Colonial Strategies in the Writing of David Malouf

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Abstract
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among burst-pod flowering gums, needle spear grasses, flies that bite; all the stones are rusting.

Listen. Soak up the inhabitedness of this rare earth, this chance to feel two thousand million years as a flash of feathers, a bright exit.

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Some of the most interesting recent work on Malouf — I am thinking in particular of articles by Peter Pierce, Laurie Hergenhan and Martin Leer — has concentrated on elaborating the significance of a relatively small number of ideas, images and oppositions which seem to recur throughout Malouf’s writing. Pierce’s discussion revolves mainly around interdependent relationships between individuals, Hergenhan’s around moments of imaginative transcendence and transformation, and Leer’s around edges and maps. Malouf’s writing surely invites this kind of ‘motif-analysis’, and the author himself has invited it on more than one occasion, most explicitly perhaps in his talk at the Warana Writers’ Weekend in 1983, where he identified a set of specific oppositions —
center and periphery, wild and civilized, self and other — as being ‘right at the centre of almost everything I do’.  

Part of what I want to do is explore the possibility of integrating the findings of these separate ‘motif-analyses’ in some way. A natural way of doing this, the one which is already implicit in most Malouf criticism, including the articles I mentioned, would be to take the motifs as ‘themes’, and to give them what I’ll call a ‘second-order significance’ by connecting them up into a ‘world-view’, a ‘moral vision’, a ‘structure of feeling’ or some other ethical and epistemological totality of that kind. Some of the difficulties with this kind of integration will emerge as I go along.

Another, more promising possibility is contained in Laurie Hergenhan’s suggestion that the oppositions Malouf mentions in his Warana talk are ‘strategies of expression rather than subjects’. When we think about these and other recurrent elements as ‘strategies of expression’ — and perhaps ‘rules for writing’ is not too bold a translation — we are not very far from thinking about them as a grammar of some kind. I shall be using this concept in a fairly unrigorous fashion, simply to designate a system of rules and conventions which both governs and to some extent generates what happens within a particular field of activity — in this case writing. I think it’s important to describe what I have in mind fairly concretely at this point, so I’d like to start straight away by looking at how three groups of recurrent motifs seem to function in Malouf’s writing: I’ll call them gaps, substitutes, and machines.

The concept of the gap — together with slight variants like discontinuity, disjunction, severance, and lack — is to be found literally everywhere in Malouf’s work. It is tempting to say that it is the defining characteristic of life and the world in their everyday, unredeemed state. Indeed Peter Pierce does say this, or something like it, but only in reference to personal relationships, such as those between fathers and sons in all the novels. But the concept of the gap is much more widely applied than this. It is used, for example, to evoke the geographic and cultural distance between Europe and Australia, and between social classes; it figures frequently in accounts of temporal discontinuities in both personal lives and the larger movements of history; and it expresses the relationship between different, and apparently irreconcilable visual and cognitive perspectives — Jim Saddler’s ‘double vision’, from above and below, firstly of the coastal swamp south of Brisbane, and later of the Flanders battlefield. There are also times when the relationship between writer and reader, actor and audience, artist and spectator, is imaged as a gap, silence, a blankness.
In addition to these ‘conceptual’ gaps, Malouf’s fiction makes repeated reference to physical gaps: in walls and fences, in photographs, between mountains, and so on; and this register of material images exerts a loosely unifying influence on the more diverse field of virtual and metaphorical absences. There are, however, no grounds for assigning a single second-order meaning to this group of motifs. On the contrary, as against the temptation to construct a ‘world-view’ in which ‘the gap’ in its various guises is taken to signify deficiency or lack, we need to recognize its radically ambivalent force in Malouf’s writing.

This ambivalence can be readily demonstrated by citing instances of the same motif — that of the gap — being used to indicate a positive or enabling condition in one sense or another. The silences of Harland’s Half-Acre, for example those of Frank Harland’s Stanthorpe relatives or Phil Vernon’s Aunt Ollie, are clearly defined both as absence of talk (by contrast, respectively, with Clem Harland and Aunt Roo), and also as the condition which enables a certain depth of human feeling and communication. Similarly, to remain with Harland’s Half-Acre, Phil experiences the gap in the family caused by his dying grandfather’s withdrawal from it as producing a stronger sense of the old man’s identity and presence than when he was physically present. Again, in the paintings of Frank Harland’s Southport period, the gaps in representation, the spaces left empty, the figures not included in the picture, are a chief source of their expressive power.

