism. This novel seems to me ultimately about the need for a balance in these propensities within ourselves.²

Both *The Conversations at Curlow Creek* and *Johnno* are concerned with psychological and emotional conflict within individuals, yet this issue is portrayed by contrasting narrative methods. While *Johnno* and *Dante* represent two opposite temperaments of rebelliousness and restraint, as a kind of combined *dopplegänger*, the character of Adair struggles with the opposing elements of sensuality and rationality within his own nature. Gray suggests that *The Conversations at Curlow Creek*, in many ways, is *Johnno* 'being replayed' (10). While this is arguable it is important to recognise that there are different outcomes for the protagonists, particularly in terms of emotional development.

Given that the central theme in both novels is the process of inner metamorphosis the *bildungsroman* genre provides an appropriate form. The novels narrate the protagonists' development from childhood, with *Johnno* written twenty years after the novel's events and *The Conversations at Curlow Creek* interspersed by the characters' flashbacks. While *Johnno* is a chronological narrative (within the parameters of the retrospective viewpoint of the introduction and conclusion), *The Conversations at Curlow Creek* begins in the narrative present but relies on characters' memories to relay the contextual framework. This imaginative use of the past through flashbacks and retrospection is further evidence of the Romantic influence on Malouf's work. The idea that memory and imaginative reconnection with the past lead to a sense of unity and wisdom is intrinsic to Romantic ideology

The semi-autobiographical nature of *Johnno* adds another dimension to the theme of metamorphoses. Malouf explains that Johnno and Dante are really two parts of the same nature and that, from the perspective of his own role as the author of *Johnno*, exploring the oppositions between these two characters provided an opportunity for self analysis: '[It] was a way of working out my own swings between a kind of recklessness and anarchy and a wish to be centred and not to move.'³ In terms of the narrative however, Nettelbeck observes '[i]n this relationship, though, two halves don't necessarily make a whole, because each personality – and Johnno's in particular – is subject to change to begin with.'⁴

This first novel is often regarded as a shadowy portrait of the author/artist as a young man, but which author/artist? Is it a portrait of Dante's artistic development or do the autobiographical elements imply Malouf's development as an artist? Certainly the similarities between Malouf's early life and Dante's fuel both interpretations. Dante's inner growth however, is not significant and there is little reference beyond the schooldays to his literary aspirations.⁵ Malouf on the other hand, does write poetry during his years in London which he eventually publishes. Critics are divided on the degree to which Johnno is a portrait of Malouf's artistic development. Indyk states that while

the detail [of the narrative] encourages some identification of Malouf with the writer in Dante [...] the portrait of the writer which emerges [...] is by no means a flattering one. So, far from being enhanced, the writer appears hemmed in by the clutter of a constrained middle-class existence, timid and self-conscious, an inhibited counterpart to Johnno's lawless bravado. (3)

On the other hand, Laurie Hergenhan believes that it 'is implicit in the successful completion of the novel that Dante, while consciously in search of Johnno, has found himself, at least as a writer'(332). If the reader identifies Dante as a version of Malouf then Malouf experiences some kind of artistic breakthrough. If *Johnno* is a 'portrait' of Malouf

in terms of artistic development, I think it is at the level of his emotional development (as the previous comment from Malouf indicates) as he struggles to balance and synthesise the creative and analytical, the 'fire' and 'ice' (Johnno and Dante), of his own temperament.

While the debate about the extent to which *Johnno* is autobiographical continues Martin Leer claims 'the basic abstraction on which his [Malouf's] novels build is not that of "character" but that of "narrative voice"' and in this way '[t]he entire work of art becomes a way of outlining a central literary consciousness, a 'self', in space and time.'⁶ Both these novels do reveal the metamorphosis of the 'implied author,' enhanced by the contrasting use of the narrative voice. While the self-conscious first-person narrative of *Johnno* reinforces the extremes of youth in the sense of intensity and immediacy, the third-person narrative of *The Conversations at Curlow Creek*, suggests the moderation and breadth of vision usually associated with maturity. This 'immaturity' in *Johnno* however, is offset by the retrospective viewpoint. The resulting distance, both temporal and emotional occasionally provides a mature filter and a breadth of vision manifested through the novel's irony. *Johnno* marks Malouf's transition from poet to prose writer and Malouf states that the narrative tone for *Johnno* (which took him several attempts to find), was derived from 'The Year of the Foxes', a poem that 'appears to offer the occasion for a story, and then delivers none.'⁷ This absence of narrative resolution both in terms of Johnno's character and the nature of his death is enhanced by the unreliability of Dante's narration. In contrast the narrative in *The Conversations at Curlow Creek* invites trust by its suggestion of balanced reflection and sustained insight. In terms of the concept of the 'implied author' the mature narrative tone in *The Conversations at Curlow Creek* is indicative of authorial metamorphosis.

The character construction in both novels uses human relationships as a vital power in the process of attitude formation and emotional development. *Johnno* is an imaginative recreation of the city of Brisbane in the 1950s – a cityscape which includes neither reference nor visits to the bush. The experience of sensual and spiritual communion with the natural world is restricted to literature and the cameo scenes of ‘mynah birds, picking about between the roots of the Moreton Bay figs’ in the city parks (*J* 83). In contrast the settings for *The Conversations at Curlow Creek* are rural Ireland and the Australian wilderness. These serve as metaphors for existential thought and spiritual transcendence. As a boy in Ireland Adair navigated his way home at night by ‘working by the sky’ (*CCC* 105) and here at the opposite end of the world there was ‘a different sky to read’ (107). There is an absence of communion with the natural world for the protagonists of *Johnno* while Adair’s development is influenced and also expressed through this. This constitutes a major difference between the two novels.

City-born Johnno and Dante attend the same school in Brisbane in the 1950s and become friends despite their contrasting family life and personalities. In their psychological journeys from adolescence towards maturity, anticipated discovery and revelation lead them in different directions. Ironically, their separate paths both result in expatriotism to Europe.

Dante’s narrative about Johnno relates their frequently interwoven life events and Malouf uses this to reveal, although sometimes tacitly, as much about Dante’s metamorphosis as about Johnno’s. Johnno’s search for self-transformation is explicit in his restless nature, manifested through his constantly changing address and the ‘transformations’ of identity and lifestyle he pursues with intensity. Ironically, Johnno accuses Dante of being a Romantic, yet Dante feels it is Johnno who leads the romantic

fantasy life usually reserved for fiction: 'I had too much irony, too much common sense. I was cut off from what Johnno called "life" – though what Johnno called life bore an uncanny resemblance, it seemed to me, to what the rest of us called "literature"' (J 84). This can be read as a metafictional questioning of the overlapping nature of reality and fiction. This is a recurring subsidiary theme in *Johnno* (and in Malouf's work as a whole) which underpins the changing nature of both the narrative and the characters. In accord with Romantic thought it is the power of Johnno's imagination which creates his own numerous changes of 'identity'. He changes from school bully to competent scholar and athlete and then, after successful university study, he reverts to his early social deviance, this time in the pubs and brothels of Fortitude Valley. Dante resents this fluid quality of Johnno's identity: 'I had found for Johnno a place in what I thought of as *my* world and he refused to stay there or to play the minor role I had assigned him. He had suddenly developed qualities of his own, complexities I hadn't allowed for' (48). Johnno remains an enigma for Dante although he only realises the extent of his ignorance at the conclusion of the novel. In her analysis of *Johnno* Nettelbeck concludes that '[u]ltimately, the truth of Johnno's life (and of Dante's narration) is not there to be revealed; what is more important, perhaps, is the *process* by which a life is made and its narrative unfolds'(27).

Unlike Johnno, Dante's search for fulfilment, like his nature, is not dramatic. As if from the shadows of his friend's notoriety, Dante's character emerges gradually. Malouf however, clarifies by their different actions and responses, that Dante's inhibitions cast him in the role of follower as much as Johnno's vital energy eclipses him. (Dante was unable to join Johnno in his spontaneous swim in the flooded Condamine, unable to respond with affection to the parting bear-hug, unwilling to go with him to the Congo and reluctant to join him in Paris). Through the establishment of a dominant character in the early stages of

the novel Malouf sets up reader expectations for Johnno's success and Dante's mediocrity, some of which remain unfulfilled.

When Johnno leaves Australia, anticipating greater opportunities overseas, Dante sinks into depression, and confesses: 'All my prospects had simply shrivelled into nothing like burning cellophane. All those inner resources I had been cultivating turned into a vacuum inside me. [...] I was simply immobilised from within' (*J* 110). There is a developing irony here because the novel concludes with the charismatic Johnno's potential squandered and his vital energy 'burnt-out' whereas the less confident, passive character of Dante indicates some psychological growth. While Johnno's transformations are superficial (from Dante's narratorial point-of-view) Dante's own barely perceptible inner metamorphosis does suggest the onset of emotional maturity. These contrasting 'transformations' expose the moral values of the 'implied author' through a rejection of the 'sensational' for a preferred orderly, quiet achievement. This echoes the Apollo/Dionysus conflict outlined by Gray and is reinforced when Malouf chooses death for Johnno (who represents the impulsive aspect of his own nature) and life for Dante, who epitomises restraint (and repression).

In contrast to the defiant Johnno, order and modest achievement are the explicit characteristics of Michael Adair in *The Conversations at Curlow Creek*. As the narrative of this novel progresses however, these features are challenged and synthesised with other repressed traits of 'disorderliness.' Born in Dublin, Adair loses contact with his 'gypsy' parents before he has any real memories. He is adopted and spends his youth at 'Ellersley', a small manor house in rural Ireland. Mama Aimee, his foster-mother, surprises the family at the age of thirty-eight by giving birth to a healthy boy, Fergus, who becomes Adair's

step-brother. Their childhood is shared by Virgilia, the daughter of Eamon Fitzgibbon, a local landowner who takes responsibility for the education of the three children.

Adair was tutored at Virgilia's home, 'The Park', which was 'modelled on the Roman villa. A marvel of order and economy [...] everything there was timed to the last minute. Clocks were everywhere' (CCC 72-73). Malouf uses this image of 'The Park' as a metaphor for Adair's early personal traits of orderliness and restraint. The motif of time-keeping is extended by the gift of a watch to Adair before he leaves Ireland. A symbol of the enduring qualities of his nature that reassure him during his spiritual transformation, the watch was 'a reminder, if he needed one, of what was fixed and unchanging in him; the counterweight, there in his pocket of his solemn self' (122-3).

At times Eamon tutored the children, drawing on Plutarch and other classicists to lecture them about the ultimate refinement of humankind: '[t]he world will be transformed. We will be transformed. The process has already begun' (130). Years later Adair still struggles to retain a belief in Eamon's idealistic vision that 'the forces of order and justice [...] would transform their lives,' (132). In terms of his own sensual nature however, Adair feels he 'remained lumpishly untransformed' with his love of justice overshadowed by his love for his own physical being (132).

With the onset of puberty a triangle of unrequited desire develops. Adair longs for a deeper intimacy with Virgilia who in turn is fascinated by Fergus. Indifferent to her affections Fergus is interested more in ideas than he is in relationships. Malouf's Romantic influence is again apparent when he uses a spring storm as a metaphor for the turbulent emotions of the adolescent Adair. Riding along the edge of Eamon's farm, trying to drive out his restless mood Adair realises 'that the trees too were in a state of disturbance' (81).

'It was, he saw now, the beginnings of a storm' and like young Frank Harland from Malouf's earlier novel, *Harland's Half Acre* the storm sparks an epiphany (CCC 82).

For Adair this state of heightened awareness culminates with the first moment of shared desire with Virgilia. His own senses are electrified by the lightning flashes and instead of running for shelter he stands in an open field and allows the downpour to drench him. Virgilia, who has come looking for him, appears to Adair as if a vision or a dream, emerging from the storm soaked to the skin but laughing. They share a moment of intimate contact as he kisses her neck, the rain eases and she gently pushes him away. For Adair this momentary absence of restraint, when he feels spiritually united both with the natural world and with Virgilia, marks a turning point in his emotional development and convinces him of his potential for change. He also realises that Virgilia has been responsive because she believes the change has occurred. Adair, though, senses that the incident marks the beginning of a long *process*. Malouf carefully constructs Adair's character from childhood to suggest a remarkable insight and emotional maturity apparent in these 'spots of time'.⁸ Malouf further defines the boy's dutiful nature by juxtaposing his behaviour with the impulsive, self-centred actions of Virgilia.

Temperament, but also different social and economic positions, explain many of the differences between Adair's and Virgilia's attitudes. Adair has no property to inherit and as a boy he realises that he must secure his own future. When he leaves Ireland he embarks on the years of correspondence with Virgilia that will transform his life. Their letters to each other begin a series of 'conversations' of deeper intimacy and self-disclosure than ordinary discourse revealed. The words 'conversation' and 'conversion' share a common root in the Latin 'convertere,' to turn or transform (Bartlett 455). As the title of

the novel indicates, conversation (both in terms of written correspondence and spoken dialogue) propels the narrative.

In addition to Adair's 'conversations' with Virgilia there is another conversation in the novel which is significant in terms of his metamorphosis. This occurs in a dark, acrid smelling hut in the wilderness of Australia during the early nineteenth century. Inside, a bushranger, Daniel Carney is awaiting a dawn hanging and he is guarded by a fellow Irishman who represents the justice system – Micheal Adair. By directing a series of philosophical questions to the educated Adair, Carney initiates a conversation, which progresses intermittently until daybreak. The setting of the small isolated hut creates a catalyst, a 'pressure-cooker' atmosphere, and their conversation serves as a crucible for Adair's life experience from which, like an alchemist, he extracts essential elements of his own true nature. During the long silences between the two men, Adair remembers other significant 'conversations' which form a counterpoint with Carney's in the composition of Adair's life. He is repeatedly drawn to thoughts of his life-long friendship with Virgilia and these flashbacks allow Malouf to link the past to the narrative present of the awaited execution and Adair's perpetual inner metamorphosis.

The idea of written correspondence creating deeper levels of communication than ordinary dialogue is a motif which occurs elsewhere in Malouf's fiction. As a means of narrative progression letters feature in *Johnno, An Imaginary Life* (this second novel is fundamentally Ovid's letter to future generations) and in *The Conversations at Curlow Creek*. Adair's correspondence with Virgilia becomes a vital means for self-knowledge. It was the power of their written conversation 'which drew out of him [...], a more eloquent, more perceptive, more passionate self' (CCC 160). In his earnest struggle to communicate his feelings to Virgilia, 'and as his changed and changing self crept forth and made itself

visible, apprehensible, through the alchemy of language itself,' Adair identifies these feelings for himself (CCC 160). When Virgilia responds to his letters 'it was to this new self he had uncovered to her' (161). Nicholas Jose deepens the implied authorial dimension in *The Conversations at Curlow Creek* when he says:

[a]t the heart of the book is a yearning for some final and enduring connection between one person and another, or between a person and the world, [...] as Adair writes to Virgilia – and we, listening on another level, perhaps hear the voice of the writer himself: 'He found in writing ... an escape into the deepest privacy of all, the one a man shares with the blank page.' (9)

While Johnno and Dante constitute a *doppelgänger* relationship, Virgilia's nature provides a counterpoint to Adair's. As they mature and exchange reflections on life, particularly through the poignant levels of communication in their letters, they create an underlying 'melody,' a combination of two styles of rhythm in a line of verse. (Given that Malouf is also a poet and a librettist I think this is an appropriate analogy.) As with many of Malouf's fictional 'relationship doubles' sharp boundaries between the two personalities erode and the two opposing elements synthesise. A visual parallel for this mutability is *The Two Fates*, Frank Harland's painting of the aunts in *Harland's Half Acre* which depicts them entwined as one: 'They leaned together. They mirrored one another. They moved in and out of each other's forms but were always themselves' (HHA 148-9). Leer effectively captures Malouf's characterisation when he says:

[t]he characters in his novels are not really characters in the conventional sense: they are not little self-contained atom-selves, they do not really have individual centres of consciousness; all reflect one another and all are part of a greater whole which is nature or Malouf's imagination. (13)

Virgilia's and Adair's letters to each other are a wellspring for his spiritual transformation and it is remarkable and disappointing that there is no example of Virgilia's written correspondence in the narrative and only one extract from a letter to Virgilia from Adair. Reverence for the written word by the implied author is apparent through Adair's

behaviour; before he writes to Virgilia he engages in a ritualistic pattern of preparation. He also rereads her letters and searches 'her phrases for what she might be saying under the bright words she spun out of herself that spoke more, as his did, than they stated' (CCC 39). These subtextual elements that Adair seeks, suggest the value of the active, autonomous constituents of language itself.

In contrast to *The Conversations at Curlow Creek*, the emphasis on written correspondence in *Johnno* is quite different between the two protagonists. While Johnno ardently writes to Dante from many, often remote destinations, ironically, Dante the writer, 'always owed him an answer. There was always someone I [he] cared for more' (J 153). Johnno's last letter is significant because it exposes the lack of authentic communication that exists between them. Johnno pleads for Dante's attention, finally articulating the gulf he has endured: 'I've spent years writing to you and you never answer, even when you write back' (154). It is this letter which motivates Dante to re-assess his own perceptions of Johnno. The character of Johnno becomes more complex, mysterious and enriched by all the possible qualities Dante never recognises. It is obvious even in this first novel, that the 'implied author' is suggesting subtextual elements of the written word generally, and correspondence more specifically, are a means of deeper communication than ordinary, face-to-face dialogue.

