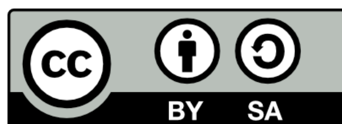
UNIVERSITAT DE BARCELONA

Men in David Malouf's Fiction

Conrad Serra Pagès



Aquesta tesi doctoral està subjecta a la llicència ***Reconeixement- CompartIgual 4.0. Espanya de Creative Commons***.

Esta tesis doctoral está sujeta a la licencia ***Reconocimiento - CompartirIgual 4.0. España de Creative* Commons**.

This doctoral thesis is licensed under the ***Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0. Spain License***.

Men in David Malouf's Fiction

TESI DOCTORAL

Carles Conrad Serra Pagès

DIRECTOR/A o DIRECTORS/ES
Dra. Sue Ballyn
Dr. Bill Phillips

TUTOR/A

PROGRAMA DE DOCTORAT
Estudis Lingüístics, Literaris i Culturals

LÍNIA DE RECERCA
Construcció i Representació d'Identitats Culturals

Universitat de Barcelona
2019

To my grandfather, Conrado Serra Pagès,
Strength, sacrifice, hard-work and courage.

The work of *becoming* human is to understand the complexities of *being* human,
at the heart of which is the intense sunshine of radical, undeniable, diversity.
We know that looking into the sun for more than a moment makes our eyes hurt.
That is our challenge.

Baden Offord

Contents

CONTENTS 1

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS 3

ABSTRACT 5

RESUM 7

INTRODUCTION 9

REFERENCES TO DAVID MALOUF'S FICTION BOOKS 20

METHODOLOGY 21

CHAPTER 1: ACCOMPLISHING MASCULINITY IN *JOHNNO.* 33

CHAPTER 2: MEN AND WOMEN'S POWER IN *AN IMAGINARY LIFE* AND *HARLAND'S HALF ACRE* 89

ANALYSIS OF MEN AND WOMEN'S POWER IN AN IMAGINARY LIFE 89
ANALYSIS OF MEN AND WOMEN'S POWER IN HARLAND'S HALF ACRE 115

CHAPTER 3: THE WAR NOVELS: *FLY AWAY PETER* AND *THE GREAT WORLD.* 219

RECONFIGURATION OF THE MYTH OF ANZAC IN FLY AWAY PETER 230
THE LEGEND OF THE DIGGER AND THE CRITIQUE OF MARKETPLACE MAN IN THE GREAT WORLD 277

CHAPTER 4: THE COLONIAL PERIOD: *REMEMBERING BABYLON* AND *THE CONVERSATIONS AT CURLOW CREEK* 363

THE "WHITE BLACK MAN" IN REMEMBERING BABYLON 363
TROOPERS AND BUSHRANGERS IN THE CONVERSATIONS AT CURLOW CREEK. 461

CHAPTER 5: *RANSOM*, OR MALE HEROISM IN OLD AGE. 539

CONCLUSION 607

BIBLIOGRAPHY 625

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank Sue Ballyn and Bill Phillips for their encouragement and patience during the time that the writing of this thesis has lasted, the timely management of the thesis at each step of its writing, and their judicious comments as my thesis supervisors. I would also like to thank Martin Renes and Caty Ribas from the Centre for Australian and Transnational Studies, and my Australian friends Christopher Macfarlane, Baden Offord and John Ryan for everything they taught me when I was new to the field of Australian Studies. Thanks, John, for your friendship and for all the illuminating conversations on David Malouf, literature and philosophy over the years. I am especially grateful to Nicole Anderson from Macquarie University in Sydney, for her support during my stay at her University. Finally, I would like to thank my wife, Iolanda Ribes. Thank you for your support, advice, and for always being there.

Abstract

The aim of this thesis is to assess David Malouf's contribution to the field of gender and men studies in his fiction books.

In order to do so, I have proceeded by offering a close reading of each of his novels so as to emphasise those parts of the plot where gender and masculinities are more relevant, and from here engaging in a series of theoretical discourses as I saw convenient in the course of my analysis. We read his largely autobiographical novel *Johnno* in the tradition of the *Bildungsroman.* In this tradition, the main characters fulfil themselves when they meet the roles that society expects of them. Therefore, becoming a man or a woman means meeting these expectations. In *Johnno,* Malouf offers an alternative form of successful socialisation that redeems the main character, Dante as an artist but is also built on personal tragedy.

We use Judith Butler's studies on the performativity of gender, Hélène Cixous and Julia Kristeva's *ècriture feminine* and their distinction between symbolic and semiotic language, Eve K. Sedgwick and René Girard's studies on homosocial desire and triangulation, and Simone the Beauvoir and Pierre Bourdieu's ethnographic research on women and Kabyle society, respectively, to read *An Imaginary Life* and *Harland's Half Acre.* In *An Imaginary Life*, Malouf fictionalises the life of the poet Ovid in exile. In Rome, Ovid defies patriarchy and the Emperor writing a poetry that is uncivil and gay. In his exile in Tomis, Ovid decides to raise a feral Child against the advice of the women in the village, who end up using their power, based on folklore and superstition, to get rid of them. In *Harland's Half Acre,* Malouf creates a male household where women are mostly absent, and a female one where the women are the main actors and men play a secondary role. When the main character of the novel, Frank Harland, finally recovers the family estate for his family's only descendant, his nephew Gerald, the latter commits suicide. One of Malouf's main concerns in his writings, the outcome of the novels privilege a spiritual sort of possession over one based on the values of patriarchy, that is, bloodline succession by right of the first-born male

child, hierarchical power relations and ownership: Ovid survives in his poems thanks to the human need for magic and superstition, and so does Frank in his art.

Michael S. Kimmel and R. W. Connell's studies on men and masculinities, and historical research on Australian identity as it was forged during the colonial period and the World Wars help us read *Fly Away Peter, The Great World, Remembering Babylon* and *The Conversations at Curlow Creek*. In Australia, national identity and definitions of manhood are closely tied to frontier and war masculinities. In these novels, Malouf portrays the Australian legend: sceptical of authority, easy-going, egalitarian, larrikin, resourceful, etc. Unfortunately, the legend had a destructive effect on women and the feminine, and that is the reason why we recover from oblivion the important role that women played in the construction of Australia. Edward Said's research in *Culture and Imperialism,* Homi Bhabha's notions of hybridity and mimicry, and Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* provide us valuable tools to analyse class and ethnic issues when we ask ourselves what it means to be a man in *Remembering Babylon*.

Margaret M. Gullette's studies on the representation of age bias in literature and Ashton Applewhite's research against ageism provide the theoretical framework for *Ransom,* where Malouf tells the story of Priam's ransom of his son Hector, urging us to wonder what kind of heroism is left to a man in his old age.

Finally, we offer a close reading of the outcome of the novels, where the agents of transformation are always male or involve male characters: Dante and Johnno, the eponymous hero of the novel; the Child in *An Imaginary Life;* Digger and Vic in *The Great World;* Gemmy in *Remembering Babylon* or Priam and Achilles in *Ransom*. In this way, we hope to better understand and more clearly render the world of men that Malouf portrays in his novels.

Resum

L'objectiu de la tesi és valorar la contribució de les obres de ficció de David Malouf als estudis de gènere i de masculinitats.

Per tal d'aconseguir-ho, hem dut a terme una lectura fidel de les seves novel·les tot emfasitzant aquells elements de la història on el gènere i les masculinitats són més rellevants, i a partir d'aquí hem emprat una sèrie de teories que consideràvem adients en la nostra anàlisi. Hem llegit la seva novel·la àmpliament autobiogràfica, *Johnno* en la tradició de la *Bildungsroman.* En aquesta tradició, els personatges principals es realitzen quan compleixen les expectatives que la societat espera d'ells. Així doncs, fer-se un home o una dona vol dir complir aquestes expectatives. A *Johnno,* Malouf ens dóna una forma alternativa de socialització exitosa que redimeix al personatge principal, Dante, però que també s'erigeix sobre una tragèdia personal.

Emprem la recerca de Judith Butler sobre la "performativitat" del gènere, l'*ècriture feminine* d'Hélène Cixous i Julia Kristeva i la distinció que fan entre llenguatge semiòtic i simbòlic, els estudis de Eve K. Sedgwick i René Girard sobre desig homosocial i el triangle amorós, i la recerca etnogràfica de Simone the Beauvoir i Pierre Bourdieu sobre la dona I la societat Kabyle, respectivament, en la nostra anàlisi d'*An Imaginary Life* i *Harland's Half Acre.* A *An Imaginary Life*, Malouf narra la vida del poeta Ovidi a l'exili. A Roma, Ovidi desafia el patriarcat escrivint una poesia que és impertinent i divertida. Al seu exili a Tomis, Ovidi decideix criar un nen salvatge, contradient el consell de les dones del poble, que acaben utilitzant el seu poder, basat en les tradicions populars i la superstició, per lliurar-se'n. A *Harland's Half Acre,* Malouf crea una llar principalment masculina on les dones hi són absents, i una de femenina on les dones porten les rendes de la casa i els homes hi tenen un paper secundari. Quan el personatge principal de la novel·la, Frank Harland, finalment recupera l'herència de la seva família i la vol entregar a l'únic descendent que queda de la família, el seu nebot Gerald, aquest es suïcida. Un dels temes més recurrents a les novel·les de David Malouf, el desenllaç de les novel·les privilegien una possessió de tipus espiritual per damunt d'una possessió basada en els valors del patriarcat, és a dir, la

descendència basada en els fills legítims o de sang i els privilegis del fill primogènit, relacions jeràrquiques de poder i la propietat.

Emprem els estudis sobre homes i masculinitats de Michael S. Kimmel i R. W. Connell, la recerca històrica de la identitat Australiana tal com es va forjar durant el període colonial i les dues Guerres Mundials en la nostra anàlisi de *Fly Away Peter, The Great World, Remembering Babylon* i *The Conversations at Curlow Creek*. A Austràlia, la identitat nacional i les definicions de masculinitat estan estretament lligades a les masculinitats de fronteres i de guerra. En aquestes novel·les, Malouf representa la llegenda del típic Australià: escèptic de l'autoritat, relaxat, igualitari, malparlat, informal, amb recursos, etc. Malauradament, la llegenda va tenir un efecte molt destructiu en les dones i els valors femenins, i per això recuperem de l'oblit l'important paper que van jugar les dones en la construcció d'Austràlia. La recerca d'Edward Said a *Culture and Imperialism,* les nocions d'hibridització i mimetisme d'Homi Bhabha, i la novel·la *Heart of Darkness,* de Joseph Conrad, ens proporcionen eines valuoses per la nostra anàlisi de qüestions ètniques i de classe quan ens preguntem què vol dir ser home a *Remembering Babylon.*

Els estudis de Margaret M. Gullette sobre els prejudicis de la representació de l'edat a la literatura, i la recerca d'Ashton Applewhite contra els prejudicis de l'edat, ens proporcionen el marc teòric de la nostra lectura de *Ransom,* on Malouf explica la història de Priam, que rescata el cos del seu fill Hèctor de les mans d'Aquil·les, tot preguntant-nos quin tipus d'heroisme li queda a un home quan es fa vell.

Finalment, oferim una lectura atenta de la resolució de les novel·les, on els agents del canvi són sempre masculins o impliquen personatges masculins. Per exemple, Dante i Johnno, l'heori epònim de la novel·la; el nen salvatge a *An Imaginary Life;* Digger i Vic a *The Great World;* Gemmy a *Remembering Babylon* o Priam i Achilles a *Ransom.* D'aquesta manera, esperem entendre millor i transmetre més clarament el món dels homes que Malouf ens representa a les seves novel·les.

Introduction

Life is a thread of events, a thread that interconnects everything. So are the threads that led me to writing this thesis.

I studied English Philology at Lleida University between 1994 and 1998. I had always loved the language and the fact that, one day, it would allow me to travel and live abroad. So, when I finished my degree, I travelled to London, where I worked as a waiter and started a Master at the University of South London on "Representation and Modernity at the Borders." Unfortunately, I did not finish it. Thanks to my experience in London, I could apply for a post as language assistant at Atlanta International School in Atlanta, USA, where I lived for one year. One thing leads to another, so the next year I applied for a post as secondary school teacher in Salt Lake City, which, in turn, allowed me to apply for a position in New York the following year. After that, I came back to Barcelona. Working and living abroad decentered my worldview, it made me live first-hand what we call cultural relativism. I had changed.

One of my life's passions has always been philosophy, which, no doubt, I owe to my father, who was a high school philosophy teacher for over thirty years. Now, he is retired. So, when I came back to Barcelona, I decided to start a Philosophy Degree at Barcelona University and to take the PhD courses at the Faculty of Humanities at Pompeu Fabra University simultaneously, while I was waiting to be assigned a position as a high school teacher in the public sector. I was well into my second year of Philosophy, when I decided to apply for a grant to study for one term at La Trobe University in Merlbourne, Australia. I still remember the day I was interviewed by Susan Ballyn and Elisa Morera at their office in the Australian Studies Centre at Barcelona University. It was a turning point in my life, and my experience in Australia opened up my horizons yet again. When I came back in 2006, I started working as a high school teacher. In 2007, I obtained my Diploma of Advanced Studies at Pompeu Fabra University with a minor thesis on Derrida, and I completed my Philosophy Degree in 2010. After my stay in Merlbourne, I became

increasingly involved with the activities of the Australian Centre and began reading Australian literature.

The first novel I read by David Malouf was *Remembering Babylon*. I was absolutely captivated by the figure of Gemmy, who so clearly stands in between two worlds. Here I had a literary work that embodied much more than could be said about what I was learning in my Philosophy Degree on Otherness. So, I decided to continue reading his work. I read *An Imaginary Life*, where Malouf fictionalizes Ovid's exile in Tomis. Once more, I had in my hands a literary work that contained some of the most poetic and philosophically profound meditations on language and exile that I had ever come across. You feel what it might be like to be removed from everything familiar to a place where you do not speak the language and have to start all over again, literally.

On a more personal note, I felt very close to the world David Malouf describes in his novels. David Malouf lived for some time in Tuscany, where he wrote some of his earlier novels, and his grandparents on his father's side were Lebanese. He also portrays with admirable pathos the resilience and sacrifices that his characters have to make in order to survive. The world and the people in his novels have always reminded me of the Mediterranean where I grew up in l'Alt Empordà, especially my grandfather's. He never had a day off while working as a small farmer and was undoubtedly the family patriarch. For me, this thesis has also been a personal quest to better understand where I come from.

When I came back from Australia, I also participated for a time in the seminars organized by the Group of Phenomenological Studies at the *Institut d'Estudis Catalans* in Barcelona, where we mainly read and discussed texts by Husserl and Heidegger, but also some Derrida. A lot has been written about the influence of phenomenology on the work of Derrida, and Derrida has had a profound influence on postcolonial studies.[1] Derrida often claimed that he had coined the term

---

[1] Derrida's deconstruction could be interpreted as a subliminal personal way of getting even with fascism and colonialism. Derrida was born in Algiers in 1930 in a Jewish family. On the one hand,

deconstruction, which in French already existed, meaning the process of translation from one language to another, while trying to render into French an equivalent of Heidegger's *Dekonstruction* of Western metaphysics in his ground-breaking *Being and Time.* In *Being and Time,* Heidegger contends that since Aristotle, we have forgotten to formulate the question of being, meaning that this question has been saturated with meaning for millennia (Sections 1 and 6). Borrowing the phenomenological tenet "to the things themselves" from his master Husserl, Heidegger proposes to deconstruct the history of Western metaphysics, that is, to radically question Western tradition and culture, and to ask ourselves about the nature of things anew. In postcolonial contexts, there is a need and urgency for a common history that ties peoples to place and that provides the fertile ground on which the individual may flourish, that is, the question of being is necessarily restated. It does not have to be explicitly asked, as Heidegger required of the stagnant intellectual milieu of his time. In the case of Malouf, a son of Lebanese and British immigrants to a country that was negotiating its bonds with Britain and coming to terms with the new Australian landscape, his writing necessarily had to come to terms with the question of being right there where it was taking place. Even though I was at first surprised, then I understood that Malouf would acknowledge Heidegger's influence at the peak of his literary production, in an interview with Paul Kavanagh in 1991:

---

in October 1940, the French government in Algeria, sympathizing with Nazi Germany, abolished the *Crémieux* decree of October 24, 1870, which had granted French citizenship to Jews from Algeria. (Derrida, *Monolingualism of the Other* 16-17) On the other hand Pal Ahluwalia remarks that Jews in Algeria were in some kind of limbo between colonizers and colonized: "The Algerian Jews were essentially nonindigenous 'natives' much like the Indians of Southern and Eastern Africa. These nonindigenous 'natives' occupied a particularly ambivalent space between colonizer and colonized." (85)

> Reading that was like suddenly seeing laid out everything that you ever thought you believed and had said. I don't mean by that, that I understand Heidegger – there has been a lot of talk, especially about poetry, and the relationship between language and objects, that goes back to Heidegger. It's so general in the critical discourse about language, that I have soaked all that up, just as if I had steped myself in Heidegger. I was enormously convinced and moved when I read him, because all that is what I feel very close to. (149)

As I read about Malouf's life and the life of some postcolonial critics, I started to find some affinity between their background and mine. In his autobiography *12 Edmonstone Street,* Malouf tells that he fondly remembers his father working in the backyard, "turning a bit of suburban South into a Mediterranean garden," (5) and his grandparents on his father's side eating "garlic and oil," which are typical Mediterranean condiments. (148) Malouf's father started working at eight, left school at twelve, was a boxer for a time, loved football, and defined his goals in life in terms of material success. In the Epilogue to *Johnno,* Malouf explains that his father started out "with a horse and a dray," (169) and that what kept him working so hard, especially during the Depression, was his terror of falling into the "troughs" (170). One of the things he was most proud of was being able to afford a brick house for his family and leave the weatherboard house in 12 Edmonstone Street, which was a poor house in a suburban neighbourhood. Malouf and his sister spend most of the time with their mother, and to that respect, Malouf admits that his father was always a mystery to him. In his essay "Are You a Man Or a Mouse?", Homi Bhabha tells about his personal ordeal at home as he grew up in Bombay: ""Are you a man or a mouse?" I can still hear my attorney father repeatedly confronting me in Bombay, his barristerish bravura seeking a kind of exclusive, excluding, bonding." (Bhabha 589) He further argues that the question "Who do you love the most, your father or your mother?" is another version of the same disjunctive. I do not know whether the fear of not being able to provide for your family was ever an issue for Homi Bhabha, but it certainly was for Malouf's father and for my grandfather. I remember my

grandfather telling us stories about the famine after the Spanish Civil War. Having a head of garlic or an onion for breakfast was a feast. I have been told about even worse episodes of famine that might be better kept private. In spite of working hard in the fields, they barely had anything to eat. Luckily, there came better times. He bought a house, had his own small farm, and could afford to send my father to University. (My father is asthmatic, so he could not continue his work at the farm.) My grandfather and my grandmother woke up every day at five in the morning, Saturdays and Sundays included, to milk the cows until my grandfather retired. Needless to say, my grandmother never had any property or bank account to her name: women were not allowed to have any during Franco's regime. Sometimes, in her old age, I heard her calling my grandfather "my owner." Like Malouf's father, my grandfather liked boxing and, still typical in some parts of Spain, bullfighting. The question of whether we were men or mice was often put to my brother and I, and it is something we grew up with to no good, as invisible tension ropes would pull me between who I was and who I was expected to be. My grandfather was a product of his time. Aren't we all to a certain extent? So, I can firmly state that despite all this, he was a good man and loved us dearly. He could barely hold his tears when I went to say goodbye before any of my trips to England, the USA or Australia. Everyone in the family loved him. Unfortunately, he passed away during the drafting of this thesis.

As I read Malouf's other novels and started reading some criticism, I noticed that all of his novels are mainly about men. It is now astonishing for me to see that I completed my Philosophy Degree, only back in 2010, without having taken a single subject on feminism or gender studies, even less men studies. I began doing some research, and that is when I read such important authors as R. W. Connell, Michael S. Kimmel, Judith Butler, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, etc. In 2013, Sue Ballyn and Bill Phillips kindly accepted to direct my thesis, and we agreed that I would do my research on the representation of gender and masculinities in David Malouf's fiction. Bill Philips let me read the thesis *Gendering Men: Theorizing Masculinities in American Culture and Literature* (2006),

written by Josep M. Armengol and directed by Àngels Carabí. That was my formal initiation to the field of men studies.

The thesis is structured into introduction, methodology, analysis of David Malouf's fiction books, and a conclusion. In the Chapter on methodology, I make a brief introduction of the *status quo* of literary theory nowadays and provide a brief reference to the critical texts and sources I have been using in the analysis of the novels.

In Chapter 1, entitled "Accomplishing Masculinity in *Johnno*", we offer a reading of the novel in the tradition of the *Bildungsroman* within the wider framework of studies on men and masculinities. To put it in a few words, growing up and becoming a man requires a period of formation and the achievement of certain goals that, within each society, are the signs that tell us whether we have become men or not. This tradition, until recently, has always excluded women from its field of study. In patriarchal societies, this could not be otherwise, since women's status stands somewhere between children and men. In *Johnno,* we find all the milestones that indicate the entry into manhood as these milestones escape the two main characters of the novel, Johnno and Dante: their generation is the first one that does not go to a war (a key experience to becoming a man); they travel to Europe, but they come back to Australia dispirited and feeling unchanged; they do not marry or start a family; they do not find a decent job, much less triumph in terms of material success, whereas other men from their generation had and, most importantly, neither of them feels like they have grown up, matured, or become "men." The narrator, Dante, realizes that the latter is a trait he shares with his generation. Despite the fact that many of his former classmates and friends of youth have money, jobs, and are married to pretty women with children, he realizes that everything is a façade and that they are still children at heart. They may have become fit for society, but they have not grown up. Fearing they might be emasculated like spinsters, Johnno and Dante turn thirty without having found themselves or their place in society, more disoriented than ever. The novel ends with Johnno's mysterious death, since we do not know whether he dies by accident or suicide. But Dante becomes a successful writer and finds a respectable place in society

when he redeems himself by writing his first novel about his friend and how they grew up in Brisbane. Among other things, the novel is a meditation on friendship and the relationship between fathers and sons, since Dante decides to tell the story of his friend when his father dies. The novel is typically modern because self-realization never happens, despite the spectacular pressures from society and family. Modern man is always an unfinished product.

In Chapter 2, we analyse men and women's power as they are portrayed in the novels *An Imaginary Life* and *Harlands' Half Acre.* In these novels, Malouf deconstructs patriarchy to show that power lies with the women. In *An Imaginary Life,* he portrays the life of the Roman poet Ovid. Ovid grows up in Sulmo, where he dreams of leaving his father's state and live a life of freedom in Rome. However, when his older brother dies, Ovid is expected to replace him as family heir. Unable to assume this role and antagonizing his family, specially his father, he decides to pursue his ambition as a poet in Rome, where he becomes a public figure. Ovid stands for everything the Emperor, who is the embodiment of patriarchal values, is not: play, entertainment, freedom from social convention, the Carnivalesque, etc. In his exile, Ovid finds the Child, a feral child who embodies an imaginary friend from his infancy. Ovid decides to educate him, and counts on the support of Ryzak, the head of the village. However, Ryzak's grandmother believes that the wolf-boy is an evil spirit who will bring doom to the village. Ovid and Ryzak make an alliance, but as things turn out, Ryzak dies of a fever and Ovid and the Child end up escaping into the woods. Within a patriarchal frame of mind, Ovid mocks patriarchy in the figure of Augustus, and is exiled. In exile, he upsets the women of the village, and is exiled yet again. Patriarchy understands reality in terms of binaries, hierarchy and power relations. There is no middle ground. The moral of the story is that there has to be a balance between the feminine and the masculine in a society where they are polarized.

In *Harland's Half Acre*, Malouf's intention was to write about the sort of power that women have and the sort of power that men have. In order to do so, he tells the story of two contrasting and opposing households, one made up mainly of male figures, where women are completely

absent, and another one made up mainly of women, and whose household head is a woman, Grandma Vernont. Since the novel captures the local customs and manners of life in Brisbane and Southport in the first half of the twentieth century, it allows us to delve with some depth into an analysis of the stereotypical gender roles at the time. The main character is Frank Harland, a gifted painter who has a patriarchal dream – he wants to recover his lost family state by selling his art. When he finally does so, the family's only heir, Gerard, commits suicide. At the end of the novel, Frank realizes that authentic male succession is of the spiritual[2] kind, which he has achieved through his artwork.

In the next two Chapters, we analyse the creation of the Australian nation and identity in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Unfortunately, Australia has also built its identity as a nation through periods of conflict and war, first during the convict and colonization period and, then, during the World Wars. Since women were excluded from war, the story of the building of Australia's national identity is an exclusively male one. War reveals and worsens the marginal role of women in society. Therefore, in the two following Chapters, we analyse the male roles and characters that appear in Malouf's novels, such as the bushrangers, troopers, ANZACs and diggers, but we also explain the important role of women during these times, recurring to historiographical accounts and, when possible, linking them to the female characters in the novels.

[2] By spiritual we mean the kind of friendship or mateship that involves trust and confidence between two people, mainly among men in David Malouf's fiction, even though there are some exceptions, for example the friendship between Lachlan and Janet in *Remembering Babylon*; Ma and Vic in *The Great World*, and Grandma Vernont and Phil's father in *Harland's Half Acre*. The relationship may be between equals – i.e. soldiers, troopers, bushrangers, etc. – or not – i.e. father and son. Spiritual succession involves the sharing or transmission of historical and cultural backgrounds through one's lived experience. In Frank's case, his experience is contained in his art, which he leaves to the Australian nation.

In Chapter 3, entitled "The War Novels", I analyse *Fly Away Peter* and *The Great World*. The former is about a typical Australian young man who is a dab hand at ornithology and decides to enlist for the Great War. *The Great World* tells about the offspring of the soldiers of the Great War, and the experience of Australians in the POW (prisoner of war) camps in Malaysia who were recruited to build the Burma Railway during the Second World War. Malouf demystifies and humanizes the male figures of legend to counteract official and political discourse, at the same time that he portrays the atrocities and miseries of war. For example, he portrays male bonding, but also conflict between men and between fathers and sons.

In *Fly Away Peter*, the tone of the novel is clearly pacifist. Malouf contrasts the beauty of Australia's wetlands and nature, and the heroic representation of the ANZACs (acronym for Australian and New Zealand Armed Corps) by war journalist and historian C. E. Bean with the horrors of trench war. The protagonist, ornithologist Jim Saddler, and the secondary characters, landowner Ashley Crowther and photographer Imogen Harcourt refer to the wetlands where they work as the sanctuary, so the novel also contrasts the void and absurdity of war with the devotee and hopeful language of the believer. In this novel, bodily sensory pleasure plays a special role.

The Great World is a much more ambitious novel. In contrast to *Fly Away Peter,* the tone of *The Great War* is patriotic. Malouf explains that the title is ironic, meaning that ordinary life is traumatic, like war. (Willbanks, 18) By means of his poetical literary resources, such as lyricism and epic, Malouf makes in *The Great World* his own contribution to the representation that Australians have of themselves and of their national identity from their participation in the World Wars. The novel begins in the 1920s and ends in the late 1980s. It is about the "diggers," as they became popularly known during the Second World War. "Digger" refers to an Australian soldier, but since Australian soldiers were volunteers, the term refers to the typical Austrian character. Everyone refers to the main character of *The Great World* with the nicknames "Dig, Digger." At the beginning of the novel, the narrative voice presents him according to folklore. However, the character evolves and is humanized. In the first part of our analysis, we focus on the folklore around the

digger, which was a construction of a certain type of masculinity, and we contrast this type with others that appear in the novel. We also analyse the role of women in the novel, since it shows that a discourse on war always made the most out of the confrontation between men and women, to the point that these discourses – and the lives they affected – were mutually exclusive. Finally, we also identify some traits of the Australian character that appeared in the military as a reaction to British rule: Australians' distrust of authority and their relaxed attitude towards norms and conventions, which originated the myth of a classless society.

In Chapter 4, we analyse David Malouf's *Remembering Babylon* and *The Conversations at Curlow Creek*. These are the novels that portray the remotest origins of Australian colonization and culture. *The Conversations at Curlow Creek* is set in the first half of the nineteenth century and *Remembering Babylon* in the second half. In *Remembering Babylon,* issues of gender and masculinities appear mixed with issues of race and social class. We can see in a simpler context, as if we were doing an imaginative exercise in anthropology, the complexity of the colonial experience. In the same way that cultural and linguistic diversity are a source of unquestionable wealth, they are also irredeemable sources of conflict and social division. The novel's main character, Gemmy, starts working as a child in the furniture factories of England, and ends up in a settler colony in Australia, after having spent thirteen years with an Aboriginal tribe. When Gemmy arrives in the white settlement, the colonizers are terrified. Though Gemmy was born a white male, due to the inhuman working conditions of child-labour and his spell among Aborigines, they do not recognize him as one of their own, and they start examining their unchecked assumptions about their own natures. Gemmy's queerness completely alters the small colony.

The Conversations at Curlow Creek narrates, on the one hand, the conversation between the convict Daniel Carney and officer Michael Adair in a hut in New South Wales, on the eve of the former's execution. Apparently, Adair is after the legendary bushranger Jack Dolan. However, he is in fact after Fergus, his childhood friend, whom he believes is hiding behind Dolan. On the other hand, it tells the story of Adair's childhood, as he reminisces it within the gaps of their

conversation: the special bond between Adair, who was adopted by the Connellans when his parents died in a shipwreck, the Connellans' only child Fergus, whom Adair mothers and raises, and their friend Virgilia. Their story enacts a love triangle in which Adair is in love with Virgilia, who is in love with Fergus. However, like the relationship between Johnno and Dante in *Johnno,* the nature of Fergus' feelings towards Adair is a matter of controversy. The conflict between the three friends leads Adair to enlist in the military, and Fergus to embark on a romantic quest for liberty and freedom in Australia. In this Chapter, we analyse the violent and oppressive male chauvinist culture that led to the creation of the legendary bushrangers in colonial Australia, and we recover the lost memory of the adversities and hardships that women of the convict and transportation period had to endure.

