The Containment of Violence: Aspects of the Roles of War in the Work of David Malouf and Les Murray

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Abstract

Responses to war in Australian fiction have not been confined to military conflict, to so-called war novels. Much of the work of David Malouf, of his poetry and fiction, and Les Murray’s verse novel, The Boys Who Stole the Funeral, show in different ways how war has indirectly affected the shaping of Australian experience. In these works war is used more as metaphor and analogy than as fact. In this paper, then, I shall concentrate not on literature about warfare but on the ways in which the chosen writers use war as a means of exploring the divisiveness they see within both the individual and society.

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Responses to war in Australian fiction have not been confined to military conflict, to so-called war novels. Much of the work of David Malouf, of his poetry and fiction, and Les Murray’s verse novel, *The Boys Who Stole the Funeral*, show in different ways how war has indirectly affected the shaping of Australian experience. In these works war is used more as metaphor and analogy than as fact. In this paper, then, I shall concentrate not on literature about warfare but on the ways in which the chosen writers use war as a means of exploring the divisiveness they see within both the individual and society.

Roger McDonald’s novel, *1915*, was the first of a crop of works, of film (*Gallipoli*) and literature (including poetry), to reassess World War I and it provides some of the basic patterns for them, whether or not they were influenced by it. By devoting half of *1915* to civilian life, half to the Gallipoli action, McDonald dealt not simply with combatant experience but with the ways in which attitudes to war can heighten the divisiveness inherent in civilian life. And war provides some equivalent of these divisions. Malouf and Murray make similar connections.

Broadly speaking these three writers offer different and typical embodiments of questions raised by war: how do we reconcile ourselves to the violence which war expresses in extreme form and which is also found in society and the individual psyche? Malouf believes that Australians have been ‘sheltered from history’, where history means European history and its regular upheavals. Hence to achieve the vision of completeness central to Malouf’s work Australian experience needs to be complemented by the European ‘nightmare’. On the other hand Les Murray, in *The Boys who Stole the Funeral*, while not seeing Australian life in complete isolation, implies that its divisiveness is of a distinct kind, the product of a community shaped by its own special history and physical circumstances of place, and
hence requiring that Australians reach a reconciliation in their own way. 'The Day of our peace will need a native/herb that out-savours rosemary'. In what might seem to be a 'reply' to Malouf, one of Murray's characters comments ironically in The Boys: 'Suffering's a migrant's game ... Who would believe/in Australians' suffering (unless they were black)?' (p. 22).

Malouf's major theme involves a breakthrough into a new dimension of awareness. This may be seen in the key poem, 'The Year of the Foxes' which on his own testimony opened the way for his first novel Johnno and which typically links war with change. Here the G.I.'s transform the Brisbane of the 1940s. Their purchase of fox furs in their pursuit of the local women provokes the ten year old persona to a discovery that this mutual predatoriness of the sexes links all human beings, including himself in his fascination and recoil, with the primitive and often violent forces of the natural world: 'I dreamed the dangerous spark of their eyes, brushes aflame ... the dark fox stink of them/ cornered in their holes'. This glimpse beneath the surface reassures the persona that his nightmares, including his own inner violence, are real and natural, not manufactured and aberrant, and that the nightmares have their counterpart in social reality where they are muffled like 'the cry of the hounds ... behind mirrored glass', i.e. the show pieces in his mother's glass-fronted cabinet. The persona is reassured to find that life is not as ordered and stable as society pretends, for the new vision of his suburban home as a 'far-hung, nomadic tent' is both a foretaste of the openness of life and of the possibility of change.

These basic motifs are again linked with war in Johnno in episodes paralleled in the poem 'Episode form an Early War'. Though Dante's home becomes 'a miniature war museum' and his world is filled with talk and other echoes of war, such as newsreels, the world of 'daylight reality' was something he knew only with 'one half of himself'. It is his childhood nightmares of fear and violence, where 'giant staghorns' leap through the window and the fernery outside becomes a 'jungle', which confirms the reality of the war for him by connecting it with inside knowledge. Thus Dante moves towards an integration of what is called in Child's Play 'the fresh, cruel, innocent, destructive beginnings' of childhood and also of the social changes war brings to Brisbane.