In addition to significant relationships Malouf also uses the effects of 'voluntary exile' to convey inner growth, or otherwise, of his protagonists. While *Johnno* was written during the nationalist thrust of the 1970s it is set mainly in the late 1940s and 1950s. There was little encouragement or appreciation for the arts in Australia during this decade until the late 1950s when, according to Thomas Shapcott: 'to read an Australian novel seemed, at last, to be something of an adventure – not something half apologetic' (5). There is a

strong political comment in the novel; the narrative is punctuated with both direct references and innuendo regarding the legacy of Australia's past. Characters' attitudes illustrate the power play; the cultural struggle for independence or conversely, the desire to maintain affiliation with Europe.

Like Johnno and Dante, Malouf grew up in a culture dominated by Eurocentrism and all three eventually became expatriots in Europe. The melodramatic Johnno raged against Brisbane's 'mediocrity': '[i]t was too mediocre even to be a province of hell. It would have defeated even Baudelaire! A place where poetry could never occur' (J 84). Soon after university he leaves Australia to 'make his fortune' in a copper mine on the borders of the African Congo. During long stretches of time alone, interspersed by drunken weekends in the city, Johnno reads crates of books, mainly literary classics and philosophy. Ironically 'what he was acquiring in Africa [...] was "civilisation"' so that he could adapt to life in Europe, his ultimate destination (107).

Dante, on the other hand, initially tries to derive his inspiration from Brisbane:

And still I hung on. I was determined, for some reason, to make life reveal whatever it had to reveal *here*, on home ground, where I would recognise the terms. In Europe, I thought, some false glamour might dazzle me out of any recognition of what was common and ordinary. (109)

Eventually he capitulates and after visiting Johnno in Paris Dante finally settles in London: 'I crossed to London, which I had always known was *my* destination [...] the Brisbane I knew had its existence only in my memory, in the fine roots it had put down in my own emotions (127). This reference to early emotional life as sustenance for later development is a recurring motif in Malouf's work and echoes Romantic thought. It reiterates Wordsworth's lines: 'But for those first affections,/Those shadowy recollections,/Which, be they what they may,/Are yet the fountain light of all our day,/Are yet a master light of all our seeing.'⁹ The significance of the past, in terms of memory and imaginative

recreation and reconnection, is a pervading theme in Malouf's fiction and is explored further in subsequent chapters.

During Dante's Paris visit Johnno intends to travel throughout Europe but remains mesmerised by Paris and none of his schemes materialise. Later on, while Dante is in London, Johnno does travel to Europe and the Himalayas, settling in Athens for a time. It is here in Greece that Dante visits him again and notes yet another transformation of his appearance, but also a difference in his manner:

[f]or the first time since I had known him his exuberance struck me as forced; he might even have been trying, for my sake, to rediscover some idea of himself that he could only fully realise through my presence. He was playing up to my vision of him. (*J* 131)

Dante contemplates Johnno's motivation and deeper emotions: 'What did he want out of life? What ordinary fate was he in flight from? What would he do next?' (135). This marks a twofold transformation: Dante's point of view is changing and maturing and Johnno's character, previously presented as superficial, is extended by possibilities.

As intended, Dante eventually returns to Brisbane. Both he and his parents expect him to resume the life he left four years ago. Despite a veneer of sophistication, he has changed little emotionally and issues which he repressed resurface on his return:

[a]ll my assurance, all my sophistication about foreign places and performances and food, [...] was a disguise that might fool others but could never fool me. Elsewhere I might pass for a serious adult. Here, I knew, I would always be an ageing child. I might grow old in Brisbane but I would never grow up. (144)

Johnno also returns to Brisbane, a Brisbane that is so transformed architecturally that most of the landmarks of his youth had disappeared. The two men have a reunion but the relationship is strained, 'the evening failed to catch fire. If Johnno had intended us somehow to revive the exploits of our youth, Brisbane itself had taken measures to prevent us' (147). The evening ends with Johnno drunk and morose and as in their earlier days,

Dante finds him a taxi and sends him home. Soon after, when Dante reads of Johnno's drowning, reported as accidental, he wonders if it had really been carefully managed suicide. After all Dante says 'I never did discover why he [Johnno] had come back' (*J* 148).

The 'voluntary exile' of both protagonists sets up expectations for their inner development, expectations based partly on the supposed cultural superiority of Europe. Traditionally the European experience was considered essential for the expansion of both the mind and soul. An examination of Johnno's and Dante's development, however, illustrates that on the whole, Malouf subverts these expectations. Certainly the young men progress intellectually, but their spiritual and emotional growth appears relatively unchanged.

In contrast to the development of Johnno and Dante, in *The Conversations at Curlow Creek* Adair's 'exile' to the opposite hemisphere influences his emotional and spiritual growth significantly. This 'reversal' is extended by the reversal of places of departure and destinations between the two novels which effectively challenge Eurocentric ideology. The novel sets up polarised views of order and chaos, with order initially represented by the cultivated landscape and classical architecture of 'The Park' (Ireland) and chaos, by the primitive wilderness of colonial Australia. These polar divisions however, are soon exposed as reductive and it is clear that both countries contain elements of disorderliness. In a discussion about ideologies held by early settlers towards landscape Malouf says that 'while European landscapes had been shaped by centuries of use and were parklike, emulating classical ideals' [the Australian wilderness] 'forced on the observer, existential questions' (Baum interview). This comment reflects contemporary romantic ecology which seeks a redefinition of 'pastoral.' Tony Pinkney suggests that

‘such a pastoral would no longer propose comfortable reconciliations of culture and nature in images of the garden; rather, it would now look long and hard at the radical *other* of culture, the wilderness, as a complex possible model for transforming human society’(415). This theory is reflected by Malouf’s construction of Adair’s spiritual metamorphosis. When Adair undertakes a journey to the *other* hemisphere, this takes him not only vast geographical distances but also inward to the emotional depths of his true nature. The result is a fusion of the civilised and repressed ‘primitive’ elements within him. The experiences in both countries create a psychological and spiritual ‘balance’ not unlike that achieved by some of Malouf’s other protagonists, Ovid (*An Imaginary Life*) and Jim (*Fly Away Peter*).

Malouf uses the prisoner Carney to represent the stereotypical view of romantic Ireland and barren Australia. Carney believes that Australia was ‘a punishment on a man just in itself’ and that it was really like a part of Ireland reserved for those that had ‘gone wrong in life’ (CCC 50). Robert Hughes explains that this European view of the antipodes: ‘the further south one went, the more grotesque life must become’ was a popular myth originating from Renaissance geography and exploration of Locac (the Malay Peninsula). The myth was revived when the British used Australia as a penal colony and ‘it was to become the continent of sin’ (44).¹⁰

In contrast to Carney, Adair’s spirit is nourished by his experience in Australia: ‘some quality of the country [...] had changed his sense of what lay before, and behind too. So much space, so much distance under the dry air, had opened his eyes to the long view,’ (52). Adair recalls the harvest activities as he travels through farms that had somehow been cultivated from the dry earth: ‘But the earth had taken the unaccustomed seed. It had sprouted, broken ground, shot up, thickened, been reaped’ (53). This description is also a

metaphor for Adair's growth. He is aware that he thinks 'less sentimentally now, of the land he had grown up in [Ireland] [...] a sad country, mournful, made human by the long sorrows it had endured, the sorrows yet to come' (CCC 53-4). He remembers the Irish system which allowed no prospect for the poor to own land and compares it to Australia with its abundance of land just waiting for those tough enough to work it. In this passage particularly, Malouf is 'rewriting' the myth of Australia as 'the landscape of Hell' by first exposing the idyllic picture Carney holds of Ireland and then depicting Australia as fertile and productive. Adair thinks deeply about Australia and decides that it is in a stage of transformation: '[i]t was a place that was still being made habitable' (54) and himself 'a stranger here, a passer by' (55). Another of Malouf's characters, Knack, from *Harland's Half Acre* shares this view. When he receives an Australian landscape painting (painted during Frank's early, idealist phase) Knack says 'I like this country you have painted, [...] A place, I think, for whole men and women, or so I see it – for the full man, even if there are no inhabitants as yet' (HHA 116).

Malouf depicts Adair's experiences in the antipodes as an opportunity for reflection and to explore new personal dimensions. This is poetically expressed by Adair's meditation on the different star patterns between the hemispheres:

[a] sky he will exchange before long for the more familiar northern one, like a side of his soul that has been in recession here; not lost nor denied but out of sight for a time – and who can say that he might not have had to come all this way, and entered into some opposite dimension of himself to know at last what it was?' (CCC 203)

Although the narrative situations between *Johnno* and *The Conversations at Curlow Creek* are reversed Malouf's underlying theme of dissolving stereotypical assumptions regarding Europe and Australia is extended. In the first novel he erodes the dominant belief of his childhood (and earlier) that the European experience was superior in

terms of psychological and spiritual growth while in the most recent novel he extends this by 'rewriting' early mythology that depicted Australia as 'the fatal shore.'

Neither Europe nor Australia overpower Johnno's temperament of self-destruction. Despite his years abroad, he remains confused and fragmented, finally sinking into the 'underworld,' or darker side of his own nature. On the other hand, Adair synthesises the two experiences into a mature balanced self. While Dante's metamorphosis is only beginning at the conclusion of *Johnno*, by the end of *The Conversations at Curlow Creek* Adair has been 'transformed' and is heading back to Ireland to propose to Virgilia. Through his 'conversations' and his wilderness experience Adair develops a panoptic vision of the human condition and imaginatively synthesises fragments of his own life into a psychological whole:

he wants at last to appear before her untrammelled and without intermediaries, in his own form, as himself; the new self that something in this harsh land and the events of these last months have created: a self that has journeyed into the underworld and come back both more surely itself and changed. (CCC 211-2)

Finally, Johnno's life and death remain a mystery and his character, fuelled by local speculation and rumours, becomes legendary. Dante's explanation of 'what dying really means' (157) encapsulates this 'living mythology':

[i]t [dying] means no longer to exist in the minds of the living as a real presence, intractably solid and unique, but to suffer metamorphosis into a pale, angelic figure [...] an insubstantial abstract of such empty recommendations as 'devoted son,' 'loyal friend,' 'a splendid example to us all.' (157-58)

Adair and Carney also become legendary figures, as stories regarding the execution or release of the prisoner spread. Even Adair's name is transformed to O'Dare and becomes an ironic reinforcement of the hero's credibility. Malouf avoids conventional endings in his fiction:

I don't want the curtain to come down. I want there to be some kind of suspension at the end of the book so that the narrative world goes on existing and so that things are not resolved. [...] We want those who are going to die not to die, and of course that belongs to the world of wishful thinking, of story-telling, of legend-making, or rumour.¹¹

This authorial desire is manifested in both narratives as the protagonists continue to metamorphose through the collective vision and 'conversations' that perpetuate their local and national mythology.

Notes

¹ The definition of implied author I take is from Booth 'the implied author chooses, consciously or unconsciously, what we read: we infer him as an ideal, literary, created version of the real man; he is the sum of his own choices' (70-75).

² Gray also regards this 'quarrel' as analogous to Malouf's own inner conflict saying that 'Dante's parents in *Johnno* are virtually Malouf's own parents, and their division – the Levantine and the English, with all the temperamental disparity that implies – is Malouf's own' (10).

³ In the 1992 interview with Ray Willbanks Malouf claims: 'I think all the writing I do has to do with this sort of opposition between the two complementary or oppositional types, involvement and withdrawal, action and contemplation' (147).

⁴ Nettelbeck points out that while '[t]he two characters signal opposing drives' Malouf's construction of Johnno and Dante is more complex than just a set of balancing opposites' (*Reading Malouf* 20).

⁵ Although in The Prologue to *Johnno* (set twenty years after the main narrative) Dante says 'The Book I always meant to write about Johnno will get written after all' (*J* 11) and Johnno's final letter, which mentions Dante's 'funny stories,' indicates he was writing (*J* 154).

⁶ Leer makes this point in the context of a discussion about the lyric, rather than epic, or particularly dramatic approach which Malouf adopts towards his fiction (14).

⁷ Malouf's essay *A "Narrative" Tone* explains: '[w]hat it ['The Year of the Foxes'] delivers within the narrative tone and the setting is a set of correspondences and associations' (Tulip 271).

⁸ Wordsworth's 'spots of time' in *The Prelude* are explained by Bloom as 'moments of space,' [...] their function is to enshrine 'the spirit of the Past for future restoration' (223).

⁹ From Wordsworth's 'Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood', (Bloom 180).

¹⁰ In *The Fatal Shore* Robert Hughes explains that Locac, in the antipodes, was 'encysted with fable' – while to some it was a golden country – for many it was 'a land of deformity inspiring legends of freaks.' Hughes claims that when the British transported their convicts to Australia the myth was revitalised: 'this imagined country was perhaps infernal, its landscape that of Hell itself. Within its inscrutable otherness, every fantasy could be contained; it was the geographical unconscious' (44).

¹¹ Malouf makes this comment during a discussion with Helen Daniel about tragedy and comedy saying: '[B]ut of course life has no happy endings. Tragedy is the only form which is absolutely true to life—the only form that deals with a condition which is inevitably going to end in death, in which that kind of ultimate disintegration and disorder is going to triumph against all your attempts at order. But we all want in some other part of ourselves some other resolution' (13).

2: *Künstlerroman*

The light was inside things It was as if he had got to the other side of things. It was the quality of his seeing that was changed.
(Malouf, HHA 148-9)

Harland's Half Acre (1984) marks a change from David Malouf's typical novella towards a more epic literary form, epic in terms of both volume and narrative scope. Within a time-frame of 1915 to the 1970s the lives of two Australian families, the Harlands and the Vernons, unfold through a dual narration. Although the two protagonists, Frank Harland and Phil Vernon (also one of the narrators) are both transformed emotionally and spiritually during the course of the narrative I will focus on Malouf's construction of Frank's artistic development. The analysis will concentrate on childhood 'spots of time,' a murder/suicide which provides a catalyst for artistic growth and Frank's life on the island as a metaphor for artistic maturity.

The character of Frank Harland shares much with the Queensland artist Ian Fairweather and while Malouf acknowledges this biographical element, he is careful to point out that this connection occurred to him towards the end of the novel. Malouf explains to Candida Baker that the original inspiration for the character of Frank comes from the early family life of Michelangelo:

I thought it was quite amusing, to be dealing secretly with an Australian version of the Michelangelo story. Nobody would ever guess that from anything in the book itself – or at least, I hoped they wouldn't. But that would sustain me in the rest of it, as a notion of the kind of artist I was dealing with. A sub-text that would never appear. (234-63)

This subtle historical connection adds another dimension to the *künstlerroman* form of *Harland's Half Acre*. Peter Knox Shaw claims that 'the peculiarly unobtrusive role' of Frank Harland is a deviation from the usual *künstlerroman* in which the artist figure dominates.¹ While I agree with this observation I find that it achieves an effective

structural reflection of the shy, subservient Frank whose perpetual social withdrawal leads to a hermitic existence. This 'artist-novel' genre coincides with the start of the Romantic revival and Malouf's construction of Frank reflects the 'artist-hero' figure prevalent in Romantic literature. The most obvious example of this Romantic influence is Malouf's emphasis on the power of Frank's imagination to transform perceptions and consequently 'reality.' As well there are the concepts of organic connection and psychological wholeness, intrinsic to Romantic ideology which underpin Malouf's construction of Frank's metamorphosis. Furthermore, the Romantic (although not exclusively so) idea of human interdependence with the natural world is expressed metaphorically throughout *Harland's Half Acre*. Two climactic moments in the novel that symbolise vital stages in Frank's metamorphosis – the birth of his naïve insight and the apotheosis of his artistic vision – are sparked by a storm and a cyclone, respectively. Malouf's use of these natural elements (explored later) creates a powerful sense of imaginative projection or subject/object integration, a concept intrinsic to Romantic art.

The Harland settlers squandered most of what they owned within a generation and Clem, Frank's father, is reduced 'to grubbing a livelihood from odd patches of what was once a princely estate' (*HHA* 3). During Frank's infancy, Clem remarries and Frank is separated from his siblings and sent to live with an Aunt. Left with only a blurred, sensual memory of his early home: '[w]hat he remembered was the special quality of warmth, and outside, a vivid greenness and an expanse of blue where they had sometimes gone for a dip' (8). When his father visits he relates stories of his own youth in Killarney and a detailed vision of the place forms in the boy's imagination: 'Killarney was the realest place he knew. It had been created for him entirely out of his father's mouth' (13).

It is Clem's stories of the Harland fortune that inspire young Frank's imagination and his desire to reclaim the land for his family. '[T]hese tales, woven out of his life, out of the countryside and the past of their family, went down into the boy's imagination' (*HHA* 22). Clem's power is reminiscent of traditional storytellers, of a time when oral literature was the only way of preserving culture through words. Young Frank is enchanted by 'his father's *talk*, the endless flow of words on that caressing breath that must itself, Frank decided, be the creative medium' (12). Through this idea Malouf evokes the Promethean myth associated with the origin of imagination and this adds an historical depth to Frank's artistic metamorphosis.²

In this chapter I explore the power of language as an agent of imagination and metamorphosis. The concept of language in my analysis however, is not confined to words but is exemplified in other forms; from sophistry to raw sound, from endless talk to silence, from composed music to nature's rhythms, and from the visual artist's language of colour, shape and line.