In Chapter 5, we analyse Malouf's last novel, *Ransom,* which recreates an episode of Homer's *The Iliad.* Hector, son of Priam, kills Patroclus in battle, who had disguised himself as Aquilles, wearing his armour. Patroclus being Achilles' childhood friend and lover, the latter retaliates, killing Hector, tying his body to his cart and dragging him in front of the walls of Troy every morning at dawn, denying him a proper burial as was established by custom. Priam, in his old age, decides to venture to the Greek camp in the middle of the night in order to ransom the body of his dead son, speaking man to man to Achilles. In this Chapter, we analyse manhood from the point of view of ageist studies. There is a marked contrast in the novel between the impulsive and invincible Achilles at the prime of his youth and the reflective, wise Priam in his old age. In the context of *Ransom,* this tension allows us to analyse what man is and what sort of heroism he can exercise in his old age.

It might be argued that, despite the fact that the title of the thesis is "Men in David Malouf's Fiction," in some Chapters there is always a section devoted to the role women played in the society where the narrative time is set. This is not only to bring to light an important part of the story that would otherwise remain invisible, or to criticize the role that patriarchy has played in this process of obliteration. Patriarchy is based on relations of hierarchy and power. Since

women have always been the first victims of the inherent violence in patriarchy, understanding them is key to understand men.

I said that this thesis is a part of a lifelong journey. I have learnt a lot writing it, and I am aware that there is a lot more to learn. Like Socrates, I feel that the more I learn about the topic, the less I know. Like Dante in *Johnno,* I feel I might be more aware of the complexities of life, but I do not feel I am wiser or mature. Language can help us understand reality, but it will never tell the whole story – that would be the end of the story. As the quote that opens this thesis states, our aim should be to understand the complexities of life and accept every individual's uniqueness.

References to David Malouf's fiction books

All references to David Malouf's fiction in the thesis come from the following editions of his books:

Johnno. Ringwood: Penguin Books Australia Ltd, 1984 (1975). Print.

An Imaginary Life. Vintage: London, 1999 (1978). Print.

Fly Away Peter. Vintage: London, 1999 (1982). Print.

Harland's Half Acre. Vintage: London, 1999 (1984). Print.

The Great World. Picador: Chippendale NSW, 1991 (1990). Print.

Remembering Babylon. Vintage: London, 1994 (1993). Print.

The Conversations at Curlow Creek. Vintage: Sydney, 1997 (1996). Print.

Ransom. Vintage International: New York, 2010 (2009). Print.

References and bibliography have been managed using Mendeley, following the MLA (Modern Language Association) style. When quoting a Kindle File, I say so but provide no page number. The reader can go to "find" in his/her electronic device and type the quote to see the exact location.

Methodology

Until the 1960s, there was a general consensus on what literary theory was. In English studies, this agreement went back to the Newbolt Report in 1921. The Newbolt Report was a governmental pedagogical initiative that established an official literary canon. Its aim was to educate on civic virtues and strengthen national identity. The Newbolt Report was inspired by Britain's foreign policy in the colonies. Literature had replaced religion, which was a hornets' nest, in the quest to civilize the new territories, with the added advantage that this sent the message that you were no longer indoctrinating or exploiting the natives of the land and migrants, but had embarked on a humanist mission to teach the positive value of arts and culture. Needless to say, Western arts and culture. In the colonial context, you could study Eastern studies, but to study the English classics was to improve yourself as a human being. (Lane, xxii-xxiii)

As colonies progressively declared their independence, especially in Africa around the 1960s and with the culmination of the independence of Algeria in 1963, new voices began to appear to tell the story from the point of view of the colonies. These voices coalesce around postcolonial studies. Similar dissident voices coming from other quarters joined in the common cause around liberation and civil rights, including protests against the Vietnam War, the gay liberation movement and the new wave for equal rights for women.

Algeria was the cradle of "French" theory, which played such a key role in the so-called "theoretical turn" or "theory wars" in the 1960s, and that turned theory upside down:

> …there is a profound connection between colonial/postcolonial Africa and "French" theory, especially in relation to those theorists born in Algeria: Louis Althusser, Hélène Cixous, and Jacques Derrida as well as numerous others who studied or lectured there, such as Michael Foucault. (Lane, 81)

The theoretical turn got back to important writings by Sigmund Freud, Friedrich Nietzsche and Karl Marx in the fields of sexuality, language and history, respectively. Freud's studies on hysteria and repressed sexuality, Nietzsche's dictum that "everything is interpretation" in his *Birth*

of Tragedy, and Marx's historical materialism described the individual at the mercy of forces he could not control because he was not even aware of them. Feminist and queer studies undertook the work of the early Freud to question that there is anything like a natural sexuality or gender, contending instead that these are the result of social convention and habit, or, as Judith Butler puts it, performatives. In his *History of Sexuality,* Michael Foucault critically analysed the history of gender classification and sexual practices, showing that they were the result of discursive practices, sometimes with hidden political agendas. Derrida contends in *Of Grammatology* that "there is no outside-text" (158), meaning that language is never value free. In a text on Nietzsche, he places philosophical discourse within the sphere of patriarchy. Since "truth" is feminine in most gender based languages, including German, French and Spanish, truth has always been treated like a woman that needs to be conquered. (*Espolones*) As we can see, these three fields of study that replaced humanism in literary theory, the study of language, gender and sexuality, and historiographical research, appear as closely interconnected.

So, what is theory nowadays? Admitting that this has become a difficult question to answer, Jonathan Culler defines it as an interdisciplinary discourse that is counter-intuitive, complex and difficult to confirm. (2-5) Moreover, theory as a method involves an engagement with a series of eclectic discourses that help understand literary and cultural phenomena: "since the 1960s, writings from outside the field of literary studies have been taken up by people in literary studies because their analyses of language, or mind, or history, or culture, offer new and persuasive accounts of textual and cultural matters." (3) These discourses may properly belong to medical or technological science, gender studies, feminism, history, philosophy, etc., or even be formulated as implicit and explicit theories in literary works. All in all, I have used and looked for theories that could help me inquire into gender and masculinities as they were represented in David Malouf's fiction.

Methodologically, I have proceeded by offering a close reading of each of Malouf's novels so as to emphasize those parts of the plot where gender and masculinities were an issue. Like any other text, a literary work is an autonomous entity that resists paraphrasing, because the reader

cannot control de context of its production (its internal and external references and cross-references), it contains semantic ambiguity, rhetorical devices such as paradox, etc. Unlike a philosophical or a scientific text, a literary work does not have to follow the conventions of a particular field, and yet, the philosophical and scientific texts always contain some irreducible elements of rhetoric and storytelling, and are never immune to misunderstanding.[3] Consequently, it has been necessary to contextualize each novel and explain the general plot before analysing how men and gender are represented in it.

My theoretical sources are diverse. Despite being a book on American masculinities, a lot of what Michael S. Kimmel says in *Manhood in America* is transposable to the Australian context. It is extremely illuminating. R.W. Connell's *Masculinities* and Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* also provided food for thought to start thinking about men and masculinities. Often, for example in *Johnno,* and especially in the War and colonial novels, a contextualization of the novel and some general background on the role of women in society was necessary in order to have a clearer picture of the role of men and gender at the time of the narrative. To this extent, Stuart Macintyre's *A Concise History of Australia* and Robert Hughes' controversial classic *The Fatal Shore* have been very useful.

---

[3] In *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, Lyotard contends that all discourses, including science, are performative: they retain their pertinence as long as they work. (Lyotard, quoted in Lane, xxv) Regarding history, new historicists Stephen Greenblatt and Hayden White have emphasized that historical discourse cannot function outside the linguistic and rhetoric strategies of literary discourse:

> Properly understood, histories ought never to be read as unambiguous signs of the events they report, but rather as symbolic structures, extended metaphors, that "liken" the events reported in them to some form with which we have already become familiar in our literary culture. (White, 1545)

There is much implicit and explicit theorizing about gender in David Malouf's fiction, and in his interviews, he provides very helpful insights into his novels. I have also used theories that appear in a novelistic or poetic form in other writers, for example Shakespeare's *King Lear* or Patrick White's *The Vivisector*. It is still true that the best literature expresses universal themes in a way that literary analysis or philosophy cannot match. Finally, I have also used critical authors and texts from different disciplines as I saw fit in the course of my analysis. Apart from the abovementioned, these include anthropology, philosophy, sociology and psychology.

In what follows, I offer a brief summary of the theoretical framework that I use in every Chapter of the thesis to analyse the role of men and gender in David Malouf's novels. I explain each of the theories I use in more depth in the course of my analysis, in the main body of the thesis.

Regarding *Johnno,* the novel is dedicated to the real Johnno, Malouf's childhood friend John Milliner. Malouf had dedicated several poems to his friend before writing the novel, and I comment on one of them, "The Judas Touch", which I believe is important because it sets the tone of the novel. *Johnno* recounts the years of formation of the two main characters of the novel, beginning in their childhood and concluding in their thirties. So, another important critical source for us is Franco Moretti's *The Way of the World,* where he theorizes about the Western tradition of the *Bildungsroman.* In contrast to Dante, who is a sensible boy, Johnno is a scoundrel. In this context, I use Flannigan-Saint-Aubin's definitions of introverted and extroverted positive and negative forms of masculinity to analyse the characters of Johnno and Dante in depth.

Whether *Johnno* is a gay novel in disguise has been a matter of controversy among critics. We explain the views of Philipp Nielsen, Ivor Indyk and Don Randall on the issue, and we offer our own interpretation after analysing the different love triangles that appear in the novel. The most important one involves Johnno, his girlfriend Binkie and Dante. To carry out this analysis, we cite the research of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick *Between Men. English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire*, and René Girard's *Deceit, Desire and the Novel.* Finally, since the novel is largely

autobiographical, we also read it in the light of what Malouf tells us in his autobiography *12 Edmonstone Street*.

Malouf provides the key to how to interpret *An Imaginary Life* and *Harland's Half Acre* from a gender perspective in an interview with Candida Baker, where he states that Ovid's problem in *An Imaginary Life* is that he fails to see that power in the village of Tomis is really with the women, and that in *Harland's Half Acre* he wanted to inquire into what kind of power men have and what kind of power women have. We have used these statements to analyse the role men and women in these novels.

An Imaginary Life is a poetic, philosophical meditation on the nature of love and men. Its tone and language being poetic, the narrative voice often suggests more than it clearly states. In this sense, we analyse the language of the novel in terms of Hélène Cixous *écriture feminine*. Moreover, Ovid being a poet, the narrative voice, speaking as Ovid, plays on the creative powers of language. Ovid is aware that by simply stating something, he can make it real, and he makes use of his powers in a way that openly challenges patriarchy and the figure of the Emperor. In the context of the women's superstitiousness in his exile in Tomis, Ovid will see their power deployed against him. In this regard, we elaborate, on the one hand, on Beauvoir's statement that men have considered women a mystery so as to degrade them and not have to accept them as equals and, on the other, on Austin, Derrida and Butler's performative nature of language in *Limited Inc., How To Do Things With Words,* and *Gender Trouble,* respectively. Since the novel itself also provides lots of insights into gender and masculinity, we also highlight and elaborate those insights.

There is a lot of literature on the figure of the feral child, the classic reference in this case no doubt being Rudyard Kipling's *The Jungle Book* and *Mowgli.* On this occasion, we put Ovid's Child in the context of real cases of feral children in Michael Newton's *Wild Girls & Savage Boys*. When analysing the first times that Ovid spots the Child and the hallucinations and dreams he has in the forest, we recur to Lacan's notion of the imaginary, pre-Oedipal phase. On the figure of the wolf, we refer to Derrida's accounts in *The Beast and the Sovereign.*

Finally, there are some echoes of Renaissance literature in the novel, and we have read some passages taking these into account. In particular, Wyatt's "*Whoso list to hunt, I know where is an hind,"* so as to contrast the figure of the deer with the figure of the wolf in the novel, and Ben Johnson's *Volpone or The Fox*, on the symbolic meaning of names.

As we have mentioned, in his interview with Candida Baker, Malouf explains that in *Harland's Half Acre* he wanted to tell the stories of two families, one in which the absence of women would be strongly felt, and another one where they would be the main actors in the household. We analyse in what ways this is so in the novel. Don Randall has pointed out that masculine succession is one of the main leitmotifs in Malouf's work, especially in this novel. This is so in a number of ways. First, regarding Malouf's emphasis on men and storytelling. Secondly, the references to *King Lear* in the novel place it within the wider tradition of literary representations of patriarchy. That is the reason why we analyse the novel in the light of some passages of Shakespeare's classic. Thirdly, Malouf recovers in this novel a topic that is also present in Patrick White's classic *The Vivisector,* and which reveals the conventional nature, on the one hand, of the respective role of men and women as subjects and objects in patriarchal society and, on the other, of bloodline succession by the first-born male child. In *Masculine Domination,* French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu tells of the patriarchal community of the Kabyles in the North of Argelia, where it is commonly accepted in a family with no male descendants to have their daughter marry a man who will play the role of patriarch in the family. Thus, in a society where it is the woman who marries into her husband's household, the man plays the role of object. Fourthly, the consequences of war in the character of Knack, a Pole who fought in the Second World War and is a victim of shellshock. We analyse the third and fourth points in the light of Foucault's notion of "symbolics of blood," which he delves into in *The History of Sexuality.* Finally, in an interview with Ray Willbanks, Malouf explains that Frank Harland, the main character of the novel, finds out who he really is by going against his nature, that is, against what his family has passed on to him.

In *Harland's Half Acre,* gender roles are not fixed, for example, Frank enjoys mothering his little brothers, his father marries a tomboyish girl, or Grandma Vernont becomes the family matriarch. In the latter example, we explain that Grandma Vernont becomes the family provider by playing her role in the interstices of what David Buchbinder defines as the patriarchal order and the patriarchal economy in *Studying Men and Masculinities*. The play of gender roles finds its climax in an anecdote about a hermaphrodite girl told by Doctor Haro, one of Grandma Vernont's friends, at a dinner party. We analyse it in the light of Julia Kristeva's *Powers Of Horror: An Essay On Abjection.* As we did when analysing *Johnno,* we use the descriptions of triangular desire in Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* and René Giard's *Deceit, Desire and the Novel* to analyse the relationship between Gerard, Phil and Jacky. In the course of our reading, we also analyse the family alliances and disputes that come up as a result of the gender and character in the novel.

The World Wars play a key role in David Malouf's fiction. He was born in 1934 in Brisbane, which means that he was a teenager during the Second World War, an age when we are easily impressed. He had an uncle who had fought in the First World War and suffered from shellshock, and there were First World War and then Second World War veterans in his hometown. Malouf and his family would listen to the developments of the war on the radio, and Brisbane was used as an American military base during the Second World War. The fear of a Japanese attack was very real. Apart from this, during the second half of the twentieth century, Australia had to find a place for itself in the world. So, as intellectuals in the West were trying to come to terms with the experience of the Wars to prevent something like that from happening again, Australia's participation in the Wars was used to legitimate its place in the world. Still today, Australians celebrate their National Holiday on ANZAC Day on 25th April, commemorating their landing at Gallipoli in the First World War.

It is not surprising, then, that at the peak of his literary career, David Malouf published two novels set in the World Wars: *Fly Away Peter* is set in the First and *The Great War* in the Second

World War. Part of the action of all his other novels is set in one or both of the World Wars, except *An Imaginary Life, The Conversations at Curlow Creek* (even if there are some ironic references to First World War), and *Ransom*, which nevertheless was inspired by the Second World War, when Malouf's primary teacher would read them *The Iliad,* and the young Malouf could not help relate it to the War from overseas they were following at home on the radio.

That is the reason why, when analysing the role of men and masculinities in *Fly Away Peter* and *The Great World,* we take into account everything Malouf has to say about the World Wars in his other novels, interviews, and biography. We put that in the perspective of what David Malouf says about growing up in Brisbane in the 1930s and 1940s in his interview with Lee Spinks: "So it was a question in the society of almost masculine identity being determined in terms of what kind of soldier you were going to make and that is a big thing to be hanging over you." (11)

Stuart Macintyre's *A Concise History of Australia,* Phillip Knightley's *Australia. A Biography of a Nation,* Graham Seal's *Inventing Anzac* and Patrick Lindsay's *The Spirit of the Digger* have been important sources of historical information in the writing of this Chapter. David H.J. Morgan's article "Theatre of War: Combat, the Military, and Masculinities," on how war produces specific types of masculinities, Linzi Murrie's "The Australian Legend: Writing Australian Masculinity/ Writing 'Australian' Masculine" and Stephen Garton's "War and Masculinity in twentieth Century Australia," on how war produced a specific type of Australian masculinity have also proven extremely valuable sources of information.

In *Fly Away Peter,* the main character is an ornithologist. The novel provides some cues as to the symbology of birds that travel from one hemisphere to another, like Australians in the novel. We analyse Malouf's poem "Report from Champagne Country", where the poetic voice speaks from the battlefields of France and we learn that Malouf had an uncle who fought in the First World War. It also provides the tone of the novel, and much of its symbolism goes back to it, in particular the image of Australian soldiers digging the earth and trying to get back to the other side of the world where they belong in their final hour. Philip Nielsen's *Imagined Lives* and Antonio

López's *1914, el año que cambió la historia* provide useful information that help contextualize some facts in the novel. We use Eugenio Tria's account of the taboo in *Lo bello y lo siniestro,* and Sarah Ahmed's *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* at length to analyse a couple of scenes in the novel in which the soldiers are put under extreme pressure: one scene represents the horror of trench war, the other the nightmare of being shell-shocked.

The way *The Great World* is structured influences the content of the novel. The first part, which is about the war, mixes the story of the main characters with the time they spend in Malaysia as POWs. The novel itself is a well of information about the war, male bonding in the POW camps, war masculinities and their effect on women. Thanks to war historian C.E.W. Bean, the myth of ANZAC is already in circulation in the Second World War. In the novel, Dig's father is a War veteran, and he learns from him to deport himself like a soldier. To analyse the distinctive characteristics of the typical Australian soldier in the novel, we analyse Malouf's speeches "The One Day", a transcript of his Official Anzac Day Address in Washington, DC in 2003, and his celebrated Boyer Lecture "A Spirit of Play," delivered in 1998. To analyse the character of Vic, who always needs to prove his masculinity, we use Connell's *Masculinities* and Homi Bhabha's article "Are You a Man or a Mouse?" Finally, we use Richard Flannagan's *The Narraow Road To the Deep North,* also about the experience of Australian POWs in the Malaysia railway, to deepen our analysis of Malouf's novel. Flannagan's novel provides more information about the Japanese than Malouf's. However, there is no single instance of male bonding.[4] Dig's mother going crazy due to her husband and son's unconcern for her needs recalls Ned Darton's short story "The Conquering Bush," so we analyse in what ways Malouf's novel gathers the tradition of the earliest Australian writing. Finally, we use Michael S. Kimmel's notion of the Marketplace men to describe how Vic unsuccessfully balances his insecurities as a man with the accumulation of money and worldly success until he loses everything.

[4] That is certainly a surprise in a Booker Man Winning novel published in 2013.

Remembering Babylon was published in 1993. An unambiguous postcolonial novel, we describe the political debate around the apology to the Aborigines, the native peoples of the land, from the 1990s to the late 2000s and place this debate in the international context. We also situate the novel in the context of colonial and postcolonial literature. *Remembering Babylon* belongs to a genealogy of novels that includes Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*, Rudyard Kipling's *The Jungle Books*, Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and JM Coetzee's more recent *Foe*. Due to the important influence of *Heart of Darkness* in postcolonial literature, and *Remembering Babylon* in particular, we analyse it with some depth, providing both a colonial and postcolonial reading of it. The colonial reading, we provide is that of the Nigerian writer Chinua Achebe. In our analysis of *Remembering Babylon,* we compare the main character, Gemmy, who clearly stands in between two worlds, with the protagonist of the novel *That Deadman Dance* by Aboriginal writer Kim Scott.

Patrick Brantlinger's article "Victorians and Africans: The Genealogy of the Myth of the Dark Continent" surveys Victorian England, its abolitionist and Imperial policies, and the rampant racism of the time. The views he presents in his article are the views of the settler colony in *Remembering Babylon*. Stephen M. Whitehead's division between, on the one hand, men and, on the other, women and children in frontier and war masculinities in *Men and Masculinities* offers helpful critical tools to analyse Lachlan's development into adulthood and gender relations in the colony. We use Edward Said's *Orientalism* and *Culture and Imperialism* to analyse in depth the relationship between metropole and colony and the role of literature in the colonisation of Empire as they are portrayed in the novel.

Remembering Babylon also provides its own tools for analysis. Most of the novel is told from the point of view of Lachlan Beattie, a child, which legitimises his point of view and points towards a more inclusive view of Otherness. As he and Janet grow into adulthood, they have to negotiate the gendered world they inhabit. In particular, Janet enters adulthood in harmony with nature, as we can gather from the episode with the bees, whereas Lachlan finds his place in society by repressing his feelings and demonstrating his bravery. Gemmy is presented as a simpleton from

the point of view of the colonizers, but when they try to trick him into revealing the whereabouts and customs of the Aborigines, he misleads them with much skill. Mrs Hutchence's authority in the colony proves that social class may overrule gender, and Mr Frazer's botanical outings with Gemmy and his compulsion to name and classify recall the Empire's compulsion to categorize in order to control and dominate.

The narrative time in *The Conversations at Curlow Creek* is the convict period and transportation. In this regard, Robert Hughes' *The Fatal Shore* provides a lot of information about the historical background of the novel, and also about the role of women at the time. As a secondary source of information, Stuart Macintyre's *A Brief History of Australia* has also been helpful. We use Ballyn and Frost's account of the life of Adelaide de la Thoreza in *A Spanish Convict in Colonial Australia (1808-1877). Who was Adelaide de la Thoreza?* to delve into the lives of convict women and to emphasize the multicultural nature of colonization. We use the latter as a point of contrast to Malouf's view that the first settlers were a homogenous Anglo-Saxon group, in his text called, paradoxically, "My Multicultural Life." We also cite and ponder Brooke Allen's criticism that the novel lacks characterological depth and compare the narrative voice in *The Conversations at Curlow Creek* with the narrative voice of Peter Carey's *True History of the Kelly Gang*. In an interview with Helen Daniel, Malouf provides some valuable clues as to the purpose of his novel. *The Conversations at Curlow Creek* being a novel about the bushrangers that builds on the legend of the Wild Colonial Boy, we take the legend as it still survives nowadays in lyrics and ballads as a point of reference, complementing it with Anthony J. Hassall's article "The Wild Colonial Boy - the Making of Colonial Legends in David Malouf's The Conversations at Curlow Creek."

We also analyse what Foucault calls the "symbolics of blood" in the novel, that is, a number of situations in the novels where blood plays an important role, and that we link to the fact that the narrative time of the novel is set in one of the most sanguine and brutal periods of British history. In his *David Malouf*, Don Randall affirms that gender identity is a key issue in the novel. Thus, we analyse how gender and male chauvinism inform the everyday life and mateship between

the troopers. Also, there is an important distinction in the novel between the insufficient law – recorded in the legal code – and the natural, higher law. We read the latter as the origins of modern individualism, using as a critical lens the philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche and his theory of the *ubermensch*.

Ransom tells the story of Priam, King of Troy, who in his old age ransoms the body of his deceased son Hector from Achilles. We use G.S. Kirk's introduction to the Oxford World Classic's edition of *The Iliad* to place Malouf's novel in the larger context of the Trojan War, and the interviews with Shannon Burns and Brigid Rooney to put the novel in context: Malouf wanted to explore what kind of heroism was possible for a man in his old age. We describe some uplifting and intimate scenes of characters taking care of the old in Malouf's novels. In *Ransom,* the narrative voice emphasises Priam's old age and contrasts it with Achilles maturity and his warriors' youth. Moreover, it portrays the Trojans ageist bias, which are our own, when Priam tells about his plan to rescue his son. In order to have an old man as the main character of its story, the narrative voice praises the new and unprecedented above the merely believable and known, and ordinary life and the comic above the pretentiousness of aristocratic life.

We use ageism criticism to analyse the novel. Simone the Beauvoir's classic *The Coming of Age* and Ashton Applewhite's *This Chair Rocks: A Manifesto Againt Ageism* provide a comprehensive introduction to the topic. Sarah Falcus' article "Literature and Ageing" in the Routledge Handbook of Cultural Gerontology, and Margaret Morganroth Gullette's *Agewise* and *Aged by Culture* are indispensable resources for literary analysis. We use Gullette's notions of "decline narrative" versus "progress narrative," "recovery novels" and "multiple identities" to analyse *Ransom.*

Chapter 1: Accomplishing Masculinity in *Johnno.*

Johnno is David Malouf's first novel. It was published in 1975, when Malouf was about 40. Malouf had been writing poetry since he was a teenager and was a renowned Australian poet by then, having published a couple of volumes of poetry: *Bicycle and Other Poems* in 1970 in Australia, which was published as *The Year of the Foxes and Other Poems* in 1979 in the USA, and later on, *Neighbours in a Thicket*, published in 1974. However, he had never managed to find the poetic voice he needed to embark on what he had long known should be his first novel. What the narrator of *Johnno* tells us at the beginning of the novel: "I had been writing my book about Johnno from the moment we met" is no doubt true about the author himself (12).

Johnno is based on Malouf's personal experience. It tells the story of the narrator and his friend Johnno in Brisbane, then in Europe and, finally, back in Brisbane. It is the story of their lives and circumstances – mainly Australian society, the landscape and life in Brisbane in the first half of the twentieth century and the World Wars – that will shape them. By the end of the novel, we have learned a bit more about Australia and what it means to be Australian. The novel ends more or less when the main characters – Dante, the narrator and Johnno – are in their thirties. We can say that *Johnno* has all the traits of a *Bildungsroman*, even though this statement will need some qualification.

In this context, the questions that concern us here are the following. What was it like being a child in Brisbane in the early twentieth century? What was it like being a boy at school? In what ways was boyhood experienced? What about being a teenager? What particular form does mateship and male bonding take in *Johnno*? What role do girls play, if any, in the novel? What role do parents' expectations play in their children's lives? In what way are their expectations dependent on the places they come from? On their culture, taking into account their origin but also their level of education, social class and values? Becoming a man or growing up in Australia meant reaching an answer or synthesizing in one way or another, for better or for worse, all these questions.

The origin of the novel is the drowning of Malouf's friend, John Milliner, in 1962. The novel is an elegy that rescues his friend from oblivion and sublimates their friendship in the purer medium of fiction. This achievement was not an easy one. Malouf had dedicated several poems to his friend. The first one was "The Judas Touch", and it bore the dedication "for John Milliner: drowned February 1962". A feeling of guilt pervades the voice persona, which is most evident in the last stanza:

> Your good friends busy meanwhile
>
> establishing elsewhere
>
> all that we have in common:
>
> the judas touch – and a talent
>
> for holding our breaths.[5]

Whereas the sense of betrayal and the feeling of unease between the two friends will persist in the novel, *Johnno* succeeds in bringing about a catharsis that will put an end to the state of mourning and reconcile the poetic persona with the memory of his friend.

The task of finding the right voice for his fiction was a slow and arduous one, as proven by the number of existing drafts of the novel.[6] In an interview with Ray Willbanks, Malouf points

---

[5] The poem is reprinted in its entirety in *Imagined Lives* (Nielsen 14). Nielsen elaborates on the poems that Malouf dedicated to John Milliner before writing *Johnno* on pp. 14-15, most explicitly in "Birthday Poem, At Thirty:" 'Having survived/ the several deaths (not all/ my own) I've walked away from…', and "With the Earlier Deaths:" 'You were always my age/ John. I'll soon be forty, life begins. You paid the price/ and keep your precious youth, *our* youth.'

[6] In the Fryer Library at Queensland University in the summer of 2014, I had the opportunity to see the two typescript drafts of *Johnno* they hold, one heavily reworked by handwriting and the other one with the important change of "Johnny" to "Johnno" in the manuscript. There are earlier

out that it was a matter of finding the right tone. He finally found it in poems he had written about particular past experiences from childhood, and the example he gives is "The Year of the Foxes", a sinister and sombre poem where the poetic persona, a child in Brisbane, recounts his experience of how his mother decided to make a business out of selling fox-furs. He recollects the profound impression that "the foxes, row upon row, thin-nosed, prick-eared, dead" hung around the house made on his highly impressionable imagination: "a fox that on her arm played dead"; "I dreamed the dangerous spark/ of her eyes"; "at night hearing their cold cry"; in the background, the experience of the war and the hardships of poverty that ensued provide the general atmosphere of the poem: "Brisbane ladies, rather the worse for wars" (Malouf 219-221). We could say that the poem is about a child translating the hardships of war and his personal experience into a symbolic language he can understand, which is the way myth works.

Malouf summarizes how he came to write *Johnno* in the following words:

> I tried to write many times what eventually became *Johnno*. You know, it's that first novel that you write out of some quite painful, particularly autobiographical experience you need to deal with and I could never find the tone for doing it. It was always all wrong. It was only really when I looked at poems I had written, a poem like "The Year of the Foxes" which is a straightforward autobiographical poem that I realized that if I went to the tone of the poem that I'd written some ten years before and simply picked that up and wrote the novel using that, there would be no problem and there was no problem and I could write the novel from beginning to end because all I had to do was hit the tone I had hit years ago. It takes you a really long time to learn something. (Willbanks 17)

---

versions of *Johnno* in the National Library of Australia. Having seen the manuscripts of the other novels, it seems to me the only novel by Malouf that has needed so much elaboration.