Gaps in Malouf, then, are thoroughly ambivalent entities. And it’s not that some gaps are negative and others positive in import, although my examples may have suggested that. It’s rather that any gap has the potential to be either, although any given instance is likely to be more strongly negative than positive, or vice versa. But like everything else in Malouf, gaps can change; and there is perhaps no more memorable example of this than the gap underneath Frank Harland’s Dutton Park house, the ‘wedge of darkness’ which is a place of solace for Tam but of death for Gerald.

The general, second-order significance of the gaps is literally ‘undecidable’ in Derrida’s sense, but their general function, I would argue, is not. They function as terms in a ‘grammar of composition’ in combination with other terms, to organize pre-existing materials of various sorts into ‘new’ literary texts. I shall consider some further aspects of their grammatical functioning a bit later. Firstly, though, I’d like to extend my account of the constituents of Malouf’s grammar by describing the two other groups of recurrent motifs I mentioned earlier: substitutes and machines. Both groups are related to the ‘gap’ group by a kind of natural
semiotic complementarity: in plain terms, the gaps scattered throughout the texts are either filled by substitutes or bridged by machines.

The notion of substitution, like the notion of absence, is both ubiquitous and ambivalent in Malouf’s work. Its most straightforward guise is when an older brother dies (like Ovid’s, the Great Writer’s in Child’s Play, and Frank Harland’s) and the gap in the family is filled by a younger brother. In each case, the substitution involved is ambivalent in its effect; it is at once a deterioration, and an enabling condition of creativity. This pattern of personal substitution can have powerfully destructive outcomes: for example, the jealous fury of Phil Vernon’s grandmother when she perceives his mother as having replaced her, become her substitute, in relation to the grandfather (though this depends in turn on a further substitution, that of son for husband, in the grandmother’s mind); and Antonella’s loss and replacement, in Child’s Play, by Angelo, who makes bombs.

Closely related to this primary substitution motif is the motif of ‘sameness-and-difference’. Characters are frequently perceived as fascinating because of their close but not perfect similarity to one another: Frank Harland’s three half-brothers; Gerald and Jacky, in the same novel; Carla and Adriana (the same person with different disguises) in Child’s Play. This last example introduces an important variant of the motif, namely play-acting and pretence, the production of substitute selves. Phil Vernon’s theatrical Aunt Roo, who devotes her life to this activity, highlights its irreducible ambivalence; she is a compulsive and self-deluding liar who is yet able (with some good fortune) to effect a real self-transformation into the woman of wealth and taste she had pretended to be.

The theme of ‘self-creation’ is, as Martin Leer and others have pointed out, present in all of Malouf’s work — in Johnno, An Imaginary Life, and Child’s Play it is arguably the central concern. But it is important, I think, to see it as contained within, even in a sense generated by, the more abstract motif of substitution, of which there are many other, less personal realizations. The question of Australian cultural identity, for example, is frequently posed in these terms, as when Knack the Polish antique-dealer for whom Australia itself is a poor substitute for Europe, finds in Frank Harland’s painting of an Australian landscape a substitute of a different kind, a positive supplement in fact, which improves upon the ‘real thing’, producing in its place a country of the future for which there are as yet ‘no inhabitants’.

Malouf’s substitution motif exhibits two further variations of special interest. The first is metamorphosis, that process by which a single entity...
passes through one or more successive states of difference — or more properly of sameness-and-difference. It has a particular significance for An Imaginary Life with its focus on Ovid, but it has a currency all through the novels and poems, and outside them as well: I am thinking of the Meanjin interview in which Malouf speaks of the ‘translation’ of European cultural objects and styles to Antipodean settings.¹⁹

The process is, again, ambivalent — changes in people and things may be for the worse or the better, nor will it always be clear which is which. An interesting product of this double ambivalence is the image of the hybrid — werewolf, hermaphrodite, centaur, but also less traditional combinations of people and machines. The latter are especially frequent, not surprisingly, in Fly Away, Peter and Child’s Play. In Harland’s Half-Acre there is a memorably ambivalent image of a soldier and a woman fucking against a wall in South Brisbane, ‘the two of them making a single creature with two locked and moaning heads, a mythological beast to which he couldn’t have given a name’.²⁰