Frank discovers that his 'language' is not words and *translates* his father's stories through brushstrokes and colour, into his own pictorial art form. At his Aunt's he begins to draw, sometimes copying illustrations from newspapers and advertising material: '[h]e loved the precision it took to recreate, detail by detail, and with delicate strokes for shading, the professionalism of the newspaper ads, and was delighted when his Aunt accused him of tracing' (11).

After the death of Clem's second wife Frank is able to go 'home' but he is troubled by a belief that the power of his own wishing may have brought about his step-mother's death. Musing over these events he climbs a granite bluff and observes an approaching storm which he associates with this 'turning point in his life' (17). The storm creates an

epiphany for Frank, a 'spot of time' in the Romantic sense of a memory preserved for future restoration. Instead of merely observing the external world Frank's naïve insight is sparked. The electrical currents of the storm charge his imagination and he finds that he can 'see into the life of things.'³ '[T]he leaves around him were glowing still [...]. They were transparent, you could see right through them' (*HHA* 14). This scene reminds Frank of the stained glass window of St. Michael's church. It is interesting that specific religious art is introduced at this point – this may be a device by Malouf to intensify the emotional effect for readers by increasing the sense of sacredness of the boy's experience. Certainly the perceived association with the stained glass is consistent with Frank's development as an artist in the attention to colour and shape 'brightness and clarity of line and form' (14). Yet, it doesn't appear that the child has any thoughts of God or heaven but only of the beauty of the stained glass images like the leaves in the storm: '[t]he light was inside things [...]. It was as if he had got to the other side of things. It was the quality of his seeing that was changed' (14). Although the significance of a religious element is ambiguous it is clear that the moment of awakening consciousness (when Frank believes his imagination has the power to bring about death) is interrelated with the moment of awakening artistic imagination.

Home again with his family Frank develops his drawing skill and eventually learns to paint. Through his art he realises a sense of his own power to change things: '[t]he page was transformed [...]. The page was his mind and contained everything that was in his mind. Hidden beneath it was the world. He had only to let things emerge, to let his hand free them' (29-30). The child Frank is portrayed as a 'blank canvas,' a creature dwelling in an original state, analogous to the pre-symbolic phase of the Child in *An Imaginary Life*. This sense of the 'primitive' in *Harland's Half Acre* is reinforced by the primeval

descriptions of the images Frank holds of his family's early estate. The 'original' Killarney, (recreated in Australia) 'the plateau, site of the family's real and legendary beginnings' (HHA 22) was a place 'where the air seemed half composed of water, into blue-grey scrub' (23). Malouf's use of aquatic imagery to describe the gum forest vegetation enhances the sense of merging elements such as air and water in his description of Killarney:

[c]ool even at midday in winter, and in summer a glittering, sighing, shimmering ocean, it was its own deep blue this gum-forest, with a whiteish foam on the surface, and on still days it was glassy. Where a breath, high up, caught the furthest crest of it, turning single leaves, or a bird pushed off and a twig vibrated, ripples flushed through it that were felt below as a trembling of light over the steady earth. (23)

Words and phrases like 'deep blue', 'whiteish foam', 'crest,' 'pushed off', and 'ripples' all develop the 'ocean' metaphor used here to describe the forest. This overall picture of the landscape is hauntingly reminiscent of the pre-creation phase in Book 1 of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* as it echoes the concepts of mutability and transformation: 'Nor yet was Earth suspended in the sky;/Nor pois'd, did on her own foundations lye:/ Nor seas about the shores their arms had thrown;/But earth, and air, and water, were in one.'⁴ The primeval scene evoked by the images of Killarney also reinforces, through metaphor, the naïve phase in Frank's artistic development. Again the idea of 'necessary correspondence' is evident here as Malouf links the past and the present through these descriptions of early landscape and ancient art and literature.⁵

A description, in the novel, of early aboriginal rock-carvings sustains the theme of metamorphosis by emphasising the interconnection between the elements and the creatures which evolve from the beginnings of life: 'The outline of a whale might be broken by that of a bounding kangaroo, the separate orders of creation, sea-beast and land-beast,

interpenetrating in an element outside nature' (*HHA* 23). Knox Shaw interprets the rock carving as a structural metaphor for *Harland's Half Acre*:

The figures that break into each other's space and join together to compose a world that belongs, in part, to the mind, offer a compelling image of the novel's structure. And in context they are given a pointedly reflexive quality by their metaphoric relation to the surrounding narrative that has to do with the exposure of layer upon layer of history.⁶

Arguably, the rock carving has even more significance than as structural device, acting also as a reminder of the artistic imagination which has 're-connected' the different species into a synthesised whole: 'the mind of whoever it was, decades back, who has squatted here and with bits of flint or a sharpened stone made the clearing a meeting-place for separate lines of existence' (*HHA* 23). The rock-carving metaphor is also significant because it pre-figures Frank's maturing artistic vision and style. Eventually his artistic vision focuses on two main ideas – interconnection through layers of history and spiritual regeneration through nature. These ideas are reflected by his developing impressionistic style, an expression of mutability, which in turn reflects the overlapping images of the rock-carving.

Although Frank's early family life is replete with sensuality and affection he realises that his father lacks the qualities to maintain the family. Believing that his art will restore the Harland empire Frank transforms the images of Killarney inspired by his father into landscape paintings, and makes a plan: '[i]t was, quite simply, to win all this back some day and restore it, acre by acre, to its true possessors [...]. His pictures were a reminder and inventory. They were also a first act of repossession' (31). Through the sale of his paintings he intends to buy back the Harland land, piece by piece.

The narrative is now propelled by Frank's movement away from the nucleus of suffocating family life into a life of increasing isolation. Malouf's characterisation of Frank

begins to conform to the stereotype of the alienated Romantic artist-hero as a series of events reveal him first as merely lonely, then as a fringe-dweller and finally a hermit. Paradoxically this social withdrawal from the centre to the edge, allows Frank fully to realise his own spiritual and artistic 'centre' or self. He goes first to Brisbane and works in an advertising agency that teaches him

the rudiments of his craft [...]. He was freed into discipline, then freed again into his old happy state of dreamlike self-discovery, but with a new sureness of touch in which the adventuring mind moved out now into uncharted spaces. (*HHA* 39)

For five years he works with the agency, learning the tricks of the trade but also forming 'the habits of singularity and a lifelong solitude' until the Great Depression closes the business down (41). Unable to find work in Brisbane, like thousands of others, Frank 'took to the road' and a life of vagrancy.

Malouf portrays this stage in Frank's experience as restorative; the countryside revives his senses, nourishes his imagination and gives him a sense of reconnection with his origins: 'he saw something of the land he had been born to: cane fields waving their plumes under the moon, [...] greyish plains [...] sea inlets fringed with glossy-leafed mangroves, thunderous surf' (43). Now dependent on charity, 'he found a companionship in misery [...]. He discovered that he belonged. But with those who were outside' (43).

Malouf's portrayal of a struggling Romantic 'artist-hero' is intensified through Frank's search for materials and shelter to pursue his art. His vagrant lifestyle increases the sensual dimension of his character and both his turbulent emotional state and his parallel artistic metamorphosis are Romantically expressed by metaphorical descriptions of the weather and tides: '[h]e had been adrift so long now that he thought he might never get back. Cross-currents and storms became the normal conditions of his existence; the paintings were flimsy rafts, then islands with their own weather' (45).

Struck by fever and in hope of refuge, Frank approaches an old car dump on the outskirts of a township. Again connections with an ancient past are evoked as a primordial scene is developed: 'when the moon was hidden it was pitch black, a darkness so dense that you might have stepped back into a time before creation' (*HHA* 46). Delirious now, Frank tries to enter one of the wrecks to sleep and is attacked suddenly by 'a black devil, all blue-black hair and breathing fire' (47). This nightmare image is revealed as one of a group of aborigines who have taken 'possession' of the dump and Frank, a trespasser, is beaten unconscious. The actual occupants of the cars were 'the watchers: stately figures, also black who looked on but did not move, their eyes unblinking under the moon' (47). They appeared from Frank's delirium however, to be 'spirits, older than the ghosts of cars and their owners. He had disturbed a rite, or interrupted an assembly of the dispossessed' (47-48). This intermingling of reality and dream-state, coupled with the images of an ancient race juxtaposed with contemporary machines, evokes the layers of history entrenched in the site of the car cemetery. Frank's rejection by other fringe-dwellers, is offset against his developing communion with the natural world. Laying face down on the earth for some time, it is daylight before he regains consciousness:

[d]amp red soil was at his eyeball with blades of blunted, razor-sharp grass sprouting from it, so coarse you could see the crystals that would cut. A host of ants was going about its business all around him, intent and scrambling, as if he were just another element in the landscape. (48)

This passage prefigures the scene of Frank's final collapse on the island. But for now his fever has broken and a breakthrough in his artistic vision, a vital stage in his metamorphosis, is also indicated:

when he staggered to his feet at last it was into a feeling of wholeness, of renewed power and strength, though he could never be sure afterwards which side he had come out on, or what pact he had made with his native earth. (48)

Violently rejected by other 'outsiders' Frank's expectations of companionship are shattered. He does make several close friends after this experience but the gap between his developing artistic consciousness and everyday human responses increases his emotional distance from others while simultaneously drawing him to the natural world.

As with many of Malouf's protagonists Frank is portrayed (through the innocent, idealistic style of his art) as somehow incomplete without a 'European experience.' Johnno and Dante (*Johnno*), Jim (*Fly Away Peter*) and Janet (*Remembering Babylon*) all seek a balance or to fill a spiritual gap either directly or vicariously through European culture. The polar extremes are reversed for Ovid (*An Imaginary Life*) and Adair (*The Conversations at Curlow Creek*) as they enter a 'primitive' environment in order to balance a life of refinement and sophistication; yet the search for the 'other' remains constant. Frank never travels beyond his home state of Queensland but Malouf brings a 'European experience' to Frank in two specific ways. First, through the cinema newsreels dominated by images of the Nazi death camps, and second, through a friendship with Knack, a cultured Polish Jew, and Edna, his Australian mistress. When he first enters the chaotic world of Knack's Junk Shop Frank finds the place disturbing: 'fragments of broken households were the stuff of Knack's business' (105). Their little flat behind the shop however, is neat and comfortable and soon Knack and Edna become a surrogate family for Frank.

Racked by powerful emotion Knack releases it the only way he can – through his music – the piano. 'Frank knows nothing about music [...]. It is mere noise at first, in which he recognises a kind of power' (110). Initially Frank understands nothing of Knack's previous life in Europe: '[t]he music was a landscape of storms and stretches of wide shining weather [...]. But over the weeks it declared its lines to him, as if he were

listening to the coursing thunder or the beat at walking pace (the world's pace) of his blood' (HHA 111). Verbal discourse was an inadequate mode of communication for such profound experience but the 'lines' of Knack's music like the 'lines' of Frank's pictures bridge an emotional gap through auditory and visual images. Frank however, cannot understand Knack's cynicism: '[h]e hoped some day to convert the man to another point of view. A picture might do it. He held in his mind against Knack's talk and the enfolding music, one of his landscapes, and wondered if that would do it' (114). Frank eventually gives them a painting, hoping it will counteract Knack's gloomy perspective, and is rewarded by genuine appreciation: 'I like this country you have painted, Frank. This *bit* of it. It is splendid. A place, I think, for whole men and women, or so I see it – for the full man, even if there are no inhabitants as yet' (116). This is a significant moment in the narrative because the ideals which still constitute Frank's innocent and immature artistic vision are exposed through Knack's interpretation of his painting. '[T]he people for it have not yet come into existence, I think, or seen they could go there – that there is space and light enough – in *themselves*' (116). For Knack, Frank's painting depicts a landscape of the future, waiting for the metamorphosis of humankind into their full potential. It also creates a visual equivalent of Ovid's affirmation in *An Imaginary Life*: '[w]e are creating the lineaments of some final man, for whose delight we have prepared a landscape, and who can only be god.'⁷ But more significantly, for this thesis, the painting symbolises a stage of innocence in the process of Frank's artistic metamorphosis.

At this point in the narrative Malouf constructs a series of events designed to shatter Frank's naïve view of human nature and thus stimulate his artistic metamorphosis. The newsreels at the local cinema, with their images of the concentration camp atrocities at the end of the war have become familiar scenes. 'These events were actual but unreal' until

one particular moment when yet another image of an emaciated prisoner appears (*HHA* 118). Suddenly Frank notices the brilliant sunflower beside the man and the familiar plant transforms the distance between them into an immediate reality. Malouf uses this interplay between the alien and the familiar to spark an epiphany for Frank who runs from the theatre, overwhelmed by emotion.

Subsequently he arrives at the bloody scene of the murder-suicide when Knack has shot Edna and then blown the back of his head off. In shock for days after Frank cannot forget the scene, in particular the blood which has sprayed across the landscape painting he has given them: '[t]he whole room shook with changes. His picture for instance – the one thing that was near enough to his own experience to offer him access. Changed! Extraordinary. Such reds! What painter would have dared?' Frank's idealised vision of life is 'blown apart,' and his artistic vision is transformed through the sudden awakening to the inadequacies of his own art. Changed forever he destroys all his previous work, gathers his few belongings and takes to the road again. When he begins to paint again it is with a newly emerging maturity and insight which is to be the outstanding quality of his future work. Again Ovid's words in *An Imaginary Life* are 'played out': '[W]hat else should our lives be but a continual series of beginnings, of painful settings out into the unknown, pushing off from the edges of consciousness into the mystery of what we have not yet become' (*IL* 135). Because Knack's cynicism is as extreme as Frank's innocence he provides an important adjunct to Frank's artistic development by balancing his world view, a view which now consists of good and evil.

Another of Frank's friends, Phil Vernon, a boy of twelve whom eventually becomes Frank's lawyer and a life-long friend, assumes the narration of *Harland's Half Acre*. Instead of the impersonal third person narration Frank is now presented from Phil's

point-of-view which, as Philip Neilsen explains, ‘finds a balance between the sensible observer and the involved interpreter of another person’s consciousness.’⁸ Nevertheless, Phil proves an inadequate narrator in much the same way as Dante does in *Johnno*. Phil is portrayed as egotistical, lacking depth of experience and empathy. As Nick Mansfield observes, ‘[w]hat Frank feels so intensely, Phil merely gawks at. The woman he loves rejects him in frustration: “Don’t you understand anything? You never see what’s really happening because you’re so full of yourself.”’⁹ Again, like Dante, it is not until the end of the novel, that Phil realises how little he knew of his friend’s inner life. This effectively distances the reader from Frank also and he remains an enigmatic figure reinforcing the Romantic stereotype.

Phil and his father visit Frank at the studio he sets up after Knack’s death, a condemned theatre known as the Pier Pictures: ‘[a] vast wooden structure [...] it stood at the end of the pier about sixty yards out in the waters of the bay and was approached by a latticed gallery’ (*HHA* 55). Again the Romantic stereotype of the artist is symbolised by this isolated fragment of architecture jutting out into the sea which serves as Frank’s home and studio. The author’s own voice from his autobiography, *12 Edmonstone Street* is clearly heard as Phil describes the place: ‘the Pier Pictures was an ambiguous area like my verandah sleepout, neither inside nor out’ (55).

Initially unimpressed by Frank, Phil knows their lives are linked when he sees a picture of Edna, a common acquaintance. Although Frank’s portrait was impressionistic the boy recognises her inherent qualities which had been captured with such immediacy. Frank notices that Phil knew the woman but neither commented, joined now by a tacit silence:

[i]t was the merest chance that Frank Harland’s experience and mine should have crossed in this way, [...]. None of this could I have put into words that day. I put it

into silence, along with other things, that I felt I shared now with Frank Harland.
(HHA 61-2)

These 'silent moments' between Frank and Phil are developed throughout the rest of the narrative culminating in his time on the island.

The title chapter, which relates a stage of Frank's metamorphosis (after the suicide of his nephew Gerald), is barely four pages long. It is described by Maryanne Dever as 'a meditation on the subject of voices, the dreamed fragments of conversations past [that] represent the varied pasts of the sites that Frank recovers through his painting.'¹⁰ The voices serve as a catalyst for Frank's artistic vision; they are those of his father, of his forefathers and of various people he meets on the road: 'of men spinning yarns beside an oildrum filled with coals, or at a siding waiting for a rattler' (175). The result of this multivocal expression is a new mythology. Like the images of the early rock-carving these overlapping voices recreate history, layer upon layer right back to aboriginal dispossession when the first Harlands claimed their land. This medley reconnects Frank imaginatively to the past and he 'repossesses' his heritage by transforming his mental images into paintings. Finally he understands that imaginative possession, a form of spiritual connection generally associated with indigenous people, transcends any legal claim that preserves land for inheritance. Like legal contracts, words are just one form of repossession and not essential. There is an 'underlying tune,' a form of intuitive knowledge, which Frank 'hears' now and which sensually and spiritually links him to his environment.