We have just said that *Johnno* could be read as a *Bildungsroman* but that this statement requires some qualification. A *Bildungsroman* is a novel that covers the formation years or coming-of-age of its main character, culminating either in his socialization or his literal or symbolic death. In the latter case, there is some debate as to whether the story would be a *Bildung*-story proper, because it would not be a story of formation but of destruction. But the definition has the advantage of covering both the classical *Bildungsroman* and its counterpart. It also has a clear advantage for us, because it covers the destiny of the two main characters in *Johnno:* Dante, the narrator, whom the story of *Johnno* will turn into a writer, and Johnno, the title character, who does not succeed at integrating himself into society and brings about his own destruction at the end of the novel, thus providing the material of the story. On the one hand, if we believe that the main character of the story is Dante, we can read *Johnno* as a classic *Bildungsroman*. Don Randall reads it in this way: "Dante's central presence strongly suggests that *Johnno* is a specific type of *Bildungsroman*, and not at all an uncommon type." (31) On the other hand, if the novel tells the story of Johnno, then it cannot be read as a classic *Bildungsroman,* rather the contrary. The former possibility is based on the assumption that Malouf is Dante and Johnno stands for his friend John Milliner, but the latter interpretation gains strength when we consider that Malouf identifies himself with Johnno, and not Dante: "The book is read a great deal in schools in Australia and on occasion when I am at a school I am asked if it is an autobiographical novel. I usually like to say, 'Well, if you mean am I the Johnno, character, yes.'" (Willbanks 14)

My thesis is that the postcolonial context from which Malouf is writing provides him with a privileged view of the complexities of socialisation and, therefore, a more comprehensive account of the *Bildungsroman.*

I build my definition of the *Bildungsroman* on Franco Moretti's definition in his book *The Way of the World.* Moretti makes a broad distinction between Goethe's novel *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship*, which defined the genre of the *Bildungsroman*, and its French and English versions. Here, our major distinction between the classic *Bildungsroman* and its opposite encompasses the

German and English traditions, on the one hand, and the French and Russian traditions, on the other. In the German *Bildungsroman,* the character matures: he undergoes both a psychological and moral growth, a spiritual transformation that allows him to accomplish successful socialisation, as for example in *Wilhelm Meister*'s story. In the English version, the process of formation concludes either in marriage and happiness, for example in Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice,* or in a restatement of social class stability, for example in the works of Dickens. In contrast, the characters in the French *Bildungsroman* rarely accomplish their social or artistic ambitions, for example in Stendhal's *The Red and the Black* or Balzac's *Lost Illusions*. The Russian *Bildungsroman* is a darker version of the French. It is worth mentioning that Johnno is an avid reader of Russian literature. He lends Lermontov's classic *A Hero of Our Times* to the only girl he falls in love with that we know of, Binkie: "It was Lermontov's *A Hero of Our Times*. He had also sent her on other occasions Tolstoi's *Resurrection*, Goethe's *Elective Affinities*…" (96). Johnno also reads Dostoyevsky and identifies with some of his characters: "He had recently been burying himself in the Russia of Dostoyevsky, and had come more and more, with his shaggy head and big-boned, ungainly gestures, to resemble Rogozin of *The Idiot,* giving way when he was drunk (after two beers, that is) to savage rages." (Moretti, 84-85)

Even if there is some irony in Malouf's early comment, where he identified himself with Johnno when asked if the novel was autobiographic, it must be noted that Johnno is the character that reads the most throughout the book. Apart from the books already mentioned, Dante tells us that he also reads the following: "Schopenhauer, Wittgenstein, Bonhöffer, Sartre – not to mention the novelists old and new, from Madame de Lafayette to Musil and Kazantzakis." Johnno devours books, and never keeps them. "He never, so far as I knew," Dante continues, "*kept* a book (as objects he despised them, they were just receptacles to be emptied of their contents and thrown away)" (107). All these European philosophers and novelists influence Johnno, but Dante has his own European influences as well. Nevertheless, his choices are less impressive, and the pace of his reading is calmer and more sober. Johnno always seems to be on the move to something else,

something new – Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Wittgenstein! When Dante was a child, his mother and the housemaid "would take it in turns to read aloud from the old-fashioned novels they liked… *John Halifax, Gentleman, The Channings, David Copperfield, These Old Shades*" (35). He had his own favourites as well: Alexander Dumas: "I was happiest at home under the tentflaps, reading my favourite Dumas" (20), and Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy*. It is Johnno who lends Dante *The Birth of Tragedy*, and this is what he thinks: "In fact it had excited me enormously, and I had thought, reading between the lines, that I could see why he had given it to me, what it was he wanted me to see" (59). At university, they both study in the same Faculty. We are not told exactly what, but we can infer that Dante takes a degree in English and Johnno in Geography or Geology. Johnno's first serious job was as a "copper miner in Congo" in Africa, and the last one "on an oil survey, out on the Condamine" (145). Before going to England, Dante has different jobs, first as a "B.P. statistics clerk" (108) and, then, in a college, coaching "failed students in English, Latin, and what I could remember (or swot up overnight) of my pure maths" (109). Once there, he starts teaching at different schools, finally settling in one in the north of England (127) – we know that Malouf himself taught in England more or less at the same period and in the same place the narrator of *Johnno* did.[7] Dante's relationship with literature, like his creator's, is a lifelong one.

We can see that, even if there was a distance of 10,000 miles between Europe and Australia, and Johnno and Dante were living in a small little village with a population of a few thousand, they were deeply influenced by the same intellectuals and were brewing the same ideals, however bohemian and eccentric, that could shape the mind and inflate the imagination of teenagers and young adults living in Paris or London. Dante and Johnno share their passion for literature. The

[7] Malouf taught at St Anselm's College in Birkenhead from 1963 to 1968. (Indyk, vii) We can gather from the novel that Dante spends one year with Johnno before going to England, where he teaches for three years. When he goes back to Brisbane, Dante says: "I was exactly where I had been four years ago." (144)

difference between them is that Dante is quieter and more stable, he has his feet on the ground and is more sensible than Johnno. In contrast, Johnno likes action and he is passionate and impulsive. Consequently, he is sensitive and as a result he never quite lets go of the child within himself. That is the reason why he pretends to be Dostoyevsky's Rogozin or asks Dante to play a part in his delirious fantasies. For example, when visiting the brothels in Brisbane, Johnno would provoke an argument, take the situation to the limit and, then, urge Dante to run alleging that the police were after them:

> "For God's sake", he'd yell as I dawdled behind, "for God's sake, Dante, what are you doing? The police are coming. Do you want us to get caught?" I would force myself into a half-hearted trot. And when I slowed again to a little more than a fast walk he would lose his head completely: "You bastard, you fucking shit! You want us to get caught. They will be here any minute, I tell you. I can hear the siren!"
>
> But I couldn't make myself run any more. It was too silly. And the game was over anyway. The houses had got to know us… (81)

These ideal characters and the places they inhabit – the lives of Edward and Charlotte in Weimar in Goethe's *Elective Affinities*, David Copperfield and John Halifax in England, etc. – influence Johnno and Dante as to what they can expect of life, feeding their need for adventure and their high expectations of Europe, enlarging the negative image they have of Brisbane, and the most important decisions they are going to make in life.

In spite of their differences, Johnno and Dante share a common core of interests. What differentiates them is their stance towards life, their attitude. But they complement each other. Malouf himself admits that they embody two opposite drives that coexist within himself. Some people are more extroverted and goal directed, while others are more cyclical and receptive. Sometimes these two trends coincide within the same person at different stages of their lives or simply in different situations. Malouf defines this tension not only as opposite ways of being in the world, but more specifically as a driving force and creative junction in his writings. It is a

principle that we can certainly see at work in the following main "couples" in Malouf's novels: between Johnno and Dante in *Johnno,* between Phil and Frank Harland in *Harland's Half Acre*, between Digger and Vic in *The Great World* and, finally, between Achiles and Priam in *Ransom.* Similar to Dante, Digger and to a greater extent Phil play the role of witnesses of the story they are telling, even if they are also actors in it. But they mainly provide order and structure to the story, they are not the driving force and generative principle behind it – rather, it is through their eyes that we see everything going back to normal. They are the witnesses to the main story.

When talking about Johnno and Dante, this is how Malouf explains this polarisation of forces at work in the writing process of his novels:

> The powerful attraction and rejection between these two characters is a way of working out my own swings between a kind of recklessness and anarchy and a wish to be centered and not to move. 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. (Willbanks 14)

This double bind, these contradictory forces coexisting within the same person constitute a hybrid way of embodying and living masculinity. Even if withdrawal and contemplation are passive attitudes towards events, Malouf is careful to choose the right words so as not to make his more passive and contemplative self - the one that Dante, Phil, Digger and Priam embody in his novels - coextensive with traditionally feminine traits of passivity, submission, object-position, etc. Malouf speaks of a "wish to be centered and not to move", a wish for stability, a desire to keep one's feet on the ground and act sensibly and not irrationally, as I was pointing out before. And these are typically manly, masculine traits.

In an article on literary metaphors for masculinity, "The Male Body and Literary Metaphors of Masculinity", Arthur Flannigan-Saint-Aubin convincingly critiques the primacies of phallic sexuality and phallic symbols that have come to define patriarchy, especially in Western countries. He proposes instead a more global imaginary for sexuality centred on the totality of the male body,

and to begin with this decentring he proposes a sexuality and a symbology based on the testicles. This can be seen in expressions like "to have the balls to do something" and "to egg someone on", meaning to have the courage to do something and to encourage someone to do something, respectively. The testicles are where spermatozoa are produced, and the eggs are also the female reproductive cells. Having the commonality of these reproductive organs in mind, and being careful not to underestimate the biological differences between men and women and the different biological cycles and aging symptoms they go through, such as the period in women and the male climacteric, Flannigan-Saint-Aubin defines both the phallic and what he calls the testeric forms of masculinity, roughly equivalent to the clitoric and vaginal forms of femininity,[8] in both positive and negative terms.

On the one hand, this is how Flannigan-Saint-Aubin defines the positive and the negative traits of the phallic mode:

> To be phallic in the positive sense is, for example, to be penetrating: inquisitive, persistent, steady, objective, courageous, discriminating, dominant. To be phallic in the negative sense is, for example, to be intrusive: violent, unyielding, discriminatory, exploitive, domineering. (248)

On the other hand, he labels as "testicular" the positive traits of the testicular mode, and as "testerical" the negative traits. He builds his discourse on Haddon's *Body Metaphors: Releasing god-feminine in all of us*: "The positive encompasses what she labels wholesome and the negative what she labels as exaggerated and atrophied." He defines the testicular mode quoting Haddon, as "characterized by sourcefulness, resourcefulness" and relating to "staying power, patience, steadiness, steadfastness, abiding presence, and providing of an undergirding, supportive base." (250) He adds the following adjectives to the list: "nurturing, incubating, containing, and

[8] This transposition as well as the examples here are mine, C.S.

protecting", and the following qualities: "patience, stability, and endurance." Finally, Flannigan-Saint-Aubin defines the negative testicular mode or testerical mode as follows:

> For just as one might exaggerate the positive phallic traits, one might do the same with the nonphallic: Staying power and steadfastness might become stubbornness or intractability and might lead to holding on when letting go would be preferable; incubation might become, in an exaggerated state, stagnation. The testerical masculine then is characterized by testiness and all that being testy implies: petulant, fretful, insolent, temperamental, morose, and so forth. It is characterized also by lack of direction and inertia. (250)

If we bear in mind that, traditionally, the phallic definition has been associated with masculinity and the testerical definition with women, the detachment of particular traits from general definitions of femininity and masculinity that Flannigan-Saint-Aubin carries out will help us to get rid of stereotypical representations of men and women within Western society. We will be freer then to venture into more plastic and pliable definitions of individual persons as who they are and their personal and individual attributes, bearing in mind that these may sometimes come to define them, but that most of them change depending on the situation, over time, or may appear intermittently or recurrently.

This is precisely one of the accomplishments of *Johnno.* On the one hand, it is true that general phallic and testicular modes apply to most male couples in fiction. By way of example, Flannigan-Saint-Aubin precisely mentions Achilles and Patroclus, who are the main characters, together with Priamus, of Malouf's last novel *Ransom*, in his reimagining of the death of Achilles in *The Illiad*. On the other hand, these general modes are constantly reworked on in Malouf's novels and, particularly, in *Johnno*. These modes being explicitly problematized, new forms of masculinity not tied to biological sex or normative heterosexuality are reconfigured to a liberating degree. This destabilisation and its transformative power is at the core of Malouf's novel. Before analysing the novel from the point of view of gender and the *Bildungsroman*, I would like to provide the reader

with a couple of clear and telling examples of how *Johnno* at once exemplifies and destabilises the dual gender forms we have just described and, therefore, questions the normality, the matter of course of normative heterosexuality.

1. In the first sentence of the first chapter, Johnno is described as a "madcap" (13). Dante recalls how often his friend was expelled from class, and how he used to make faces on the other side of the door glass: "Johnno, his nose flattened against the pane, his eyes rolling, gives a good imitation of a fish in a tank" (13), while the teacher was trying to get his students to focus on the lesson, or meander up and down the hall and whistle, until the teacher would tell him to come into class again and ask him to behave. In class, he is a source of continuous and offensive turmoil, and spends the time whistling, making "noises that he can produce at will, from every part of his anatomy, stentorian belches and burps, farting sounds from the armpit, or real farts either wheezily protracted or released in a staccato series, short sharp punctuations of a sleepy afternoon" (14), and disrupting the class in any imaginable way.

The lively and humorous way in which Malouf narrates Johnno's misbehaviour arouses sympathy and understanding towards the rogueries of a child that probably simply pretends to attract the teacher's attention and at the same time to be accepted and respected by his peers. After all, this is the most common form of bonding and male affirmation among teenagers. Girls would rarely fart in class, nor act dirty in front of their peers as a form of bonding. Normally, they will act funny or laugh at their peers' jokes, fight with another girl for a boy, or succumb to a tantrum if taken to the limit. They also cry if they are hurt, but as the saying goes, boys do not cry. Boys affirm their masculinity being dirty, insolent, mean, insensitive and reckless. There was nothing that Johnno would not do: "He would do *anything*." (15) He is described as capable of transgressing the most fundamental cultural conventions and taboos:

> Johnno cared for nothing and nobody. No crime was beyond him. . . . It was generally agreed he would have slept with his sister if he'd had one. We were

> appalled and delighted by him. He gave our class, which was otherwise noted only for its high standards of scholarship, a dash of criminal distinction (16).

He was followed by a group of youngsters he called "The Boys", (47) who imitated his wrongdoings, wanted to look like him and cheered when he misbehaved: "the gang of slavish and dim-witted followers who repeated his wisecracks, wore their hair with the same gangster parting, and greeted his every gesture with boisterous guffaws," (16) but Dante could perceive in Johnno a feeling of contempt towards those boys: "Johnno took their loyalty for granted and treated them unmercifully", and even anger: "I think now that he hated them." (17)

Everything changes when, to everybody's surprise, Johnno passes his Junior exams and turns into a mature, swot student. "Even Soapy had to accept, reluctantly, that Johnno's interest in geology was genuine after all and that he was making fair to be his star pupil." (46) His complexion also changes. He is no longer the skinny, big-headed, all limbs boy, wearing neatly parted long hair he used to be. He had turned, suddenly, "into a sporting type", who "could be seen most dinner-hours in singlet and spiked shoes jogging round the sodden oval, or doing press-ups on the grass;" (46) "he had ceased to be an ugly duckling, all arms and legs, with a head too big for his body, and had developed, as if to match his aspirations, the long hard lines of an athlete." (47) In short, Johnno's character changes from phallic to testicular. The boys who used to accompany him everywhere vanish and he finally seems to mature: "Free at last of their expectations, Johnno had simply settled and become himself", which proves the strong influence others have on us. What's more, Johnno becomes "predictable": "Was he about to settle, after all, for the *predictable*?", Dante asks himself; that is, he becomes a reliable, stable, solid and sensitive person, in other words, a testicular character: "I had to admit with something like panic that he might even be as *sensitive*, in his own way, as myself!" (48)[9]

[9] My emphasis, C.S.

Shocked, his classmates meanly try every now and then to bring to light Johnno's old self, but Johnno simply looks pained and red-faced. At this point, even Dante asks himself: "If Johnno was not Johnno where did any of us stand?" (47) And, shortly after, he reflects on the sense of self and identity Johnno had helped him establish. In a world where Johnno was not Johnno and identity was established by means of binary opposites and constant categorisation, how could one be sure about one's identity, people's word and values and, beyond that, about the permanence of things? In a society in which the tendency and habit of categorising everything provides security and peace of mind, but also where these same categories often become so rigid to the point of trapping people in them instead of serving their needs, Johnno's change represented a menace at the same time that it provided Dante with food for thought, fuelling his growing scepticism. Dante admits that Johnno had served him as a negative marker when his mother referred to his friend as "bad company". Johnno had been labelled as bad and made so much the worse because that was what was expected of him. This is what the impulse to categorise and define oneself by means of binary opposites can do to people. Dante even admits to a side of hypocrisy in his being good, which means that, like all things in life, nothing is neatly black or white:

> I was utterly bewildered. Ever since those days, long ago at Scarborough, when Johnno had been identified for me as "bad company", I had used him as a marker. His wildness had been a powerful warning to me in those carrot-chewing days when I thought bad habits meant not getting your homework done as soon as you got in from school, and lately it had come to seem a marvellously liberating alternative to my own wishy-washy and hypocritical niceness. Now all that was changed. I didn't know where I was. What made me most resentful, I think, was his refusal to stay still. 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. I had to admit with something like panic that he might even be as sensitive, in his

> own way, as myself! I began to think if Johnno's old daring hadn't been an atonement for *our* cowardice; an attempt to shame us out of timidity. Everything I had ever seen of him in these last years begun to shift and change its ground. Maybe, after all, it was Johnno who was the deep one. (48)

Whenever there is a binary opposite at play, things are always a bit more complex than they seem at first sight. Johnno was a bad influence, and there was nothing more terrifying than the thought of being bullied by him. He was feared but also, paradoxically, since he was remorseless when challenging authority and unmerciful when bullying his colleagues, he was greatly admired. He held a symbolic power against authority, that is, he was the phallic character at school par excellence, no one could compete with him: brave, always ready for action, reckless, outgoing, confronting, etc. He was a hero, someone his peers looked up to, someone they would have wanted to be like if they had had the courage. As Dante says, perhaps "Johnno's old daring had been an atonement for *our* cowardice". If only they had been braver and less hypocritical, Johnno would not have been one of a kind. Johnno is compared to Marlowe's Tamburlaine and Al Capone (47), and the first time Dante is invited over to Johnno's house, he is eager to prove to Johnno that he "really was on the side of disorder and was ready, behind a show of middle class politeness, to defect," (40) which means that Dante is not a pure testeric character. Binary opposites tend to converge at some point - that is the reason why it is said that they form a system. They all wanted to be like Johnno and hold the symbolic phallus themselves because this meant being feared and respected but, since they feared him and could not compete, Johnno was also, paradoxically, despised, vilified and stigmatized.

2. The testerical characters appear in *Johnno* in a positive light that affirms a different form of masculinity, an alternative to the phallic, normative one in patriarchal societies. The testerical character is not presented as inferior and subservient to the phallic character. It is portrayed instead as a non-phallic affirmative form of masculinity. What is remarkable is that even if the friendship between Johnno and Dante is tinted with feelings of distrust, hostility, or antipathy, or even when

Johnno and Dante portrayed as tired of each other, and this in spite of their closeness, there is never a hint of homophobia anywhere in the novel. On the contrary, the reader empathizes and becomes fond of them. Malouf succeeds in representing a strong form of male bonding and mateship that may even translate into homosexuality in a positive light. This is a major achievement when we consider that male identity in patriarchal societies is achieved by warding off testicular forms of masculinity - which are typically labelled as feminine and, thus, become a rejection of the feminine *tout court*) – and homosexuality, that is, through sexism and homophobia.

However, one thing is that Johnno and Dante feel reassured in their masculinities, and another how they live their sexuality and the possibilities their sexuality may offer them. There is controversy among critics as to whether Johnno and Dante are bisexual or homosexual in the novel. It is a thorny issue, but I think that everything falls into place when we include the powerful influence of sexual politics into the equation, that is, the requirement that patriarchal societies overtly impose on their citizens, demanding that they clearly present themselves as either male or female, and to act accordingly, so that no one can have any doubts about their sexual orientation and gender, and can choose a sexual partner without ambiguity.

This debate rests on two pieces of evidence from the novel. The first one takes place before Dante leaves Brisbane and follows Johnno. He dates several girls, he even admits that "several times I thought I was in love", and mentions, casually, that "once, not so briefly, with a boy from Sarina." (109) The other one takes place in Paris, when there is a moment when homosexuality seems to be a given between them Dante and Johnno. But we do not know whether this has translated into sporadic sex between them – what we know is that it has not translated into any sort of commitment. We find out because, being short of money, Johnno proposes to go to Sweden and "launch" Dante as a "male tart". The reader could take it as a joke, but the serious dispute that follows makes it clear that what Dante finds offensive is not that his friend is implying that he is homosexual, but that he wants to prostitute him.

This is the scene:

"Johnno", I said firmly, "you'd better stop getting all worked up about it. We're not going."

"What do you mean?" He looked hurt.

"I mean," I said, "that without wanting to be spoil-sport or anything, I'm not interested. If you want to launch someone, launch yourself!"

"But I'm fair!"

"Well, go to Spain then."

He looked uncomprehending. "But f' Christ sake, Dante, in Spain everyone's *poor*!" (121)

This passage allows multiple interpretations. Are Dante and Johnno in a casual relationship because, having had such a dissolute and active sexual life, Dante does not believe Johnno capable of entering into a committed, serious relationship? Or is Johnno so cold-hearted, so insensitive, and so masculine, that it does not bother him to prostitute Dante? What if he is just making fun of his friend and the whole scene is a farce?

Critics have interpreted these passages as proof that homosexuality plays a key thematic and structuring role in the novel. On the one hand, in his book *David Malouf*, published in 1993, Ivor Indyk talks about a "homosexual romance" (7) between the two characters that never quite gets out of the closet due to "the cluttered social world of Brisbane, which is felt as so constricting by both Dante and Johnno." (6) On the other hand, in his study of David Malouf published in 1996, *Imagined Lives*, Philip Nielsen straightforwardly defines Johnno and Dante as bisexual: "Both characters are sufficiently bisexual for a sexual relationship between them to develop; both have had homosexual experiences, as well as the heterosexual relationships we hear about." (34) In line with Nielsen, Don Randall, in his book entitled *David Malouf*, published in 2007, recalls that Malouf has objected to a reading of *Johnno* as a gay novel in disguise and subscribes to the interpretation of Dante and Johnno's sexuality as bisexual when saying that "internal evidence shows that homosexual desire has an avowed place within the text." (32)

All these labels answer to a compulsion to categorise in order to fix the sexual identity of Johnno and Dante into familiar and easily recognisable identities. But I do not think it is possible to enclose them in these oppositional binaries. Malouf suggests more than he says about gender and sex in *Johnno*. These motives do not aim at establishing or describing a state of affairs: they are driving impulses that will always leave the book open to new interpretations.

Regarding my own reading in the context of the representation of men and masculinities in *Johnno,* I feel closer to Ivor Indyk's interpretation of the sexual lives of Johnno and Dante when we consider the novel in the light of the politics of gender I outlined above. That is, I agree that *Johnno* can be read as a homosexual romance, even if we will have to qualify this statement so that it can accommodate Malouf's disagreement with it. However, let it be clear that my purpose is not to settle the dispute, but to try to better understand the way *Johnno* calls into question and deconstructs patriarchy and the conventional norms of the time about gender and sexuality.

To begin with, sexual identity is a concept that needs some qualification. In the same way that normative constructions of gender might blind us to richer and non-dualistic possibilities if we do not limit gender to male and female, but consider a wider spectra of possibilities, if we get rid of prejudices that stem from normative, heterosexual and exclusively genital sex there appear a wider spectra of possibilities which can give way to sexual pleasure and intimacy.

In *Epistemology of the Closet*, Eve Sedgwick defines this range of possibilities in the following terms:

> To some people, the nimbus of "the sexual" seems scarcely to extend beyond the boundaries of discrete genital acts; to others, it enfolds them loosely or floats virtually free of them; many people have their richest mental/ emotional involvement with sexual acts they don't do, or even don't *want* to do (qtd. in Gutterman 226).

How do Johnno and Dante seek sexual pleasure? Who are their partners? When commenting on Johnno and Dante's escapades to the brothels, Nielsen points out that Johnno

had made several attempts to gain "greater intimacy" with Dante. If we take into account what will follow – that is, Johnno's last letter at the end of the novel, in which he tells Dante "I've loved you", and some confession Johnno had made while drunk in one of their outings: "You know Dante, when we were at school, I used to think of you as the most *exotic* creature – so strange and untouchable. Like a foreign prince" 154 – I believe we can claim that Johnno is the first of the two who more or less knowingly falls in love, and his choice is Dante. The evidence Nielsen provides can be used for our argument here:[10]

> But it is crucial to recognize that Johnno also initiates many other, more direct and less dangerous moves towards greater intimacy, which Dante also either rejects or responds to inadequately or coolly. For example, up to this point in the novel, there is Johnno's "cheerful… claiming" of Dante on their first day at Grammar (18), Johnno's invitation to Dante to come over to his house during the holidays (40), Johnno's giving Dante *The Birth of Tragedy* to read (59), and the first phone call asking Dante to meet him in town. (67) (Nielsen 16)

Nielsen argues that Dante remains unresponsive because of the compulsory sexual politics of Brisbane at the time, arguing that Dante's contradictory feelings towards and away from Johnno respond to the nature/culture conflict within him: his natural impulses tell him to get close to Johnno, whereas cultural conventions and norms make him feel this pull as illicit and dangerous. (16-17) For example, when Johnno invites him over to his house, Dante accepts but he lets "three weeks go by, not to appear eager" (40)

Even if they are too young for it, Johnno soon drags Dante to frequenting bars where they would never be asked their age in order to get in. The act of going out to drink at night marks the first step towards manhood, and the risk of doing it before they are the legal age increases the bonds and the level of intimacy between them. They have left boyhood behind and taken the first

[10] Nielsen uses the same edition as I do, so I am just transcribing the number pages he provides.

steps towards manhood together. The bars they frequent are still emblematic of Brisbane, and teenagers today who have read *Johnno* at school must necessarily feel they are following the steps of Johnno and Dante into adulthood – *Johnno* has been compulsory reading at Australian schools for years. Johnno and Dante are still alive in the bars, streets, and parks and almost in every corner of Brisbane, because they are alive in the minds of their readers. Intentionally or unintentionally, in *Johnno,* Malouf created a mythology of his childhood years in Brisbane that has served several generations of teenagers as a Southern Star that tells them the path they have to follow to find their true selves regardless of social conventions about their sexuality and genders.[11]

These bars retain typical features of the idiosyncratic, exotic, typically postcolonial and beautiful architecture of the place, for example the Prince Consort Hotel, today a backpacker's lodging place, the Criterion and the glamorous Grand Central:

> After that [the first time Johnno called asking Dante to meet him at the Criterion] he rang regularly, and we began to spend Friday nights together in one of the three or four city pubs where they never asked your age. One of them was always the Criterion. Others were the Lands Office in George Street, the Prince Consort in the Valley, a big old-fashioned pub with two cast-iron balconies, and best of all, the Grand Central (69-70).[12]

---

[11] I am using gender in the plural now to emphasize the possibilities beyond the male-female dualism.

[12] On occasion of Malouf's eightieth birthday on March 20th 2014, the Museum of Brisbane organized an exhibit to commemorate his work. One of the highlights was an app that worked as a route of Brisbane following Malouf's life and literary landmarks in the city. The Criterion still retains its old magic and takes you back to some of the scenes in *Johnno*. The Grand Central, as Malouf tells us in the novel, was soon "replaced by a shopping arcade." (127)

Soon after that they begin frequenting the Greek Club on most Friday nights, where Johnno's "conspiratorial phase" begins. (74) I suggest that this phase is Johnno's own reaction to his friend's unresponsiveness to his attempts to achieve greater intimacy. After all, being in love with Dante, and sensing that Dante was drawn towards and at the same time away from him, Johnno must have perceived the situation as excruciatingly unfair.

Johnno's "conspiratorial phase" consists in imagining that everything: "wars, depression, revolutions, the lot" is the oeuvre of a big and anonymous "Organization" (75), and that the people behind it are not precisely political, religious or intellectual leaders of the world – "And the joke is, even the top people in the Masons, the Grand Masters or whatever they are called, even the Pope doesn't know!" (76) – but the abject of society:

> "But that's not the whole thing, even yet. It gets better and better. Because the Big Ones, the ones who really matter, the ones who are pulling the strings and making it all happen – well, what's so enormous is that they aren't big people at all, or not the sort of people you'd *know* were big, with their names in history books or in the newspapers. They're the most inconspicuous people in the world. People you wouldn't tumble to in a million years. Like all those men at the Public Library, f'r instance. Who'd suspect one of them? Or Stavros there." Johnno jerks his head towards him, sleeping, or pretending to sleep, with his arms folded on the bar. "It's perfect, don't you see? It's – " he searches for the word, "it's Copernican! Once you've been made to realize it everything suddenly makes sense." (77)

From our point of view, we can argue that Johnno's conspiratorial phase is actually a metafictional account of cultural criticism. Imagining that it is the abject of society who actually hold the key to the functioning of things is another way of saying that what is normative and normal can only be established by means of a violent exclusion of the binary opposites that do not conform to the normative and normal, in this case homosexuality and male intimacy. Since what is considered the normal functioning of society depends on this containment and its existence, as

Johnno tells Dante society at large is in the hands of a big Organisation consisting of the abject of society who, unlike him, unquestioningly perpetuate an state of affairs instead of revolting against it: the outcast of society including homosexuals, Jews, Aborigines, the lower classes, etc. Johnno's analysis enlightens us as to the consequences of the way society has of structuring itself, at the same time that it explains Johnno's miserliness and presciently informs us about his fate. As always, when Dante reacts with apathy and shows no interest in Johnno's story - he simply shrugs his shoulders – Johnno insists: "But it's the only thing that would explain it all. . . The unfairness of things, the absurdity." (77)

The disproportionate dimensions of the "Organisation" Johnno imagines matches the dimensions of what he consciously or unconsciously is fighting against: the sexual politics of Brisbane, Queensland, Australia and Western society in general. Taking into account the asymmetry between the adversaries we could label Johnno as "a hero of our times".