The other extension of the substitution motif, by way of pretence and play-acting, is of course play in general. Like metamorphosis, play carries within it the contradictory promise of civilized freedom and destructive violence. The antinomies of play are explicit in An Imaginary Life and, as both titles imply, these have become thematically quite central in the next two novels, Child’s Play and Fly Away, Peter: the young terrorist’s extended preparations for the murder are in one sense an elaborate game-for-one, with assumed identities and multiple narrative possibilities, while the horror of the trenches is sometimes seen as a team game which has escaped rational controls.²¹

The last example, from Fly Away, Peter, leads very naturally into the third and last group of motifs: machines. Machines are one of Malouf’s long-standing obsessions, and they figure in one guise or another, in almost everything he has written, from the title poem of his early volume, Bicycle and Other Poems to most of the stories in Antipodes. That this preoccupation has received so little critical notice, in comparison with other far less prominent and persistent motifs in his work, is perhaps a measure of its resistance to moral translation. It’s that same morally non-committal quality that makes it a very clear illustration of the ‘grammatical’ function I want to ascribe to Malouf’s recurrent motifs.

I proposed earlier that we might think of machines, in terms of the general economy of Malouf’s grammar of composition, as things that bridge gaps. Because they are, almost by definition, man-made assemblages of elements of the non-human world, the gaps they seek to bridge are frequently those between the human and the non-human. In this
respect, the machine is a variant of the ‘edge’ motif and analogous with the animal-human hybrids. Its differentiating characteristic, clearly, is the notion of human agency and purpose. Machines, whether bicycles, cameras, cars, clocks, aeroplanes, surfboards, guns, sewing machines, cinemas or pianolas — these are just some of the machines that figure in Malouf’s writing — all represent human attempts to achieve working relationships with the material world. But the relationships, the bridges, are not only of the material technological kind. The school photograph at the beginning of Johnno effects a junction between previously separated time periods; the bi-plane at the beginning of Fly Away, Peter is not only a machine for bridging physical distance, it also joins the mythically separate realms of earth and sky and the different species of humans and birds. Later, when Jim Saddler goes for a ‘spin’ in it, it bridges his close-up world of ‘individual grassblades’ and the ‘long view of the country … laid out like a relief-map’. Finally, in combination with a cigarette-rolling machine, the bi-plane helps to bridge the social distance between Jim and Ashley Crowther, against the class and national chauvinism of Jim’s father who objects to the ‘fancy accents’, ‘new-fangled ideas’ and ‘machines’ of Ashley and his set. In the same way, it is the English woman Imogen Harcourt’s photographic equipment that cements a relationship between herself and Jim.

The machine motif is metaphorically extended to include various types of ‘mechanical’ human behaviour: repetitive, ritualized and obsessive activity are frequently so termed, and they perform bridging functions analogous to those of the real machines. An obvious example, from Fly Away, Peter, is the military regulation of mental and physical behaviour which does produce a certain kind of social cohesion. In combination with the real machines of war, it also illustrates the extreme ambivalence of the connections and alliances which are achieved by this means.

One final point about Malouf’s machines, whether real or metaphorical, is that the connections they forge, the unities they establish, are very makeshift and provisional affairs in which the joins are visible, the link is incomplete, or something is left out. Military discipline cannot contain the murderous animosity between Jim Saddler and Wizzer Green, the contrived pretences of Aunt Roo and Gerald cannot close off the unpredictable onset of suicidal despair, the terrorist’s mind (‘a machine with a life of its own’) cannot effect a final conjunction of present planning with future action (the Great Man’s sister provides a last-minute complication). In a more literal mode, the terrorist’s camera cannot quite complete the circle of the Piazza. In this respect, their fallibility, the machines differ from the often miraculous-seeming fusions that occur in
nature or the imagination. Mechanical unities are all human beings can hope to achieve by their own efforts.