Sound in *Harland's Half Acre*, both formal music and natural rhythms, harmonises in much the same way as the varied species in the rock carving blend and the impressionistic images of Frank's art fuse subjects, and subjects with objects. Although this title-chapter of the novel opens with Frank's dreams dominated by ancestral voices representing the historical and legal dimension of his repossession, the moment of Frank's

understanding of 'authentic possession' is represented by the sounds naturally occurring as the environment accommodates the human element. Instead of depicting nature's sounds alone Malouf integrates those of nature and humanity: 'Or bees in a kerro tin, that sort of music not yet honey. Or doves going hammer and tongs under the shingles of a weatherboard steeple. Or steps on gravel' (HHA 176). The humming of bees, (usually in hives), and the sounds of doves (usually a gentle cooing) are associated harmoniously with 'abrasive' manufactured items, that is, 'kerro tins', 'hammer and tongs' and 'gravel'. This integration is a metaphor for Frank's own imaginative integration into the environment and creates an atmosphere which will soon represent Frank's new life on the island. No longer needing to dominate the land by legal ownership Frank *feels* part of the history of the landscape through the power of his imagination. While Phil, in his legal capacity, buys back the various packages of land for the Harland family, Frank gathers all his canvases, imaginative fragments of the Harland empire, and lays them side by side like a quilt, a quilt which would have measured about half an acre. This is his legacy for his family. One day he walks out of the house, taking nothing with him and after a time wandering the roads again he settles for the remainder of his life on an island. This marks his ultimate withdrawal from society into a world of solitude with nature and art and consequently a final stage in his metamorphosis.

From Phil's initial visit to Frank on the island it was obvious '[h]e was living the life that suited him' (183) and that despite the appearance of a makeshift camp '[i]t was permanent' (183). No longer suffocated by family responsibilities and social expectations, Frank is now deeply connected to his environment. This Romantic fusion of the human with the natural, the subject with the object is apparent in Malouf's imagery. Frank is described as having 'gone to earth' (190) and Phil says '[h]e had his own seasons' (185).

Phil's first sighting of Frank on the island is expressed through environmental imagery, reinforcing his integration with the landscape:

[t]he scrub, its trunks all spotted and peeled with grey, lime, mushroom, ochre, came right up to where he worked; and Frank, himself all spotted brown and peeling white or pink, in a straw hat and frayed army-shirt, was as much part of it as any straight trunk or gnarled and papery limb. He was not so much painting it as painting out of it. (*HHA* 184)

The landscape appears as an artist's palette with 'its trunks all spotted and peeling with grey, lime, mushroom ochre,' (184) where creator and created integrate: Frank, his art and the natural world. The idea of the subject integrating with the environment suggests a metaphysical experience. Despite Ruskin's and other's scepticism it is an experience many poets profess to have had, along with artists in general, and Eastern and Western mystics.¹¹

The following extract from a poem by the Chinese poet Li Po is an excellent example of this:

The birds have vanished into the sky,
And now the last cloud drains away.
We sit together, the mountain and me,
Until only the mountain remains.¹²

Frank's later work, created on the island is a continuing revelation of his vision of reciprocity and 'necessary correspondence between things' (*IL* 64). While Frank's early portraits of Phil's Aunts, Ollie and Della, capture the essence of their shared lives through an impressionistic style:

I knew them at once, though there was no attempt at likeness [...]. They leaned together. They mirrored one another. They moved in and out of each other's forms but were always themselves. They communicated through a play of shared lines. (*HHA* 148-9)

Landscapes dominate now, scenes usually devoid of people:

[w]hen he admitted the human to this world it was on nature's terms [...]. Walkers by the sea with a dog or a solid shadow at their heels, gave up their separateness and the hard lines of a species, and as they moved on into the landscape resumed

earlier connections, between bough and bone, and hand or foot-print and leaf.
(HHA 187)

Again the elements and the earth are merged with the human. The human is depicted as having 'resumed earlier connections' indicating the evolutionary process (187). This passage from the text creates a definite sense of regression or re-entry into a primordial state reminiscent of Frank's childhood images of Killarney and indicates a sense of cyclical wholeness or completion in Frank's artistic metamorphosis: '[t]he spirit that moved back and forth in him was like the breeze that swung between land and sea' (187). Frank's vision merges the elements of air and water, it dissolves the boundaries between people, and between people and the earth, resulting in an ecstatic vision of cosmic unity.

Neilsen points out that in *Harland's Half Acre* Malouf resolves the traditional Romantic contradiction, of the artist alienated from the natural world, through a 'Romantic solution.'¹³ Part of this solution, according to Neilsen, is a sensual and organic connection with nature. Frank's art, specifically through his use of natural materials including earth and blood exemplifies this organic connection. Sometimes instead of canvas, Frank uses bundles of old newspapers as background collage, *transforming* their initial effect to suit his purpose:

[he]e *laid* his paint thickly over these events and made his own news. Forms emerged from the forest about him and the forests from which these sheets of newsprint, by a long process, had themselves emerged. Fresh occasions and immanent, uncarnate creatures swam to the surface of the paper as to the surface of his mind. (187)

In this passage Malouf's use of language reinforces the theme of metamorphosis; 'forms emerged', there were 'fresh occasions'. The italicised 'laid' has connections with evolutionary growth in the sense of layers remaining, or the retention of some of the original layer of existence, history or in the case of collage, previous background fabric. All this Phil absorbs during his visits to Frank which are often long periods of silence

punctuated by conversation. These 'silent moments' shared between them are interspersed with nature's rhythms and develop the ideas (from the title chapter of the novel) of sounds and of the 'underlying tune' I discussed earlier in this chapter.

The silence was deep but never absolute [...] There was always the slight hushing sound of a breeze high up in the leaves [...] the clatter of banksia cones, [...]. A grasshopper's saw-foot rasped across bark. Each sound was infinitesimal, but multiplied they made a continuous burring note, so low and unchanging that the ear could ignore it and the mind might take its ceaseless buzz for silence. (HHA 185)

Frank's 'silence' on the island was occasionally interrupted by the roar of a bushfire or the howl of a cyclone and again sound is the basis of Malouf's imagery as Frank relates an event: 'You could hear the sea buzzing like a great swarm, that was the first thing. Then it roared like it was going to break right over the island' (208). Towards the conclusion of *Harland's Half Acre*, when Frank survives the cyclone on the island it invigorates his creativity. He clings to a tent-pole for seven hours as the cyclone rages and when Phil visits him soon after he recalls his animation:

[h]e was happier, I think, than I had ever seen him. Some of the storms' electric violence had got into him as he lay huddled under his tent, holding fast to a raw pole of it and feeling the vibrations go down through him, the strokes of power. (208)

The cyclone stimulates an epiphany for Frank, it renews his vision as it sweeps the island first with a force of destruction and eventually with Edenic regeneration:

[t]ill just before dawn the wind simply dropped into the middle of the island like a stone, and when he struggled to his feet and went out it was morning, the first light of creation; astonishingly pale and clear with the slick of new birth on everything, on mud, leaves, branches, and all things wet with colour. (209)

This moment in the novel symbolises Frank's artistic and spiritual apotheosis.

Ironically, while his work is being catalogued for a national retrospective, Frank's strength deteriorates, culminating in his final collapse. He is found on the path to the beach by one of the young surfies who provide yet another surrogate family for him. When Phil

arrives the frail old man is barely conscious, hip broken and dehydrated from hours in the sun. Phil waits beside the makeshift stretcher for the medical helicopter to arrive. They share their final 'silence' except for the sounds of the island itself: 'layer on layer of small lives fretting or ticking or whirring above or below' until 'a new note that was regular, insistent' emerges from the medley – the rotor blades of the helicopter (*HHA* 219).

Malouf's recurring theme of a physical and spiritual 'return to the earth' (as in Ovid's death in *An Imaginary Life* and Jim's death in *Fly Away Peter*) is continued in *Harland's Half Acre*. Frank's affinity with the natural world expressed through his primitive living conditions, his mature artistic vision and his final collapse in the bush suggest a spiritual transformation, preparatory to death. Subsequently, Frank's metamorphosis into physical death and inevitable decomposition evokes the completion of the organic cycle, evolution in reverse, a sense of return to the beginnings of life.

In previous novels Malouf's protagonists experience a spiritual transcendence at the point of death, for example, Ovid in *An Imaginary Life* and Jim in *Fly Away Peter*. Frank achieves this level of spirituality however, soon after he settles on the island. He has quit society and except for his surfer friends and Phil he is totally immersed in his art. For Frank the arrival of the helicopter, the roaring sound and the wildly moving vegetation as it lands, recreates the scene of the cyclone and his last moments of consciousness are of this previous epiphany.

The national exhibition is a success. Frank the 'outcast' is venerated through his art and he continues to evolve through mythology. Like the character of Johnno, Frank becomes something of a legend but also like Johnno, his character continues to metamorphose through unrealised depths and subsequent possibility on the part of their respective narrators. Phil, who had known Frank for most of his life and had been present

during the creation of many of his paintings, believed a special intimacy existed between them. Yet he is now aware of how little he really *knew* him and that Frank and his art are in the end a mystery. This juxtaposition of intimacy and isolation is at its most poignant when Phil, observing Frank's assembled works, recalls familiar moments between them yet senses the existential loneliness:

I could have wept. Not only for the power of individual pictures and the joy of seeing again paintings that recalled to me odd moments in Frank's company and the echo, distinctly caught, of his voice; but for the immense distance I felt between the man I had known and the dweller on that star, whose loneliness I had barely touched and had understood only as I translated it into my own terms. The distance was immeasurable. (*HHA* 223-4)

Notes

¹ Knox Shaw provides an extended discussion with examples on traditional *künstlerroman* (31).

² According to Greek mythology Prometheus' theft of fire (or breath) from the Gods which he then gives to mortals is associated with the imaginative power to create and transform their world.

³ Line 49 from Wordsworth's poem 'Tintern Abbey' which refers 'not to a mystical reverie, but an aesthetic state of contemplation.' See Bloom & Trilling (147).

⁴ In Book 1 of *Metamorphoses* Ovid offers a symbolic account of the origin of things, beginning with the creation of the world out of chaos (pxiv). It was a time before separation and fragmentation, before either God or man intervened.

⁵ The idea of 'necessary correspondence' is a recurring motif in Malouf's work which appears, in these words, in *An Imaginary Life* (64). It refers to a mythological sense of unity when the human, animal and environment are experienced as parts of one life form, interdependent, rather than clearly separated.

⁶ Knox-Shaw's article has an extended discussion of the significance of the rock carving in *Harland's Half Acre*.

⁷ A recurring theme in Malouf's work – this quote from *An Imaginary Life* (29).

⁸ Neilsen makes this point in the context of a discussion centred on Frank's increasing ease both with his art and with nature as this is recognised by Phil.

⁹ Mansfield provides several examples of Phil's inability to appreciate and communicate the complexity of characters' relationships in the novel (236-7).

¹⁰ Dever's comment is from a post-colonial perspective that does not perceive Australia as an empty land until European settlement but rather, a place already steeped in culture and history. Frank's recognition of this inspires his spiritual metamorphosis.

¹¹ The ideology of High Romanticism included the belief in the spiritual fusion of self with nature, (a remarkable parallel to the ancient belief in interdependence between humanity and nature and also the Buddhist principle of cosmic oneness). The sceptic Ruskin referred to this merging of the subject with the object as 'the pathetic fallacy.' See Hutchings for extended discussion.

¹² The spiritual merging of the self with the universe is a fundamental principle of Buddhist philosophy. For further information see Goldstein who chose this passage from Li Po as an epigraph for his book *Insight Meditation*.

¹³ Neilsen refers to four repetitive elements which provide a Romantic solution to a conventional Romantic contradiction – often the artist is removed physically and sensually from nature through intellectualism but Frank draws closer to the Natural by means of a cultural practice. Frank literally uses natural materials in his paintings.

3: Reshaping Ovid

We are free to transcend ourselves. If we have the imagination for it.
(Malouf, *IL* 67)

An Imaginary Life (1978) is the seminal text for this thesis and, I would argue, for any analysis of David Malouf's fiction. It introduces integral themes which are expanded throughout subsequent novels. These themes include metamorphosis, the power of the imagination to transform perceptions, the significance of the past and the interdependence of humans with the natural world. The focus for this present discussion is the power of the imagination to transform perceptions and stimulate metamorphosis. I will show that Malouf's emphasis on the imagination demonstrates strong connections with Romantic ideology. I will also delineate other Romantic elements evident in *An Imaginary Life* specifically the significance of landscape and the celebration of childhood. *An Imaginary Life* continues to attract a vast body of diverse critical material (see final bibliography) and I only draw on a fraction of this for my purposes in this chapter.¹

The idea of 'imagination,' a concept central to this chapter, has attracted misconceptions and misappropriations for centuries. In part this confusion may be attributed to advances in learning and to the different theories postulated by traditional and contemporary philosophers. Out of research ranging from the theories of David Hume and Immanuel Kant in the eighteenth century, the Romantic theories of Coleridge and Wordsworth, and contemporary scholars, Douglas Sloan and David Novitz (see final bibliography for more detail) I propose my own 'working definition' of the concept of imagination. First, I define 'imagination' as associated with the empirical qualities of sense experience and with the transcendental, or spiritual qualities of the soul. Second, this synthesis dissolves traditional mind/body divisions as the senses, memory, emotions, cognition and spirituality interact and synthesise into a heightened awareness, transforming

perceptions and creating a new 'reality.'² Finally, I assert that both passive and active elements contribute to the imaginative synthesis of life-experience fragments in the creation of a holistic vision. By 'passive' elements I refer to ideas from both David Hume and William Wordsworth. Hume's theory which is based on the power of memory, does not recognise active or creative elements in the concept of imagination. Hume's interpretation in 1739 asserts only a representational association (in the sense of reproducing a copy) of ideas as the basis for imagination.³ Wordsworth in 1798 however, acknowledges both the passive and active elements of the poetic imagination in the following lines from 'Tintern Abbey:' 'Of eye, and ear – both what they half create,/ and what they perceive' (ll 106-8). Bloom and Trilling provide the following interpretation of these lines:

Man half creates as well as perceives Nature because his senses are not wholly passive but selective, to a high degree; Man's choice among what his senses present to him is a kind of creation, one that is guided by memory, and that strives to attain continuity by linking together earlier and later presences of Nature. (149)

In other words passive elements involve perception of sensual stimuli and also memories while active, creative elements involve an *original* synthesis of ideas. This combination of elements is reflected in Malouf's comments to Willbanks regarding his own writing process: '[it] is a process like being asleep in the most wakeful possible way' (149).

Given Malouf's preoccupation with the past (specifically, human origins and unity with the natural world), it is no surprise that classical mythology is a source of inspiration for his fiction. Written in AD8 Ovid's epic poem *Metamorphoses* already contains the seeds of a primitive (in the sense of naïve) concept of evolutionary process implicit in its central theme. A collection of mythological and legendary stories, *Metamorphoses* not only deals with 'metamorphosis' as a theme but the stories themselves are 'transformed.'

As each myth 'evolves' into the next through an almost seamless transition, the shape of Ovid's poem reflects its thematic concerns.

It is not Ovid's imaginative interpretation of classical myth however, which is the inspiration for Malouf's *An Imaginary Life*. It is the poet himself, Publius Ovidius Naso, born in 43BC at Sulmo (a town of the Roman Empire), who provides the primary impulse for Malouf's second novel. From a noble, wealthy family Ovid's early verse reflected his own sophisticated, hedonistic lifestyle. Gareth Griffiths claims that the *Metamorphoses*

invoked at the level of a sophisticated celebration of sensuality the image of a period when men perceived themselves to be in direct connection with the world, a world of myth where man saw nature as co-extensive with himself, as part of a general subjectivity, not as a subject for control and analysis. (63)

This *image* of 'direct connection' however, created either from past events or from future projections, had, as Griffiths points out 'become enshrined by the time of Augustus in a mythology increasingly divorced from its originating epistemology and utilised as a mere source for metaphor' (63). In other words, the sense of original unity or direct connection with nature had deteriorated to a second-hand experience obtained from reading about it rather than any actual, personally felt experience. At the pinnacle of his career Ovid is banished by the emperor Augustus, to Tomis, on the edge of the Black Sea. It is this dramatic change of lifestyle from the refinements of Rome to a life of survival and animal sensuality which provides the opportunity for Malouf's Ovid to transform the *image* of direct perception and co-existence into 'reality.' Little is known of the historical Ovid's time in Tomis and Malouf finds that 'it is this absence of fact that has made him useful as the central figure of [his] narrative and allowed [him] the liberty of free invention' (63). Thus through an original synthesis of ideas Malouf transforms the historical character of Ovid into the fictional character of Ovid in his novel *An Imaginary Life*.

Malouf emphasises the *process* of metamorphosis in *An Imaginary Life*: 'it is about a kind of mystical process in which you see everything as continually evolving and moving and yourself as part of a process rather than as an entity.'⁴ While authorial metamorphosis (Malouf's writing process) is acknowledged it is the spiritual metamorphosis of the fictional Ovid that dominates the narrative of *An Imaginary Life*. Stimulated by his experience in Tomis and by his imaginative reconnection with his past Ovid eventually understands the process of *becoming* and develops an awareness of his own spiritual transformation:

we have some power in us that knows its own ends. It is that that drives us on to what we must finally become. We have only to conceive of the possibility and somehow the spirit works in us to make it actual. This is the true meaning of transformation. This is the real metamorphosis. Our further selves are contained within us, as the leaves and blossoms are in the tree. We have only to find the spring and release it. (*IL* 64)

As Ovid's perceptions change he also develops a changing relationship with Tomis, saying 'I belong to this place now' and decides never to return to Rome (95).