On the other hand, Johnno (the character) is a 'war child' in that his 'wildness' is simplistically and complacently attributed to the absence at war of a controlling father and not to his anger and frustration at the seeming irreconcilability of inner and outer worlds. In turn he simplistically blames the misunderstanding and pretence of his family and of society on Brisbane, not realizing, as Dante is to do, that provincialism and colonialism can, like war, throw into relief an
underlying problem, not create it.

In the European section of the novel, an episode in Paris where Dante and Johnno are frisked and assaulted by gun-men, brings home to Dante the reality of terrorism, one of World War II’s legacies: ‘What flashed into my head were those moonlit newsreels that had also made up for a time my childhood nightmares’ (p. 120). He realizes that but for an accident of time a Jewish grandmother would have been enough to make him a war victim, and now such victims take on a new meaning: ‘I had broken through into my own consciousness and ... Europe was a different place’ (p. 120). Again inner and outer worlds are connected and Johnno’s violence (and implicitly Dante’s own) is seen no longer as a ‘private disorder’ but part of ‘a whole society’s public nightmare’ (p. 120). Dante believes that this reassurance, echoing his own earlier one, ‘cures’ Johnno of himself, but this is not altogether so. Europe and expatriatism cannot ‘cure’ Johnno who, back in Australia, later commits the ultimate violence against himself, suicide. This may be partly a failure in reconciling inner divisions but for Dante it offers a kind of assertion, apparently representing a facing up to issues, a playing out of possibilities, which most others comfortably put aside. This is also the theme of a poem about the original of the character Johnno, ‘With the Earlier Deaths’ (NIAT, p. 16).

Much of Malouf’s poetry is concerned with European wars and upheavals, seeing this recurrent violence as answering to the ‘real’ nightmares of the self. In Europe ‘bad dreams have monuments’ and ‘the Turks are always at the Gate’ (‘Bad Dreams in Vienna’, NIAT, p. 35). Here ‘brutal illusions are not done with yet’, for ‘peace is illusory’ and ‘the old divisions persist’ (‘Report from the Champagne Country’, NIAT p. 41). History, as it is ‘written and rewritten’ enacts ‘terrible prophecies’, but it is ‘our daily lives’ which ‘make them happen’ (‘Theologica Germanica’, SP, p. 100). But destruction is offset by a sense of continuity and renewal, by being ‘closer to the earth’ which is ‘seeded with death’. The ‘unkillable grass seeds’ are the equivalent of the words of the poet Mandelstam, victim of political persecution. In An Imaginary Life words are also the means of creation, the seeds of Ovid’s new life. But words can also be destructive. They are to the father of the painter, Frank Harland, and, in the earlier poem ‘News from the Dark Ages’, about Ezra Pound’s Pisan captivity, when the poet, like Dante, descends into the ‘Inferno’ of himself, he learns ‘black news’: ‘The Inferno/is real and men have made it. Words/too are of the process’ (NIAT, p. 34). This message again connects inner and outer life, thought (or words) and action.

As with Murray, in Malouf’s work violence can be rooted in family experience. Not dissimilar from the war poems is Malouf’s early work, ‘At My Grandmothers’, set in Brisbane and dealing with the unspoken divisions of personal relationships. In this poem which has links with
violence in the terrorist novel, *Child’s Play* and with war and women in *Harland’s Half Acre*, a small boy is the ‘prisoner’ of a destructive grandmother and he sits in her room in speechless terror, just as ‘the parrot screeches soundless in its dome of glass’ (*SP*, p. 4). Here glass is again associated with stifled feeling which is part of the violence.