Eventually, what Dante terms "conspiratorial phase" gives way to what I would call Johnno's "arsonist phase." It consists in metaphorically and literally setting fire to everything that has to do with patriarchy and religion, that is, the institutions from which the prevailing political and moral order Johnno wants to subvert stems. Johnno refuses to accept the situation and starts to feel the irrepressible need to act upon and fight the established order, and more particularly its political and religious institutions, the conventions and morality they have helped establish and maintain. Patriarchy is the system of values that defines man as opposed and superior to woman, and since it bases its first principle on this premise of opposition, it structures the totality of the social order on the base of hierarchical relations of power. Hence, in a patriarchal society, the basis of human relationships is not love but power. That is the reason why patriarchal societies inevitably lead to corruption and war.

Johnno takes place in a predominantly Catholic context. Dante, like Malouf,[13] has been raised as a Catholic, even if the other major religion in Australia, Protestantism, is also structured, like Catholicism and all monotheistic religions, around the same principles of hierarchy and power that characterize patriarchal societies.[14] When talking about his aunts, Dante comments "they never spoke if they could help it to known Protestants," (30) and in his grandmother's house there was "a Sacred Heart of Jesus over the bed, and on the shelves of the dressing-table a whole series of extravagant saints among artificial flowers." (32) It is worth mentioning that Dante's parents, sharing the same religion, could easily overcome their different cultural backgrounds, but they would not have been able to overcome their differences and marry so easily if one of them had been a Protestant, and this even if they had been born and raised in the same neighbourhood. For example, Dante's first girlfriend breaks up with him because he is a Catholic: "Then, suddenly, without warning, it was over. Rhoda's father disapproved of me, I was a Catholic." (93) Similarly, since they went to the same school, we can gather that Johnno was also a Catholic.

Why does Johnno rebel against patriarchy and religion in his arsonist phase? The religious discourse legitimizes the principle of patriarchy, which as we have just seen is based in its turn on the opposition between men and women, therefore defining all social relations as relations of power. Consequently, this discourse must represent women as less and as subservient to men. For example, in the myth of Adam and Eve, women are created a posteriori *for* men, so that they will have a companion. As a punishment for having eaten from the tree of knowledge, God tells Eve

---

[13] Malouf's family was Catholic, both on his father's side, who was of Lebanese origin, and on his mother's side, who was English. In what he has to say about Dante's family regarding religion, Malouf is probably highly autobiographical.

[14] While it is true that both historically and recently women are taking on a more important role in the Protestant Church (for example, a woman can become a bishop in some protestant factions), they have never fully had the same rights as men.

that she will give birth in pain from then on, so that after the Fall, the purpose of sexual intercourse is to procreate, not pleasure, the latter being strictly forbidden outside the sphere of marriage. As a result, homosexual intercourse or any other kind of sexual intimacy not aimed at reproduction is definitely deviant, unnatural and sinful. That is the reason why Christianity and patriarchy intensify misogynistic hate and homophobia. Regarding patriarchy, since the powerful hold the key to the law, they equal the values that benefit them with the good, therefore conceiving a legislation that portrays men as morally superior to women. But men still need women to secure an heir. Having labelled women not only as inferior but bad, that is, bad according to the values that they have established, they deem them promiscuous and lustful. Men then believe it acceptable to keep them under strict control to make sure that they provide them with a legitimate heir. In contrast, a man who has several mistresses outside of marriage is perceived as manly and successful.

This is the picture of what Johnno considers "the unfairness of things", "the absurdity." (77) Johnno can only indirectly criticise the Christian and patriarchal system of values we have just described because, like Dante, he is biased by the system. The hyperbolic imagining of a fabulous Organisation in the hands of the abject of society is a reaction against those values.

Consequently, Johnno's arsonist phase is, at bottom, a denouncement of the strict gender roles imposed by mainstream Australia. I believe that this is one of the great strengths of the novel regarding the deconstruction of normative sexuality and gender values. This arsonist phase has two stages. The first aims directly at the State and social conventions it helps instil, propagate and, when necessary, enforce by means of presenting as unnatural any kind of sexual intercourse not aimed at reproduction. Johnno's targets are his companions at school and the brothels in Brisbane. We could label it the metaphorical arsonist stage, because it amounts to making lewd comments to assert his masculinity and inhibit his peers at school, and later on leads to incendiary remarks he will make to wreak chaos in the brothels. The second stage takes place a bit later, just before Johnno leaves for the Congo in Africa, even if he does not tell Dante until years later. This time Johnno's rage is directed against the Brisbane churches: "four Methodist, one Congregational, one

Anglican, and one of some other nondescript nonconformist creed." It takes symbolic dimensions, because the original plan was to set fire to nine different Churches in the form of a cross spread out on the Brisbane map, one a day, but he could only manage to set seven on fire because the rain thwarted his plans. "The Catholics had escaped because the bastards always built in stone!" (136) We could call this phase the literal arsonist stage.

Johnno's education and the values he seeks to overturn must be put in the context of the Brisbane where he grew up and his particular family circumstances. It is also in this context that we should understand his character and the complexities of his sexuality.

The World Wars play an important role – they are always there in the background permeating the general atmosphere of the novel. Thus, reflecting on what life was like in Brisbane before and after the outbreak of World War II, Dante ponders:

> Was it the war, I wondered afterwards, or some change in me, that made everything in the years before I went to school seem different from the khaki and camouflage years that came after, when even the flowers we made out of plasticine were uniform grey, the result of a dozen colours that could not be replaced being patted and squeezed into a single colour that was like the dirt-rolls in your palm. Was it only the war that made things change? (22-23)

The war, in this case World War I is the explanation that is given to account for Johnno's character – he is described as "a war child", because his father had gone missing in World War I. This was the reason for his "wildness": "In the years when it really matters he had lacked the benefit of a restraining hand." (22) It is worth noting here that up until very recently war was exclusively a men's thing and that, in the last instance, it is the father who educates the child exerting violence.

It is in times of war that the principles of patriarchy, based on relations of power and opposition find their ultimate expression. The aim of war is to establish a relationship of power and dominance over the enemy or its outright annihilation. The soldier incarnates the ideal of

masculinity during a war: a man who does not go to war to defend his country is not a real man. It is a matter of honour.

If the brothels were the places where soldiers gathered, then, going to the brothels had to be a sign of manliness. Sex is linked to sexual virility, and a virile man is a fertile, strong man. In a patriarchal society, the positive value of virility must be carefully opposed to lust, to which so many women from Brisbane had been lost, including several of Dante and his sister's nannies. As he tells us, he could not understand "the sudden fall from grace (which was perfectly inexplicable to me) of several "big girls" at Scarborough who had once minded us for the day or taken us to the pictures" (30-31).

Johnno was known at school as being "experienced in sexual matters", which gave him "an aura of dangerous charm. Girls flustered at his approach." Supposedly, he had made an acquaintance with a "tart" and her protector in the South Coast, "sixty miles from staid, old-fashioned Brisbane" and he spent a weekend travelling together with them. Also, "two queers had offered to take him to Hong Kong" (55) but he refused. In Brisbane, all boys tried to sneak a peek when passing in front of the brothels of Albert Street, "but Johnno had actually been in." (56) He had been manly enough; in comparison the other schoolboys were sissies. Again, this voyeuristic pleasure is described as "unhealthy" when the gazing subjects are Brisbane's women:

> [The brothels] "exerted an unhealthy influence over the imagination of a good many of the city's most respectable young ladies, who liked to be driven past on their way home from the pictures, to marvel at the crowd of men round the doorway, and to catch, if they were lucky, a glimpse of one of "them" (78).

Johnno's reputation and confidence makes him seem like a Golden Boy, one of those "who had been marked for *success*", almost but not quite, because that "was a possibility he had already determined to reject." Already at school, Johnno could not avoid mocking malestream sexuality and the show the so-called Golden Boys put on, and he could succeed at it because he could manage its dimensions within the school precinct: "… he was brutally frank. 'I'm just here

for the sex,' he'd announce to stiff-shirted, black-tie brigade, 'what are you here for?' Or at Moss's dreamily, through ground teeth: Jesus! Just look at those tits!'"

Dante recapitulates, "His parody of the Golden Boys was reckless." (56) Johnno's ribaldry and the stories he tells about his experience in sexual matters affirm his sexual prowess and, therefore, his manliness, which places him above the rest, intimidating boys and girls alike. What's more, his ribaldry and his stories aim at arousing and inflating his peers' imagination. Metaphorically speaking, Johnno sets them on fire. They all wanted to know what was going on inside the brothels, in spite of their middle-class morality and religious values (or perhaps these just made their curiosity even more morbid).

Johnno and Dante start frequent the brothels that, as a result of World War II, begun to proliferate around Brisbane. Dante explains that after the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor, the war had broken into "our hemisphere" (26), recalling that "the Americans arrived in '42" (20). In the poem "The Year of the Foxes" we analysed at the beginning of this Chapter, the alliteration between the words "worse" and "war" refers to Brisbane women who went into prostitution, emphasizing the negative and baser nature of war: "Brisbane ladies, / rather the worse for war, drove up in taxis wearing/ a G.I. on their arm." (220) A G.I. armband identified a U.S. soldier.

As the city was crowded with American soldiers, the Grand Central opened a beer garden at the back "that was known as the Sex Pit, since it was the special preserve of Brisbane's most flamboyant tarts." (70) The contrast between the spectacle of the prostitutes, with long faces, bored, and polishing their nails and Johnno's excitement could not be more sardonic:

> "Just look at them," Johnno would hiss delightedly, "the whores."
>
> They sat with their legs crossed, looking bored, and one of them might take an emery stick from her handbag, snapping it shut with an audible click, and saw away at her nails.
>
> "Aren't they marvellous!" (70)

Johnno makes valid the principle that it is our paradoxes that really define who we are. On the one hand, his whole being strives to subvert the patriarchal establishment. On the other, the pressure of the patriarchal order he wishes to subvert is so big that he can only define himself in its own terms, that is emulating the figure of the macho man and womaniser. Likewise, the glamour of the prostitutes exists only in his imagination. Moreover, one can already see here that Johnno's situation is a tragic one. One thing is to mock the patriarchal values of malestream society at school and another to mock them outside in the streets and to face society at large. Johnno cannot cope with the dimensions of what his nature drives him to subvert, so that the role of macho man he wants to play is ridiculous. Masterfully, the overall effect is that of a parody of patriarchal values.

Soon the brothels stop being a novelty and the initial excitement volatizes, but Johnno tries to revive it introducing a new element of risk and effrontery. There is a turnabout of events that echoes an earlier episode that epitomizes man's violent and brutal nature and, hence, his reaffirmation in patriarchal societies. A "famous brawl" that had confronted Australian and American soldiers in the Grand Central, where there had been several dead ("… seven dead. Or three. Or five.") and was already part of "Brisbane's wartime legend." (70)[15] Johnno and Dante would go to a brothel and, after an informal and friendly chat with Madam, "she chiding him a little when he went too far, he smiling sheepishly," (79) he would go in with one of the girls, and Madam and Dante would be left on their own, with Madam trying to charm Dante with one of

[15] These brawls between soldiers are a common affair. In February 2002, while I was in Salt Lake City coinciding with the Winter Olympics, there was a similar brawl between the district armed forces of the city and the State reinforcements that had come from other parts of the USA. It happened in what was the only fashionable pub in the city (Salt Lake City has very few pubs and it is a very conservative and traditional place, due to the influence of the Mormons). Next to it, there was a huge window-shop, and I clearly remember a military man throwing another one against it. It was a formidable event.

the girls. Shortly, Johnno would have gathered quite a mob of girls around him. When Madam had heard enough to worry about it and go in, it was already too late.

This is one of the most commendable scenes of the novel, staging a cycle that expresses Johnno's eagerness and pleasure at getting involved with Dante in illicit and risky exploits, and Dante's proclivity to step back from them.

So, the Madam would go in and exclaim:

> "Now look here. What *is* all this?"
>
> The protests, recriminations, counter-recriminations, squeals, a full-scale shouting match with slaps, yells, little heel kicks, savage four letter expletives, and Johnno would be whispering at my elbow: "Get ready to run. They're going to call the police!" as with a last vicious stand at the door he would proclaim fiercely: "Get fucked, all youse!" and make off round the corner, with me breathlessly at his heels and the lights of Queen Street swimming dizzily ahead. "Faster!" Johnno would be hissing, "Faster! I can hear them!" Till we were both exhausted and had to pull up in the entrance to a shop.
>
> The police never did come, though Johnno swore he heard the car and would spring into a crouch every time there was a glare of headlamps in the street. And it dawned on me at last that the police, and the chase up Edward Street, like Johnno's drawn-out conversation with the Madam and his carefully calculated scene with the girls, were part of a private and powerfully exciting fantasy that left him panting and streaming with sweat, and which I could not share. The brothels suddenly lost their glamour for me. I became more and more unwilling to go." (81)

It is likely, as Nielsen has suggested, that Johnno provokes these situations so that he can strengthen his bonds with Dante and gain greater intimacy with his buddy. (15) Partaking in life and death situations strengthens ties between people. If you take somebody out for dinner, you will gain greater intimacy if the restaurant catches fire in the middle of the meal and you have a

narrow escape. But there is more to Johnno's fantasies. The kinds of things they get involved in are not simply risky or dangerous for their own sake. These are adventures that are only possible in a patriarchal society where women are seen as objects and objects of trade. As we have argued, going to the brothels is a way of affirming men's masculinity and manhood. But by metaphorically setting the place on fire, Johnno is letting his anger and frustration loose against the State and the social conventions that make him miserable. Hence, the joy he feels when they call the police and he can finally incarnate the role of the dangerous criminal that menaces to turn the whole world upside down – that is, the world of strictly dual gender codes.

The State is directly responsible for the maintenance and resilience of these conventions about gender and sexuality because it is by means of State institutions that these roles are most visibly and neatly established. When a child is born, he is immediately classified as boy or girl and his or her parents are going to educate their child according to its sex. Then, at school, children are taught what is expected of boys and girls, etc. The same thing is true in the domain of knowledge discourses financed by the State, such as Universities, and within the University, most prominently within medicine. It was within the medical discourse of the nineteenth century that the term "homosexuality" was no longer seen as a particular act that somebody could carry out sporadically, but as defining a person's identity, and labelled as depraved and sinful.

Finally, Johnno set fire to seven churches, at Christmas, one every day, carefully chosen so that if someone cared enough to try to find a pattern to catch the arsonist, he would see that the criminal act had been deliberately planned and that all the fires drew a huge cross all over Brisbane. The event was serious enough to come up in the papers.

> "Well, you can check the bloody papers," he said, "The Courier-Mail, you'll believe that I suppose. It was in the last weeks of December. I did my last one just before Christmas, at the Gap. I would have done nine altogether to make a cross, but the rain set in and I had to leave one whole arm off. (137)

The irony is that perhaps the rain was a sign for Johnno, a sign meaning that Brisbane would not give up its faith and values. When Johnno tells Dante the story, he asks him what he thinks of it. Dante recalls having heard about this: "No doubt I'd remember the fuss there'd been. A firebug! A maniac! Well, it was *him*." (136) But the story repeats itself. Johnno gets excited and wants Dante to participate in the excitement of his heretic act and the refusal of everything the Church stands for, but Dante fails to respond. He does not respond to the offer Johnno makes him to enter "some larger dimension" that would lead to another "existence".

Not knowing what is being offered to him, Dante simply turns Johnno's offer down:

> Somehow the excitement of it had made him blaze up for a moment like the old Johnno, something impish leaping clear of the heavy body that I had finished off with my failure to respond. I felt mean. As if I had cheated him of some larger dimension of his own improbable existence (137).

In his book *The Way of the World,* Franco Moretti has provided me with the main conceptual tools I would like to use to analyse the status of *Johnno* as a *Bildungsroman* and place it within its specific postcolonial context. These conceptual tools revolve around the following main four axes:

1. We began this chapter asking ourselves whether *Johnno* could be read as a *Bildungsroman*. As we have seen, it tells the story of Johnno and Dante from their early years until adulthood (the novel finishes when they are thirty), and the balance they try to find between being faithful to their nature and finding a place in the world: the concept of the *Bildungsroman* indicates a harmonious solution in "the conflict between the ideal of *self-determination* and the equally imperious demands of *socialisation*" (Moretti 15).

We have read this struggle in the light of the social demands and expectations of society regarding gender, sexual identity and the crises that nonconformity with mainstream society may bring about. Struggling to find themselves as men, Dante and Johnno will not be able to conform

to the ideal of manhood of the society in which they live: as successful, prosperous, heterosexual middle class men, married and with kids. This could become an issue in the novel in the first place because the society it portrays is itself in crisis and still in the process of finding its identity – what it means to be from Brisbane, Queensland and Australia is a recurrent theme throughout the book.

2. The *Bildungsroman* is a typically modern or, in other words, the paradigmatic novelistic form of modernity. The reason is the rise of the bourgeoisie and the new class mobility that the recently developed economic order brings about. Franco Moretti talks about the "collapse" (4) of status society. You do not necessarily have to die in the same social stratum where you have been born, that is, you do not have to mature into the same social class as your parents. Maturing now means something else entirely. You have to find your own place in the world.

The modern age starts to identify with the young, because the young symbolize that stage in which the future is still open and full of possibilities - as well as dangers - and life is lived to the fullest. Being young means being capable, sexually alluring, full of life and not yet laden with the symptoms of age and troubled by the shadow of death. The young are not yet fully socialised, and neither are they expected to be, and this allows them to enter and move between the different social strata. Becoming an adult stops the game. Faced with the new possibilities of the modern world, the young must make their place in society, which might be experienced as a chance at fulfilment or a source of anxiety. In any case, the young become restless. Modern man lives in an age not only characterised by mobility, but also by recklessness:

> 'A specific image of modernity': the image conveyed precisely by the 'youthful' attributes of mobility and inner restlessness. Modernity as a bewitching and risky process full of "great expectations" and "lost illusions." (Moretti 5)

In modernity, life becomes a continuous process of becoming and adapting oneself to a reality that is also in a continuous process of transformation.

Australia was a nation in the making at the beginning of the twentieth century, that is, a nation still trying to figure out its own national identity and what place it was going to occupy in

the world. Australia was living its own modernity back then – and still is. It is not surprising that it identified itself with the young, and it is in this context that *Johnno* portrays an important period of social transformation in the history of Australia.

3. The interdependence between finding oneself and finding a home. Actually, Moretti stresses that finding or becoming oneself means, specifically, finding a place one can call home and that feels like home. Failing in this quest equals death. And this was not a minor pursuit in an immigrant country.

Moretti puts it as follows, in a typically Heideggerian tone: "Time must be used to find a homeland. If this is not done, or one does not succeed, the result is a wasted life: aimless, meaningless. . . Outside the Whole, outside the world-as-homeland there is no life whatsoever." (19)

4. Finally, the incompatibility between modernity and maturity. An age that mirrors itself and has its model in youth can hardly reach a state characterized by predictability, permanence and certainties. At the end of the novel, Dante finds no certainties and no answers in the twice-told story of Johnno, which is also his own story, in spite of the deeper understanding he has achieved. When Dante thinks about his friendship with Johnno and considers that dreaming might be truer than vigil, that what did not happen but might have happened is as important as what did happen in his life, that is, that our dreams and aspirations might be more real than the dry facts of reality, Dante is praising the child's most valued faculty – imagination:

> For what else was his life [Johnno's] aiming at but some dimension in which the hundred possibilities a situation contains may be more significant than the occurrence of any one of them, and metaphor truer in the long run than mere fact. How many alternative fates, I asked myself, lurking there under the surface of things, is a man's life as we know it intended to violate? (165)

In the modern age a man continues seeing the world through a child's eyes regardless of his age. He might lose his innocence, his capacity for surprise, his curiosity and even his aspirations,

but he will never gain in knowledge and certainties about himself and his place in the world. The image of the modern man is a particular interpretation of youth and childhood, and he reflects himself in that image. As Dante realizes by the end of the novel back in Brisbane, after having spent four years in Europe: "Here, I knew, I would always be an aging child. I might grow old in Brisbane, but I would never grow up" (144). The paradigmatic image of masculinity in the modern age is a particular construction of youth, and man constructs his self-image in this ideal:

> Yes – 'maturity' is hardly compatible with 'modernity'. And contrariwise. Modern Western society has 'invented' youth, mirrored itself in it, chosen it as its most emblematic value – and for these very reasons has become less and less able to form a clear notion of 'maturity'. (Moretti 27)

Johnno starts with the death of Dante's father. Dante is "on study leave" in England when news reach him that his father has had a heart attack. When he arrives in Brisbane, his father has already passed away.[16]

The death of the father brings about a revision of the narrator's past. After all, fathers provide boys with the first model of manhood, they are their first referents as to how they should behave and act differently from women and girls. In the patriarchal society of Brisbane, this role was central in providing the narrator with a sense of identity regarding gender, sexuality, and his role in the world. Dante, like Malouf, only has a sister, so the death of the father means the disappearance of any older male referent in the family he can look up to. It also means that, his father having past on, he is now able to reconsider his relationship with him and his place in the world.

[16] Malouf was teaching at St Anselm's College in Birkenhead, England, when his father died in August 1964, and when he arrived in Brisbane his father had also already died. What follows is probably highly autobiographic, even if we should never confuse the narrative voice in *Johnno* with that of the author.

First and foremost, Dante revisions the image he has built of his father. At the opening of the novel, Dante is aware that, as a child, he grew up forging an image of his father that was a compromise between his father's peculiarities and his own character and self-image. He could not put the necessary distance between himself and his father to discriminate any "complexities" between them. But from an early age, Dante admits to having had an uncanny feeling towards his father – his father had a familiar air with an exotic touch:

> I had forced upon my father the character that fitted most easily with my image of myself; to have had to admit to any complexity in him would have compromised my own. I chose the facts about him that I needed: his one solid gold tooth that glowed when he laughed like a miraculous image in a southern monastery; his habit of crossing himself whenever he passed a church; his talent for walking on his hands along the beach at Scarborough, strutting about like some exotic bird, carrying his body through the air as if it were plumage, heavy, extraordinary. I found these images of him *comfortingly foreign*.[17] (5)

The reader infers that Dante's father is of Lebanese origin, and that his mother is English, as Malouf's. His parents are utterly different; they barely have anything in common. Dante's mother tries to instil into her children the sense of orderliness and organisation the she inherited "as the last of a big family in pre-war (that is, pre-1914) London". Dante contrasts his mother's English style with the "emotionalism of my father's people", most vivid in his memory of his father's funeral: "At the funeral, I remembered painfully, one of his sisters, the older, unmarried one, had wailed and beat the coffin with her fists." (3)

Does "painfully" mean that Dante felt embarrassed at the way his father's relatives mourned him? Or was he remembering the pain of his father's loss?

---

[17] My emphasis, C.S.

Taking into consideration Dante's comments about his father in the novel, we can further describe the mixed feelings he has towards him. Most importantly, Dante does not participate in his father's vision of worldly success, his materialism. When the family moves to a brick and mortar house, all commodities and splendour, Dante is not happy. It does not feel like a real house to him because he cannot manage to feel at home there. It is excessively posh and flamboyant. Instead, he prefers the old Queenslander, the house on stilts where he had grown up with its verandas and the space under the house full of secrets. "My memories were all of our old house in South Brisbane", Dante tells us: "The new house at Hamilton was stuffily and pretentiously over furnished and depressingly modern." (4)

Dante's feelings towards the old Queenslander in *Johnno* are described in almost exactly the same terms in David Malouf's autobiography *12 Edmondstone Street*, which carries the name of the street where the house was located.[18]

Dante does not share his father's ideal of success that translates into a particular ideal of manhood. But there are other differences as well regarding their respective views on masculinity. His father was "a great sportsman in his day," (1) but Dante "refused absolutely to have anything to do with it: swimming, boxing, football, the lot. It was a terrible disappointment to him." (71) Dante is of the intellectual sort, and this put him at odds with his father's ideals. Dante tells us about his father: "he had never, so far as I knew, read a book." (5)

---

[18] In *12 Edmonstone Street,* the contrast between Malouf's feelings towards the old Queenslander and his father's is still more prominent:

> Like most people in those days, my father was ashamed of our house. He would have preferred a modern one made of brick. Weatherboard was too close to beginnings, to a dependence on what was merely local and near to hand rather than expensively imported… (Malouf, *12 Edmonstone Street 31*)

Like most teenagers, Dante rebels against his parents: "There is nothing in what I feel or think these days that relates to my parents, to what they know or might have taught me, nothing at all." (50) But his litany is against his father's expectations of him. As one would expect, his father and his mother have opposite views regarding what Dante should do with his life and the career he should pursue, but none of them suit him. His mother wants him to be a doctor or a lawyer, whereas his father would like him to start his own business from scratch as he has done, and to be his own man. Two worlds and two cultures that clash in the expectations they have for their son and the sort of man they want him to be. As has been pointed out, perhaps because boys use fathers as their first referent in the world, Dante's father is always at the centre of the memories that hurt him the most, and this resentment goes both ways. Dante does not want to have anything to do with sports and does not like practical jobs, and his father does not like to see him reading so much. His father thinks that reading too much can lead him astray. He even believes that being bookish is a bit effeminate.

In his long tirade against his parents' plans for his future, Dante just devotes one line to his mother:

> We have nothing in common now. Sometimes, seeing a light under the door, my father will step in and say: "I think you'd better get to bed son. You don't want to read too much." He picks up one of my books and weights it on the palm of his hand. What he means is that books are useless (certainly he's never found any use for them) and might even be a bit effeminate. He distrusts their influence on me. In weighing them on his palm like that he is testing the enemy. Proud as he is of any success I might have at school, he would prefer me to get out into the world and start on my own account, as he did, instead of experiencing everything second hand, through books. This is a matter on which he and my mother disagree. She would like me to be a doctor, or to go in for the law. How little they understand

> me! What I am, what I will be, can have nothing to do with them. I feel like a stranger in the house. (50-51)

Father and son do not share their views about life because the father is of the phallic type, whereas Dante belongs to the testerical type, like his mother – after all, being a poet, a writer or a scholar is an intellectual profession, like being a doctor or a lawyer. Generally speaking, intellectual people are of the testerical sort, even if one could also distinguish between phallic and testerical characters in intellectual professions. For example, Johnno likes reading and is a phallic character throughout the novel except for a short spell. Nevertheless, Johnno's intellectualism, like Hamlet's, dooms him. Since these distinctions are a matter of degree, one can always make them relative to a particular standard.

What is important to note here is that the death of the father coincides with a revision of the figure of Johnno in Dante's life, and that this revisionist phase transforms Dante into a writer.

Before drawing the pertinent conclusions about the relationship between Dante and his father, I would like to take a brief detour in order to delve into the sexual orientation of Dante and Johnno from a new perspective. We have seen that Ivor Indyk reads *Johnno* as a "homosexual romance" (Indyk 6-7); that Neilsen argues that Dante and Johnno are bisexual (Nielsen 34), that Randall reminds the reader that Malouf has rejected the idea that *Johnno* "be read as a gay novel in disguise", but concludes that "homosexuality has an avowed place within the text" (Randall 32). Randall's conclusion does not say much at all, and it does not take fully into account Malouf's reaction if we read it within its context:

> Readers of a later and more knowing time have taken this to be a gay novel in disguise. It is not. If I had meant to write a gay novel I would have done so. If there was more to tell about these characters I would have told it.
>
> Johnno's occasional experience that way is frankly admitted, so is Dante's relationship with his "boy from Sarina", but they do not see themselves as being defined by these involvements and they are not. (*Wikipedia "Johnno"*)

It must be pointed out that when Malouf says that "Johnno's occasional experience that way is frankly admitted", he is referring to the episode in France we have just quoted and that actually involves Dante as well. As we will see now, there is no evidence at all in the novel that tells us that Johnno is openly homosexual.

A comprehensive and synthetic answer that can accommodate the previous positions, including Malouf's, can be reached if instead of taking for granted Dante and Johnno's homosexuality we do the opposite and consider the topic under the following hypothesis: What if Dante and Johnno were heterosexual? As will be shown, if we put the question like that, evidence in the novel points towards Dante and Johnno's heterosexuality, even if Johnno's heterosexuality will need some qualification, hence accommodating for Malouf's reaction against reading the novel as a homosexual romance at the same time that Johnno's homosexuality will have an acknowledged place within the text.

It will be borne in mind that there is only a conventional relationship between gender, sexuality and being born with male or female sex; that these distinctions are something we learn and that, therefore, things that question, complicate or subvert this established order might occur, unveiling a deeper character formation not apparent at first sight.