The opening paragraphs of *An Imaginary Life* introduce memories, fantasy and dreams and establish a Romantic tone for the novel. Early descriptions of Tomis, Ovid's landscape of exile, evoke a primeval atmosphere of alienation, a place not modified by human shaping: 'Even the higher orders of the vegetable kingdom have not yet arrived among us. We are centuries from the notion of an orchard or a garden made simply to please' (15). Malouf (like the Romantics) uses landscape as a metaphor for human emotions. The desolate descriptions of Tomis reflect Ovid's state of mind as he observes a sky 'empty as far as the eye can see or the mind imagine' (16). Not only is the sky 'empty' at the empirical level, 'cloudless, without wings' but more significantly the exiled poet's imagination, his soul, is a void (16).

Despite a pervading Romantic ideology in *An Imaginary Life* this mind-state initially experienced by Ovid in Tomis (expressed through the imagery of the landscape), does not correspond with the traditionally sublime Romantic experience associated with solitude in nature. In fact Malouf's description is much closer in emotional tone to Henry Lawson's depiction of the Australian bush where the land is barren and monotonous and the isolation is threatening. While Wordsworth's humans are frequently transformed spiritually by communion with nature, Lawson's characters suffer loneliness, often deteriorating into drunkenness or mental instability. Many of Malouf's characters begin like Lawson's, with their early experience with the natural world as one of alienation. Malouf however, uses this merely as a starting point. In contrast to Lawson, Malouf adopts a Romantic emphasis on the mind's own power and dissolves the negative interaction with nature, rebuilding new perceptions and new mythology, through his characters' imaginations.

Exile in Tomis constitutes material, social and intellectual deprivation for Ovid: 'My life here has been stripped to the simplest terms' (*IL* 16). It is through the lack of these 'distractions' in a semi-barbarian landscape, that his spiritual regeneration occurs' (16). Peter Bishop observes that when Ovid arrives in Tomis 'on the inner plane, he [Ovid] is primitive despite the outer veneer of civilisation.' Ovid enters the process of spiritual refinement while living with a barbarian tribe, which introduces an irony based on stereotypical expectations of 'civilised' and 'primitive' values. (This is a common theme in Malouf's writing and among other things it dissolves stringent classification divisions.)

Malouf's use of seasonal transformations as a metaphor for Ovid's psychological state and spiritual metamorphosis further sustains the Romantic influence. At the outset of the novel the landscape is bleak, suggesting the 'winter' of the exiled poet's soul and

imagination. The opening description evokes a sense of endless space 'with a view to infinity' (IL 15). As explained by the narrator this is a metaphor for an existential experience: 'but I am describing a state of mind, no place' (16). The portrayal of Ovid's depression is intensified as he describes the landscape: 'for eight months of the year the world freezes' and it is impossible to travel outwards very far (15). Malouf creates this confinement in Tomis as a catalyst for Ovid to begin a metamorphic journey 'inward' to his authentic self. Malouf's characters' metamorphoses here – as in other novels – include psychological 'regression' to an original state where they feel a sense of mythological unity.⁵ This begins an imaginative reconnection and a recreation through a spiritual 'journey' of rediscovery.

As Ovid adapts to his new environment he enters 'Spring' both in the literal sense and in the sense of psychological rebirth. This is expressed through imagery of seeds and flowers and the epiphanic moment when he sees a windblown poppy:

I was stopped in my tracks by a little puff of scarlet amongst the wild corn [...] Scarlet. Magic word on the tongue to flash again on the eye. Scarlet. And with it all the other colors come flooding back, as magic syllables, and the earth explodes with them, they flash about me. I am making the spring [...] Poppy you have saved me, you have recovered the earth for me. I know how to work the spring. (30-2)

This 'poppy scene' emphasises the power of language but the imagination plays a vital role in synthesising the various elements of the experience. The sight of the poppy, its scarlet colour, and Ovid's chanting of the Latin word for it, serve simultaneously to intoxicate his senses and inspire his soul. His memory of Sulmo is stirred and the images of his mother's flower-filled garden return. Ovid's heightened state culminates in an epiphany of colours, sounds, tastes and scents as he imagines fields of flowers. He believes by uttering the word or name for an object that his imagination will re-create it. For Ovid this experience with the poppy imaginatively *translates* to human metamorphosis and he says 'so it is that the

beings we are in the process of becoming will be drawn out of us. We have only to find the name and let its illumination fill us' (*IL* 32).

The natural world is used by Malouf in *An Imaginary Life* 'both for its own sake, in that Ovid develops a feeling of unity with it, and also to stimulate in him new forms of consciousness which burst old moulds in a way comparable to physical evolutionary change' (333). This observation by Hergenhan is evident after the poppy scene epiphany when Ovid rejects his old life and embraces his new one with the fervour of a religious conversion. Bishop's psychological analysis presents this as confirmation of emotional immaturity:

after the first contact with the unconscious, Ovid continues in a kind of middle-class intellectual confessional. Jung terms this an *enantiodromia*, meaning the swing of opposites. In Jungian terms, it signifies psychological immaturity.' (423)

This 'swing' of course, is part of the *process* of Ovid's spiritual metamorphosis and in mystical terms could be regarded as one of the simplest and most common forms of illumination. According to Evelyn Underhill 'where such a consciousness is recurrent, as it is in many poet, [Keats, Shelley, Wordsworth] there results that partial yet often overpowering apprehension of the Infinite Life immanent in all living things, which some modern writers have dignified by the name of 'nature-mysticism.'⁶ For Ovid this moment is not equated with a particular religious being but rather it is the start of an awareness of 'the necessary correspondence between things,' in other words, a feeling of cosmic unity (64). The poppy scene is merely an illustration of part of the *process* of Ovid's metamorphosis and not the definitive moment of its completion.

In *An Imaginary Life* the setting of Tomis works in much the same way as the bush hut occupied by Adair and Carney in *The Conversations at Curlow Creek*. The spatial restrictions intensify self-analysis and serve as an alchemist's crucible from which both

Ovid's and Adair's spiritual potential is refined. For Ovid the mind itself, through dreams and memories, acts as a 'cauldron' for the distillation of his life experience. In an analysis of *The Conversations at Curlow Creek* Turner observes that 'isolation is often for Malouf, a cauldron in which a new self is forged [yet] it takes a mystical connection with another being [...] for humans to evolve into more fully realised beings' (50). In Adair's case his conversation with Carney stimulates a re-assessment of his values and for Ovid it is his relationship with a feral child which serves as a further catalyst for transformation.

Inspired by a mystical connection with a boy raised by wolves, Ovid eventually reconnects with his childhood self. Through retrospection he imaginatively re-creates his past (as *he* believes it really was) and synthesises this with his adult experience and perception, transforming his sense of personal identity:

a whole hidden life comes flooding back to consciousness. So it is that my childhood has begun to return to me. Not as I had previously remembered it, but in some clearer form, as it really was; which is why my past, as I recall it now, continually astonishes me. It is as if it had happened to someone else, and I were being handed a new past, that leads, as I follow it out, to a present in which I appear out of my old body as a new and other self. (*IL* 95)

The Child represents not only an imaginary playmate from Ovid's youth but also symbolises a Jungian unconscious, or 'inner child' frequently associated with lost innocence and the creative force. Carl Jung reflects the Romantic celebration of childhood when he writes that childhood 'sketches a more complete picture of the self, of the whole man in his pure individuality, than adulthood' (Moore 53). Jung goes on to say that 'a child will arouse primitive longings in an adult for unfulfilled desires that have been lost in adaptation to civilisation' (Moore 53).

Unlike the poppy scene, which commences with an empirical sighting of the flower, when Ovid first sees the wolf-boy he is unsure if he is really 'seeing' him or experiencing a vision of the imaginary friend of his youth: 'and suddenly, as if my

imagination had indeed summoned him up, I see the Child [...] Did I really see him? [...] Was the vision real?' (*IL* 48-9). Later reflection, and the memory of the boy's eyes fixed upon him, convince Ovid that he saw a real wild child that day in the woods: 'that stare is something I could not have imagined. I have seen nothing like it before, except from the eyes of *my* Child, so many years ago' (50). Ovid says: 'I have invented nothing like it in my poems,' which were fables of creatures in stages of transformation, and that 'it exceeds my imagining,' (50):

how poorly my poetry, with its elegant fables and pretty, explainable miracles, compares with the accidental reality of this creature who must exist (if he does exist) not to impress but simply because he has somehow tumbled into being. (50)

This struggle to categorise the Child indicates the erosion of clear boundaries between states of consciousness. At this stage in the narrative, Ovid is unable to decide whether the image of the Child (either in Sulmo or in Tomis), is a reality or a vision. The mystery is extended one evening in the woods when Ovid's mind is in a state of dreamlike perception: 'I wake to find myself alone, [...] and then fall into a deeper sleep, and dream; or wake again, I cannot tell which' (50). He senses the presence of an animal (or the Child) very close to him in the dark. Again the boundaries between states of consciousness, that is, sleep, dream, and waking are blurred. At this point in the narrative Ovid is unable to determine to which element – sleep, dream or waking – the 'presence' in the dark belongs:

I am face to face with something that is not myself or of my own imagining, something that belongs to another order of being, and which I come out of the depths of myself to meet as at the surface of a glass. Is it the child in me? Which child? Where does he come from? Who is he? (52)

Two years elapse but dreams and thoughts of the wild boy continue to obsess Ovid and eventually he is convinced that the Child is the companion of his youth who has returned. One autumn there is another sighting of the Child and this time Ovid knows he is real and plans to capture him. With the anticipation of regaining his childhood companion,

coupled with his gradual adjustment to exile, Ovid becomes more attuned to his environment. He also learns to respect the underlying dignity of the tribe and their survival skills. The headman of the village, Ryzak, teaches Ovid to fish and weave nets and the exiled poet develops an intuitive understanding of ecological harmony. Awareness of the interdependence between the human and the natural worlds represents a significant stage in Ovid's spiritual metamorphosis. He realises that

what is beautiful is the way one thing is fitted perfectly to another, and our ingenuity is also beautiful in finding the necessary correspondence between things. It is a kind of poetry, all this business with nets and hooks, these old analogies. (*IL* 64)

There is a clear parallel here with the poetic imagination which Spencer Hill claims 'grows out of seamless bond between perception, memory, association, feeling, intellect and a sense of language as being in some way autonomous' (3). Ovid's recognition of 'necessary correspondence' as a 'kind of poetry' is apt for a classical poet but also prefigures the Romantic doctrine of organic unity. This doctrine emphasises the interdependence of both form and content and the idea that to move a part of a poem is to damage and possibly destroy the whole.⁷

Ovid takes no active part in the Child's violent capture and is concerned that his trust may never be won: 'how can he possibly think of us as anything but cruel? Which of the beasts would have done this to him? [...] hunt him down on horseback, truss him up, carry him away from all he has ever known?' (77). Eventually, after an initial period of resistance, followed by withdrawal, the Child begins to adapt to his new surroundings.

As Ovid leads the boy into his lost childhood, the Child acts as a catalyst for Ovid to reconnect with his own youth. Malouf claims that 'the retrospective view, the revival, gives us the real thing at last, which we missed the first time round. The past represents itself as a work of art.'⁸ Certainly Ovid's memories of his early life seem to be infused with

a creative agent which suggests Malouf is demonstrating imagination's power when Ovid states: 'I touch again on an experience that I recognise as mine only because its vividness can only be that of life lived in recall. Imagination could not present to the mind, to the senses, anything so poignantly real' (*IL* 82-3). The word 'imagination' in this context seems to be used by Ovid to indicate fancy/fantasy (which would be authentic for his time) and the result of the memories recreated is set apart as having a deeper truth.⁹

While it is Ovid's metamorphosis which remains Malouf's focus in the novel and my focus in this chapter, I think it is necessary to outline the transformation of the Child, too, because of the significant role he plays in Ovid's spiritual growth. The Child's power lies in his understanding of the natural world and it is soon obvious that he has much to teach Ovid. Their reciprocal relationship, based on learning, adds a further dimension to the Romantic ideology underpinning *An Imaginary Life*.¹⁰ When Ovid is teaching the Child the names for things the Child teaches him to imitate the bird calls and takes him to see the actual bird he is trying to mimic. As the Child enters the symbolic order of language, where self is defined by difference, Ovid recaptures the state of imaginary projection from childhood which regenerates his original sense of correspondence with the natural world.¹¹ In this sense both subjects, Ovid and the Child, are in the *process* of transformation, ironically proceeding in reverse directions but on the same path to a unified self. Ovid says of the Child: 'there are times when it comes strongly upon me that *he* is the teacher, and that whatever comes new to the occasion is being led slowly, painfully, out of me' (95).

They develop an intimacy based on shared consciousness and achieve a profoundly sensitive level of communication. This allows Ovid to 'recapture' sensually and metaphysically, his childlike (in the sense of naïve) appreciation and delight in the natural world which is a vital part of his metamorphic process to spiritual wholeness. The Child

deepens the exiled poet's understanding of nature but he also enables him to form a close bond with another human being who mirrors some aspects of his early self, thereby facilitating greater self-knowledge. Through their relationship Malouf imaginatively synthesises the 'primitive' with the 'contemporary' both between the two characters and within their individual psyches. As John Turner observes: 'Ovid is transformed as he transforms the wolf-boy [...] It is almost like retracing the evolutionary steps of our entire species in a brief account of time' (98).

Eventually the Child develops a sense of interconnection with his own species that replaces the physical bonds binding him more powerfully: 'the web of feeling that is this room, the strings – curiosity' (*IL* 82). The objects in his new world 'are threads that hold him now, and along which his mind must travel to discover how he is connected to us' (82). During winter, Nature isolates the pair, serving as a crucible while they are confined together for shelter. This is a time of pressure which Bishop regards as analogous to the alchemic process: '[a]t such times the alchemist would put the ingredients into a secure vessel where nothing else was allowed in and nothing allowed out [...] During this time the physical bondage of the Child is transformed into a psychological one' (424).

In contrast to most other critics Veronica Brady does not recognise either the latent or developing humanity of the Child. Brady chooses the Hindu teachings of the *Bhagavadgita* on which to base her analysis of *An Imaginary Life*, because of her sense of the 'non-dualistic, non-judgemental and multivalent sense of reality' expressed in Malouf's novel (234). I think Brady's overall interpretation is a valid, if uncommon one. Her analysis of the role of the Child, however, seems to diminish the character. Brady accords little significance to the 'transformations' of the Child whose role she interprets as that of an Avatar, merely an agent for Ovid's spiritual growth.¹² This interpretation, though, does

provide a further analogy with the crucible metaphor mentioned earlier in that it serves to apply pressure to Ovid's psychological and spiritual growth. Brady claims that 'to anyone familiar with the Hindu doctrine of the Avatar this might also be read as the beginning of the divine manifestation which is to call Ovid from illusion to liberation, from darkness to light' (242). Brady's Eastern reading of the Child as a mystical being who 'comes for the purposes of enlightenment' places him in the realm of the supernatural (in the sense of being above the laws of nature, divine rather than secular) (243). Yet this seems to me to negate both his integral connection with nature, and his emerging humanity which Malouf so clearly portrays through the Child's development. For instance the Child's relationship with nature is portrayed as sensual as well as spiritual. Furthermore his transformation from 'wolf-boy' to human child involves the *process* of learning human behaviour including speech, humour and love. For a purely 'divine' being, it seems unnecessary for Malouf to describe the actual development of these human attributes. Ultimately, of course, as Brady acknowledges, to see the Child as an Avatar, the manifestation of the divine in human form, it is necessary to believe in the divine – this point goes a long way to explaining our different interpretation (249).

With the death of Ryzak Ovid and the Child no longer have a protector in the village and they must escape, across the frozen River Ister and out into the steppes. For Ovid this is the final journey before his death. He must cross this river, 'the final boundary of [his] life' which he has always intuitively known would be there waiting for his arrival (IL 136):

However many steps I may have taken away from it, both in reality and in my mind, it remained, shifting its tides, [...] whispering to me: *I am the border beyond which you must go if you are to find your true life, your true death at last.* (136)

According to classical mythology the Ister, which flows to the sea, is believed to represent a spiritual re-entry into the universe after physical death. This dramatic stage in the narrative is intensified by Malouf's use of seasonal imagery: 'now at last, in the early light of a late winter morning, at the very edge of spring, I make my way toward it [River Ister]' (IL 136). 'Late winter' symbolises Ovid's approaching death but this is juxtaposed with 'the very edge of Spring' which represents his spiritual rebirth. In addition 'the early light' juxtaposed with 'the late winter morning' integrates imaginatively beginnings and endings through the evocation of the organic cycle.

The last part of the narrative, focused as it is on the *process* of Ovid's death, provides a cameo scene within which the stages of his metamorphosis are reviewed. Through memories, dreams and imaginative projection he synthesises various fragments of his life-experience:

Strange to look back on the enormous landscape we have struggled across all these weeks, across the sea, across my life in Rome, across my childhood, to observe how clearly the footprints lead to this place and no other. They shine in my head, all those steps. I can, in my mind, follow them back, feeling myself with each step restored, diminished, till I come to the ground of my earliest memories again. (151)

Ovid remembers 'the green lands of [his] father's farm' at Sulmo, the olive trees, goatherds and the imaginary child of his youth (145). He recalls the original sense of unity now revived by his relationship with the feral child. The final stage of his metamorphosis, spiritual transcendence, occurs at the point of his death.