Another key poem, ‘Asphodel’ (*NIAT*, p. 1), is linked with both *An Imaginary Life* and *Fly Away Peter*.11 Here the persona descends to an underworld in a violent struggle against drowning in a Brisbane mudhole. But the outcome is positive: he develops ‘a lifelong taste for earth’, a sense of being part of life’s ecological and evolutionary unity. The poem has links with Ovid’s enforced exile in *An Imaginary Life*, where this violence breeds positive results and where the Roumanian delta is a counterpart of the mudflats of some Brisbane poems. There are also links with *Fly Away Peter* where the anti-world, or Hades-like underworld of the French trenches of World War I, with their corpses, rats and mud, is offset by the harmonious world of a bird-filled Queensland swamp. The poem ‘The [mud] Crab Feast’ also celebrates through ritual the cycle of death and renewal, the containment of death and violence.12

Malouf, then, in his poetry and fiction sees European life more as complementary to Australian life rather than as co-extensive with it. *Harland’s Half Acre*, however, suggests the latter. The novel is about possession, asking the question of what, if anything, can we ‘possess’ in life when so much is lost or destroyed, for instance by possessiveness. Three of the novel’s four sections centre on violence. Part I shows the possessiveness of a father who dominates his sons’ lives. Part II climaxes with a startling eruption of aggression by a grandmother who vents her hatred on her daughter-in-law for having supposedly dispossessed her of her son. This anger is ‘a kind of violence for which [even her son Gil, a victim of World War II nerves] had no terms’ (p. 102) and which leaves the rest of the family fearful and impotent victims. Part III raises, through a Polish refugee called Knack, Malouf’s question of whether Australian experience, even including the widespread suffering of the depression years, is by comparison with Europe innocent and incomplete. Knack’s Australian lover Edna, learns from him that there’s ‘a lot of darkness’ in everyone. She shares her knowledge with Frank who is frightened of the darkness in himself. In another climactic scene, this time a suicide pact, Knack shoots Edna and blows off the back of his own head, smearing a wall with blood. This leads to a ‘breakthrough’ in Frank’s consciousness, for through the resulting wall ‘painting’, which ‘dares’ more than Frank’s Australian landscape that has hung there, he sees Knack’s action as not simply destructive. ‘Searingly alive’, Knack’s ‘painting’ reconciles ‘terror and beauty’, because as well as involving ‘sickening loss’ it asserts or possesses, with some sense of triumph, the
complete whole which many people disown (p. 126).

But Frank in turn becomes possessive of a nephew Gerald and helps to drive him to suicide in the dark ‘underworld’ beneath Frank’s Brisbane house. Built on stilts on a steep slope it straddles a darkness Gerald has always been afraid of. The novel apparently suggests that one does not have to endure ‘the civil wars, revolutions and ... war [between nations]’ (p. 120) to experience the darkness in ourselves and others and the suffering it can cause. Frank struggles to reach his reconciliation but in the end a realization of the ‘mess’ of his life is needed to complement his paintings if its unity is to be understood.

Like Malouf’s work, Les Murray’s The Boys connects inner and outer worlds of violence, and while European history is not involved, Australia’s participation in Gallipoli is used as a central point of reference. Again like Malouf, Murray brings out into the open the violence which individuals and society hide and rationalize. As Geoffrey Lehmann has pointed out, the ‘other worlds’ in Murray embrace not only a vision of wholeness, one that is given a religious dimension, but its anti-world of the inhuman forces in modern society. These both have their counterparts in Malouf’s work, but a further ‘other world’ in Murray is social justice, the ideal or belief which sustains the ‘common’ people, and is related to a religious dimension. In fact, while Malouf extends his social range in Harland’s Half Acre, Murray is much more concerned with Australian society, in criticizing its strengths and weaknesses in The Boys through an extraordinary range of voices and experiences. These subtle and highly condensed checks and balances call for tentativeness in interpreting it, especially when it uses extremes and invites ideological disagreement by attacking fashionable causes.

The unifying idea behind The Boys is that a society supposedly at peace is really torn by inner divisions, a kind of undeclared civil war. Accordingly, while Murray has acknowledged some technical influence by an unnamed contemporary American poet, an unlikely analogy for The Boys is the early Victorian verse novel, Tennyson’s Maud. Here the inner violence of the protagonist, which leads to madness and eventual reintegration, both mirrors the exploitive conflicts of society and is fuelled by it. Maud, however, is a ‘monodrama’ with more emphasis on the internal self. Its many voices or moods originate in what Matthew Arnold called the modern mind’s ‘dialogue with itself’. The Boys is more of a social dialogue and is full of conversational exchange.