As that last remark might suggest, Malouf's own efforts as a writer can very easily and naturally be included among the mechanical, connection-making activities. Many of the activities performed by different characters and marked with the mechanical tag involve the use of language, and can quite readily be taken as metaphors of Malouf's own writing: Jim Saddler's listing of the local bird species; the studied role-playing by Aunt Roo and Gerald; habitual letter-writing with little hope of a sympathetic reception; playing with different narrative possibilities, like the terrorist in Child's Play, or flirting precariously with destructive passions and forbidden identities, like the Great Writer in the same novel. I'll have more to say about these and other reflexive metaphors in a moment.

At this point, though, I think I should try to state as precisely as possible what I've been saying (and also what I haven't been saying). First and foremost, I've been describing a system of motifs, which extends right throughout the body of Malouf's writing, and which I call a grammar of composition. What I'm not saying is that these are 'key images', or even 'key ideas', in an overarching structure of meaning — hence my emphasis on the irreducible ambivalence of each motif across the range of its particular appearances in the texts. It is this that effectively prevents the motifs from falling into large-scale semantic patterns of a stable and non-contradictory kind.

The feature of the whole system that I hope will have been conveyed by my detailed illustrations is its high level of reticulation, the fact that every motif is connected directly to some, and indirectly to all the other motifs, within a general systematic economy of absence and presence. All the motifs I've dealt with — gaps, substitutes, play, metamorphosis, machines, hybrids, and the rest — as well as those discussed by other people, such as pairings, edges and maps — have their place in this system. This doesn't mean, however, that the system is present in all its constituent motifs from the earliest texts to the latest; it grows in complexity and inclusiveness from book to book, while retaining, at each stage, its highly reticulated wholeness as a system.

Thus, for example, the grammar which is functioning in Antipodes is somewhat larger and more complicated than the one operating in Johnno. Indeed, it's larger by at least one important new motif than the grammar operating in Harland's Half-Acre. (The new motif in Antipodes is 'chance',
which is connected to the rest of the system through the already established motif of ‘play’.)

How then does this grammar of composition work, and what does it have to do with Australia’s colonial relations? In answer to the first question, it works, like any grammar, in two distinct ways: as a guide to expression for writers and speakers, and as a means of understanding, of decoding, for readers and listeners. I’m not going to be able to deal with the latter of these functions here, partly because it would require more detailed interpretation of individual texts than the scope of this paper allows. I can, however, deal with the expressive function of the grammar in a general way.

For Malouf-the-writer, I suggest, the grammar of motifs I’ve described works rather like a classical or Renaissance rhetorical handbook, as a set of ‘topoi’ or ‘places of thought’ which can be used to explore the recesses of a pre-selected area of subject-matter, reorganizing, amplifying and elaborating it in various different ways. This may sound like an excessively mechanical account of the writing processes of an author who so frequently alludes, in his work, to the mysterious transforming powers of the creative imagination. I’d argue that this Romantic view of literary composition functions in Malouf’s texts as what Terry Eagleton, among others, would call an ideology of literary production, that is, an ideal representation of a productive process, the material reality of which is actually much closer to the fairly accessible and non-mysterious practices described here as rhetorical. The obvious debating point, of course, is that Shakespeare composed rhetorically; but a more specific defence of the rhetorical model can be made by pointing to the supplementary relationship Malouf’s novels have to a variety of other texts: that of An Imaginary Life to works by Itard and by Ovid himself; of Child’s Play to Conrad’s Under Western Eyes; of Fly Away, Peter to Roger Macdonald’s 1915; of Harland’s Half-Acre to The Tree of Man. Even Johnno is a reworking — a very substantial one, obviously, as are all the other reworkings — of pieces of his own earlier writing. This is not intended to impugn Malouf’s ‘originality’ in the least, but to suggest the extent to which his work really does consist, as the rhetorical account would imply it does, of rewriting, elaborating, reordering and amplifying a range of pre-existing textual materials.