Johnno only falls in love once with a girl in the story. Her name is Binkie. The most outstanding thing that Dante can say about her is that she likes to play a game called "bottles", consisting in numbering off numbers except the ones containing a four or a seven or a multiple of them, otherwise, you have to drink your allotted glass of beer, rum etc. We are also told that she is "tomboyish" (91).

The indignation of the otherwise listless Dante is worth noting when he tells us that Johnno has fallen in love with Binkie in absolutely negative terms. Dante complains about the weakness of his friend that has let him succumb to such an ordinary and common passion such as love: "He had been caught while his resistance was low by the most insidious bloody madness of them all, the subtlest and most self-destructive invention of the whole rag-bag of bourgeois delusions,

romantic fucking love!" The terms he uses to describe Binkie are no less disparaging. He calls her "an idiot" and a "silly bitch," (91) and concludes about her relationship with him and Johnno: "For nearly a year, perhaps more, she must have been to Johnno what she was to me, one of the liveliest girls at the parties we went to, the dark, tomboyish daughter of a Mackay cane miller." (91)

The issue has been raised as to whether Binkie acts as an object of mediation between the two friends. This interpretation is based on Eve Sedgwick's ground-breaking study *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire*. In all societies, some men embody an ideal of masculinity to a greater degree than others who share the same ideal, and it is often the case that everyone wants to imitate and to be like the man who represents that ideal to the highest degree. The ideal man, then, turns into a competitor. The feelings of admiration and rivalry alternate within the individual, or one may predominate. No one can express these feelings because that would be either admitting to a deficiency – I recognize you are more masculine/ manly than I am – or admitting to a homosexual desire that is strongly stigmatized in patriarchal societies (I admire you, I like you). However, men may recur to a third object, in this case a woman that will act as a mediator between them. Therefore, the reason why the object of love has been chosen is that she has previously been the choice of the rival / competitor, not for any specific attributes she may have. Sedgwick builds her analysis on René Girard's definition of metaphysical desire in his book *Deceit, Desire and the Novel.* René Girard distinguishes desire from basic human needs and appetites, and labels it metaphysical because it always comes from the other. "At its birth," he says, "in other words at the very source of the subjectivity, one always finds a victorious Other" (Girard 33). Therefore, for René Girard triangulation is not limited to a love triangle between a woman and two men (although this scheme can be further complicated), but it includes all possible objects of desire, including inanimate ones. He gives the example of Don Quixote, who wants to be a knight errant after having read the romances of Amadis de Gaule, in this case the mediator.

Sedgwick emphasizes: "Girard finds many examples in which the choice of the beloved is determined in the first place, not by the qualities of the beloved, but by the beloved already being

the choice of the person who has been chosen as a rival" (Sedgwick 21). If we take into account that the rival was originally the idol, the person to emulate, and we recall all those instances in which Dante confessed to himself that he was on Johnno's side, in spite of his pretence middle class politeness, and that Johnno, Dante and Binkie know each other and are friends, it is very likely that the love triangle will be enacted at some point in the novel.

The triangle is enacted, but in a way that shows Johnno's homosexuality. He is not interested in women and no woman except prostitutes will go out with him. As Reeser points out, "the very transformation or permutation of the model reveals as much about gender, sexuality, masculinity, and power as the model on its own static terms." (Reeser 70)

Binkie does not like Johnno, and she rejects him outright. Johnno turns out to be a poor seducer, a parody of the infallible Humphrey Bogart. Once, after a party, Dante takes Binkie home. After a while, they discover that they are being followed. Suddenly, Johnno appears in the middle of the path. "Johnno looked big and foolish in the half-light. His shirt half out of his trousers, his hair ruffled, he was pretending, not very successfully, to be drunk." (95) Binkie walks past him, and Dante follows her. In front of Johnno, Dante shrugs his shoulders: "As I did so he laid his hand briefly on my shoulder, as if to absolve me of any complicity in the affair. It was strictly between Binkie and himself." When Dante and Binkie resume their way, he continues following them, until Binkie turns around and frightens him off: "'Go to hell,' she shouted. 'Why can't you behave like other people? You know I don't want you. Just piss off!'" (95)

As a result, she and Dante get closer. If we think about the terms Dante used when describing Binkie to the reader after finding out that Johnno was in love with her ("the girl was an idiot" etc. 91), then the source of Dante's desire for Binkie could only possibly be that she was the object of Johnno's love. Indeed, one evening at her house, Dante tries to seduce her, but he also fails:

> She sat in a window-seat amid a scatter of stockings, clothespegs, old copies of *Harpers* and *Vogue*. I was suddenly swept by a familiar emotion.

> "You're lovely, Binkie," I said, and reached out for her fingers.
>
> She made a wry face.
>
> "Oh, don't you start, Dante!"
>
> And it was enough, at that moment, to turn away the brief possibility. (97)

Years later Dante and Binkie meet again at Johnno's funeral. Binkie is married with children, and she has read about Johnno's funeral in the newspaper. At the funeral she meets Dante and is visibly upset. We learn that in spite of her adolescent contempt for Johnno, deep down she was fond of him: "I used to think about him a lot after he went. I was crazy about some of the boys I knew, and now I can hardly even remember their names. Isn't that awful?" (160). Then, what was wrong with them?

Perhaps chemistry only worked one way or, more likely, Binkie probably had thought that Johnno (that "madcap", 13) was not a good enough match for her. When Johnno leaves for the Congo and then Europe, Dante comes across Binkie in the National Library in Canberra and she tells him that "she was engaged again – this time to a doctor whom she would marry 'almost absolutely immediately, before he gets away.'" (108) Binkie had succumbed to or hurried to comply with the demands society made of her – she made a good match, married and had children, becoming yet another piece of the impregnable social machinery of Brisbane. "I've settled down," she tells Dante, "just the way they said I would. It's not so bad." (160) In this case, the love triangle would not have worked because Johnno did not belong to the same social class as Binkie.

Nevertheless, Binkie has paid a price for it. Dante has just turned thirty, and he is still young and looks young, like Johnno, who died "in the flower of his youth" (as the clergyman delivering his final eulogy puts it, 186). On first seeing him, Binkie exclaims: "You haven't changed a bit. You look – exactly the same –" (158-159) and after the funeral, before parting, she insists on her first remark, emphasizing her surprise, as if she had been witness to some magic event: "You haven't changed a scrap, you know that, Dante?" (159-160) On the other hand, Dante recognizes the signs of age in Binkie's face: "the skin had begun to break up round her eyes, and thicken,"

and she also admits she has changed: "I've changed like hell! – Oh, there is no need to pretend I haven't. Did you know I've got two kids?" (160) What the reader sees as well is that, in spite of having become a part of Brisbane's social machinery, of having married and had children and matured according to social conventions, Binkie does not feel either secure or happy. She is more lost than Dante: "'I wish I understood things', she said, half to herself. 'I've always been so bloody dumb!' She laughed. 'They always told me that too.'" (161) In her final comment, we can also see how stereotypes about women in patriarchal societies have moulded her self-image: women are stupid, they cannot possibly understand.

Johnno and Dante remain free from social conventions but, more important than that, they remain essentially young/modern. As Dante puts it: "I might grow old in Brisbane, but I would never grow up." (144)

The novel enacts two more instances of the love triangle that have gone unnoticed to the critics, who have just seen this triangle enacted between Johnno, Dante and Binkie (Randall 32-33).[19] The most interesting enactment proves Johnno's disavowed homosexuality, and Dante is always left out of the equation. It happens every time Johnno goes to the brothels or has a mistress who is a prostitute – that is, in all cases with the only exception of Binkie. It has to do with Johnno's obsession with the prostitutes' protectors or "pimps". At school, one of the stories he told to impress his classmates had already included the figure of the protector within his sexual fantasies. Dante tells us that Johnno "had spent a whole weekend once with a tart and her protector who were travelling around Australia in a caravan." (55) Later on, in Paris, Johnno has a mistress who works as a prostitute, and he admits to Dante that sometimes, when she came with a client, he would hide in the wardrobe and "jerk off." (118) In this perverse triangle, Johnno's mistress acts

[19] Randall just notes that "the presentation of Johnno's one serious-seeming heterosexual romance, with Binkie, does not yield any of the intensified triangulated desire that Sedgwick's criticism delineates." (Randall 33)

as a mediator between Johnno and her client. However, the clearest enactment of this perverse triangle happens in Paris, every night that Johnno and Dante go whoring. Before going with a girl, Johnno would have a look at her pimp, and if he did not like him, he would call the deal off: "no style", Johnno would say to Dante. The looks, the clothing, the mannerisms and the poses of the pimps enthral Johnno; he is fascinated, bewitched. His obsession with the "pimps" explains his hidden homosexuality. Sedgwick's love triangle allows Johnno to unfasten his homosexual impulses under the alibi that his "real" object of desire is the prostitute. In a patriarchal society, he cannot admit to his homosexuality, from whence his perversion.

The second triangle is enacted in the same passage. It relates the whole of Parisian society to Brigitte Bardot. When arriving in Paris, Dante notes that "in all the cafes now the tables were crowded with girls in suede jackets and long blonde hair à la Bardot and young men with beards cut square under the cheek bones and bare upper lips" (113). On another occasion, Johnno talks about "the young Bardot girls and their bearded young men" (115). In this case, the triangle is an instance of what Girard calls "external mediation", which happens when the desired object is not within the reach of the desiring subject(s).[20]

In the following scene the case of external mediation is mentioned in passing, but it fully exemplifies the case of internal mediation between Johnno, the prostitutes and their pimps that we have just analysed above. Although it is a bit long, it is worth quoting it in its entirety:

---

[20] René Girard distinguishes between "internal" and "external" mediation:

> We shall speak of *external mediation* when the distance is sufficient to eliminate any contact between the two spheres of *possibilities* of which the mediator and the subject occupy the respective centers. We shall speak of *internal mediation* when this same distance is sufficiently reduced to allow these two spheres to penetrate each other more or less profoundly. (Girard 9)

Each night, after dinner at La Source or the student restaurant in the Beaux Arts, we would make our way slowly through the labyrinth of dark alleys behind the Tour St. Jacques ("Mystical" Johnno would proclaim, regarding its proportions in the moonlight), where the tarts stood at regular intervals of two feet or so in the dusky lamplight, heavily made-up à la Bardot and calling to us in their heavily formalized patter. Somewhere in the steamy little cafes behind them were the leather-jacketed toughs who were their pimps, and I think it was the pimp, or at least the knowledge of his presence close by that was the real source of excitement for Johnno. Very often, before deciding to go with a girl, he would ask about her pimp, and we would stand on the pavement with our noses pressed to the grimy glass while she pointed out a cap or a black leather shoulder at one of the tables inside. Johnno would nod approvingly or suddenly call the whole deal off, whispering to me as he slouched away, "No style. Just a jumped-up factory worker." He sang the praises of the pimps with a passionate lyricism that would have done credit to Genet: the elegance of their pointed shoes! And the cars they drove! The way they stood with one hand lightly cupping the crotch, and shifted themselves! The flick-knives hidden away somewhere in the top of a boot! The mean slits of eyes! The way they rolled their spit on their tongue and jetted it in a clean fast gobbet between their teeth!

"It's the mystery of it all," Johnno would whisper, watching one of them entranced, as he moved towards an assignation. "Sperm being transmuted into gold – the apotheosis of capitalism. It's the only place left now where there's any style or anything like a genuine ritual. The mass has become completely debased, did you know that?" He had recently become a Catholic. "They might as well serve it in the supermarket. But this is the real thing. Mystery! Mystery!" (117-118)

When Johnno mentions the perversity of the capitalist system ("Sperm being transmuted into gold – the apotheosis of capitalism.") what he means is that there is nothing that money cannot afford and, therefore, no commodity or pleasure that is not corruptible. We see here the complicity between patriarchy, that is based on power relations because it affirms that men are superior than women and, therefore, establishes a relationship of hierarchy between men as well, and money, that gives you the power to buy and have anything. As we will see at the end of this Chapter, for Malouf there is only one exception: love, which is what literature is all about.

The mystery at the origin of Johnno's dark desires ("Mystery! Mystery!") is what the perverse triangle allows us to formalize, but whose core must necessarily remain hidden from us. Who is Johnno's rival? The hyper masculine male, the family provider whose wife cannot satiate his lust and the soldiers who go whoring as a form of male bonding and to put off their unbridled sexual desire. Paradoxically, what Johnno's attitude reveals when analysed through the lens of Girard's model of triangulation is that the prostitutes only serve Johnno as mediators to reach his real object of desire: the hyper masculine male he so blindly emulates. Girard admits that, in the last instance, the triangle reveals the mystery behind transcendental desire, but that it does not explain it. Why do we choose the rivals and/or models we choose and not others? "The triangle is a model of a sort, or rather a whole family of models," Girard tells us. "But these models are not "mechanical" like those of Claude Lévi-Strauss. They always allude to the mystery, transparent yet opaque, of human relations." (Girard 2-3)

Regarding Dante, it is a similar story, because he tells us of countless relationships he has with women, but none of them works out. Dante tells us about them with a certain distance and humour.

While Johnno is courting Binkie – or, more exactly, giving her the creeps - Dante is having "his own problems, in the form of a plump, good-natured girl called Rhoda." (93) But her parents disapprove of him because he is a Catholic, so they decide to get him out of the way by bribing her: "Rhoda's father had promised her a Californian hardtop for her twenty-first. And, well -. She

looked dewy-eyed and regretful, but I saw immediately that I couldn't compete." (93) The car is worth seven hundred pounds, so at least Dante can console himself using some irony: "I nursed my wounds and told myself, stoically, that it wasn't every young man of just twenty who knew his price on the open market." (94)

Before that, Dante had fallen heavily in love with a girl called Roseanne Staples, a "diving champion." (56) The affair did not last more than three weeks. They met for dancing on Wednesdays three weeks in a row, but on the third week Dante is left thunderstruck when she tells him that the only thing that she cannot stand is "boys who don't pivot." (57)

Miserable and in the company of the other boys round the dance floor, Dante embarks on a long meditation on what he calls "Test of Manhood", in which he puts together his not knowing how to pivot, the War, sex and religion. They all have something to do with manhood:

> So much then for the test of manhood. There were things they hadn't warned us of, pitfalls in the corners of rooms, girls who would expect you to pivot and perform God knows what prodigies. There was also the Cold War, the Cobalt Bomb, pre-marital intercourse, the death of God – it was a battlefield, as the headmaster had warned us, and I thought with envy of all those old boys whose names were picked out in gold on the honour-boards, lying safe in some corner of a foreign field that would be forever Wynnum or Coorparoo. Ours was to be a quiet generation. It was the little tests that would break us (nor forgetting the wives and the mothers) and there was no one to help us through. (58)

What this digression does is lament the pressure and demands that are put on men to achieve the standards of masculinity set by patriarchal societies. A man has to behave manly, gallantly and be affectionate at the right time, be a good dancer, perform in bed, provide for his family and maintain a certain standard of living, go to war and die for the country when necessary, and put up with the minutiae of everyday life without faltering. Even the misogynistic tone of the comment in parenthesis is part of that ensemble.

The feeling of not being able to cope with the demands of society on men, that is, to comply with the standards of manhood of Brisbane society at the time, slowly increases as the novel progresses. Firstly, before Dante decides to follow Johnno to Europe. He stays behind in Brisbane "determined, for some reason, to make life reveal whatever it had to reveal *here*, on home ground." (109) However, nothing happens. If anything, what is revealed to Dante is his inadequacy, the feeling that he does not belong. Subsumed in a general apathy, he tells us that during that time he thought he was in love several times, mentioning casually his love affair with the boy from Sarina. Dante is unable to fall in love and settle, and his feeling of not belonging increases as everyone else around him moves on in the world. Being a man does not depend so much on the individual as on what others the same age and sex do around you. They were getting "Rhodes Scholarships to Oxford" or playing in the "cricket selections"; one of them even "found uranium on his father's cattle station and was a millionaire twice over before he was twenty-two." As his friends and acquaintances pair off and get married, Dante finds himself retreating more and more within himself: "I bought them water sets or electric jugs and failed to turn up at the reception." But the feeling is not a negative one: he does not feel either regret or envy or anything of that kind. Dante finds himself "entirely without ambition"; he feels no need to "succeed in those terms." (110) That is the reason why he finally decides to go to Europe and reunite with his friend Johnno in Paris.

Dante finally makes it to London by himself and begins teaching, then moves to the north of England, where he spends about three years. (126) While there, he meets a girl, also from Australia, and they decide to leave England and settle back home. But the story repeats itself. What in Europe "had seemed possible", alleviated "with all the ease and openness that comes from having only such possessions as will fill a rucksack and a couple of light cases", back in Brisbane everything turns "to be decisions at every point, a whole set of little locks" having to do with where to live: "she came from Grafton and was excessively devoted to her parents"; "the sort of "home" they might settle for", and what kind of wedding they are going to have, all having to do with

things Dante "had never cared for." They would see each other on weekends, and during the week they would suffer and quarrel over the phone like teenagers. "We broke, made up again, broke. The thing was hopeless but wouldn't end." (143) Dante's parents also hope that now that he is back, their son will finally settle, get married and find a proper job. They are "bitterly disappointed." (143-144)

At this point it is possible to answer the question of whether Dante and Johnno are heterosexual in the affirmative, and to consider their homosexual adventure in Paris as an isolated episode, like the affair between Dante and the boy from Sarina. It is important to bear in mind that these are the only *de facto* homosexual affairs that take place in the novel. As it has been argued so far, Johnno only has sex with women when he goes whoring, his perversion revealing a dormant homosexuality when analysed through the lens of the "perverse triangle" involving himself, the prostitutes who act as mediators and their protectors, who are the real objects of desire. Regarding Dante, what we know for certain is that he has many girlfriends throughout the novel; his apathy and his reticence to engage, marry and settle could reveal a dormant homosexuality, but it can more likely be a simple matter of character. Perhaps, his homosexuality is a possibility Dante does not seriously consider because it does not fit his frame of mind, the values and norms he had grown up with – in other words, the sexual politics of Brisbane at the time. Why not? But he does not define himself as homosexual, or his homosexual drive is not constant enough – far from it – fro him to describe himself as homosexual.

As previously stated, what the critic or reader must avoid at all costs to rush into categorising in constricting and opposing terms the gender and sexuality of these characters. This is precisely their allure. We have seen how close and muddled the feelings of identification, admiration, rivalry and hate are.

We come at the end of our brief detour to resume what is at stake in the contradictory feelings Dante has towards his father. As pointed out before, in patriarchal societies men have as their first mentors and as their measure of success the figure of their fathers. The novel *Johnno*

begins with the death of the father, which allows the narrator Dante to revisit his past in the light of his friend Johnno. It is a matter, all throughout the novel, of finding an alternative voice to that of the father and, in this way, reaching a valid alternative ideal of manhood.

The troubles and difficulties that Dante faces when he goes back to Australia with the girl from Grafton result in their breaking up. This turmoil does not happen in isolation, but in consonance with another troublesome presence: the vision of his old mates, who reappear again when he accompanies his nephews to play rugby. He recognizes "the ghosts of school boys still visible behind the solid, dull presence of friends"; they have all made it into the world: "lawyers, stockbrokers with seats on the Exchange, architects, accountants, successful real-estate agents," etc. (144) His old mates, that when he decides to go to Europe are making their own start in life, are now happily settled, rich, married and with children. When he visits them, they show themselves "uneasily proprietorial as they allowed the children to show off a little and their wives to be admired." (145) Nevertheless, they still have one thing in common. They do not seem to have matured, to have grown-up at all – they have let themselves simply be carried away with the flow of prosperity that has swept Australia. Like Dante, they have grown old, but they have not grown up: they retained, "for all their ponderous self-assurance, some hint of boyishness that seemed like a national trait." (144)

Australia has finally entered modernity, and that is the main character trait of its citizens. Before leaving Brisbane, both Johnno and Dante, in their own ways, ascribe their feeling of uneasiness and strangeness to Australia. There is something in the place that does not let them fulfil their expectations about themselves, even if they are not able to put it into words. When thinking about his place in the world, Dante recalls the author of the *Divine Comedy*, whose "love for *his* city was immense", a "force that had shaped his whole being." Dante considers the prospect of having been shaped by Brisbane "fearful." "Brisbane is so sleepy, so slatternly, so sprawlingly unlovely!" (51) Just after that, he considers what the State of Queensland may contribute to his identity, but the thought is no less reassuring. If Brisbane is ugly, Queensland is a "joke":

"Queensland, of course, is a joke!" Things do not get better when Dante ponders about Australia and realizes that it is a continent still profoundly unknown, indefinable. He recalls his geography lessons at school, the names "of several dozen capes, bays, promontories" he had to learn by heart, and the journeys of the explorers he had learnt to trace in: "Sturt, Leichhardt, Burke and Wills". But Australia still is a "mystery", "the darkness at our back door", what is still unexplored in Australia is larger than what is known: "Too big to hold in the mind!" Dante gives up trying to figure out what Australia is. "Australia is impossible! Hardly worth thinking about." (53) Finally, Dante considers the world, but he regards it in completely different terms. The world is what is going to measure them as individuals and as a people, so that being who they are going to be is inextricable from where they are from. It is what is going to give them the true measure of their manhood: "The World, as the headmaster tells us severely at his weekly "peptalks", is what we are about to be tested against." (53) What about Johnno? In more or less the same terms, he scorns: "What a place!" And with his obscene language, observes: "This must be the bloody arsehole of the universe!" Brisbane is the worst place in the world because it has "no soul" and it is a place where people suffer "without significance". When Johnno leaves Australia, he does it with the purpose of purifying himself from it, both physically and mentally:

> I'm going to shit this bitch of a country right out of my system," he told me fiercely. "Twenty fucking years! How long will it take me, do you think, to shit out every last trace of it? At the end of every seven years you're completely new – did you know that? New fingernails, new hair, new cells. There'll be nothing left in me of bloody Australia. I'll be transmuted. I'll say to myself every morning as I squat on the dunny, there goes another bit of Australia. That was Wilson's Promontory. That was Toowong. Whoosh, down the plughole! And at the end of seven years I'll have squeezed the whole fucking continent out through my arsehole. I'll have got rid of it forever. All *this*! (98)

In this way, their not being able to find themselves or their place in society is intricately linked with their being unable to find a place, a relationship with the world where they can feel safe and at home – a restlessness within themselves and in the outside world does not let them be.

This time, unlike what happened before leaving Brisbane for Europe, Dante does not tell us that he feels no need to "succeed in those terms." (110) When he is at his lowest, he comes across Johnno, who has also returned to Australia – the continent sucks him in like a magnet. He hadn't told him he was back but took for granted that Dante should have known: "Yes, yes, he had been in Australia for three months. Didn't I know" and was working on an "oil survey." (145) When they finally catch up, there will be two things that will call Dante's attention about his friend: a conversation they have in which Johnno mentions that he had "destroyed the myth" two nights before, with Bill Mahoney, and the spiral of self-destruction towards which Johnno is rushing.

The narrator uses the word "myth" four times in the remainder of the novel. The first time he quotes Johnno, who is completely drunk and can barely figure out what his friend is trying to tell him:

> … all I could make of his mutterings was our need to "destroy the myth". *He* had destroyed the myth two nights ago. With Bill Mahoney. Bill knew what it was all about. He kept repeating this, with great loose guffaws, and moments between of looking baffled and stricken. Then submerged into silence, sodden and morose. I found no way of reaching him. (149)

Next time the term occurs, Johnno has already passed away and Dante reflects about the "Myth", this time spelled in capital letters. He talks about the "Myth" in exclusively economic terms, and defines Australia as "the biggest success story of them all":

> Well, the seven years were up. Like a bad charm. And it was Johnno who was gone. Australia was still there, more loud-mouthed, prosperous, intractable than ever. Far from being destroyed, the Myth was booming. There were

> suggestions that it would soon be supporting thirty million souls. Australia was the biggest success-story of them all. Real estate was pushing deeper into the gullies…

Later on, when Dante meets Bill Mahoney and asks about that night when, supposedly, they had "destroyed the myth", he "had nothing to tell". Johnno was pretty drunk, they had taken a couple of girls for a swim, Johnno had an argument with one of them, took the girls home, and then Johnno told him he "had some harebrained scheme about their burning a church down, and had spent most of the journey going through the details of how he'd do it." (164)

As pointed out earlier, if we consider that the Church was complicit with the State in maintaining the status quo of the bourgeois morality – that is, normative heterosexuality and all that stems from it – then "destroying the myth", for Johnno, amounted to destroying – perhaps a better word would be deconstructing – patriarchy. When written in capital letters, "Myth" seems to refer to the fact that Australia has become a First World Country in economic terms and in its way of life, more or less in the same terms as we talk about the American dream: Australia is a place where men willing to work and with ambition can lead successful and prosperous lives.

Regarding the spiral of self-destruction in which Johnno is caught, the first time Dante worries about Johnno is when, while living in England, he visits him in Athens. There he realizes that his life "was more mysterious than ever," (134) and the mystery had to do with some of Johnno's acquaintances. Dante worries that perhaps Johnno has enmeshed himself in drugs or politics: "What was he involved in, I wondered. Drug trafficking? Politics? Of the left? Of the right?" But hearing him throw up at night, Dante fears that it might be worse. Johnno could not bear his own existence, the world that had been offered him. Dante asks himself: "What did he want out of life? What ordinary fate was he in flight from? What would he do next?" (135) Back in Brisbane, Dante realizes again that there is something terribly wrong with Johnno's life, and the proof was that he had come full circle back to Brisbane: "What sort of defeat of his expectations, what moment of panic, had brought him back full-circle, the long way round the Condamine, via the Congo, Paris, London, Hamburg, Athens?" (148-149) Dante's worst fears soon materialize,

when one day he reads in *The Courier-Mail* that Johnno has drowned in the Condamine: *"Accidental drowning near Miles"*, the headlines read.

Just as Dante is reading about Johnno's death in the *The Courier-Mail*, he receives a letter from him. It is a love letter, a letter perhaps no much different from others Dante had received from him, except that the reality of his death suddenly offers another perspective:

> Dante,
>
> Please, please come. Or we could go to Stradbroke for the weekend. Why don't you ever listen to what I say to you? I've spent years writing letters to you and you never answer, even when you write back. I've loved you – and you've never given a fuck for me, except as a character in one of your funny stories. Now for Christ sake write to me! Answer me you bastard! And please come.
>
> love
>
> Johnno

After reading the letter, Dante feels his mind whirl, "a whole past turning itself upside down, inside out, to reveal possibilities I could never have imagined." (154) Dante recalls that he always "owed" Johnno an answer, and all his attempts at getting closer to Dante. When they were children, Johnno had invited Dante over to his house. On seeing Dante, Johnno's mother had looked "surprised", and when he complimented her for the roses she had in the front garden, had looked "positively alarmed." (41) During that visit, Dante was obsessed with the idea of impressing his friend and had stolen "two screwdrivers and a matchbox jeep." (40-45, 153) When he showed them, Johnno "looked pained, embarrassed even," (43) and Dante felt ashamed because he realized that with his gesture he had shown Johnno his "low opinion of *him*" (44); the occasion had been spoilt. Other memories come to his mind. While they were in Athens, and Dante was helping Johnno, who was completely drunk, he had told him: "You know Dante, when we were at school, I used to think of you as the most *exotic* creature – so strange and untouchable. Like a foreign prince." (154) So, Johnno's words "I've loved you" might finally have struck home for Dante.

Love – that is what the story between Johnno and Dante is all about. But what is "love"?

As if to bring the whole matter into a conclusion and clearly frame what Johnno's love message is meant to balance, Dante resumes in the Epilogue what brought him to tell Johnno's story: his father's legacy. Dante reflects about his father's life and the terms of his success. His father had only ever had owned two books. One was "a big old-fashioned ledger" where he kept track of his accounts, "the day by day progress of a phenomenal career," (166) and the other one was called *A Young Man with an Oil-Can*, which told the story of a young Scot "who, beginning with just an oil-can. . . . had gone to found the biggest chocolate factory in the Commonwealth." (167) Dante says that this book represented "the palpable record of a great national mythology"; Dante's father was an entrepreneur, and with the two ideas in mind that these books stood for, had made a decent living and become a "successful" man – "success of the golden sort" (168). But at the crucial moment, as Dante insists that his father's was "a real success story," he adds: "any story that matters is here a success story. The others are just literature." (169) In other words, any story worth telling is a love story, not mediated by power, capital or convention.

His father's "success story" brought him to mind, vividly and painfully, the other side of the story: the story of all of those who did not make it. Dante's father had also been afraid and even close to failure: "My father had kept out of the troughs. After all, he had the graph. But he knew they existed, and he had come often enough to the edge, and looked over, to know just what the troughs were like." (170) That is the reason why his parents never failed to feed those who would come to their house asking for work – former battlers, swaggies and derelicts. His father never refused to help those who had not made it:

> But even then there were old-timers, like Peg-leg, who had not been drafted into prosperity and still came hat in hand for something to help him through the week. My father had a dozen old mates like Peg-leg, who had fallen on hard times, or had never fallen on good ones. Some of them he knew from his fighting days, they were old fans. Others from the early years when he had carried from the markets.

> He never failed to stop when they hailed him, and never refused the few bob that they would immediately, my mother assured us, drink away in one of the Valley wineshops, whose panelled half-doors only the "lowest" ever went through. (169-170)

As Penelope Fitzgerald told her American editor in 1987, "I think you should write biographies of those you admire and respect, and novels about human beings who you think are sadly mistaken" (qtd. in Barnes).

The biography of the young Scot, *A Young Man with an Oil-Can* was a success story, but Dante could only write a novel about someone whose life he felt had been sadly mistakes, and Johnno fitted the pattern. But if Johnno and Dante had somehow shared the same destiny – feeling ill-at-ease first in Brisbane, then in Europe, and then back in Brisbane again; if they had failed to find a path to success and successful socialisation in terms they could agree with, etc. – Johnno's sacrifice provides Dante with a story that will finally redeem both of them. By sacrificing himself, Johnno saves Dante. Whereas Dante succeeds at socialisation overcoming his quirks through his writing, his soul mate's failure to do so provides him with the raw material to become a writer.