Briefly, the story is concerned with two young men, Kevin Forbutt and Cameron Reeby who steal the corpse of Kevin’s ‘Digger’ uncle, Clarrie, from the anonymity of a Sydney funeral parlour so as to honour his wish to be buried in the country town of his origins. The enterprise is successful but it focuses family and social rifts and it leads
to climactic violent actions. A feminist, Noeline Kampff, pours a bucket of ox blood over Reeby only to have her face scalded in revenge. Reeby, after attacking a policeman, is shot by him.

The novel is explicitly a story of the 1970s. The youthful ‘thieves’ are social rebels, representing the dispossessed who are both economically and spiritually deprived. They are ‘resurrection men’, not simply in the sense of thieves of dead bodies but because they are seeking psychic and social rebirth. And they are not simply ‘at the age of soldiers’, they are soldiers in that their positive protest represents a taking up of arms. They are, however, no unblemished heroes, nor is the war a matter of simple right and wrong.

The divisiveness Murray sees takes several main forms. These are not exclusive to the 1970s and have counterparts in the strife Malouf sees as recurrent in Europe. First there is economic exploitation, both rural and urban, resulting in widespread unemployment and poverty. Murray himself comes from and represents the rural poor, the small landholders and the country workers who figure in Australian literature much less frequently than those better off than themselves. They are also represented in McDonald’s 1915. They are depicted in Murray’s poems (e.g. ‘Saw Mill Towns’, ‘Country Widower’, ‘The Mitchells’) and in the moving group from The People’s Otherworld about his mother’s death.14 She haemorrhaged in a miscarriage and died partly as a result of the local doctor’s disregard for poor patients, partly because of mistreatment at an earlier confinement where forceps were misapplied.

In The Boys Kevin is unemployed, Reeby a student drop-out. Sydney is ‘a building site now’, ‘gobbled’ by ambition (as in pictures of the city in The People’s Otherworld), and while rural life retains some dignity and meaning, it is also under threat. Struggling farmers are exploited by one of their fellows, and workers ‘grieve, sorely injured in their music’, providing an example of the equivalents of ‘war casualties’ who are to be found in the novel. This is the ‘New World’, an ironic and ambiguous term Murray uses to attack the false ambitions of modern society and, at other times, to suggest a version of the Utopian dream traditional in Australia’s history both of which take a social and spiritual form.

Another cause of divisiveness is an ideological one, the undermining of sound Australian values by the false liberation of the 1970s, a pernicious ‘import’ the novel challengingly suggests. Out of their frustrations people turn with ‘ferocity’ and ‘louder’ cruelty to fashionable causes which express self-interest and frustration rather than compassion. Kevin’s father displays an ideological trendiness and his lover, Noeline Kampff, represents militant feminism. Other negative causes include abortion, a key metaphor and fact linked with the killing of war, and with the rejection of life (including family life) for death.
Social debate is really a battle because understanding has become ‘conquest’. Trivializing trendiness and cause-seeking is illustrated by a journalist’s anticipation of Kevin’s motives for stealing the funeral. ‘But what’s the strength of the rural consciousness demo? A back-to-roots ritual?’ (The Boys, p. 23). Kevin’s alienation from his parents is part of his social alienation.

Through Clarrie, Gallipoli along with other wars which Australia has involved itself in, is a recurrent motif, but actual battle scenes are rare and brief, and instead warfare imagery, including some of the most violent (e.g. machine guns and snipers), is reserved for the social divisiveness, especially that of the ideologues. Indeed Murray apparently agrees with Yeats’ chauvinist view that some, especially women, ‘by opinions are accurst’ and that ‘an intellectual hatred is the worst’. In The Boys, ‘Literature’ is perjoratively associated with what he refers to in Persistence in Folly as ‘repeated attempts by man to force meaning on the world and seal it with literal human sacrifice’.