Malouf acknowledges Eastern elements in his work claiming that they are more a product of his temperament than a result of extensive reading on the subject.¹³ This Eastern influence is apparent in the portrayal of death in his fiction that, as Malouf explains to Willbanks, 'is always as a transition, never as an abrupt end' (155). In turn this is in accord with Malouf's overall vision of 'not seeing the world as separate events [...] but seeing the

world as an evolving fluid process' (155). Again the idea of *process* is emphasised and 'death becomes part of a whole process of being' (155). Towards the end of the narrative, when Ovid is aware that his own death is close, his perceptions of this stage of his life are not centred on aspects of loss and decay but focus on positive anticipation, bordering on celebration as he imagines this phase of his metamorphosis:

I think sometimes that if I were to listen hard enough I would hear my own body breaking forth in the same way, pushing at the thin, transparent envelope that still contains it, that keeps it from bursting forth into whatever new form it has already conceived itself as being, something as different from what we know as the moth is from the chrysalis. (*IL* 148)

The emotional tone of this passage indicates that Ovid expects to attain his 'nibbana,' which he previously describes as a state reflecting the perfection of the gods: '[w]e are creating the lineaments of some final man, for whose delight we have prepared a landscape, and who can only be god' (29).¹⁴

Ovid's death in *An Imaginary Life* is depicted as part of the organic cycle of the natural world. For Malouf, the organic process is a means to express the interdependence of humankind and nature and also to sustain his theme of metamorphosis. In addition to the seasonal transformations of weather, the 'seasons' of the birth, death, decay and regeneration also shape the changes and paradoxically establish continuity in the world. The human, Ovid, originating from the earth according to mythology (see the creation in *Metamorphoses*), returns to the earth during the process of dying. As he nears death his transformation includes the dual elements of the material and the spiritual.

In material terms the physical decay of the body will enrich the soil, forming compost which in turn nourishes new life. This cyclical process extends a key idea in *An Imaginary Life*; Ovid's understanding of 'the necessary correspondence between things' (64). This mythological sense of unity, coupled with the Romantic idea of organic

connections between humans and the earth, is continually reinforced by Ovid's comments. While he is lying amidst the tall grasses of the steppes, now too weak to walk, he scoops a handful of earth and says: 'and when I take a handful of it and smell its extraordinary odours I know suddenly what it is I am composed of' (*IL* 146-7). Later, closer to death he says: 'I shall settle deeper into the earth, deeper than I do in sleep, and will not be lost. We are continuous with earth in all the particles of our physical being' (147). At the edge of death Ovid believes he has finally discovered 'the point on the earth's surface where [he] disappear[s]' (150).

In terms of his spiritual transformation Ovid reconnects with his early feeling of original unity through a Romantic subject/object integration or imaginative projection which eventually culminates in transcendence. Stimulated initially by the sensual interaction with the environment of the steppes, Ovid finds the vast horizonless space also inspires feelings of transcendence. He feels divided 'as if [he] were moving on two separate planes [...] The spirit experiences what the body does but in a different form. [...] It expands to become the whole landscape, as if space itself were its dimensions' (142). The introduction of a dichotomy of this nature at the end of the narrative may seem contradictory given the overall spiritual and psychological synthesis which has led to Ovid's maturity. The 'division' however, is not a sign of conflict, its purpose rather is to express a panoptic vision and to articulate complex emotions. Eventually Ovid feels that he is 'growing bodiless. [He is] turning into the landscape' and it is this image which Malouf uses to connect the seemingly opposing elements of spiritual transcendence with a sense of deep connection with the earth (145). As Genevieve Laigle observes:

What is described here reminds the reader both of the Romantic concept of the individual's fusion into the One and of the simultaneous dissolution and expansion of the self experienced by a number of Western and Eastern Mystics. (77)

When Ovid and the Child cross the river they enter ‘another dimension,’ for Ovid a realisation of the imagined Elysium, ‘No more dreams. We have passed beyond them into the last reality’ (*IL* 141). The imagery Malouf selects to describe the landscape fuses the earth with the water elements creating an imaginative association with the original state described in the creation phase of *Metamorphoses*. (This is remarkably similar to the aquatic imagery used in the description of the forest in the later novel, *Harland’s Half Acre* [*HHA* 23]). As the old man and the Child journey across the plains: ‘[t]he grasslands [...] sway and ripple like the sea, so that wading through them, swimming at times through the chest-high grass heads, is more like floating than walking’ (141). In turn this creates a symbolic image of the transition from life to death, through the imaginative association of the individual merging with the universal. This image creates an analogy of the Eastern concept of each soul symbolised by a drop of water in the ocean of life. The finite and the particular, represented by Ovid, the Child and their specific location and era, are synthesised with the infinite and the universal, that is, the mythological, the historical and the contemporary, through the power of the imagination. The vast horizonless landscape stimulates Ovid’s senses and inspires profound insight:

The spirit experiences what the body does but in a different form. It does not move along a line with the body, northward, dividing the grasses’ light. It expands to become the whole landscape, as if space itself were its dimensions. (142)

Ovid both remembers the past and imagines the future creating a holistic vision of his life: ‘[f]rom a point far ahead I see us approaching. From a point a whole day’s distance behind us, I see us moving away’ (142).

The imaginative synthesising of all these elements – land and sea, body and spirit, past and future – achieves a profound intuitive level of understanding which transcends the calculating power of the intellect. In the ‘Afterword’ to the novel Malouf states that one of

the reasons he sets the narrative in a remote place and in a time 'in which mysterious forces were felt to be at work, and thinking had not yet settled into a rational mode,' is to 'break into a field of more open possibilities' (IL 154). By comments like this and also through Ovid's metaphysical experiences, it seems clear that Malouf intends a mysterious element, a spiritual alchemy perhaps, to pervade the novel.

Ovid's 'final landscape' is vibrant with the sound of insects and the colour of wildflowers. Ovid knows 'This is the Child's world at last' (143). It belongs to him in an indigenous sense because he knows it intimately and now Ovid is developing a similar affinity. When the north wind becomes too severe Ovid says 'we crawl in then, like insects, under the roots, and let the great sea roll over us' (142-3). When Ovid becomes weak and unable to travel any further, the Child feeds him insects, tubers, seeds and nectar from the surrounding earth; the earth which Ovid will ultimately nourish through the decay of his own body. Again the theme of necessary correspondence between things is evoked and the boundaries between humankind and nature are blurred by the imagined integration of the material particles of flesh and earth. Ovid's feelings of intimacy with the natural world increase as he nears death: '[t]he earth, now that I am about to leave it, seems so close at last' (146). This imagined union stimulates his senses and the resulting expanded consciousness leads to a state of epiphany. As the wildlife around him emerges from various dormant or chrysalis-like forms he imagines his own metamorphosis and as his physical energy ebbs away, back into the earth, his spirit expands and fuses with the landscape.

For Ovid, in *An Imaginary Life*, the anticipation of his own death paradoxically serves to strengthen the definition of his life. Now he blends memories of his own childhood with thoughts of a future for the Child who symbolises the continuation of

humankind's journey to perfection. As Ovid watches him 'moving slowly away now into the deepest distance, above the earth, above the water, on air' this ethereal image enhances the transcendent dimension within which Ovid's spirit rests (*IL* 152). While Ovid's life is ending the Child plays along the edge of the stream mysteriously 'floating' out of the picture into an unknown future that coincides with the conclusion of the novel. The organic cycle of birth, decay, death, and regeneration is complete. For Ovid the past and present fragments of his life are integrated, the 'circle of life' is complete and his final thoughts reflect this: 'I am three years old. I am sixty. I am six. I am there' (152).

In the final analysis *An Imaginary Life* becomes a 'poetic' celebration of the power of the human imagination to inspire the *process* of spiritual metamorphosis. Hergenhan encapsulates Malouf's achievement in this novel:

The novel is primarily a fable of the possibilities of the human imagination for transforming the perceiver's world and thereby initiating change. In a sense the real hero is the imagination, and Ovid and his world are its vehicle. (333)

Notes

¹ Chosen for their contribution to the theme of metamorphosis in *An Imaginary Life* the critics I draw on demonstrate a range of analytical perspectives. These perspectives include a 'poetic' analysis by Laurie Hergenhan, a psychoanalytical approach by Peter Bishop, a spiritual interpretation derived from Hindu philosophy by Veronica Brady and a discussion of both Eastern and Western mystical elements by Genevieve Laigle. While I acknowledge that there is considerable scope in *An Imaginary Life* for analysis in terms of its metaphorical representation of the Australian colonial experience, that is, a 'national metamorphosis,' regrettably it cannot be pursued within the confines of this thesis.

² 'Traditional mind body divisions' is Sorrel's reference to Cartesian dualism – a sharp distinction between mind and body which regarded the capacities of sensation and imagination as inessential to the mind. According to Descartes the mind is one sort of substance and the body another, because it is possible to form a conception of the mind and a conception of the body by way of totally separate sets of clearly and distinctly perceivable attributes (81-2).

³ In *A Treatise on Human Nature* Hume delineates three main principles which inspire the human mind to connect ideas, particularly in writing – *resemblance* = a picture that makes us think of the object it represents, *contiguity* = 'When St. Dennis is mentioned, the idea of Paris naturally occurs,' *causation* = when we think of the son we are apt to carry our attention to the father. It is Hume's recognition of this *connecting* power of imagination which proves influential for future thinkers (352).

⁴ In his 1992 conversation with Ray Willbanks Malouf talks about his own creative process and agrees that he writes from an Eastern perspective based on ego dissolution, merger and transcendence. For Malouf writing 'is a process like being asleep in the most wakeful possible way' (149). This echoes the idea of overlapping states of consciousness intrinsic to Romantic thought.

⁵ Other novels where this occurs include *Harland's Half Acre* with its primeval description of Killarney reinforcing Frank's naïve insight (HHA 23), *The Conversations at Curlow Creek* with Adair's journey into the 'underworld' of the Australian wilderness (CCC 212) and *Fly Away Peter* where Jim and Ashley take a punt into the ancient swamp (FAP 30).

⁶ The term 'nature-mysticism' in the writings of Evelyn Underhill (a self-educated scholar who became the first woman lecturer in religion to appear in the Oxford list) forms part of her explanation of the mystics' quest for spiritual perfection. This quest involves several stages of transformation of consciousness; the awakening self, contemplation, rapture, 'The Dark Night of the Soul' and finally transcendence or the 'Unitive Life.' According to Underhill "to see God in nature," to attain a radiant consciousness of the "otherness" of natural things, is the simplest and commonest form of illumination. Most people, under the spell of emotion or of beauty, have known flashes of rudimentary vision of this kind' (234). For Ovid in *An Imaginary Life* his moment of 'radiant consciousness' (inspired by the beauty of the scarlet poppy), is the realisation of the 'necessary correspondence' between things and ultimately of his potential for spiritual metamorphosis.

⁷ In *Biographia Literaria* Coleridge uses the following analogy to illustrate organic unity: 'it would be scarcely more difficult to push a stone out from the pyramids with the bare hand, than to alter a word or the position of a word, in Milton or Shakespeare (in their most important works at least,) without making the author say something else,' (12).

⁸ In the article 'Uses of the past,' published in *Creative Investigations: Redefining Research in the Arts and Humanities*, Malouf explains that this need to revisit the past is not a nostalgia in terms of regret or loss but rather 'a wish to live through, all over again, some period of the past [...] which now that it *is* past has revealed the essence of itself, the essence of its attractiveness' (4). In other words we require emotional 'distance' in order to develop a balanced or mature understanding of events. Interestingly this echoes Wordsworth's belief in 'emotion recollected in tranquillity' as the basis for art.

⁹ In the *Biographia Literaria* Coleridge presents a complex argument that fancy/fantasy is merely representational in terms of passive memory and separates it from the active original synthesis of ideas which he regards as imagination (145-6). While the soundness of this argument is challenged by some contemporary philosophers Coleridge does draw attention to the different elements which make up imagination. This distinction drawn by Coleridge is reflected in Malouf's comments in an interview with Baker: 'I don't like fantasy at all. I think fantasy is not a move inside but a move outward, whereas I like the way you can look at ordinary acts or objects and discover how they have been transmuted by people's perception of them into symbols, into myths, into dream and so on' (258). The key word here is 'transmuted' – to change in form, appearance or properties and thus *create* something *original* which still reflects a psychological or mythological truth.

¹⁰ I refer specifically to the epigraph in Wordsworth's 'Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood' – 'The Child is Father of the Man' (Bloom 176).

¹¹ The linguistic theory of Jacques Lacan as explained by Selden – a child begins with no sense of 'otherness' (in the sense of separate ego) – the imaginary stage. This is followed by a transition to the mirror stage where the recognition of one's own body image as a separate entity creates a sense of spiritual loss of connection and stimulates a desire to regain the imaginary state of unity (137-9). It is the symbolic stage, that of speech, which displaces the Child in *An Imaginary Life* from the world of the imaginary (subject/object integration) forcing him into a necessary 'exile' as part of his journey to self-realisation.

¹² Brady explains that an Avatar 'can manifest himself in any form and, [...] usually chooses the form best suited to people's understanding' (246). In the context of *An Imaginary Life* Brady calls on Geoffrey Parrinder's definition of 'Avatar' – 'the Avatar represents a visible and fleshly descent of the divine to the animal or human plane [...]. But he comes, for the purposes of enlightenment, for the "preservation of earthly Brahman [all pervading God] of spiritual life upon earth"' (*Caught in the Draught* 243).

¹³ In this (1992) interview with Willbanks Malouf discusses 'the Eastern perspective' of his writing and also confesses that he is 'obsessed with the moment of death' [...] as 'part of a whole process of being' (152-5).

¹⁴ K. Sri Dhammananda explains that in the East, the Buddhist path to Enlightenment involves a series of spiritual rebirths with *nibanna* (the highest bliss, eternal happiness) as the ultimate goal (134).

4: Re-reading the Australian Landscape

*One life was burned up, hollowed out with flame, to crack the seeds from which new life would come;
that was the law.
(Malouf, RB 181)*

*And me all that while lying quiet in the heart of the country, slowly sinking into the ancientness of it, making
it mine, grain by grain blending my grains with its many black ones.'
(Malouf, DS 130)*

'A land can bear any number of cultures laid one above the other or set side by side. It can be inscribed and written upon many times. One of those forms of writing is the shaping of a landscape' (SP 51). According to David Malouf we do not merely replace the old with the new when we transform the landscape but rather, we create layers of history thereby supplementing and enriching what existed before. This perception of supplement rather than substitution is a 're-reading' of our landscape and in turn, of our national mythology. Consequently, changing perceptions of our landscape influence the *process* of human metamorphosis in terms of spiritual and cultural identity.

The texts analysed in this chapter are *Remembering Babylon* (1993) and two short stories, 'Blacksoil Country' and 'Jacko's Reach' from Malouf's most recent publication *Dream Stuff* (2000). Although it was the winner of the inaugural International IMPAC Dublin Literary Award, *Remembering Babylon* has attracted criticism for its 'apolitical' content. In a time of heightened national consciousness concerning the dispossession of the indigenous population this novel is primarily a poetic expression of spiritual reconnection and unity. According to Suvendrini Perera an attack on *Remembering Babylon* by Germaine Greer, titled 'Malouf's Objectionable Whitewash,' backfired into a revelation of Greer's own 'exile' from Australia.¹ Perera also states however, that 'the focus on Greer acted to erase and make invisible her central questioning of Malouf's representation of the figure of the indigene' (16). Perera, in particular criticises Malouf's concept of 'hybridity' claiming it 'seems an easy answer to the troubled questions of identity posed by settler

societies, and one that erases the complexities of the process for its indigenous subjects' (19). While these political issues are noted they will not form part of my analysis which focuses on Malouf's imaginative 're-reading' of the Australian landscape.

Of course, the geographic landscape itself changes and metamorphoses as a result of natural disasters, changing climate and urbanisation. In Malouf's fiction however, these external changes remain subordinate to his theme of renewed vision. It is the changing perceptions of his characters which dominate the narratives. Humankind has sought to adapt to a changed or changing landscape by various means ranging from cultivation (sometimes viewed as desecration) to restoration and recreation. In an interview with Nikos Papastergiadis Malouf discusses early European perceptions of the Australian landscape:

Landscapes reflect back and tell us how human we are and how powerful we are because we have made them.

When those early European settlers came to confront the Australian landscape, it wasn't the hostility of extreme drought and rain that was most frightening to them, rather it was the sense that the landscape reflected nothing back of their own humanity. They would look at it and it would remain something quite separate. (84-5)

Initially, European settlers attempted to transform this 'alien' bush into a recreation of European estates and parks. Indigenous flora and fauna were ignored in favour of European imports in a vain hope of imposing a familiar order onto an unfamiliar land. Even the indigenous names of places and natural objects were often ignored. They were replaced by familiar European names designed to add a superficial lustre or gloss to an environment generally perceived as monotonous and arid. The unintended result of this imposition of a ready-made language on a new and different culture is disorientation, identity confusion and tension that, according to Malouf, still exist in contemporary Australia:

We have our sensory life in one world, whose light and weather and topography shapes all that belongs to our physical being, while our culture, the larger part of what comes to us through language for example and knowledge, and training, derives from another. (SP 32)

Malouf also reminds us in *A Spirit of Play* that ‘the landscape the first settlers came upon was, as we now recognise, a work of land management that native Australians had been practising for perhaps thousands of years’ (47). Generally, the early settlers were unable to ‘read’ the signs of aboriginal husbandry practised since ancient times. The indigenous use of fire for example was perceived as a weapon against the colonisers. While the aborigines did use fire as a form of attack and defence against the European settlers (known as the ‘scorched earth’ policy) its main purpose in their culture is to promote regeneration of plant food for both themselves and the animals which they hunt.²

There was, therefore, in nineteenth-century Australia, a dual vision of the landscape: the white settlers’ perception of a land that had previously been uncultivated and for all intents and purposes, uninhabited, and the indigenous perception of a land replete with physical and spiritual nourishment. Malouf’s fiction erodes these clear-cut divisions primarily through his characters’ changing perceptions and subsequent spiritual metamorphoses. This chapter argues that Malouf achieves this dissolution of stringent divisions. First, through depicting his characters’ developing affinity with their new land, and subsequently through the creation of ‘hybrid’ figures, figures that can accommodate and synthesise both perspectives into a holistic vision. The concept of the hybrid is a recurring motif in Malouf’s fiction which ‘not only defies boundaries but, like the image of metamorphosis, it signifies change, and therefore empowerment.’³ The concept of the ‘hybrid’ is supplemented by the idea of the white indigene; white settlers born and living in the Australian bush for many generations who develop their own unique spiritual

connection with the land. While Malouf does not use the term 'white indigene' explicitly in his fiction, I will argue that it is an implicit part of his ideology.