Chapter 2: Men and Women's Power in *An Imaginary Life* and *Harland's Half Acre*

David Malouf has gone deeply into gender difference and how power and power relations change and redistribute themselves within gender roles, particularly in his novels *An Imaginary Life* (1978) and *Harland's Half Acre* (1984). In this section, I will go into the difference between men´s and women´s power in these novels, at the same time that this will allow us to elucidate David Malouf's stance towards established gender roles in Western society. We will also see how the two novels deal with these issues differently.

Analysis of Men and Women's Power in *An Imaginary Life*

An Imaginary Life tells the life of the Roman poet Ovid (43 BC-12/13AD) in his last days, a historical character whose life in exile Malouf fictionalizes. David Malouf draws on the written materials by Ovid himself and of what is known about him to supply his text with historical veracity and characterological depth. Ovid is the author of the *Metamorphoses*; he had an older brother who died at the age of 20 and Ovid refused to take his place as heir, deciding instead to travel to Athens, Asia Minor and Sicily. At age fifty, he was exiled to Tomis by Emperor Augustus. Little is known about Ovid's life in exile, and Malouf takes advantage of this gap to write his story. (Wikipedia, "Ovid") Malouf recalls the story of a public figure, a renowned poet, exiled by an Emperor. As Malouf imagines it, Ovid lives in Tomis with the head of the village, Ryzak, who is responsible for him. Ovid also lives with Ryzak's mother, his daughter-in-law and his grandson. Deprived of his former life with its securities and comforts, and ostracized by the Getae[21], Ovid wanders all day alone and miserable until one day, while taking part in a hunting party, a feral child is spotted, a

[21] The inhabitants of Tomis. The Getae were Tracian tribes that lived next to the lower Danube, in the border of what is today Northern Bulgaria and Southern Rumania. (Wikipedia, "Getae")

child that reminds Ovid of a feral child from his infancy.[22] The story then revolves around Ovid's efforts to convince Ryzak, the head of the tribe, to capture the wolf boy and, once the Child is captured, about his endeavors to educate the child and teach him to speak. Throughout the story, Ovid fosters his relationship with Ryzak, who respects him in turn because Ovid is a Roman and a man of letters. Ovid tells us that Ryzak "has a great desire, in my presence, to appear superior to his superstitious people." (61) They play a game resembling chess and Ryzak asks Ovid to teach his grandson, Lullo, the rudiments of the Latin language. But Ovid is a foreigner in Tomis, he does not speak the language and does not know the customs and traditions of the place. He is a kind of an effeminate clumsy adult child. Ryzak's mother, one of the eldest women in the village, who knows everything about women's rituals and women's spiritual powers, distrusts Ovid, and when they capture the feral child she believes that Ovid has purposely brought an evil spirit into the village: "She believes, I think, that I am some sort of rival wizard – is that what poet means to her? – who is using the Child to make a different and more potent magic." (98) The old woman is mad at her son, Ryzak, for having trusted Ovid against her better judgment. When the Child catches a fever, the old woman believes it is the "white wolf" who is trying to emerge through the Child's body. (113) When Lulo's mother sympathizes with Ovid and the Child, the old woman rebukes her. Eventually, the Child recovers, but then it is Ryzak's grandchild, Lulo, who gets the fever. Ryzak's mother blames her son for not having followed her advice, and Ovid can see real fear for the first time in the old man's eyes. (120) Every member of the household soon takes sides: Ryzak and Ovid, on the one hand, and the old woman and Lulo's mother, on the other. The relationship between the male and female members of the household is soon established in terms of power:

[22] Ovid's encounter with the child has all the elements of an anagnorisis, that is, the hero's reencounter with a character or personage from his youth and that reveals his true nature. The first time Ovid sees the feral child he 'recognizes' him: "I see the child, and stranger still, recognize him." (41).

"Behind his male prerogative, established in law, lies the darker power of the women." (97) The weakening of the one results in the strengthening of the other, and vice-versa. As the events unfold, the boy Lulo recovers, but shortly after that, Ryzak also falls ill and suffers a terrible death. The villagers, believing that the old woman's admonitions have come true, imbue her with a superior moral power. Ovid and the Child can only escape while the whole village is occupied with Ryzak´s funeral.

It is in these terms that *An Imaginary Life* can be read in terms of a gender war. The plot we have just summarized above echoes the situation that has brought Ovid to Tomis, and that David Malouf saw fit to use to criticize patriarchy: Ovid was the right sort of character and his life in exile provided the perfect background context where new possibilities could occur. As we said, *An Imaginary Life* starts by referring to Ovid's exile by the Emperor Augustus. In spite of the fact that Ovid is a male writer, this should not distract us from the fact that he symbolizes the feminine side of Empire in the economy that relates him to Augustus.[23] Augustus symbolizes patriarchal power; he stands for the law, strict social conventions and commands respect. His is an empire that is meant to last. On the other hand, Ovid symbolizes everything that is gay and fun, his poetry aims to entertain, and he is the author of the *Metamorphosis*, the book of changes, where everything is possible, and everything is transitory. In the values they embody, Augustus and Ovid represent patriarchal power and female power, respectively.[24] As we said at the beginning of this section,

---

[23] A distinction must be made between biological sex (male, female or hermaphrodite), gender (feminine, masculine or non-binary), which is something cultural, and sexual desire (homosexual, bisexual, and heterosexual). These distinctions are not absolute; they describe certain points in a spectrum. Thus, we may have a heterosexual feminized male, or a straight (heterosexual) manly woman. In a patriarchal society, power relations define gender roles.

[24] Generally speaking, they stand for what modern criticism has termed as patriarcal logocentrism and *écriture feminine*. *Écriture feminine* is an expression coined by the French feminist Hélène Cixous

gender is a movable quality: Ovid may identify with Ryzak and add (or subtract) to his male power in Tomis against the women, or he may revolt against the Emperor and patriarchy in Rome with his poetry and, thus, take sides with women. Ovid's exile is the fatal blow that patriarchy, in the figure of the Emperor Augustus, symbolically strikes against women. The rest of the novel, set in Tomis, stages women's retaliation and Ovid will also be its victim.

Ovid's exile has some things in common with a tragic event from his infancy. It is difficult to say whether the exile is a severe punishment against Ovid or something that Ovid himself actually wished for and provoked. We can surmise the former possibility from a traumatic childhood event, when he is pushed to abandon his family and his place of birth at Sulmo because he could not compromise with the patriarchal values of his father. During a hunting ritual in Tomis, riding up and down among funerary mounds and the remnants of impaled skeletons of

---

(b. 1937), by which she meant a sort of writing characterized by loose sentences, suggestion and rhetorical unpredictability, as opposed to normalized writing practiced by male writers and female writers who did not know how to write otherwise. Cixous recalls the examples of George Eliot and Charlotte Brönte given by Virgina Woolf in *A Room of One's Own.* Normalized writing is prosaic, patterned, well-structured and straightforward. Julia Kristeva (b. 1941), following Lacan and Cixous, distinguishes between symbolic language and semiotic language. Symbolic language is the language of the father and the government, a language which classifies and hierarchizes members of society. By contrast, semiotic language is pre-Oedipal; it is the language of the imagination and creativity. Both Cixous and Kristeva follow Derrida in claiming that the symbolic and the semiotic are two *aspects* of language. Hence, all symbolic language can be deconstructed. The distinction between the symbolic and the semiotic would be analogous to the distinction between the conscious and the unconscious. These forces are at play between Augustus and Ovid and they reappear, translated, in Ovid's exile in Tomis. This section explains this translation. (Barry, 121-124)

riders on horses, Ovid screams, possessed by the spirits of the place, and recalls the death of his younger brother and how he could not fulfill his father's dreams of a heir for his estate. After that experience in the woods, Ovid tells us the whole story. He recalls his life at Sulmo. He explains that his eldest brother identified with the patrimony that he knew that one day would be his; the limits of his mind were the limits of their lands: "For my brother, I know, the farm and his mind are one. The stones glow at the edge of what he is…" (82) In contrast, Ovid dreamt about escaping from his father's lands and discovering the Roman world beyond: "I too know all the boundary stones of our land, but to me they mean something different. They are where the world begins." (82) According to the social conventions of the time, Ovid's older brother was the legal heir to their father's heritage and was eventually supposed to replace him. Ovid, for his part, had to find a future for himself somewhere else. But, as events unfold, Ovid's brother dies and, consequently, he is meant to replace him as next in line of succession. However, what this event unveils instead is Ovid's rejection of social conventions, law and, most important, the patriarchal values his father embodies. It also reveals Ovid's true nature, eager for adventure, imaginative, passionate and prone to the emotional.[25] All this is poignantly evident at his brother's funeral when, riding in front of his father, Ovid knows what he is thinking: "…that of the two of us it is my brother who should have survived. I am the frivolous one, who will achieve nothing in the world." (38) Both due to his character and as something he consciously detests, perhaps also out of spite, Ovid abandons his father, rejecting the patriarchal values he represents, and leaves for the city, where he will start a new life: "I lived (…) as if I had sprung into the world complete with my first book of poems, an entirely new type, the creature of my own impudent views and with no family behind me, no tribe, no country, no past of any kind." (78) Ovid rebels against patriarchy because he doesn't

[25] This is also a character feature Malouf takes from the real Ovid: "According to Seneca the Elder, Ovid tended to the emotional." (Wikipedia, "Ovid")

cherish "such old-fashioned notions as duty, patriotism, the military virtues;" (49) it was his first public act of rebellion.

This event may help us better understand what Ovid did, which represented such a threat to the Emperor. Actually, it was something Ovid *caused* through his poetry. Ovid openly defied Augustus in a poem in which he wrote about somebody, we are not told whom, having illicit sex in a portico dedicated by Augustus' sister to her devoted husband. The phrasing is very important: it makes use of irony when talking about a couple having illicit sex in a building that stands for faithfulness. It also implies that the person is 'someone' important, because s/he is important enough to be mentioned in a poem. In addition, it suggests that the person is female or gay as they were the only ones who could adopt a passive stance in the sexual act (be "fucked"). Being power associated with an active sexual role in the sexual act, Ovid's poem was openly irreverent and subversive in having somebody influential "being fucked". What Ovid recounts in his poem may or may not have happened. Ovid tells us that he made it real just by putting it into words:[26]

> But in the shadow of a portico dedicated by his sister to her faithful husband, someone tonight is being fucked; because in a poem once I made it happen, and made that particular act, in that particular place, a gesture of public defiance. Each night now

[26] When Ovid says that "he made it happen", he means that words do not simply refer to things, but that there are certain speech acts that are performative, that is, they create that to which they refer to, as it happens in promises. The first philosopher to theorize about performative speech acts was J.L. Austin (1911-1960), in *How To Do Things With Words* (1962). Derrida took up Austin's theory in *Limited Inc* (1988), arguing that all speech acts are at bottom performative, because language depends on the mechanisms of 'citation' and 'repetition' to work. Since these two mechanisms do not require as a condition *sine qua non* a referent (to truth, to the world, etc.) to function, they can function equally well whether they are true or false. This is precisely the force of Ovid's poem that so annoys Augustus.

> Augustus thinks of it and bites his thumb. There are places closer than the Black Sea where the Emperor's power stops. The Portico of Marcellus is one of them (20).

The irony of the poem is not the only thing that upsets Augustus, and perhaps it is not the thing that upsets him the most. Having intercourse in a public space and in a building that Augustus' sister dedicated to her husband is a profanation, it is an act that pollutes the social and political body, which the person of the Emperor and his sister symbolize. Offending their persons or violating what represents them (or what they represent) is one and the same thing. As Judith Butler argues in *Gender Trouble:* "If the body is synecdochal for the social system *per se* or a site in which open systems converge, then any kind of unregulated permeability constitutes a site of pollution and endangerment." (180) Ovid's poem has polluted Augustus' own body, in the same way that we feel our intimacy has been desecrated when burglars have broken into our home. This is as true of the king as it is of the average person, and pollution can work from the bottom up or vice versa. It means that the social order and laws that Augustus incarnates in the figure of his person and everything that stems from him, including his administrations, public offices, buildings and all those related to him by blood or law, is also connected to every individuals' consciousness pertaining to his Empire. The family structure, with the head of the family, the father, his wife and children also replicates the hierarchical power relations of the Empire from within, as an interior vision that reflects the structures of State power. That is the reason why Ovid's story threatens the social order at large, and the more powerful and irreverent the image is, the more threatening it becomes. When Ovid says "I made it happen", he also means that his act of defiance rooted in people's minds.[27]

---

[27] In other words, it was a successful speech act. Judith Butler further argues the interrelationship between the social and the psychological we have just discussed as follows:

> In other words, acts, gestures, and desire produce the effect of an internal core or substance, but produces this *on the surface* of the body, through the plays of signifying

The presupposition that the person being fucked might be a woman is even more provocative than if it were a man. First, a woman being unfaithful would jeopardize the certainty of her husband's biological succession, since children always carried the father's last name and guaranteed the survival of the family name and its possessions.[28] Secondly, at the time, a woman was not a free citizen of the Roman Empire, she was her husband's possession, and especially so sexually, since a woman having intercourse with a man other than her husband was an offence to her husband and the integrity of his estate: the successful legal regulation of the body orifices symbolized the soundness of the State and the impregnability of its borders. Ivor Indyk has emphasized the way Malouf presents certain images and scenes in his fiction as emblems, that is, conferring on them a certain sensation of distance and as if they were framed. Indyk calls these emblems "images" or "idea images", and they usually reappear within the story either transformed

---

> absences that suggest, but never reveal, the organizing principle of identity as a cause. Such acts, gestures, enactments, generally construed, are *performative* in the sense that the essence or identity that they otherwise purport to express are *fabrications* manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and other discursive means. That the gendered body is performative suggests that it has no ontological status apart from the various acts which constitute its reality. This also suggests that if that reality is fabricated as an interior essence, that very interiority is an effect and function of a decidedly public and social discourse, *the public regulation of phantasy through the surface politics of the body*, the gender border control that differentiates inner from outer, and so institutes the "integrity" of the subject. (Butler, *Gender Trouble* 185, my emphasis, C.S.)

[28] As Margreta De Grazia writes *à propos* Shakespeare and the reign of Queen Elizabeth: "As the law itself under Elizabeth confirmed by more severely prosecuting fornication between men and women than between men, nothing threatens a patriarchal and hierarchic social formation more than a promiscuous womb." (Grazia 276)

or altered in a way that, metonymically or metaphorically, a larger idea is conveyed. These "idea images" often appear in couplets and bring to light certain contradictions that confer dynamism and expressive richness in Malouf's writing.[29] It is in this regard that there is another scene in *An Imaginary Life* that evokes and complements the one we have just quoted. It is a scene in which Ovid recalls his early childhood at Sulmo, when he and his brother were taken care of by the housekeepers. He remembers how his father's lover taunted his older brother, the heir of the estate, taking him by his prick and making him walk like a goose. Ovid is made aware of the irony by recalling the scene within the frame of a recollection. It is then that he recognizes his father's lover. In this case, there is nothing wrong with his father having a lover, and this time the scene is relaxed and fun:

> I watch again as one of the girls, her skirt hitched up over her bare legs, her arms gleaming wet, takes my brother by the prick and leads him round the tub like a goose, while all the women throw their heads back and laugh, and the children splash and clap their hands and toss suds in the air. And I realize suddenly, nearly fifty years after the event, that this must be the girl my father is sleeping with. I see her lead my brother, the little heir to

---

[29] Ivor Indyk, *David Malouf:* "The emblematic technique Malouf employs (…) gives him distance from his subject, allowing the kind of exploration that might be inhibited by closer identification (…) and some of the most memorable moments of *An Imaginary Life* (…) are memorable precisely because of their emblematic quality, the framing of the figure and the sense of distance both working to intensify their expression of desire." (Indyk 47) Then, he quotes Malouf in an interview by Ray Willibanks: "I've always structured a novel as I would have structured a poem, that is to find something that interested me and then let the novel create itself by association around that idea, by its oppositions, by its metaphorical extensions rather by its necessary logical ones, and so the structure of the novel is often clearer around certain images or idea images than it is in terms of plot or chronology." (Willbanks 47)

all this world, round the sopping kitchen floor while the women show their gapped teeth and hold their sides and laugh. It is a vision of utter joyfulness; and I am at the center of it, understanding, for the last time perhaps, a little of its mystery. (80)

As we will see, Ovid's life will be a journey towards the mystery the world of women embody.

In both scenes, it is difficult to say what really happened. Had Augustus' sister been unfaithful to her faithful husband? Was the girl who was teasing Ovid's brother really sleeping with their father? The point is that it is not what actually occurs, but how we view things, that matters. Patriarchy has to make up what it does not control in order to show that it controls. That is the reason why Augustus exiles Ovid. The blind spot of the neurosis is the unequal relation between men and women, which turns women into men's possessions, and that it only serves to measure men up against men and mediates all relationships – those between men and women and those between men - through power. The childhood scene around the hot tub serves to soften the gravity with which men imbue their patriarchal values, inviting the reader to choose between a violent and domineering version of patriarchy or a lighter and understanding one.

In the patriarchal tradition that Malouf transvalues, there is an emblematic scene from the English literary tradition that he magnificently subverts in *An Imaginary Life*. I think it deserves some attention. In *An Imaginary Life*, it will be complemented by the last scene, in which Ovid dies and the Child departs towards the unknown by the river Ister. This idea first appears in Petrach's (1304-1374) "Una candida cerva sopra l'erba", which Thomas Wyatt (1503-1542) famously adapted into English under the title "Whoso list to hunt", when introducing the Italian sonnet to England.

The Petrarchan sonnet "Una candida cerva sopra l'erba" belongs to the courtly love tradition, which has its origins precisely in Ovid's *Ars Amatoria*. The courtly love tradition was a code of behavior that ruled over the platonic love relationships between aristocrats in Medieval Western Europe, at a time when marriages amounted to business deals and political alliances. In

these Sonnets, Petrarch celebrates Laura's beauty and Wyatt celebrates his beloved's beauty, most likely Anne Boleyn (1502-1536), married to Henry VIII (1491-1547). Both women were faithfully married, but in the aristocratic circles of Wyatt's time women were a mere trophy that added to the wealth of men and also reflected their political influence. The Tudors had succeeded in separating the figure of the King from the Catholic Church, Henry VIII soon becoming the head of the Anglican Church and concentrating absolute power, including the thorny jurisdiction over sexual matters. Courting Anne Boylen was a certain source of anxiety and ensured failure, apart from risking the death penalty.[30] As it turned out, Anne Boylen was executed after being charged

[30] The themes of 'unrequited love' and 'forsaken love' for an ideal woman were characteristic of the Petrarchan sonnet up until Shapeskeare. Petrarch dedicates all his Sonnets to Laura. But nowhere in the tradition as in Wyatt does the poet feel such an intense powerlessness, his beloved Anne Boylen being married to the fearsome Henry VIII. The poet can only conceive of her in 'fear and trembling'. Moreover, Wyatt is surrounded by rival suitors and competitors, making it difficult to tell apart love from power games at court:

Whoso list to hunt, I know where is an hind, / But as for me, helas, I may no more. / The vain travail hath wearied me so sore, / I am of them that farthest cometh behind. / Yet may I by no means my wearied mind / Draw from the deer, but as she fleeth afore / Fainting I follow. I leave off therefore, / Since in a net I seek to hold the wind. / Who list her hunt, I put him out of doubt, / As well as I may spend his time in vain. / And graven with diamonds in letters plain / There is written, her fair neck round about: / Noli me tangere, for Caesar's I am, / And wilde for to hold, though I seem tame.

In the first stanza the poet is speaking to other potential lovers while hunting the deer (Anne Boylen) without any success. In the next stanza a paradoxical situation is staged: the poet knows he cannot succeed but won't renounce his desire for her. He is forced to give up because chasing her is like trying to "hold the wind in a net". The diamond necklace signals that she belongs to Henry VIII, and *noli me tangere* is a quotation from the Latin bible, the words of the risen Christ

with having had affairs with several noblemen, including her brother. They were also all executed. Wyatt himself was imprisoned for the same reason and saw Anne Boylen being executed from his prison cell. In Wyatt's poetry, love affairs intermingle with power games, and failure in one sphere is projected onto the other. Compared to Petrarch's, Wyatts' poetry exudes deep anxiety: courting Anne Boylen was very risky, and it meant measuring himself up to rival suitors and competitors at court, including Henry VIII. (Cerezo and Concha Muñoz 155-162) We could imagine Ovid seeing himself enmeshed in this sort of power ploys and having not emerged unscathed from them. Life in Tomis would feel like purgatory, until the Child (his Beatrice) appears to show him the way.

In both Petrarch and Wyatt's Sonnets, a deer symbolizes the beloved, and a love triangle is displayed: the king/husband, the poet and the beloved, Wyatt adding in the rival suitors. In *An Imaginary Life,* Ovid comes across a deer in a dream. He is aware that coming across the Child has transformed him, giving him new hopes and a new horizon to his existence in Tomis. It also has metamorphosed his world. Ovid dreams that he is transformed into a pool of water - he mirrors the moon, the birds. It slowly grows dark and it gets cold. Suddenly, he hears footsteps. It is a deer that approaches to drink. What follows is a scene full of sensuality and eroticism: Ovid feels the tongue of the deer lapping a bit and he breaks in circles. Having satiated its thirst, the deer leaves and, shortly after, Ovid hears more footsteps. He is afraid that this time it might be a wolf, selfish and evil, and prepares for the worst.

From the following passage, the highly charged erotic experiences between Ovid and the Child need to be emphasized. Ovid's experience also oscillates from contentment (he reflects sunlight and feels "warm", feels the "suddenness of wings") to horror (the night comes and he is afraid of freezing and breaking into "ice crystals") in his interaction with the environment, as it

to Mary Magdalene (Titian 1511-12), that refer to the divine ascendancy of the king and symbolize the absolute power of the Henry VIII.

will oscillate from pleasure to horror in the intersubjective experience between him, the deer and the wolf:

> I fall asleep almost immediately, and dream. What I half thought in the woods yesterday, while we were watching the Child, is true. We have all been transformed, the whole group of us, and become part of the woods. We are mushrooms, we are stones – I recognize my companions. I am a pool of water. I feel myself warm in the sunlight, liquid, filled with the blue of the sky; but I am the merest broken fragment of it and I feel, softly, the clouds passing through me, their reflections, and once the suddenness of wings. Slowly it grows dark. A breeze shivers my surface. And as darkness passes over me I begin to be afraid. My spirit hovers somewhere close and will, I know, come back to me when I wake. But I am afraid suddenly to be just a pool of rain in the forest, feeling the night creep over me, feeling myself grow cold and fill with starlight, feeling the temperature drop. I consider what it might be like to freeze. I imagine that. But only at the edges of myself, as the first ice crystals click into shape. It is fearful. What would happen to my spirit then? I lie in the dark of the forest waiting for the moon. And softly, nearby, there are footsteps. A deer. The animal's face leans towards me. I am filled with tenderness for it. Its tongue touches the surface of me, lapping a little. It takes part of me into itself, but I do not feel at all diminished. The sensation on the surface of me is extraordinary, I break in circles. Part of me enters the deer, which lifts its head slowly, and moves away over the leaves. I feel part of me moving away, and the rest falls still again, settles, goes clear. What if a wolf came, I suddenly ask myself? What if the next tongue that touched me were the wolf's tongue, rough, greedy, drinking me down to the last drop and leaving me dry? That too is possible. I imagine it, being drawn up into the wolf's belly. I prepare for it. (55-56)

Malouf's description of the deer shakes the tradition and subverts the intertext just referred to above and dominated by the figure of Henry VIII, a despot. Clearly, Malouf subverts the tradition because there is intercourse between the poet and the deer. Intercourse takes place in a

natural surrounding as a natural response to a natural urge: thirst. The deer drinking from the pool of water satiates desire; both the poet and the deer achieve their deepest wish. This interpretation reinforces that the core message of *An Imaginary Life* is to critique patriarchy, and it allows us to further specify what it is about patriarchy that Malouf abhors: oppression, cruelty, greed an unbridled desire that kills instead of giving life. That is, everything the figure of the wolf stands for. Ovid also disambiguates the mixed feelings with which the deer was presented in the Renaissance Sonnets, especially in Wyatt, by liberating the deer from male possession. The wolf catalyzes patriarchal values in the dream. But Ovid belongs to the patriarchal world, and he sometimes will behave with the Child in the same way in which men behave towards women: "All these weeks I have been following my own plan for the Child, and have never for one moment thought of him as anything but a creature of my will, a figure in my dream."[31] (103) As we know, children, women and the foreigner have been put in the same basket, standing as the other of the white heterosexual male.

Apart from fulfilling the poet's desire, the dream has a deeper significance. We are in the child's world – the dream has enacted a regression to Lacan's imaginary phase.[32] The Law of the

---

[31] It is worth putting the quote in context, as Ovid mentions he is feeling guilty for having captured the Child:

> I wait, with Ryzak, for the Child to exhaust himself. He sinks against the wall at last, with his nails bloody, and I am filled with pity for him, and with a terrible feeling suddenly of guilt; but I cannot touch him. All these weeks… (103)

[32] Madan Sarup, in *Post-structuralism and Postmodernism,* explains the Lacanian distinction between the imaginary and the symbolic n the following terms: "'Imaginary' is the term used by Lacan to designate that order of the subject's experience which is dominated by identification and duality. Within the Lacanian scheme it not only precedes the symbolic order, which introduces the subject to language and Oedipal triangulation, but continues to coexist afterwards." (Sarup 22) He further

father and social conventions, including language, have been suspended. In Lacan, the child experiences desire as something ubiquitous and genderless, like Ovid in his dream mirroring the whole of nature. Moreover, unlike Wyatt's poem, Ovid does not suggest anywhere that the deer is female; we are not told whether the wolf of the dream is male or female, and throughout the novel Ovid prefers using the generic 'the Child' instead of 'the boy'.[33] In this way, the loving nature of the deer and the voracious nature of the wolf are not presented as gender-specific attributes; they stand for good and evil, respectively, in the logic of Ovid's dream.[34] The logic of the dream does not need to be consistent with the whole of the tradition it belongs to. Mythical figures, like cultural constructions of men and women, are full of contradictions. For Rousseau, men are good by nature and it is society that corrupts; contrary to Rousseau, Hobbes believes that in the state of nature,

---

elaborates that he imaginary stage is the 'mirror stage', and compares it with Freud's pre-Oedipal stage: "The imaginary order is pre-Oedipal. The self yearns to fuse with what is perceived as Other. The child confuses others with its own mirror reflections; and since the self is formed from a composite of introjections based on such mis-recognitions, it can hardly constitute a unified personality. In other words, we experience a profoundly divided self." (Sarup 25)

[33] 'Deer' is the generic word for stag (male deer) and hind (female deer). 'Wolf' can be used both as a generic word or as referring to male, whereas we need to add the personal pronoun 'she' to specify gender: she-wolf.

[34] As Derrida says in *The Beast and the Sovereign, vol. I*, one thing is the stories each culture creates around the figure of the wolf and the other is the real wolf that does not know anything about Estates, nations, cultures and languages:

> Without asking permission, real wolves cross humankind's national and institutional frontiers, and his sovereign nation-states; wolves out in nature as we say, real wolves, are the same on this side or the other side of the Pyrenees or the Alps; but the figures of the wolf belong to cultures, nations, languages, myths, fables, fantasies, histories. (5-6)

homo homine lupus, and that it is society that must correct this deviation. Women are likewise represented sometimes as angels and sometimes as demons. The wolf in Western culture is mostly represented as rapacious, ferocious and as announcing war,[35] but there is the exception of the story of Romulus and Remus, who were found and suckled by a She-Wolf, and several legends about feral children having grown among wolves also point towards a gentler nature of wolves.[36] What Ovid faces in his dreams are two cultural symbols: the deer symbolizes love and the wolf greed. The experience of erotic desire in Lacan's imaginary phase opens up new possibilities of experiencing sexual desire that is not limited to heterosexual or homosexual intercourse: desire can translate into all sorts of edifying intersubjective experiences, including child rearing and childcaring.[37]

Fortunately, the footsteps are the Child's, who, like the deer, kneels, takes a handful of water, drinks, and leaves. The encounter with the Child overflows Ovid with pleasure, dissolving his ego in waves:

---

[35] Comparing the dove and the wolf, Derrida compares their symbology in the following words:

> What the dove's footsteps and the wolf's footsteps have in common is that one scarcely hears them. But the one announces war, the war chief, the sovereign who orders war, the other silently orders peace. (4)

[36] For example, Michael Newton recounts the stories of the most popular feral children in Western history, including the story of Kamala and Amala, supposedly breast fed and raised by wolves. He also recounts the history of Romulus and Remus as a miracle of nature's unbounded love: "Nature's mercy admonishes humanity's unnatural cruelty: only a miracle of *kindness* can restore the imbalance created by human iniquity. From this experience the city may begin over again, refunded in the Building of Rome." (Newton, Kindle file)

[37] In Freudian psychoanalysis, the genesis of sexual desire must be sought in infancy, involving drives and instincts. Sexual desire encompasses the whole of experience.