Gallipoli is viewed ambiguously. The novel de glamorizes Clarrie’s reasons for enlisting (they include ‘Literature’ and adventure) and also his return to civilian life when he succumbs ‘to a virus that war and the New World both [modern Europe and Australia] had nourished: I spent my life looking for my platoon’ (p. 56). In other words he becomes rootless and nostalgic for male mateship, never marrying or farming the block of land intended for him. The young Reeby promises to follow the path but is killed in his prime. A penetrating criticism of the war, and of the internecine social conflicts of the 1970s, is that ‘by putting their trust in what they died fighting’ for these soldiers ‘ruined their singleness’ (p. 35), their concentration of purpose. It is interesting that war victims in The Boys embrace those of the Pacific action of World War II which is not as significant as European wars in Malouf, with the notable exception of The Great World, even though closer to home. Beryl Murchison’s husband is a life-long invalid after working on the Thailand railway, and Beryl herself, now a widow, has had to sacrifice much of her life to nursing him in near penury which is their ‘depression’.

On the other hand Clarrie’s experience involved some self-sacrifice. For him and other ‘battlers’ war was ‘their only proud employment ever’ (p. 47). The necessity of dignified, significant labour, of a ‘place’ in society for every person, is a key issue in the novel. Hence for Kevin, Clarrie’s life offers some guidance. If Clarrie was ‘partly ruined by a war ... he had dignity’ (p. 48), whereas Kevin’s father is fighting an ‘antiwar’, not against war as he believes, and what he has gained for his efforts is ‘white levis’, that is, the uniform of fashionability.

In a dream sequence some of the mysteries of life are revealed to Kevin by two Aboriginal wise men. He is given an embracing vision, like an aerial map of the whole Australian continent and of its ‘blood
In Murray’s poetry blood is associated with sacrifice of self and others and the baffling moral problems these raise (as in ‘Blood’, ‘The Abomination’, ‘SMLE’, ‘Lament for Country Soldiers’ and ‘Visiting Anzac in the Year of Metrication’, in VP, pp. 21, 22, 54, 47, 138). In The Boys the ‘blood history’ embraces wars between whites and Aborigines as well as overseas wars, although Murray is again unfashionable in suggesting that the ‘blood theologies’ of the Aborigines could be destructive. It is interesting that McDonald and Malouf also link mistreatment of Aborigines with overseas wars.

If we look at the novels considered here the visions of possible harmony, individual and social, in 1915 Walter’s experience in the Cairo mosque or Billy’s hopes of domestic happiness, are aborted dreams, and not the ‘realities’ they are in Murray and Malouf. Murray’s vision is a striking one, seen more in terms of common human experience and bonds than Malouf’s sense of the individual’s oneness with the natural world. In The Boys the main images of wholeness, of a unifying ‘centre’, is that of ‘the common dish’ which Clarrie reveals to Kevin apropos of talk about war. The ‘dish’ is important in suggesting both something that can contain and the essential food it contains. The contents are what is available to everyone. They comprise the contrarities, ‘work, agony and laughter’. The flavour varies for individuals and it can be ‘difficult food’ (p. 46). There are those who refuse to eat, like Kevin’s parents who avoid commitment. Tasting involves unhappiness and ‘blood’, but if you refuse ‘the depths of your happiness may be spared you’. If a poor family at their dinner is ‘the holiest thing in the Universe’ it is because it is a ritual image of the harmonized human family.

The outcome of The Boys is a balancing of possibilities. Kevin reconciles his inner divisions, Reebey does not. While the latter gives in to disillusion and is killed, his life ‘aborted’, Kevin, who is himself tempted towards death and to ‘smash his gift of action’, is finally ‘reborn beyond abortion’, finding a ‘place’ in life, in farming the property intended for Clarrie. While Noeline Kampff is softened by tears, her attacker Jennie is hardened by bitterness. There is no ‘human solution’, however, only a religious one beyond earthly life, as suggested by the sacramental significance of the ‘common dish’: ‘Jesus blessed it and devoured it whole’ (p. 46).