As the title suggests, retrospection, a major tenet of Romantic doctrine, is the dominant narrative viewpoint in *Remembering Babylon*. Memory forms a 'landscape of the past' as themes of displacement and repossession are revisited through Malouf's story of European settlers' integration with nineteenth-century Australian life. The biblical Babylon was a place of exile, and according to the prophet Jeremiah, dwelling there was considered a form of punishment by God. For the early settlers Australia was a wilderness and its indigenous people sub-human, thus the reference to Babylon in the title. As Perera points out however, 'Malouf's text explores the redemptive possibilities [...] of settlers' connection to the colonised earth' in particular 'the imperative to build Jerusalem in the stolen land of Babylon' (18).

Remembering Babylon's central concern is with relationships; relationships between people and humankind's relationship with the environment. This chapter will focus on various changing relationships with the land that are reinforced structurally through Malouf's use of multiple 'voices.' Lee Spinks draws attention to the multiple identities of the narrative voice 'you' and 'they' suggesting that there is not always a clear distinction between who is speaking (169). Malouf confirms this observation when he explains to Micheal Ondaatje his reasons for selecting a third person voice in the novel:

I wanted a situation where you see something from many different points of view, in each case subjectively, so that you'd get that sense that there were many ways in which any situation is seen. Part of the complexity of what is happening is that different people are seeing the same event in different ways. (54)

The narrative of *Remembering Babylon* begins when a small group of European children and their dog 'round up' a stray 'Aborigine' and take him back to their settlement. The captive is Gemmy Fairley and his unique identity serves as an agent of metamorphosis

for many characters in the novel. In a discussion of the novel's Romantic elements Peter Otto postulates Gemmy as Wordsworth's 'Idiot Boy' while Bill Ashcroft asserts that he is Ovid's lost Child who 'reintroduces the issue of "becoming"' [from *An Imaginary Life*].⁴ Ivor Indyk observes that Gemmy tests the responses of the settlers: 'Gemmy is a trigger, a testing of their ability to project beyond themselves through fear or imagination or love' (25). Neilsen, who claims the mythical significance of Gemmy creates a parallel with the Lost Child of Australian art and literature, also identifies an important variation on this myth. 'In *Remembering Babylon*, a revisionist fable, the myth is reversed; the child is found, demonstrating the possibility of survival in the new environment' (202). This 'recovery,' also a 're-writing' of our national mythology, illustrates the 'redemptive possibilities' in *Remembering Babylon* mentioned by Perera (18).

Although from a white European background, Gemmy has lived with the Aborigines since his late childhood. His entrance in the novel is through a Romantic description of his integration with the landscape: 'some bit of the land over there that was forbidden to them, had detached itself from the band of grey that made up the far side of the swamp, and in a shape more like a watery, heat-struck mirage than a thing of substance' finally appears balanced on the boundary fence (*RB* 2). It is a human element which has broken away from an integrated landscape, analogous to Phil's description of Frank on the island in *Harland's Half Acre*: 'He was not so much painting it [landscape] as painting out of it' (*HHA* 184). In the case of *Remembering Babylon*, Gemmy emerges from 'beyond the no-man's land of the swamp, that was the abode of everything savage and fearsome' which the settlers equate with the realm of Absolute Dark (*RB* 3). His identity is not clear at first and the children consider that he might not be human or at least entirely human:

The stick-like legs, all knobbed at the joints, suggested a wounded waterbird, a brolga, or a human that in the manner of the tales they told one another, all spells and curses, had been changed into a bird, but only halfway, and now, neither one thing nor the other. (*RB* 2)

For the settlers the Aborigines form part of the landscape in much the same way as the flora and fauna: 'Mr Frazer saw nothing at all. Even when they [the blacks] were meant to be seen, he did not distinguish them from the surrounding vegetation or the play of light and shadow between the leaves' (68). Gemmy's unique identity serves as a catalyst for the settlers to 're-read' their landscape and to reconsider what actually constitutes indigeneity – was he a black, white man or a white, black man? 'For the fact was, when you looked at him sometimes he was not white. His skin might be but not his features. The whole cast of his face gave him the look of one of Them' (40). Both his natural body odour 'the smell of the myall, half meat, half mud' and the quiet way he moves are a constant reminder of the Aboriginal dimension (41). In the end it is this very impossibility of classifying him that is so unnerving for the settlers: '[I]t was the mixture of monstrous strangeness and unwelcome likeness that made Gemmy Fairley so disturbing to them, since at any moment he could show either one face or the other' (43). This image of the dual visage is enhanced through its evocation of the mythological god Janus who symbolises new opportunities and new life as Gemmy does for the settlers when he enters their society.⁵ Malouf explains to Papasterigiadis that Gemmy 'has been reborn into that landscape [the black world], and reshaped by it. [...] He represents a kind of pioneer spirit of what that landscape and that continent might do to you if you really and completely committed yourself to it' (85).

Ashcroft aptly describes Gemmy as 'a living conundrum of authenticity.'⁶ He is continually transforming in the novel, both literally in the various changes of lifestyle but also in the perceptions of the settlers as they struggle to accommodate psychologically, his constantly changing identity. For the colonisers Gemmy fits no stereotypical pattern, no

'black and white' category and this liminal state inspires both fear and imaginative attempts at resolution. As they endeavour to come to terms with the qualities that constitute authenticity and indigenous origins they frequently undergo their own psychological and spiritual transformation.

Gemmy's 'hybrid' status is reinforced in the novel through the perspective of the Aborigines who find him shipwrecked on a beach. Like the white children the Aborigines are also undecided regarding his identity when they first discover him. Malouf's imagery sustains the theme of metamorphosis: 'What was it? A sea creature of a kind they had never seen before from the depths beyond the reef? A spirit, a feeble one, come back from the dead and only half reborn?' (RB 22). But when they revive him and he joins their camp 'he [rises] up in the firelight and dance[s], and change[s] before their eyes from a sea-creature into a skinny human child' (27). Eventually 'he was accepted by the tribe but guardedly; in the droll, half-apprehensive way that was proper to an *in-between* creature' (28 [my italics]).

Despite his white origins Gemmy is depicted in the novel as the character with the deepest connection with his environment; he draws his physical and spiritual nourishment from the land and in fact regards it as a symbolic mother. Like Ellen Roxburgh in Patrick White's *A Fringe of Leaves*, Gemmy is proof that a white person, with a European early life can adapt to the Aboriginal way of life – a life based on an interdependent relationship with the land. At one point in the narrative Gemmy is visited by some of the aborigines who, concerned about his health since he has been living with the settlers, have come to heal his spirit. Though they sit in silence, through imaginative communication, 'a conversation of another kind,' they

spread the land out for him, gave him its waters to drink. As he took huge draughts of it, saw it light his flesh. Watched him, laughing, bathe in it, scooping great

handfuls over his breast. In the little space of dust between them as they sat, they danced, beat up clouds, threw rainbows over their heads. Then they rose, exchanged the formalities of parting, and went. (RB 118)

The complex character of Gemmy in *Remembering Babylon* not only introduces the concept of the 'hybrid' but prefigures the idea of the white indigene. This recurrent motif in Malouf's fiction is extended to other characters in the novel, particularly Mr. Frazer the minister/botanist, Joc McIvor, a Scottish settler who provides a home for Gemmy, and Joc's daughter Janet who transforms her 'Australian Babylon' into a 'Jerusalem.'⁷

Colonial attempts to transform the Australian landscape into a replica of Europe are represented in *Remembering Babylon* by the governing sector and the farming community. The colonial hierarchies cling to European customs and values failing to develop an appreciation or even an interest in the unique qualities of their new land. A minor character in the novel, Mr Herbert, the Premier, is an English gentleman unsuited to 'the rough and tumble of colonial democracy' (173). Disregarding the native fruits and flora Mr. Herbert establishes 'Herston', a property modelled on a large English garden. Farmers, like Joc McIvor attempt to eradicate the foreignness of the landscape through cultivation, 'stripping [...] of every vestige of the native; for ring-barking and clearing and reducing it to what would make it, at last, just a bit like home' (10). Yet despite cultivation, fencing and legal claims the settlers could not erase the native 'possession' of the land. *They* needed no legal authority from the land office in Brisbane; *they* belonged to the landscape and had existed interdependently with it since ancient times. Legal documents created 'boundaries that could be insisted upon in daylight' but in the darkness the white man's authority faded and the names and claims 'reverted to being a creek bed or ridge of granite like any other' (9).

Perceived by the settlers as barely articulate, Gemmy has in fact learned to speak several of the native languages. In *A Spirit of Play* Malouf discusses the importance of

language as an agent for imaginative possession. He refers specifically to the process which can transform an alien landscape into one that is familiar: 'it comes to exist for him, through the power of words, as a thing *felt*, and therefore fully seen at last, fully experienced and possessed' (*SP* 38). Malouf quotes Judith Wright: 'there is little mention of trees, flowers and birds by name or by recognisable description in Australian verse during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries' (18-9). He extends Wright's observation by adding, 'they [endemic flora and fauna] carried no charge of emotion (18-9). Wright explains that the flora and fauna of the new country, unlike the flowers of Swinburne and Tennyson, 'had as yet no ritual or symbolic associations in literature' (19). Unaware of the indigenous language for endemic objects the settlers are 'twice removed' from spiritual connection with their new land; they do not have the original names of things and the things have no symbolic association in their own language.

In the context of a discussion of Australia's literature Malouf suggests that the first breakthroughs into a reflection of the unique qualities of Australia's landscape occur when continuity between the life without and the life within is generated. This is usually sparked by imaginative association between language and culture which succeeds in a 'full possession of a place. Not legally, and not just physically, but as the Aboriginal people, for example, have always possessed the world we live in here: in the imagination' (39). Gemmy's source of power is his intimate knowledge of the landscape and 'the sounds that linked up all the various parts of it and made them one' (*RB* 105):

There was no way of existing in this land, or making your way through it, unless you took it into yourself, discovered on your breath, the sounds that linked up all the various parts of it and made them one. Without that you were blind, you were deaf, as he had been, at first, in their world. (65)

Although Gemmy establishes a friendship with the minister he develops no deep understanding of Gemmy's difficulties because their life experiences are too diverse. The

process of Mr. Frazer's metamorphosis is manifested through a developing appreciation of the wilderness environment which, unlike the majority of white settlers, he does not try to change physically into another Europe. Instead he learns to recognise the unique potential and beauty of Australia which constitutes a 're-reading' of the landscape. In a relationship superficially reminiscent of Ovid and the Child, Gemmy accompanies Mr Frazer on 'botanising' expeditions and teaches him some of the aboriginal symbolism associated with the land. He also teaches Mr Frazer some of the aboriginal names for the plants: 'it was always the same routine. He named the fruit as he plucked it, biting into the flesh or splitting it [...] then he passed the thing to Mr Frazer [...] then he too tried the name on his tongue' (RB 66). Despite the sensual appreciation of the fruit however, the two men are still using language in very different ways. As Philip Neilsen points out Mr Frazer uses it for scientific purposes, 'to categorise and separate,' whereas Gemmy uses it to connect spiritually: 'he was sensitive to this dealing between name and spirit (66)' (208). Neilsen also observes that the minister has 'limited success in "hearing" Gemmy' name the flora and fauna and that 'like the explorers, [he] is blind to much that he is "mapping" or "writing"' (208).

There are elements of irony, or at least authorial playfulness, in Malouf's character construction of Mr Frazer. These are most obvious through the minister's meticulous botanical recordings as he 'translates' the wilderness objects and aboriginal nomenclature back into the familiar images and concept of a cultivated garden. In his field notebook the *barkabah* is described as 'tasting a little like dried banana and the *kardolo* as a 'blue flower like that of cultivated tea [...] with a root not unlike carrot (RB 128). Even the notebook entries themselves 'give no indication of the conditions under which they were made. Their clear copperplate, the lines as straight and orderly as a row of cabbages in a Berkshire

field' (RB 128). Despite Mr Frazer's appreciation of the unique qualities of the Australian landscape ironically he is still translating them into familiar 'imperial' or European terms. These 'regressive' aspects of his response however, are counterbalanced by the spiritual qualities which Gemmy observes in the minister's drawing which, I think, redeem the integrity of Mr Frazer's character and intentions.

Gemmy is impressed with Mr. Frazer's sensitive perception, revealed through his drawings of the plants, because it indicates an intuitive understanding of ecological harmony:

The drawings for him [Gemmy] have a mystical significance. They are proof that Mr. Frazer, this odd whitefellar, has grasped, beyond colour or weight or smell, the *spirit* of what he has been shown. Watching a plant emerge, the swelling bulb or fruit, the perfected leaf, Gemmy is entranced almost to breathlessness, his own spirit suspended as the real, edible object, in its ghostly form, breaks out of itself onto the whiteness of the page. (129)

Malouf explains to Papastergiadis the necessity to understand the meaning of the world we live in, meaning in terms of its plants and animals and a 'sacred sense of what those things mean in terms larger than just nature' otherwise you make no connection with the land (86). For Mr Frazer, Malouf continues, 'there is no interconnection yet, but there may be, and gradually what that man is doing is building up some kind of knowledge that will make those interconnections possible' (86). As Mr Frazer 'pauses on the brink of emotional understanding of the Australian landscape' he illustrates the concept of the 'hybrid' *in process*.⁸ Ironically Mr Frazer recognises Gemmy as a 'forerunner' of the hybridity which will eventually dominate the new land. 'He is no longer a white man [...] but a true child of the place as it will one day be [...] that in allowing himself to be at home here, he has crossed the boundaries of his given nature' (132).

Gemmy didn't reveal all his knowledge to Mr Frazer, concealing certain things both to protect the minister and to avoid 'creating a disturbance in the world' (67). Mr

Frazer's journal entries trace a metamorphosis in his perceptions of the Australian landscape. He writes, 'we have been wrong to see this continent as hostile [...] it is habitable already [...]. We must rub our eyes and look again, clear our minds of what we are looking for to see what is there' (RB 129-30). The minister's appreciation of the endemic flora and fauna is incorporated into the broader realm of his religious convictions. He believes God would not provide a land unable to sustain humanity: 'no continent lies outside God's bounty and his intention to provide for his children. He is a gardener and everything he makes is a garden' (130). In his journal he writes of Australia as a promised land, like the biblical Jerusalem: 'much of its richness is still hidden; but then so was the milk and honey of the Promised Land, which was neither milk, in fact, nor honey, and the land itself to all appearance parched and without promise' (130). Malouf then *translates* Mr Frazer's appreciation of the 'wilderness' into awareness of the human potential for transformation. Mr Frazer writes: 'This is what is intended by our coming here: to make this place too part of the world's garden, but by changing ourselves, rather than it and adding thus to the richness and variety of things' (132). This is a clear echo from Ovid in *An Imaginary Life*: 'It is our self we are making out there, and when the landscape is complete we shall have become the gods who are intended to fill it' (IL 28).

Malouf's characterisation of Mr Frazer fulfils the idea of 'redemptive possibilities' for colonisers noted by Perera (18). While Mr Frazer's perceptions are transforming Malouf implies that despite changes created by white settlement the Aborigines are not 're-reading' their landscape in any spiritual sense. While their vision of Gemmy moving through the bush is illuminated by

the energy set off where his spirit touched the spirits he was moving through.

All they would see of Mr Frazer was what the land itself saw: a shape, thin, featureless, that interposed itself a moment, like a mist or cloud, before the land

blazed out in its full strength again and the shadow was gone, as if, in the long history of the place, it was too slight to endure, or had never been. (RB 68)

Here Malouf imaginatively links the collective indigenous soul with the soul of the landscape, 'all they [the Aborigines] would see of Mr Frazer was what the land itself saw' (68). This profound connection between the Aborigines and the land enhances Gemmy's role as a vehicle to transform perceptions of an alien land.

While Mr Frazer's metamorphosis is inspired by intellectual knowledge of the land both Joc McIvor's and his daughter Janet's perceptions are transformed through a series of epiphanies stimulated by sensual connections with the natural world. When Joc's neighbours resent his protection of Gemmy and engage in intimidation and cruelty Joc is shocked into a re-evaluation of his life. 'Was he changed? He saw now that he must be, since they were as they had always been and he could not agree with them' (106). Joc's transformation takes the form of an emergence from the collective opinion of the other settlers to an individual moral stance. His authentic self steps out from behind the cover of his social mask: 'It was as if he had seen the world till now, not through his own eyes, out of some singular self, but through the eyes of a fellow who was always in company, even when he was alone [...]' (106). While Joc suffers the loss of society (in the sense of neighbourly support and acceptance) he gains a sense of unity with the natural world. In a scene reminiscent of Ovid and the Child as they journey across the steppes Joc's vision of the landscape is illuminated:

Wading through waist-high grass, he was surprised to see all the tips beaded with green, as if some new growth had come into the world that till now he had never seen or heard of.