> Another footfall, softer than the first. I know already, it is the Child. I see him standing taller than the deer against the stars. He kneels. He stoops towards me. He does not lap like the deer, but leaning close so that his breath shivers my surface, he scoops up a handful, starlight dripping from his fingers in bright flakes that tumble towards me, and drinks. I am broken again. The disturbance is fearful, a noisy crashing of waves against the edges of me. And when I settle he is gone. I am still, reflecting starlight. I sleep, I wake. (57)

Having analyzed the manifest content of the dream, that is, the figures of the pool of water, the deer, the wolf and the Child, we have related it to its latent content: an erotic search for pleasure. Erotic pleasure is, by definition, intersubjective, it is a longing for the other. It is original. The latent content can also be interpreted as Ovid's need and longing for affection and tenderness to compensate for his isolation, first, from the Roman world and, then, from the Getae. The Child symbolizes Ovid's soul mate from his childhood, someone whose mere existence puts things into place, like Ovid's older brother did: "I am reminded of my brother, and realize what he means to me this Child, what it might mean to lose him."[38] (112) someone with whom to feel at home with, someone whom to love and cherish.

It should be noted that in this dream the narrative voice personifies elements of nature (the pool of water, the sky) and anthropomorphizes the wolf and the deer, perhaps also the Child (is He animal, human or God?), the wolf and the deer embodying conflicting human values. There is an echo of the "morality plays" that influenced Restoration comedy and the XVIII century in England, in which symbolic names stand for human virtues or vices (such as Volpone for the fox and Celia for goodness in Ben Jonson's satirical comedy *Volpone*). In the dream, we find in a

[38] It puts Ovid into place in the same way that the Law of the Father does in Lacan's account. Ovid's older brother's death turned everything upside down.

condensed form what is at stake in *An Imaginary Life*. The narrative voice dissociates human character traits from specific gender roles, thus inviting the reader to assess the dream critically.

It is surprising that in this novel, in which the longing for the warmth of home, the familiar and the hearth are so often and so movingly portrayed, no woman appears. So far in *An Imaginary Life*, we have been told mainly a story that involves men: Ovid, Augustus, Ovid's father and brother, Ryzak and his grandson. Ryzak's mother is presented as an old hag, and his stepdaughter, being from another village is accepted as an adopted child because she is the mother of her grandson; she has a good heart but is powerless. Similarly, Ovid told us about Augustus' sister because her behavior could pollute what Augustus' stood for. Finally, in the recollection of the household women in his childhood home at Sulmo, the "woman's world" (79) is presented as festive, childish, a world shared by "women and children," (80) and innocent. These are all the women that appear in the novel. *An Imaginary Life* portrays mainly a men's world.[39]

When it makes its appearance, the world of women is a world in which the stiffness of social conventions relaxes. When his father is out during the harvest months and his mother in bed with hay fever, Ovid and his brother are put in the same bed with the children of the household keepers and slaves; they are also bathed together. The bathing scene is disorderly and festive: "We children, perhaps a dozen or more, splashing about together or paddling in pools on the floor, all shrieking and starting away wherever one of the women, their arms already holding in the big fluffy

[39] In his interview with Candida Baker, and at her prompt that "it's hard to feel as much sympathy for your female characters" because they do not "seem quite as real", Malouf acknowledges: "If you are a writer you work with your weaknesses and I think most male writers over the last few years have become selfconscious about stepping too easily into the female point of view. I mean people like Henry James did it all the time and there were no difficulties there. But over these last years we've become more sensitive about that issue. We stick to what we see and know." (Baker 240-241)

white towels, reaches out and makes a grab for us." (79) The bathing scene recalls a harmless festive Dionysian orgy. It is in this scene when one of the girls takes Ovid's brother "by the prick" and makes him walk "like a goose", unabashedly mocking his status as heir. In the mornings, Ovid looks "scandalized" when he sees the women stopping and making a "mocking obeisance to the scarlet-stained figures of Priapus that are set in the midst of the wheat to scare off birds." (80) The mocking attitude of women contains all the elements of Bacchanalian revelry - it is potentially subversive. This potential is held in abeyance in normal circumstances, but the presence of the Child in Tomis is going to unleash it.

The story in *An Imaginary Life* tells us what happens when men ignore, underestimate, oppose or simply fail to take into account women. It is a fact that Malouf's writings are mostly about men and that women appear as a light of contrast that serve to illuminate some aspect of men's world in an experimental fashion, perhaps the only exception being *AIL*, in which the power of women rooted in mystery counteracts the world of men absolutely. Yet, at the end, we are left with the image of Ovid and the Child all on their own, escaping into the woods.[40]

Halfway into the novel, at the end of Chapter 2, the Child is captured. The novel has 5 Chapters, all more or less of the same length. From Chapter 3 on, the power struggle between Ryzak, Ovid and the Child against the women is what confers rhythm and dramatic tension to the story. For whatever reason, the women are wary of the Child, and Ovid has to assume both the father and the mother role with him: "Since the first occasion the women have refused to touch him. When he fouls himself I must wash him down." (67) Maybe the women fear the Child because they feel there is something unnatural about the Child and Ovid relationship. Like Frank Harland,

---

[40] Arguably, Janet in *Remembering Babylon* is the most charismatic female character to appear in Malouf's novels. However, her role within the novel is limited by the constrictions of what a woman can accomplish in a men's world. On the other hand, as we will see, the matriarchy that Malouf presents in *Harland's Half Acre* is to serve as a light of contrast to the world of men.

the Child seems to have come to existence as if through a "bright hole in reality" (*Harland's Half Acre*, 22), and as in the relationship between Frank and his father, Clem Harland, no women mediate in the relationship between Ovid and the Child.[41] From the beginning, Ovid has claimed the Child, washing, feeding and nurturing him. Strictly speaking, Ovid *fathers* the Child: he is both who has brought him into the village, conferring on him a social existence, even if a marginal one, and takes care and protects the Child.

Ovid soon senses the trouble he has got himself into. When he washes the Child, he sees that "all along the spine there is a hairline, reddish in color like a fox", that to him does not mean much, but "terrifies the women". For them, "it is some sort of sign." The women's gossip gives wings to Lulo's imagination, who does not see that the hardened feet and worn out toenails are the result of the Child going barefoot in all weathers. When Ovid takes him and puts him in front of the Child, and asks him what he sees, Ovid realizes that what the boy "imagines is much more powerful than the facts." (69)

The shaman and the women team up against Ovid and the Child, trying to get Ryzak on their side through his grandchild. But Ryzak decides to support Ovid:

> The old woman and the boy's mother, I know, are encouraging him in this, because of his influence with the old man. But Ryzak, for what reason I do not know, remains my

---

[41] Even if the Child must have been biologically born from a woman's womb, the Child is given to Ovid directly from nature, without having been socialized. In *Harland's Half Acre*, as we will see, the narrative voice goes to great lengths to eliminate any female influence in the conception of Frank:

> The more he thought about it the more it seemed to him that he had had no mother at all but had been born out of some aspect of his father that was itself feminine; not in being soft or yielding, but in being, quite simply, powerful, and so full of animal warmth that it must inevitably give birth to something other than itself. (12)

> supporter in the business. Against the women. And against the shaman, who has come only once to examine the Child, and on that occasion refused to sing – another fact that the women mutter over and hold against me. The shaman and the women, of course, are in league. (70)

Fortunately, the good weather comes and Ovid and the Child move to an annexed outhouse from where they can come and go as they wish and do as they please. During that time, they avoid places where they can come across people from the village, particularly "a little grove to the west which is sacred to the women, and where at certain phases of the moon they sacrifice to Hecate with the entrails of a dog." (85) But when summer is over and winter approaches, Ovid begins to be wary about moving back with the Child into the main house and the stables, where they will all have to live together. Ovid realizes then how much during summer he has lived apart with the Child and been disconnected from the people of Tomis.

When he shares his worries with Ryzak, the head of the village reassures him: "No no, my friend, you must trust me. They will not trouble the boy." (97) Nevertheless, Ovid has his doubts. He is aware that as they will resume their life together, the suppressed reticence, suspicion and sullenness between the men and the women of the house may explode at any moment. Since the power of the women is not based on physical strength and the authority of the law, but is based on other subtler, more mysterious means, Ryzak will be able to do little to save them.

Ovid has been observing Ryzak and his mother long enough to know that the old woman resents "the male strength she once gave him and which all these years has been the source of his ascendancy over her"; he has seen Ryzak beating her, bringing out her "real hostility" towards her son, (123) and he is also aware of Ryzak's real fear, deep inside, of his mother, the shaman and the spirits they sacrifice to, who are the real masters of his world:

> But I am not convinced. I am inclined to think that for all his position as headman, and for all his quiet assumption of authority, Ryzak holds less sway over the village than he would have me believe, and less sway, also, over the house. Behind his male prerogative,

> established in law, lies the darker power of the women. The old woman his mother, especially, has a strange ascendancy over him. He shouts at her, and once or twice I have seen him strike her. But his spirit quails before hers, I feel it. In some darker area of belief, it is her demons, the old spirits she mutters to under her breath and sacrifices to by moonlight, who are the powerful beings of this world, and Ryzak knows it. He is scared of her magic, as he is scared also of the shaman. All he has on his side is bodily strength and the authority, such as it is, of the law. (97)

Shortly after that, several incidents increase the old woman's suspicion that under the Child's appearance hides an evil spirit that will bring doom to the house. The worst cases happen when the Child refuses to obey Ovid and has a tantrum that startles all of them. The first time, the boy reacts in the same way as an annoyed, deeply hurt dog or wolf would react: howling, scratching the walls, showing his teeth and hands menacingly. "Behind me", Ovid says, "the women", observing. (103) Then, on still days when they can open the windows, the child becomes "crazy with joy, rocking on his heels at the edge of the sill, and making little whimpering sounds like a puppy." (109) Also, in the long periods during which they must remain enclosed in the room, the boy sinks into a deep "sullenness", and once, when Ovid tries to cheer him up imitating the sounds of one of the animals that the Child had taught him in their outings together, he becomes "hysterical", persuading the "old woman that he is no child but a beast in disguise who has wheedled his way in" among them. (110) To top it all, the Child has a fever, confirming the old woman's suspicion that he is possessed by a beast from the woods that, now, wants to break out among them, and also confirming Ovid in his premonition that their living together would end in disaster.

The old woman refuses to help provide the medicine that would help the Child. Hostilities increase to the point that Ovid has to watch over her as well to make sure that the Child will not be hurt:

> The old woman watches from across the room. I know what she is thinking. This is no ordinary fever. The Child is wrestling with his demon, the animal spirit who protected him out there in the forest, and is fighting now to get back. When I appeal to her for some sort of medicine, some of the herbs she gathers and makes portions of, she shakes her head and turns her thumb down, spitting. I have to watch the Child day and night. If she thought for even a moment that the spirit might triumph and enter the Child's body again, she would cut his throat. I know it. (112)

The Child becomes a catalyst of the war between the old woman and Ovid, and also between the old woman and Ryzak, since Ryzak has supported Ovid in his business all along. As events unfold, the old woman will describe what happens from her point of view and her worldview, saying, for instance, that the evil spirit possessing the Child's body is the "white wolf" that is "struggling to get out of it." (113) Everything will confirm her in her belief: at the climax of his fever, the Child utters a human word, making her and the young woman believe that it is the boy Lullo who has spoken through the Child, and that the white wolf has jumped into her great grandson's body while he was dreaming himself away in the woods as children his age normally do. All this devastates Lullo's mother, who has been helping Ovid against the old woman, and shakes Ryzak's spirit, who cannot bear to think of the possibility of his grandson dying. Should this happen, Ovid is convinced that Ryzak's suppressed anger would fall upon him and the Child, (120) which means that Ryzak also, finally, would believe in the power and admonitions of his mother.

Indeed, the Child recovers and Lullo sickens. However, he finally recovers, but Ryzak's spirit has been deeply hit. The old woman will repeat over and over again that it has been thanks to her magic and her potions that Lullo has been saved, and that it was Ryzak's thoughtlessness that put them all in jeopardy, particularly Lullo, being the most vulnerable. We are in a new scenario. Now, "it is the old woman who rules." (123) Shortly after that, Ryzak falls ill. Then, everybody knows that this is the real struggle and that Ryzak is going to lose it: the old woman

says that "the boy's illness was a diversion" (127); the shaman visits Ryzak and rapidly "flees with his magic before it too is contaminated." (128) Ryzak suffers an agonizing and horrible death.

The old woman has won the battle.

What is the moral of the story? That power is really on the side of women, and that Ovid has failed to act accordingly.[42] What also calls the reader's attention is that Ovid has seen all along that power is on the women's side, for example when saying that Ryzak shuddered in the presence of his mother because he was afraid of the demons and dark forces she worshipped at night under the moon. However much Ovid criticized his father's and Augustus' patriotism, civic virtues, the military, that is, patriarchal values in general, he still saw the world through men's eyes. As the French feminist and existentialist philosopher, Simone de Beauvoir (1908-1986) put it in *The Second Sex* (1949): "… the categories in which men think of the world are established *from their point of view, as absolute*: they misconceive reciprocity, here as everywhere. A mystery for man, woman is considered to be mysterious in essence." (de Beauvoir 286) Ovid sees that power is on the side of women but feels helpless when confronted by it because in the patriarchal frame of mind in which he finds himself, women can only be conceived of as essentially mysterious, dark, irrational and incomprehensible. Nothing can be done. [43]

---

[42] Malouf himself has expressed this view in an interview with Candida Baker:

Malouf: ... One of the things that happens in *An Imaginary Life* is that Ovid (...) fails to see that the power is really with...

Interviewer: The women.

Malouf: That's right and he has put all his eggs in the other basket. (Baker, 241)

[43] At the time I am writing this, January 9th 2014, the 106th birthday of Simone de Beauvoir has been celebrated in Google with a new 'doodle' on the feminist writer. She is in fashion again. Why doesn't Ovid try to make amends with the old woman? According to Simone de Beauvoir, giving up trying to understand requires less effort and is less troublesome (Simone de Beauvoir's

Ovid's situation in Rome in relation to his father first and, later, Augustus is reversed in Tomis, even if the patriarchal frame of mind in which he lives, as we have just said, remains unaltered – Ovid simply exchanges places. Within Roman rule, he felt more at ease on the side of mystery, glamour and poetry. Everything on that side was possibility. In Tomis, Ovid seeks Ryzak's support in order to capture the Child and against the old woman, who thinks that in the Roman Empire a 'poet' is some sort of wizard and that Ovid plans to use the Child to make a more potent charm against her. (98) Augustus is unable to live with mystery and ambiguity, he can't tolerate the existence of subversive forces within his Empire in the same way that Ovid is unable to do

---

partner, Sartre famously stated that for men, women mean 'trouble') than trying to understand. It also strengthens the sense of self of man, his autonomy and his vanity:

> Of all these myths, none is more firmly anchored in masculine hearts than that of the feminine "mystery". It has numerous advantages. And first of all it permits an easy explanation of all that appears inexplicable; the man who "does not understand" a woman is happy to substitute an objective resistance for a subjective deficiency of mind; instead of admitting his ignorance, he perceives the presence of a "mystery" outside himself: an alibi, indeed, that flatters laziness and vanity at once. A heart smitten with love thus avoids many disappointments: if the loved one's behavior is capricious, her remarks stupid, then the mystery serves to excuse it all. And finally, thanks again to the mystery, that negative relation is perpetuated which seemed to Kierkegaard infinitely preferable to positive possession; in the company of a living enigma man remains alone – alone with his dreams, his hopes, his fears, his love, his vanity. This subjective game, which can go all the way from vice to mystical ecstasy, is for many a more attractive experience than an authentic relation with a human being. What foundations exist for such profitable illusion? (de Beauvoir, The Second Sex, 285-286)

anything apart from witnessing the power of the old woman rooted in mystery and that is going to irremediably destroy him. Occupying different positions in the social ladder, Augustus and Ovid live under the spell of social conventions, which establish a rigid gender asymmetry. In Tomis, the old woman's power haunts and paralyzes Ovid.

An Imaginary Life ends in pastoral exile. Ovid and the Child escape towards the woods, far from social conventions, the rule of law and, not without irony, the potent charms and spiritual power of the women. It is a place where they will finally feel free and at ease with themselves. The novel conflates a circular structure and a linear structure: the eternal return of the same and progress. It begins with Ovid's recollection of when he was a child at Sulmo, aged five, six or eight. He remembers a wolf boy with whom he shared a language of their own devising. The odd thing was that Ovid was the only one who could see him – not even his twin brother could see the Child. When Ovid reached maturity and entered the world of language and norms, the Child disappeared. Now, at the end of his life, he finds himself with the Child in the woods again, waiting for the last transformation: he will lay on the soil and let the pores of his body take in the grains of sand composing the earth in the same way that there is commerce between the sky and our lungs when we breathe. The wheel of life takes Ovid in so that it will be able to throw him back to life again one day, in a better world and as a better person ("we are creating the lineaments of some final man"), and love is the primal mover: "We are moving, all of us, in our common humankind, through the forms we love so deeply in one another, to what our hands have already touched in lovemaking and our bodies strain towards in each other's darkness." (23) Ovid has finally found himself in his old age, and he will die "immeasurably, unbearably happy" (153) watching the Child walk away towards the north up the river Ister. It is spring, it is warm in the late afternoon and the scene is lively and it comforts Ovid. It contrasts with Ovid's dream, when he dreamt that he was a pool of water and a deer and the Child came to drink from him. "There are no wolves," (151) he says. In the dream it was nighttime, and as it happens in dreams and at night, Ovid was not sure who was approaching or for what purpose. Moreover, he was a pool of stagnant water. Now, the

river Ister flows abundantly, there are no shadows. The river flows as life itself, and on it, Ovid can see the Child moving away into some further being:

> He is walking on the water's light. And as I watch, he takes the first step off it, moving slowly away now into the deepest distance, above the earth, above the water, on air. (153)

In a deconstructive fashion, Malouf aims at a reconsideration of men and women's power pivoting between the forces of nature and culture, dreams and wakefulness, childhood and adulthood, mystery and normalcy, barbarism and civilization, exile and citizenship. As Malouf states it in his afterword,[44] he will have Ovid undergo the experience of transformation he portrayed so often in his poems. The I will abandon the subject position in order to meet the other: the imaginary, the unconscious, the semiotic, exile. When Ovid says: "the Child is there," (152) we can infer that he is here, where the subject position always is. In the last sentence of the novel, Ovid says: "I am there", meaning that he has met the other; he has died.

Analysis of Men and Women's Power In *Harland's Half Acre*

Harland's Half Acre is a much longer and ambitious novel than *An Imaginary Life*. It has an epic air since it tries to capture the spirit of Australia in the first half of the twentieth century and the building of a national identity as it is represented in the work of Frank Harland, a gifted painter. Events that indirectly affect the story line and Frank Harland's art include the World Wars, the economic recession in-between and Australia's economic and political booming as an active agent in world affairs after World War II.

[44] In the afterword to *An Imaginary Life*, Malouf justifies why he chose Ovid as the main character of his novel: "My purpose was to make this glib fabulist of 'the changes' live out in reality what had been, in his previous existence, merely the occasion for dazzling literary display." (156)

The formal structure and content of *Harland's Half Acre* resemble that of an *An Imaginary Life*. As Malouf explains in his interview with Candida Baker, he set out to create a mainly male household where the absence of women would be strongly felt and, then, contrast it to a household where the active members of the family and those who held power were mainly women. *Harland's Half Acre* is a sort of experiment in gender analysis and power. In the novel, we see how men and women access and exercise power in different ways. According to Malouf, talking about the differences on how men and women deal with power is talking about two different "cultures":

> I wanted to show a suffocatingly all-male household in which the absence of women would be strongly felt, then I wanted a household where women would not only have all the power but would be the moving figures, and the second household in the book is something like that. Two households, two cultures. I've always been interested in where power lies, what kind of power it is, and what kind of power the men have and what kind of power the women have." (Baker 241)

In *An Imaginary Life*, we saw how these two cultures collided, first in the figures of the Emperor, symbol of patriarchy, and Ovid, a cheerful poet – he refers to his poetry as "gay" (19) – whose aim was to parody everything the Emperor stood for, and, later on, on the one hand in the figures of Ovid and Ryzak, and on the other Ryzak's mother. In spite of the fact that in the interview Malouf talks about two cultures, we must emphasize that in both *An Imaginary Life* and *Harland's Half Acre* the female culture mainly serves the purpose of shedding light on male culture and male concerns as a point of contrast. The formal structure of *An Imaginary Life* resembles that of *Harland's Half Acre* because both Ovid and Frank Harland's worlds are deeply transformed due to their neglect, ignorance or inability to cope with or take into account female culture. In both novels, the story reaches its zenith at the moment of this realization.

Harland's Half Acre is made up of six Chapters: 'Killarney', 'An Only Child', 'Knack', 'Nephews', 'Harland's Half Acre' and 'The Island'. The first two chapters take up almost half of the book, and they respectively tell the lives of the Harlands and the Vernonts.

The story of the Harlands revolves around Clem Harland. Originally Irish immigrants to Australia, the Harlands had taken possession of a considerable amount of land to use as pasture after a "brief bloody encounter" (3) and, imposing white man's law, named it after the place in Ireland they came from, Killarney. The area wasn't cattle country: "In fact it was the ruins of a folly. This had never been cattle country." (24) However, the Harland's were convinced that with enough effort and perseverance they would succeed. Eventually, one of the Harlands lost an important part of his state in a game of cards, another one drunk it away, another had to foreclosure on credit and was expropriated, and what was left was taken away "by sly cousins, envious brothers-in-law, fly neighbours," (31) until just a parcel and the remnants of a farmhouse were left. That is where Clem scrapes by as best as he can as a farmer.

In brief, this is the Harlands' story as told by Clem, Frank's father. It tells them who they are by linking their lineage to a mystified glorious past: "Harlands are brought up on the story of how they won and then lost the land." (3)

Clem will repeatedly mourn over his bad luck at not having inherited anything from his family's estate, as if everything you could own in life had to be passed on to you or obtained in inheritance or by a stroke of good luck, with no hard work or sacrifice behind it. He is a melancholic character.[45] Frank will soon perceive his father's weakness and indulgence looming

[45] This is what Clem tells Frank in one of their conversations:

> There must have been a time, you know, when it all was so solid and settled, their life up there. Well-to-do people with aristocratic connections, silver on the table, n'big vases n'marble statues and that. And in my time it was all gone, and I was grubbin' away at a few acres of what was left, milkin' seven days a week and always dog-tired with never a spare penny to buy a bit of luxury, and no real knowledge of anything except a few Latin verbs they taught me at Toowomba, and *algebra*! The prospect of it was enough t'make you cut yer throat. (22)

on his family line, and against which he will have to fight all his life. This weakness is described in terms of his father's not being able to stand his own ground or not being 'manly' enough:

> With regret, and without at all qualifying his affection for the man, Frank admitted it: his father was all self-indulgence and wistfulness, there was no strength in him; when the storm came he would run to some woman, hide his head in her lap and demand, like a child, to be smooged and mothered. (28-29)

In spite of Frank's harsh vision of his father, he will let himself be enchanted by his stories, which "Frank loved to hear", and that will provoke "the first stirring in him of a sense of his own power." (29) Manhood is a value the Harlands have lost, even if the conventions of patriarchy remain intact: none of Clem's sons will dare revolt against their father, with the exception of Jim, Frank's older brother. Frank and Tam will show a quasi-religious reverence for him.

Don Randall has pointed out the repressing effect of patriarchy and, more specifically, "masculine succession" in in *Harland's Half Acre*. He contends that Clem exploits the inertia of "unjust systems of power and priority with the sole alibi of not being the originators of the order whose benefits they enjoy," and argues that the novel suggests "that the convention of masculine priority may well be at the core of social and familial problems."

(Randall 96)

Clem Harland is a dreamy character who always tells stories around the same motif: he comes across a seductive young woman in the distance, whom he never quite apprehends or really approaches. These notions are a metaphor of the elusive presence women will have in his life until he reaches his old age, at the lowest point of his manliness, when he remarries and definitely settles. At the beginning of the novel, when he shares his stories with his first young, determined wife, Madge, she hopes that he will grow out of them soon and that she will be able to make "something" of him, that is, a "man". They are so poor they sleep under a quilt she made herself "out of some old calico tablecloths and a set of green velvet curtains from her mother's lounge." (4) The quilt will become a metaphor for Frank's art and reflect the determination and character

he will inherit from his mother.[46] They soon have two kids, Jim and Frank, but six months after Frank is born Madge dies of blood poisoning: "A rose thorn it had been. Blood poisoning. So sudden. He couldn't believe it." (7) At 23, a kid himself, Clem is left with two kids to take care of. It takes three years for Clem to marry again a girl called Sally. Just after they marry, they decide to send Frank away with Clem's sister, married with a fruit farmer and who had recently lost a son in France during World War I, Ned. Frank occupies his cousin's room, a room full of memories, especially for his aunt Ellen. (9) A surrogate child in his aunt's house, Frank is loved, receives a proper schooling and helps his uncle in his business, but misses his former life at Killarney.

Clem visits him on Sundays every other weekend. They sit together on a big rock overseeing Killarney, while his father tells him the stories of his forebears:

> His father's talk of his youth at Killarney, and the odd bits and pieces of family history he liked to retell, all mixed in as they were with myths, legends, jokes, facts, fables – these things explained to the boy's satisfaction, and more

---

[46] In a half conscious, half dreaming state, and after a period of utter turmoil, Frank has the experience of his mother sewing the quilt, which she actually did, but before Frank was born. This experience is interspersed with the recollection of everything he has painted up until then, and that roughly makes up half an acre:

> And there was a quilt, mostly green, that when darkness covered it like a second quilt showed its true colours. Hands had chosen them from a drawer full of remnants. The pads of fingers felt for ridges. They were stitches where a needle had gone through with the force of a hand behind it, and behind that a body. He mimicked, as he brought his own colours into being, the movement of that hand.
>
> The quilt was green beyond green, an island continent in the dark of his sleep. He had news of it and the news now must be spread. In colour, in colours. When all was done and the fragments gathered and laid side by side, he would have laid bare say half an acre… (178)

> convincingly than anything he had been told either at church or at school, both what he was and where he had come from, and gave him such a vision of Killarney itself that he knew just how it would look when he returned there. (13)

Having outlived his mother since he was six months, Frank's ties to his parents were restricted to his relationship with his father until he was three years old, when his father remarried and he was sent away with his uncles, and to his talks with his father when, hereafter, his father visited him every other Sunday. His father's visits made Frank cling to the "special quality of warmth" he remembered from his father's house and, "outside, a vivid greenness and expanse of blue." (8)

Frank missed his father and his older brother Jim a lot; Killarney was home. It was out of this longing for home and the "special quality of warmth" between father and son, that Frank created notions of his own, believing that…

> he had had no mother at all but had been born out of some aspect of his father that was itself feminine; not in being soft or yielding, but in being, quite simply, powerful, and so full of animal warmth that it must inevitably give birth to something other than itself. (12)

Frank had been taken care of by his father and was staying with his uncles from his father's side. It was only legitimate that he felt this way.

The special bond between father and son is based on bloodline succession, and *Harland's Half Acre* is a meditation on blood ties and the symbolism of blood. In the special relation Malouf wants to portray between Frank and his father, he transforms the latter into a sort of hermaphrodite that would have given birth to the boy all by himself. In this way, Malouf makes real in the boy's imagination the phantasy against nature of male conception and procreation, without the mediation of women:

> His father would have a suffering look, as if their being together like this, and for such a short spell, evoked pain as well as love, or as if those emotions were

> insolubly linked or were the same emotion in different forms; like the two forces, male and female, out of which his father, by a process that was not to be referred to and which obeyed other laws than the ones he had observed among animals and learned from the brute facts of the school yard, had brought him to birth. (12)

The birth of Frank Harland recalls the births of the Greek goddesses Athena, who was born out of his father's head, and Aphrodite, who was born from her father's cut genitals thrown out to the sea. Spellbound by his father's stories, Frank "could only have been breathed forth in a great bubble or spat bodily from his father's mouth." (12)

The medium, the "sacred thing" in the conception process was breath, "his father's *talk"* (12, Malouf's emphasis). It was thanks to his father's stories that Frank acquired a sense of belonging and had a clear picture in his mind of the status his family had once achieved through the ownership of a considerable state: "Killarney was the realest place he knew. It had been created for him entirely out of his father's mouth." (13) Clem still controls language and memory, the medium by which social conventions are maintained and passed on through different generations. It is important to stress that land, family and sense of selfhood cannot be extricated in the story of the Harlands. His father's stories root deep in him:

> These tales, woven out of his life, out of the countryside and the past of their family, went down into the boy's imagination, and as his hand moved on now from the heads of his sleeping brothers to freer landscapes of grass and cloud [Frank was beginning to discover his gift as artist], answered yet again, when he put it, the question of how he came to be Frank Harland and how he had got into the world – at what point in time and place and through what black hole in reality. (22)

As a result, early in his life, Frank will have a clear picture in his mind that, to keep his family united and recover its dignity, he will have to recover the lost state. Only in this way will all its members regain a true sense of identity and belonging again.

Needless to say, the story is told from a patriarchal stance, because it is grounded on a story of conquest and it roots family history to the achievements of its male members, however much they have decayed at present. It is also a stance that defies change by clinging to a glorious mystified past that must be recovered.