Not the least advantage of this way of thinking about Malouf’s writing is that it gives us some purchase — finally — on the nature of his perception of, and response to, the writer’s position in a post-colonial society like Australia. This has proved to be a rather slippery topic for Malouf
critics, partly because it is so often present in his work in metaphorical rather than literal terms. In fact, the importance critics have attributed to it has varied with the extent to which they have been prepared to read the texts allegorically. Most would agree that *An Imaginary Life* is a fable, if not an allegory, about being a writer 'on the edge' of a contemporary empire, because Malouf himself has given this reading his imprimatur in an interview.\(^{26}\) Fewer, I suspect, would accept a reading of, say, Jim Saddler’s cataloguing activities in *Fly Away, Peter* as a metaphor for writing in a post-colonial culture, though I think it can certainly be read that way. Malouf’s work poses the problem of the limits of interpretation in a very acute form, because the relatively restricted grammar of motifs which orders and amplifies the material multiplies the possible analogies between narrative elements, but the fairly naturalistic style doesn’t signal which analogies have a special second order significance and which don’t. In any case, a wide variety of actions and situations in the novels do lend themselves to interpretation, not just as metaphors of writing in a general sense, but of writing in a specifically post-colonial situation.

I won’t at this stage identify fictional instances of this, but simply say that they embody, metaphorically, various ways of thinking about the writer’s dilemma in a post-colonial society. These include, for example, the notion of having to work in a makeshift way, with whatever materials come to hand; having to start from scratch, without the benefit of a fully relevant tradition; having to work in isolation from the most receptive audiences, and to address oneself to unsympathetic or incomprehending audiences; being placed at a distance from the perceived centre of things, and having little sense of the world as an interconnected whole; having to accept, and take responsibility for, an inherited burden of uncongenial or irrelevant cultural traditions.

These all add up to a fairly bleak picture of the post-colonial situation — perhaps not a ‘picture’ at all so much as a disconnected and somewhat contradictory series of responses to it. In any case, I’m not offering them as constituting a view that Malouf merely expresses or endorses; I want to see them rather as a range of possible obstacles and restrictions which, in his own practice as a writer, he is actively and continuously pressing against, even as he develops the thematic concerns peculiar to each individual novel and short story.

In the larger of these two contexts, that of Malouf’s work as a single body of writing, the text functions in what we can call, I believe with some accuracy, a *mechanical* fashion. The *machine* in question is the grammar of motifs itself, which does its work of classifying, reorganizing and amplifying materials into repeated patterns and relations reliably,
unobtrusively, and at a certain mediated distance from the author, whose more immediate concern is with those elements which are distinctive to particular works and remain outside the grammatical system.

What I am proposing, then, is that Malouf practices what amounts to an internal division of authorial labour. Its special appropriateness to a post-colonial situation resides partly in the fact that it shifts the locus of integration from the point of representation to the point of structuration. He doesn’t, in other words, depend on fictional representations, of either cultural integration or cultural independence, to bring these any closer to realization, since the very possibility of imagining and signifying them adequately is always already compromised by the fragmenting and constraining effects of both old and new colonial relations on the writer’s own consciousness. Instead, he establishes, first, a very minimal (and therefore possible) position of independence from those colonial relations by inventing a grammar, in one sense simply an interconnected arrangement of common motifs, which is *his own* in a way that nothing else in his writing is, or can be. And the effect of this grammar, functioning at a distance from the author’s ‘colonised’ consciousness, is to produce a steady progression, over time, towards real cultural integrations: towards a real sense of wholeness and interconnectedness in the life represented in the texts, and towards an increasingly intimate and knowledgeable relation between the writer and his readership.

Malouf’s practice as a writer, then, materially rather than ideally considered, is really two simultaneous practices: writing poems and narratives on the one hand, and devising a grammar for them on the other. By way of conclusion, it is tempting to see an allegory of this double writing practice in *An Imaginary Life*. In his place of exile, the poet Ovid has not only to learn to use a new language; he also has to teach it to the boy, who then becomes his helper and ultimately his guide. Bizarre as it might sound, if Ovid stands for Malouf, the Boy almost has to stand for Malouf’s personal grammar of composition.

NOTES


3. Hergenhan, 328.
4. My use of the term 'grammar' owes something in a very general sense to the likes of Todorov and Greimas. I think there are more specific affiliations with the work of Marc Eli Blanchard in *Description: Sign, Self, Desire. Critical Theory in the wake of semiotics* (The Hague: Mouton, 1980).

5. Pierce, 526.


12. *Harland's Half-Acre*, p. 64.


17. Leer, 14 ff.


26. See Davidson, pp. 277-278.