The Boys received a mixed critical reception. Rural life is idealized and conversely, in this version of pastoral, feminism is demonized. It might be argued that such extreme depictions are strategies which suit Murray’s imaginative polemic, but in literature effective exaggeration can be distinguished from falsity and in this case The Boys imposes distortion, though elsewhere it relies on imaginative realism. Feminism may have had its excesses, and no other writer of Murray’s calibre has
dared to say so, but so have most other movements for change, whether of the right or the left, and excesses should not blot out the real gains, or the need for them. Noelene Kampff is meant to be a monster but she is a contrived one. As with feminism, urban life is seen too negatively. It is not integrated into Murray’s synthesising view as in ‘The Buladelah-Taree Holiday Song Cycle’ or in The People’s Otherworld. But, as Peter Porter has suggested, aggressive-defensive aspects of The Boys should be seen in the Australian social context of Murray’s origins and audience and in the context of Murray’s whole contribution:

Nobody should read The Boys who has not first absorbed Murray’s other poetry, since its aggressive tone is directed at his Australian readership, and is part of a long-lasting, small-print argument about values for the forthcoming republic. Overseas readers may find the poem otiose in its harangues and even, at times, morally disturbing. Yet it is full of brilliant writing and provides the fullest evidence so far in Murray’s career of his tendency to the baroque — a tendency which I believe makes him the most accomplished and inventive poet in Australia today, and among the half dozen most successful poets in the English language world wide.

In contrast to the visions in Malouf and Murray of the way violence can be contained, McDonald in 1915 is compassionately pessimistic. Here human beings fail to break out of the prison of self, and human relationships, beginning in kindness and curiosity, suddenly burst into a crescendo of ‘cruelty and destruction’ (p. 423). In this respect the ‘distant world’ of Europe is ‘no different from this one’ (Australia). Murray and Malouf, however, see both the problem and the means of dealing with it in Australian terms, that is as modified by Australian life. Towards the end of 1915 a Latin quotation is used ironically, apropos of war: ‘Quod omnes tangit, ab omnibus approbetur’ (‘Let that which touches everyone be approved by everyone’). Some characters approve or disapprove out of self-interest, socially identifying with the war effort or resenting dislocations of personal life. But 1915, like the works of Malouf and Murray, suggests that the violence of war, and the analogous divisiveness found in ordinary living and in all places, does ‘touch all’ and accordingly should be ‘approved’ in the sense of faced and contained. Frederic Manning, expatriate Australian author of the classic war novel of World War I, Her Privates We, wrote in the ‘Prefatory Note’: ‘War is waged by men; not by beasts or gods. It is a peculiarly human activity’. If for Manning war is tragic but inescapable, Malouf and Murray express similar but individual views, even if they see the destructiveness of war as part of a larger, positive pattern. While one could not for a moment say that any of these novels condone war, their attitudes might be seen in the 1980s as the kind of views which, even if unintentionally, help to make further wars inevitable. Australian writers of the future will surely continue to
engage with this issue in their long-standing literary dialogue about war.

NOTES

2. Les A. Murray, *The Boys Who Stole the Funeral* (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1980). All further references are to this edition and are included in the text.
4. David Malouf, 'The Year of the Foxes', in *Selected Poems* (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1981), p. 9. Further quotations in this paragraph are from this poem. Hereafter, *SP*, and all further references are to this edition and are included in the text.
5. David Malouf, 'Episode from an Early War', in *Neighbours in a Thicket* (St. Lucia, Brisbane: UQP, 1974), p. 13. Hereafter, *NIAT*, and all further references are to this edition and are included in the text.
6. David Malouf, *johnno* (St. Lucia, Brisbane: UQP, 1975), p. 25. Further quotations in this paragraph are from p. 25. Hereafter, all further references are to this edition and are included in the text.
8. For a continuation of this theme in David Malouf's work see, 'Off the Highway' and 'A Poet Among Others', in *NIAT*, pp. 39, 36.
10. David Malouf, *Harland's Half Acre* (London: Chatto & Windus, the Hogarth Press, 1984). All further references are to this edition and are included in the text.