When he looked closer it was hundreds of wee bright insects, each the size of his little fingernail, metallic, iridescent, and the discovery of them, the new light they brought to the scene, was a lightness in him – that was what surprised him – like a form of knowledge he had broken through to. (107)

Philip Neilsen describes this epiphany as a Maloufian ‘special moment’ which temporarily achieves ‘a Romantic resolution of the conflict between individual and collective, between subject and object, [...] linked with an intimation of progressive change’ (207). Certainly Joc’s re-reading of the landscape through his senses inspires a spiritual metamorphosis which extends into a rekindling of intimacy in his marriage.

Janet McIvor’s metamorphosis is stimulated by events from nature but these are transformed into sacred and at times mystical experiences. Janet’s young imagination was captivated by her parents’ idealised stories of their life in Scotland before she was born. She spends her childhood dreaming of this other, European world and rejecting her wilderness birthplace. An epiphany inspired by an ordinary event begins Janet’s transformation. After picking a scab on her knee which reveals a layer of fresh skin underneath, she believes that a finer being beyond her external, social self exists. The ensuing description of the landscape and Janet’s intense feeling create a sense of cosmic joy with more than a hint of the religious conversion that is to eventuate. The grass heads are ‘haloed with gold’ and ‘in a particular vibrancy of light [...] all the world shimmered and was changed’ (*RB* 59). As her communion with the natural world intensifies she feels ‘suddenly floaty, as if she had been relieved of the weight of her own life, and the brighter being in her was very gently stirring and shifting its wings’ (59). The image of ‘wings’ sustains the theme of metamorphosis through association with butterfly (from chrysalis). It also reinforces the religious element through the imaginative association of wings with angels. Veronica Brady notes this event as a ‘qualitatively different’ experience for Janet which ‘brings her closer to Aboriginal culture, to a sense of space in which the land becomes a source of power and sacredness to be shared by entering into her power (Moore 129), not just a source of material productivity’ (‘Redefining frontiers’98).

A Wordsworthian 'wise passiveness' is evident as Janet's spirituality develops. Her mind is open to learning and absorbs knowledge at a profound level. Lyn McCredden suggests that it is Janet's 'openness to the powers of nature in this land, her refusal to panic or destroy or command the events, which perhaps makes the ideal type of Malouf's future Australian' (5). Malouf tacitly confirms Janet's significance in the novel by depicting her as the only person who sees Gemmy as he really is. He explains to Papastergiadis that 'Janet has the ability of looking right into him [Gemmy], and Gemmy recognises that she shares the faculty that his world is based on' (89). Through these insights Malouf intensifies the novel's thematic connection between understanding Gemmy and understanding the landscape.

At the moment of puberty, Janet undergoes a symbolic trial by fire which results in a definitive moment of religious commitment. When a swarm of bees engulfs her she believes the words of her trusted mentor Mrs Hutchence who warns the bees will not harm her if she remains perfectly still. She faithfully follows this advice as the swarm encrusts her body. The pressure of this endurance creates an analogy with the alchemical process of heat pressure which separates gold from base metals. This is evident in Janet's reflections after the event: 'She had remained cool inside, and when the flames [the bees] drew off what was restored to her had a new shape, was simpler' (*RB* 144). The image of fire as a means of purification is reinforced when Janet momentarily glimpses Gemmy's vision of her as 'a charred stump all crusted black and bubbling' (144). Neilsen describes the significance of this event: 'It is at once a communion with Nature and a religious experience, and again Gemmy is partly the agent: she is "convinced" of her metamorphosis when she looks back at the swarm "through Gemmy's eyes" (144)' (215). Through this fire motif Malouf forges links between Aboriginal culture, Christian belief and mystical

process. For the Aborigines fire is a vital symbol of renewal and regeneration initially through destruction of the old. The significance of 'fire' is sustained throughout the novel and is apparent as Gemmy exits the narrative. As he makes his way through the bush, away from white settlement, back to the Aboriginal way of life, he observes the remains of a fire and reflects on its symbolic meaning:

There was no finality in it. He knew that. One life was burned up, hollowed out with flame, to crack the seeds from which new life would come; that was the law. The seasons here were fire, ash, then the explosion out of blackened earth and charred, unkillable stumps [...] and the new forest, leaf by leaf in its old shape, ghostly at first in its feathery lightness, breathes out of charred sticks and smoulder [...]. (RB 181)

Janet interprets her 'incineration' by the bees as the moment when Christ claims her as his 'bride' and her perceptions begin to transform. Gradually her resentment of Australia, which she regards as a place of exile, like Babylon, changes. She no longer dwells on bitter feelings of displacement from her European heritage. Discovering Australia's unique beauty she re-reads the landscape and it becomes a new 'Jerusalem.' Again Malouf conveys that it is not the environment that has changed but the character's perceptions of it. *Remembering Babylon* concludes with the evocation of a mystical reverie as Janet watches a sunset over the bay. Reflecting on her life she imaginatively synthesises fragments of her past into a holistic vision. Despite convent life, her external changes, in terms of her environment, have not altered dramatically. Emotionally however, she has metamorphosed from an angry, lonely child to a spiritually fulfilled woman who now feels a sense of belonging and love for her land and all its creatures.

Dream Stuff, a collection of nine short stories based on dreams, memories and imagination continues Malouf's theme of imaginative and spiritual reconnection with the past and with landscape. In an interview with Ray Willbanks Malouf clarifies his interest in the past by explaining that it is individual interpretations rather than actual events which

interest him: 'I am interested in the way I read the past, that more than the events or objects of the past. I'm interested in an evolving interpretation of the world' (146). This phrase 'evolving interpretation' illustrates Malouf's belief in history as a type of organic process, containing layers of experience, which continue to regenerate and metamorphose.

Michael Fitzgerald situates *Dream Stuff* contextually within the body of Malouf's fiction:

In his recent novels, such as *Remembering Babylon* and *The Conversations At Curlow Creek*, David Malouf has helped uncover the myths and dreams that lie hidden in the Australian landscape. *Dream Stuff* continues those deep excavations, presenting small shards of fiction – painful and probing – that cut to the heart of things. (60)

In many respects 'Blacksoil Country' is a distillation of *Remembering Babylon* as the themes of colonial settlement, legal and imaginative possession of land, the concepts of the 'hybrid' and the white indigene, and the idea of 'evolving mythology' are revisited. Like *Remembering Babylon*, 'Blacksoil Country' also has its critics. Louis Nowra for example, implies Malouf's style is didactic and finds his narrator unconvincing:

Partly narrated by a boy who sounds more like a contemplative middle-aged novelist, the story seems less shaped by the natural progression of character and story rather than by Malouf the Boyer lecturer as puppet master, giving us a history lesson about Aborigines and national guilt. (8)

This underestimates the complexity of Malouf's vision which is based on universal interconnection and the overall human condition. Soon after the publication of *Dream Stuff*, Malouf said that 'contemporary politics was not very much at the top of his mind when he was writing, and that he would certainly never write anything that came directly from political opinion.'⁹ With respect to the narratorial voice, I too find it disconcerting but for different reasons to Nowra. While he hears a 'contemplative middle-aged novelist' I hear Malouf straining for a reverential, almost ghostly effect (because it is narrated 'posthumously') but the result seems awkward at times.

The narrator of 'Blacksoil Country,' twelve-year-old Jordan McGivern is a variation on Gemmy's 'hybrid' role in *Remembering Babylon*. The McGivern family manages a property in nineteenth-century, outback Australia. The adults have no understanding of the land or its indigenous people and feel alienated. Mr McGivern, increasingly embittered by the extremes of drought and floods and the ever-present threat of the Aborigines, 'cursed it and had a complaint about every aspect of it. Most of all about the blacks, as if all the faults of the country were their doing' (DS 121). Their children Jordan and Jamie however, develop an affinity with the landscape. As characters they extend the concept of the white indigene from *Remembering Babylon*. In contrast to his father, Jordan establishes a sensual connection with the land:

This is my sort of country, I thought, the minute I first laid eyes on it. [...] It was more than it looked. You had to give it a chance to show itself. There were things in it you had to get up close to, if you were to see what they really were – down on your knees, then sprawled out flat with your chest and your kneecaps touching it, feeling its grit. Then you could see it, and smell the richness of it too, that only come to your nostrils otherwise after a good fall of rain, when the smells were in the steam that rose up for just seconds and were gone. (121-2)

As Jordan discovers the secrets of the landscape, 'things that no one else [knew] except maybe the blacks' he passes on his knowledge to his younger brother Jamie who 'had known no other place than this' (128). Images of the feral Child from *An Imaginary Life* are rekindled when Jordan observes: 'there were times, little as he was, when I felt he [Jamie] was showing it to me' (128). The children in 'Blacksoil Country' represent a 're-reading' of the Australian landscape primarily through the contrasting attitudes with their parents. Their youth also symbolises the beginnings of a new vision, a new generation who learn to work with the land rather than striving to change and dominate it.

When McGivern misreads a situation with the Aborigines and kills a member of their tribe the blacks retaliate with the murder of Jordan. When the boy's body is found

‘hidden away in the heart of the country’ his father harnesses a lifetime of anger and vents it on the Aborigines. He leads the other settlers in vengeful attacks and both his son’s death and his own savagery become the stuff of local legend.

Like the Aborigines, Jordan’s blood and flesh become part of the landscape. Jordan continues to narrate the story from his grave and in a passage reminiscent of Ovid’s final death scene in *An Imaginary Life* he says: ‘And me all that while lying quiet in the heart of the country, slowly sinking into the ancientness of it, making it mine, grain by grain blending my grains with its many black ones’ (DS 130). The phrase ‘many black ones’ imaginatively links the black soil of the country with the black flesh of the deceased indigenous people. A sense of cosmic unity, of ‘necessary correspondence’ is created by the image of Jordan’s decomposing body enriching the ‘new’ landscape. Now the McGivern family is spiritually and therefore authentically connected to the land and its layers of history. Jordan’s mother, who never before looked beyond the confines of the hut and the washing line, ‘raise[s] her eyes to the land and gaze[s] off into the brimming heart of it’ in search of *familiar* ghosts hidden in its folds (116).¹⁰

Malouf’s interest in ‘an evolving interpretation of the world,’ in the multiple readings and re-readings of place, is encapsulated in ‘Jacko’s Reach,’ the shortest story in the *Dream Stuff* collection. Jacko’s Reach refers to four and a half acres of scrubland in the centre of a contemporary Australian town. The area ‘lies like a shadow over even the most settled land, a pocket of 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’ (94). In the name of ‘progress’ it is to be transformed into a shopping mall, skateboard ramp, tennis courts and Heritage Walk.

Jacko's Reach has a multi-layered history beginning with aboriginal possession: 'and the few local Aborigines who claim an affinity with the place that may or may not be mystical' (*DS* 93). A legal ownership established in colonial times has passed the property on to a Sydney family and the last of the generation, a Miss Hardie of Pymble sells it to community developers. In the narrative present it serves as a refuge for derelicts and winos, a place of adventure for children and a private place for adolescent sexual experimentation. All this disturbs the older, more conservative citizens of the community who, repressing memories of their own, more 'primitive' selves, now only want 'the one area of disorder and difference' eradicated (94). They want to concrete over the last fragment of nature and thus reshape it to reflect their control.

To understand Jacko's Reach, the narrator tells us, you have to have lived there or been exposed to the local stories 'for as long as you can recall' (94). The old story of a quarrel between two bullockies which results in a hanging and the more contemporary story of 13-year-old Valmay Mitchell who disappears, add to the history and mystery of the patch of wilderness. 'It 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' (99). The transforming narratives about Jacko's Reach, many of which involve violence or perversity, enrich and perpetuate its mythology. Each generation 'reads' it differently yet an underlying truth and continuity connect the superficial changes. While Malouf's short story itself provides a synopsis of Australia's multi-layered history Ihab Hassan observes the relationship between the national issues and the universal dimension: 'Under 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' (39).

With each generation Jacko's 'had to be interpreted in a new way, as if it had belonged all the time to another and secret language' (DS 96). While the facts of the same stories are often transformed with each different storyteller, still the mythological truth, the underlying emotion or mood is retained. With the structural changes, 'Jacko's, as we knew it, will enter at last into what a century and more has already prepared it for, the dimension of the symbolic' (99). Its mystery and quality will be preserved through words and it will continue to be 're-read' through the collective imagination:

It 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. (99)

Malouf's resistance towards fixed endings for his narratives and his desire for a sense of continuity beyond the last pages is reflected by the narrator's ambivalence: 'So it will be gone and it won't be. Like everything else' (99).

The metamorphosis of Malouf's own vision can be traced through his fiction. Like Ovid's characters in *Metamorphoses* Malouf's characters and 'places' reappear in different forms; The Child in *An Imaginary Life* is transformed into the less idealised figure of Gemmy in *Remembering Babylon* whose hybrid status is translated into Jordan and Jamie, the 'white indigenes' of 'Blacksoil Country.' The primitive landscape of Tomis in *An Imaginary Life* is regenerated as the colonial 'Babylon' of *Remembering Babylon* and the last patch of wilderness in 'Jacko's Reach' is a remnant of the 'primitive' in an otherwise subjugated environment. Neilsen points out elements of continuity which exist in Malouf's body of fiction noting the perpetual 'questioning of the difference between "history" and the story that we make of our lives' (218). As we read and re-read this, frequently through our perceptions of landscape, we enter both individually and collectively into the *process* of mythology. Instead of a history based just on facts we enter imaginatively into the

experience through dreams or myth and 'recreate' the past. Malouf's fiction offers new possibilities of perceiving the world, new ways of reading our history which, as he explains to Helen Daniel, 'societies can only become whole, can only know fully what they are when they have relived history in th[is] kind of way' (13).

Notes

¹ Perera regards Greer's attack on Malouf as engendering 'patriotic solidarity' and 'galvanis[ing] critical enthusiasm' for *Remembering Babylon* in Australia while simultaneously depicting 'Greer as an ungrateful exile, envious of Malouf's 'major' status and soured by her own failure to be honoured in her native land (Craven)' (15-16).

² In *The Future Eaters*, Flannery refers to the Australian aboriginals as 'Sons of Prometheus' (217). He also provides an historical account of the aboriginal use of fire including reference to Professor Rhys Jones' seminal article entitled 'Fire-Stick Farming' (222-3).

³ Philip Neilsen makes this comment in the context of a discussion about Gemmy whom, he claims 'is empowered by his hybrid combination of indigenous and European knowledge and perspectives' (210). The important point about Malouf's concept of a hybrid is that it is not a diminished status but rather one of enrichment.

⁴ According to Otto both Gemmy's proximity to nature and his imagination suggest 'Wordsworth's ideal of the Child – "best Philosopher", and "Eye among the Blind" etc. In Romanticism both Idiot and Child are often characterised as dwelling on the border of two worlds – imagination and adult's reality' (554). Ashcroft makes his comment about Gemmy in 'The Return of the Native,' a comparative analysis of *An Imaginary Life* and *Remembering Babylon*, claiming that the character of Gemmy extends the theme of 'becoming' by problematising the question of authenticity (56).

⁵ Tripp explains that for the ancient Romans Janus was the god of beginnings or origins and of doors or gateways to the future.

⁶ In an article entitled 'Habitation' Ashcroft discusses boundaries and their significance in post-colonial thought. He uses Gemmy from *Remembering Babylon* as an example of a symbol that brings together two different ways of being in the world, two different modes of discourse, that is the aboriginal and the colonial. Ashcroft claims that Gemmy's 'own subjectivity, developed so differently within the discourse of Aboriginal life, is now made to enter the ambivalent marginal state between cultures, the edges of the empire, the region in which subjectivity itself comes into question, where its potential for transformation is realised' (35).

⁷ Examples of other novels portraying the concept of the white indigene are: *An Imaginary Life*, in Ovid's developing affinity with Tomis; *Fly Away Peter* in Jim's relationship with the birds and their habitat, and *Harland's Half Acre*, in Frank's existence on the island.

⁸ Lindsay and Murray's comment refer to a stage in the process of coming to terms with an 'alien' land. Their article is focused on the process of national self-discovery and provides a detailed analysis of the fourfold vision of the Romantic poet William Blake as it relates to Malouf's introductory epigram (100).

⁹ This is an extract from an article by Robert Hefner, a literary editor for the *Canberra Times*. He attended a literary lunch at the Hotel Kurrajong where Malouf read from *Dream Stuff* and answered audience questions.

¹⁰ This action by Jordan's mother, of looking ahead across the frontier instead of either backwards into the past or rigidly within the confines of their own 'safe' area, symbolises a transformation in her attitude to the Australian landscape. It is also an excellent illustration of the following comment by Ashcroft in 'Habitation': 'The ocularcentrism of Western discourse is marked by the complementary, though opposed, concepts of horizon and boundary. Whereas the horizon adumbrates the region of imaginative possibility which the method of thinking attempts to regulate, boundaries organise visual space in ways that enable the method of perspectival vision to dominate thinking' (33).

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