Frank's imaginary birth can be read as a parody of the patriarchal ideal of male succession. Clem is self-indulgent, proves unable to support a family and is portrayed as lacking all manhood qualities, which makes it easier for the reader to appreciate the irony of Frank's admiration for his father. The absence of a wife/mother also feminizes the figure of Clem in Frank's eyes; he must find both, a father and a mother, in his father. The scene can also be read as a parody of a civil society that renders women invisible from civil registrations and public life. As soon as they marry, women take their husband's last name, and so do the children. In Frank's life, his mother is simply not there, in the same way that women do not have a say in public life.[47]

Malouf gives a final twist to Frank's formation years and his aim to create a household in which most of its members are male. Sally, Frank's stepmother, dies of "Spanish 'flu'" (17) when Frank is eleven, which means that Frank will be able to move back with his father. In a way of thinking characteristic of Frank's age and primitive societies, so-called 'magical thinking', he believes it was his strong desire to move back with his father that made it happen: "No one would ever know the triumph he felt in having made all this happen," (16-17) and that "his will to return had been stronger than the woman's will to survive." (17)

Frank feels elated at the prospect of moving back to Killarney and relieved to leave his uncles' house, where he was a surrogate son occupying the place of his deceased cousin. Every

---

[47] A Marxist reading of *Harland's Half Acre* would affirm that the self-indulgence, hopelessness, ostracism and abjection of Clem derives from his position at the bottom of the social ladder, and hence his portrayal as childlike and womanlike. In a thesis on masculinities and in the course of our exposition, we derive the Harlands' social ostracism from gender attributes.

time Frank undergoes a deep transformation a storm brews nearby. At this point in the story, the description of the storm points to three different motifs that will help us interpret the general concerns of *Harland's Half Acre.* As Frank recalls it, the announcement of his return was followed by a storm that changed everything around him and, most important, the way things appeared, as if "light was inside things." (14) But soon the description of the change will make it clear that the transformation involves both subject and object, which points at the interrelatedness of these two categories. The storm showed everything under a new, a sort of fluorescent light, as if things radiated a light of their own that now Frank was able to capture: "it was the quality of his seeing that was changed." (14) The new light, the tones of water overhead and the shadows the clouds project onto the landscape that one day he will capture in canvases, prefigure Frank's potential as an artist, as if his future was being outlined there and then: "An immense stack of water, tons and tons of it, suspended there, swirling and darkening everything its shadow touched, but at the same time catching it in a new light from within." (15) This first time, the storm signals the birth of the artist and his potential to enrich culture with new possibilities of signification and new modes of being. The storm is a manifestation of the divine announcing Frank's destiny.

Secondly, the storm reflects Frank's excitement at the prospect of reuniting with his family again. The scene recalls the scene in *King Lear,* when the King, betrayed by his daughters Goneril and Reagan, exposes himself under a terrible storm, cursing against his daughters and refusing Kent's advice to take shelter. The inclemency of the weather upon Lear's body reflects the inclemency of his daughters towards their father, and the pouring and violent disturbance caused by the storm reflects Lear's mental distress; in both cases, it is a matter of nature raging against nature. But Lear was gathering what he had sown, since he had decided to divide his state between the daughters who professed to love him the most. Deceived by the hypocrisy of his two older daughters, he had banished Cordelia, his favorite and the one who truly loved him, because she admitted not loving him more than she loved her future husband, but as a daughter is expected to love a father:

> Cordelia: Good my Lord,
>
> You have begot me, bred me, lov'd me.
>
> I return those duties back as are right fit,
>
> Obey you, love you, and most honor you.
>
> Why have my sisters husbands, if they say
>
> They love you all? Happily when I shall wed,
>
> That Lord, whose hand must take my plight, shall carry
>
> Half my love with him, half my care, and duty,
>
> Sure I shall never marry like my sisters
>
> [To love my father all.] (Shakespeare 26)

King Lear and *Harland's Half Acre* are similar in that they both are concerned with filial love and loyalty. *King Lear* dramatizes what looms on the father who expects too much love from his daughters and the perils that surround kings who do not act sensibly, whereas *Harland's Half Acre* stages how patriarchal obsessions, foibles and sins pass from father to son, compromising the lives of their children, which is what Clem does by continuously recalling a vanished mystified past to his children. Lear is the patriarch par excellence. He is a good man and remains so for the audience, in spite of his mistakes and his foolishness. Harold Bloom remarks that *King Lear* represents both the "universal idealization of the value of familial love" and "the destructive nature of both paternal and filial love." (Bloom 484) Likewise, Don Randall emphasizes that in *Harland's Half Acre* Malouf portrays families and family succession, "especially masculine succession, from father to son" as "notably troubled." (Randall 96) Clem loves his children and rejoices in their upbringing, but, like Lear, he cannot stand the idea of his children not looking up to him; he cannot stand the idea of his children growing up and standing their ground. When Frank is told that he will be moving back with his father, his aunt complains that her brother wants "a cheap nursemaid." (17) Clem emasculates his children, but it will not be Frank who will assume the responsibility of looking after their father. When Frank decides to become a painter and move on with his life, he

is acutely aware that he is "delivering up Tam", one of his younger half-brothers, "who would stick to their father now out of duty, then habit, then inertia, and would never get free." (44) In spite of the fact that Frank is aware that his choice commits Tam to look after their father for life, he has made up his mind "out of the great love" that mediates filial and fraternal bonds: "What I leave you", Frank says once he has become a successful artist, "my dear brothers – and you too father if you survive me – is only the smallest part of what I wanted to give you out of the great love I had for you." (178)

King Lear's influence on *Harland's Half Acre* is also clear in that there are two references to the play in the novel. The first one is a passing reference to an actor who always plays the same role because the role matches his character: "a born King Lear." (135) The second one is a quote. Frank is talking about the weaknesses of his family when he quotes the following words by the Fool, which tells us about the extent to which Frank identifies with the values of the play. Frank openly despises the feminine trait of 'sensitivity', saying that he has 'educated' himself, not emotionally, but in the sense that he has subdued his emotions and hardened his spirit:

> '*He's mad that trusts in the tameness of a wolf, a horse's health, a boy's love or a whore's oath.* Do you recognize that? It's *Lear* –the Fool. I was as ignorant as stone when I was a young man, all – sensitivity. But I educated myself. Not to know *Lear* is to be – unprepared for your own life.' (153)

Frank identifies with Lear and he is unaware that he is living the myth out.

Finally, running home to escape from the storm he is leading after him – the narrative voice tells that Frank "begun to race the cloud home, controlling its tumbling power of growth and motion as he ran, watching it roll, within his will, right across the sky towards the town," (15) – Frank sees his neighbor's wife, Milly Shoals, "driving chickens into a shed, whose rusty blood-redness in the new light hurt." (15) The "rusty blood-redness" that catches Frank's eye mirrors his fierce determination to win back what his family's weaknesses hadn't been able to retain. It is the

redness of roosters' combs and wattles, which commonly symbolize the blood-shedding upshots of male violence and patriarchy.[48]

When Frank moves back home, he meets his half-brothers: Clyde, Tam and Pearsall. They believe Frank has come to "replace their mother" and he will rapidly respond by taking on the responsibility of mothering them: he will have "to have a snot wiped or their braces undone so that they could run outside to the dunny" or will "be called to wipe an arse" (19). It is the assumption of female roles by males in the absence of a female figure in the house, that Malouf most convincingly uses to show the functional nature of these roles, in contrast to essentialist gender positions. Similarly, when Frank's mother, Madge, died, Clem pleasantly found that "there was a feminine side to him" that made him enjoy mothering the children:

> There was a feminine side to him that made tending the children, bathing and changing them, feeding them, walking them up and down, feeling them nuzzle and squirm against him while he mouthed lonely baby-talk, a pleasure he would have been shy of admitting. (7)

Life in the farm at Killarney will prove harder than life in the fruit business with his uncles. He, Jim and his father wake up before five to milk the cows. Then, while their father drags the cans out and takes care of the cows, Jim makes breakfast and Frank wakes up and gets his little brothers ready. Clyde, who is seven, the oldest of his half-brothers, sets the table. Frank soon finds that Pearsall also tells stories, thus resembling their father. Every now and then they have to go to the city for groceries or to buy clothes. During these outings, Frank realizes that the way people looked at them "made them in some way outlandish", and he would feel hurt at the way some men teased his father for the lack of manual skills that define manhood: "Hey Clem!

[48] An example is the poem "Roosters" by Elisabeth Bishop: "The crown of red / set on your little head / is charged with all your fighting blood." (Bishop 35-39)

How's that fence comin'?' someone might call as if it could only be coming badly (it was, but that was bad luck.)" (20)

The house is soon described as chaos, confirming the general sexist belief that men are unable to keep an orderly and clean home, even though there is a continuity between how the house was managed before and after Clem's second wife, Sally, who was described as "tomboyish" (11) and as resembling "a cheeky boy," (18) passed away.[49] Madge, Clem's first wife, who was "several years older than himself" was described as passionate: her "passionate intensity put stolid men off, but not Clem"; down to earth: "her own life was grounded in what she could touch" and "very determined," in contrast to Clem's "boyish" and ethereal character: "he was full of notions, all cloudily unreal." (4) The women that make a brief appearance (Madge, Sally) in the Harland family are masculinized and they help create the "suffocatingly all-male household" Malouf is after. The Harlands, Clem and his sons all live in one room, which contains two beds, a fireplace and the kitchen. Jim and Frank sleep with their father on one bed, and the others sleep on a bed at right angles to it, "muddled together like puppies." (17) Frank learns from his half-brothers "the half-dozen places a tea-strainer might get to, and in which of the stepped canisters you would find cinnamon or rice or sago (since whoever had first established a kind of order here hadn't stuck to

[49] Her gender ambiguity also derives from her being described as "only half-grown up." (11) In one of their meetings while Frank is staying at his aunt's house, his older brother, Jim, tells him about their stepmother. On one occasion, she climbed a pine-tree "right to the top, swinging on the springy top boughs and shouting all she could see"; when Clem told her to come down, she told him "to piss off" and "had to be coaxed down like a cat"; when she finally came down, "her legs were all scratched and pricked with blood and his father that night had bathed them tenderly in warm water and Solyptol." (11) When Jim says that "she was mother and woman enough, Sally, to have replaced their real mother," (12) he means that she was a tough woman, not that she was feminine.

the worn and unreadable labels)"; (18) the room is always untidy, the beds unmade, "the sink full of pans and dishes and the litter" on the table, with "five boys around it, all chins and elbows and scarred and grimy knees." (27) The clutter and dirt will soon make Clem regret the absence of a woman in the house: "We're too many men in this house, that's it, eh Jim? Some other influence. It's missing. That a woman could provide." (27)

Maybe because of this, disorder will be a permanent feature in Frank's life. The mess and chaos from his childhood home will provide the creative frame of mind of Frank's art, as if every new painting was a world in itself that could only be born from chaos. In the Harland retrospective that will be assembled at the end of the novel, Phil, his lawyer and friend will complain that the orderly and lit up exhibition does not capture the kernel of his friend's art: "Mess, that was what was missing, and it was essential." (224)

As the boys grow into manhood, they become distant with their "boyish father". First, it is Jim's turn, and then Frank's. Frank's awareness of what is going on reveals the new alliances and recognizable family traits resulting from Jim's new distaste for his father.[50] The grimace of bitterness on Jim's face while listening to his father's stories recalls his Aunt Else's facial features to Frank: "There had begun to be a kind of hostility between Jim, who was fifteen, and the boyish father. Jim's face during his stories had a hard line about the mouth in which Frank recognized a likeness to his Aunt Else." (26) While he stayed with her, Frank had often heard Aunt Else disapprove of their father: "He was younger than me, your father. Twelve years. And a fascinator.

---

[50] In an interview with Jean Bedford, David Malouf states as follows his concern in *Harland's Half Acre* of how power is distributed among different family members:

> It's a lot about families and family relationships and interrelationships. I'm interested in how people play different roles with different people, choosing and rejecting relatives, playing favorites. The structures and movements of role, power, initiative and affection in a family structure. (Nielsen 153)

He got away with it. With everyone, including my mother. But not with me'" (13). Jim's first act of rebellion is to sleep separately. "Out of some newly-discovered distaste for the man, and his own sense of being no longer a child, Jim now refused to sleep in the same bed with him." (26) He begins to sleep in a bench near the stove, and everything gets rearranged. Clyde, the next brother in line, moves in the same bed with his father and Frank. But before long, conflict between Jim and his father grows into real hostility: "Everything about the boy's change into something other than the child he had been (and Frank too saw this) affronted the man, put him out of sorts or enraged him." (27) Being Clem in a superior position of power, his hostility becomes contempt: "'Let him', the father said, 'if he'd rather be out there with the toads than in here with his brothers. It's his nature. He can't help it.'" Then, it turns into mockery: "'Jim's after the girls,' the father sneered. 'He's a ladies man.'" (28) Finally, Jim moves out to work as an "apprentice printer", and it is Frank's turn to move to Jim's bench-bed near the stove. "A first step away – the longest that could be taken inside the house itself. One more and he too would be gone." (33) Every change within the family brings about a psychological and physical readjustment of all the other parts.[51]

There is irony in the fact that it is a woman's vision of things, Aunt Else's, that Jim and Frank share, and that reveals Clem's insecurities and lack of manly qualities. Letting himself be challenged by his own children puts Clem at their same level; he is not man enough to deal with other men.

In one business trip to Brisbane for the farmer he works for, Frank asks for some time off and goes to one of the local galleries with his "watercolors tied up in a clean singlet." (33) They

---

[51] Philip Neilsen develops at length the idea of families forming an ecosystem in part III of his chapter devoted to *Harland's Half Acre*:

> One of the most striking achievements of *Harland's Half Acre* is Malouf's treatment of households and families, and particularly interesting is his application of the ecological theme, so that households are seen as organic entities or ecosystems. (152)

refer him to a college art teacher, Hopkins, who finds Frank a job "advertising art work" and accepts to teach him for free. (36)

In this way, Frank also leaves the family home and moves to Brisbane, where he develops the peculiarities of a solitary man and embodies the bearings and appearance that will define him:

> He grew the thin reddish moustache he would have for the rest of his life, and developed the self-sufficient ways, the capacity to clear a space around him in a crowded room, of men who live in boarding-houses, often sharing, for whom privacy is a thing to be insisted on. He wasn't unsociable but he had no friends. It was a lonely life. (36)

Malouf also tells us how others see Frank, as an uncanny and somber figure: "People thought him odd, a tall, spare cove, not old enough to be so old looking, with a gingery moustache and mild, milk-blue eyes." (40)

But it is in relation to the other sex that Frank's darker side is revealed. On the one hand, the reader cannot help but sympathize with Frank from the very beginning of the book. After all, we are told his story, and his growing reputation as Australia's finest artist will endow him with an aura that will place him beyond good and evil. Phil, who from Chapter 2 on will tell Frank's story from the first person point of view, alternating a first person narrative with an omniscient knowledge of the characters, will eventually become Frank's closest friend and his only confident, so the way he tells Frank's story can only be biased. Phil is the only one whom Frank will confide his lifelong purpose: to recover the Harlands' lost estate and restate it to his family. On the other hand, there are some cracks on the smooth surface of the narrative through which the reader can glimpse into Frank's darker nature. Women – or their absence - played a key role in Frank's childhood. He lost his mother when he was barely six months old; his father marrying a second time meant his removal from the family home and, most important, the lack of a solid fatherly figure had translated into a progeny with a deeply troubled sense of self. In the case of

Frank, and in spite of his strict self-discipline and austere habits, this will translate into a troubled sexuality and his resulting inability to establish a sentimental relationship with women:

> Little girls in faded frocks skipping rope beside a fence would stop with the rope in a limp arc, puzzled by what it might be in them or in the stopped game that had caught his eye; and were not convinced when he smiled weakly, shoved his hands in his pockets and sloped off. (40)

Tam will also show signs of a troubled sexuality. Later in the story, his nephew Gerard will describe him as his grandfather's "nursemaid", resembling "an old woman", and will report having seen him looking at girls: "When he goes out shopping he stops in the park, I've seen him, to watch the schoolgirls playing netball." (159-160) While being Hopkins' apprenticeship, Frank will have the chance of marrying one of his "three clever, half-grown daughters" and lead "another sort of life", but "he didn't want that". In his early twenties, Frank had already developed "the habits of singularity and a lifelong solitude" (41) that will translate into an absolute lack of interest for women that will keep them at a distance. There will be only two exceptions: Ollie, Phil's aunt, and Edna Byrne.

Settled in Brisbane, the distance will not diminish Frank's affection and dedication to his family. It continues to be the center of his world. The last pages of the first chapter, "Killarney" are interspersed with Frank's letters, first to his father, then Clyde, Tam and, finally, they will be addressed to all of them. The epistolary and the torn-up drafts give us a glimpse of how the Harland family and the society they belong to begin to fall apart. The first of the brothers to get into trouble is Clyde. Frank uses the euphemism "*boxed in*" (Malouf's emphasis) to say that he is serving a sentence not in "a real prison" but in a farm, but when he visits him he finds out that the place gives him the creeps: "I had no idea there could be such a place! Not that I saw anything direct. It was more like a smell." (37) Frank is afraid of the "hardened and brutal looking" gazes of the other inmates and, worst of all, Clyde's attitude, who "blames everyone except himself", always "trying to impress people with *talk*" [Malouf's emphasis] and "trying to win others some

easy way – by toughness, or by bribing them with presents and things." (38) He never sends the letter recounting this visit to his father, maybe because Frank is afraid that in describing his brother's weaknesses his father might recognize himself. Having been released from prison, Clyde menacingly writes to Frank asking for money, but everything is to no avail. Before the possibility of being imprisoned again, and even before the trial has taken place, Clyde commits suicide.

At around this time, World War II breaks out in Europe, and Australia goes into a deep recession period. The omniscient narrator of Chapter 1 succinctly tells us that "the times had grown rapidly worse"; (42) the advertising agency where Frank worked goes bankrupt and, being unable to find a job after some time and with no prospect of finding one, he takes to the road. Jim joins the army and goes to fight in Europe, where he will die, leaving behind his wife and his son Gerard. Homeless, in the last letter he sends to his family, Frank says that he will ask "friends in Sydney to give me an advance on some work I sent them" in order to help "in the other matter," (44) but we are not told what trouble it is the family got into this time. On the road, Frank meets men from all walks of life who have fallen from grace: "drought stories, mortgage stories, wife stories," and worst of all stories from World War I:

> …stories of the war that had been raging during his years in his aunt's house and which some men were still fighting, deep to the eyeballs in mud; stories of prickly-pear, of rust in wheat, of diphtheria and whooping-cough epidemics, of prison terms – the ordinary miseries of the poor. (43)

Not unsurprisingly, Frank finds a new sense of belonging among the miserable that will replace his feelings for home, and that he had not been able to experience while he had been settled in Brisbane: "He found a companionship in misery that he had never known when he was in work, or which in those days he had not needed. He discovered that he belonged. But with those who were outside." (43)

The second Chapter, 'An Only Child', tells the story of a family made up mainly of women, where women have the power and are the active agents in the household. The head of the family is Grandma Vernont. We are not given her Christian name. The story is told from the point of view of her grandson Phil, a child in his early teens at the moment the events in the story are recounted.[52] Grandma Vernon married an Englishman several years older than herself at sixteen, Jeff Vernont. He impressed her family with his manners: "the Englishman whose accent and good manners had so impressed her parents." (72) They had five children, in the following order: Ollie, Connie, Phil's father (we are not given his name either, the narrator refers to him all the time as "my father"), Roo and Gil.

The story starts when Phil's family, that is, his mother, his father and himself move from Brisbane to his grandparents' house on his father's side in Southport. Jeff Vernont, Phil's grandfather is dying and, not without irony, Phil's mother is the only one who "is tolerable to him as a day or night nurse" in a house in which his wife and his three daughters live. Phil associates Southport with holidays. Hee goes barefoot, and the routine of going to school and the activities

[52] It is important to remark that even if Malouf presents a family in which the active members and those who have power are female, he is aware of the difficulty of stepping into a female character's shoes. Maybe that is the reason why we are told the story from the point of view of a boy barely twelve: "I was just twelve" (49), and who speaks in the first person. There is in the narration of Chapter 2 both the innocence of children as well as their uninvolved witnessing of important human flaws. Moreover, children cannot get involved in family matters as adults can, they do not have well defined gender character traits and their sexuality is still dormant. Nevertheless, this will change in the following Chapters as Phil steps into manhood, playing a gendered and sexually active and interested role in the way the events in the novel unfold.

For a discussion of the difficulty of male writers representing believable female characters, see footnote 19 in the first part of this Chapter.

of arithmetic and parsing seem "mere pretend" compared to his former life in Brisbane. Sleeping in the open air in the front verandah, Phil feels he has "scope." (49)

Phil's father has to drive to Brisbane every day to run the family business, which he does in partnership with Phil's grandmother. Being Phil's mother busy taking care of her father in law, father and son have the chance to develop a close friendship in Southport, like Frank and Clem did during Clem's visits on Sundays while Frank stayed in his aunt's house. Malouf always opens up a space for male friendship and male camaraderie to develop between father and son, but also between adult and child - symbolically in *An Imaginary Life,* between Ovid and the Child, as we saw in the first part of this Chapter, and between Frank and Phil in *Harland's Half Acre*, as we will see. On the one hand, the camaraderie, mutual trust and understanding between father and son and, on the other, between adult and child – and often behind the women's back - is something Malouf explores in more depth in *The Great World.* We will delve into *The Great World* in Chapter 3.

Phil soon realizes that his father has inherited the manners and bearings of his grandfather: "He had about him, my father, something of the small-town dandy. He had inherited that from his own grandfather." He always wears a suit, "some wheat-colored or dove-grey material in summer, with a knitted tie, and in winter a three-piece herring-bone." (50) He is a successful and popular businessman in the fruit industry, whom people like to stop for a chat in his walkabouts with his son in his childhood town, greeting him and "calling him 'Boss', or 'Mister', or simply 'Bob'". It is possible to make an inventory of masculinities in the Southport of the 1950's just by listing the "old-timers" of the place father and son come across. They have names like "Snow, Nudger and The Champ", and they include returned soldiers, boxers, footballers and "a politician who had suffered a fall." (51) The nicknames Snow, Nudger and The Champ stand for arriviste, coaxer and restless friend, respectively. What soldiers, boxers, footballers and politicians have in common is that these are jobs which up until very recently have been reserved for men; they have to do with the exercise of power and the need to beat the adversary, where no half measures are accepted.

But Phil's father is not a born businessman. In fact, he continued the family business out of duty. His real passion is the discovery of men with talent who need a little push in order to make their dreams come true. Phil describes him as a born patron and headhunter. Ironically, Grandma Vernont regards her son's diversions with impatience and irritation. The irony stems from the contrast between the male worldview and the female, which are always at odds:

> In all ways magnanimous, he had the style, I used to think later, of the born patron, that spirit of generosity that asks nothing for itself, feels no threat in the presence of greatness, takes joy in every form of excellence or superior art or skill, and cares only that what has come into the world as a large possibility should not for the world's sake go unfulfilled. In another place and time he might have endowed colleges or commissioned altars or become an entrepreneur of all that was bizarre and marvelous (…)
>
> He had an eye, my father, for the way nature might outdo itself – and not only in the matter of apples and pears. He liked to believe that the world was blessed with men, rare though they might be, of outrageous ambition and uncanny gifts. People knew his weakness and brought him news of wonders. Or as my grandmother put it, pestered him on behalf of every sort of scoundrel, no-hoper and lame duck. (52-53)

The divergence between the way mother and son see these men illuminates one of the central tenets of the book, which is also a shared background among much of the literature of the twentieth century: society's patriarchal structure leads men to build castles in the air, while women are more realistic and true to life. Malouf expresses his own take on the issue letting the reader read between the lines the irony of the situation. The men Phil and his father visit are really the wretched of the earth.

One of his discoveries is a half-cast youth, the son of a boxer who expects to have a last shoot at the big money. The boy is seventeen, "tough, darkly resentful, but good." They watch

him dancing a little and punching a sand bag that his father subjects with his shoulder while he calls him a killer. "He looked like one," says Phil. "I thought it was his father – that nearest of all white men – he might decide to kill". In both *Harland's Half Acre* and more in depth through one of the main characters in *The Great World*, Digger, boxing is the arena in which the white man can purge his fears and insecurities by engaging himself in combat against half-castes and blacks, from which he fears resentment and retaliation. The hostilities are staged in a sporting context in the boxing ring, and victory symbolically reaffirms ethnic superiority. The half-cast Phil and his father are observing is merely postposing his future submission to racial order:

> …this was a way – perhaps the only one – of saving himself for a time from the inevitable round of drink, then jail, then more drink; of keeping off, while he was still strong-winded and fast on his feet, the shadow and sour stink, and angry sick despair, of fellows two or three years older than himself whom he remembered from school as clean-cut youths with a future and whose mouths were clamped now on a metho bottle. (53)

Another of his father's acquaintances is "an old man, retired and half-blind with cataracts, who 'invented things.'" He shows them "a device for picking up leaves that could be made out of the frames of old umbrellas, and an unwieldy contraption, iron-jawed and sprung, for cracking Queensland nuts." Still another collects all sorts of bottles and wants Phil's father to buy them or lend him some money "or talk some Minister into making a museum." Finally, there is Frank Harland. He is introduced after Phil's father embarks in a disquisition about how men in Australia are suddenly "full of ideas" in the threshold of a new era that will mean the discovery of Australia "for the *second* [Malouf's emphasis] time. It is all there," says Phil's father, "three-million square miles of it, just waiting to be grasped and hauled up by its boot-straps into –" but he couldn't finish the sentence, the word he needed "was too blinding or far off." (54)

Again, Malouf's irony is corrosive, because there is an abysm between reality and the dreams and ambitions of these men. All the men Phil and his father come across with have big

dreams, but their situation is dramatic. The irony is between what Phil's father imagines - Australia about to be discovered "for the *second* time" - and what he actually sees - a half-caste youth who soon will give himself up to drinking, a crack nut inventor, a collector of empty bottles, a politician who has come down in the world, the bizarre painter Frank Harland living like a beggar. The whole scene reminds us of King Lear again. Having abdicated and ignored by Goneril and Reagan, weakened by old age, he behaves as if he still maintained the aura and position of a King. In this regard, it is possible to conclude that the implicit message of *HHA* is that manhood in Australia in the 1950s was severely damaged, because men couldn't live up to their ideals of patriarchy. Women had to take on the responsibility of holding up the country.[53]

Frank Harland will turn out to be the only exception to Grandma Vernont's sarcastic view of her son's vocation. Through his art, Frank will build a bridge between the miseries of the outcast and mainstream Australia, accomplishing the feat at the expense of his own dreams. When Phil and his father meet Frank, working on the abandoned lighted stage of the Pier Pictures, a vast wooden structure out in the waters of the bay, he is wearing "an old army short and sweater and boots without socks", resembling the clothes of a "tramp", but wearing them "with a natural elegance," in a very "contained and formal, almost soldierly" stance. (57) Frank asks who is there and Phil's father greets him to reveal his identity. The darkness and the echoes of their voices, the fact that the place had been a movie theatre in which the films of foreign places and events had been projected, without substance, the adventures of Tom and Jerry and the images of the concentration camps in Germany included, intensifies the feeling in the reader that Frank's art has an element of black magic, taking in and assimilating all the misery and suffering of the outcast to

[53] On the one hand, this could mean that Australia couldn't compete (economically, military, culturally, etc.) with European nations in world affairs. On the other, it opened up a space for the transformation of patriarchy and thus transforming the European values those men wanted to emulate.

redeem and transform it into a work of art, to be enjoyed and bought by the wealthy and the glamorous.

It might help to understand how men and women dream differently and how these dreams translate into conflicting worldviews to analyze the opening lines of Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God.* Grounded in metaphor, this excerpt reveals more profoundly the uncoupling between men's ambitions, encouraged by the patriarchal system they belong to and reality in *HHA*. Malouf largely draws from the literary canon when portraying male and female cultures. Zora Neale Hurston's introductory paragraphs to *Their Eyes Were Watching God* provide an excellent overview of this canon:

> Ships at a distance have every man's wish on board. For some they come in with the tide. For others they sail forever on the horizon, never out of sight, never landing until the Watcher turns his eyes away in resignation, his dreams mocked to death by Time. That is the life of men.
>
> Now, women forget all those things they don't want to remember, and remember everything they don't want to forget. The dream is the truth. Then they act and do things accordingly. (Hurston)

This is how the text works at a metaphoric level: the ships are the dreams, the tide fate, and the men and women on the shore average men and women who are in the existential stance of having to decide what they are going to do with their lives, what they are going to do with their futures. In the first paragraph, the author describes two kinds of men. On the one hand those whose dreams come true with the tide, which means that circumstances make their dreams come true easily. Since the tide is provoked by the gravitational influence of the moon, the tide symbolizes the dark and unknown forces of this world, what men cannot control in the political arena and by means of physical strength. We saw that to some extend in the first part of this Chapter when analyzing *An Imaginary Life.* The other of the sun (the moon watches over night in the same way that the sun watches over day), the moon symbolizes everything that is mysterious

and cannot be subsumed under rational laws: magic, intuition, etc. The moon symbolizes the world of women. The tide symbolizes fate or luck. On the other hand, there are those men whose dreams never come true, either because it wasn't meant to be or because they did not pursue their dreams hard enough to make them real. If the "Watcher" is a man on the shore who "turns his eyes" from the ship (= his dream), then some men do not fulfill their dreams because they don't pursue them long enough. If the "Watcher" is God (that would be the reason why it has been written in capital letters), who turns his gaze "away in resignation", then Zora Neale Hurston's God and Phil's father wishes are one and the same: seeing somebody's personal talent or gift go unfulfilled in the world makes them suffer. But this God would not be an all-powerful God. Turning "his eyes away in resignation", he cannot push or help men fulfill their dreams, he can only watch.

Women are different. "The dream is the truth" means that women build their dreams from what they have at hand - they have a look at the opportunities that open up for them, they have a look at what they already have, and they start from there. They work to fulfill those dreams, to make them real and to make the best of them. The kind of work they have to carry out to fulfill their dreams has to do with memory, that is the reason why they forget what "they don't want to remember" and remember what "they don't want to forget". Like the work of mourning, the acts of remembrance and forgetfulness take time and involve the unconscious. Women are detached from a patriarchal world that does not recognize them as active agents, but this detachment makes them aware of both the pernicious influence of patriarchy on men and the limits of volition in front of the contingencies of life. Men have a distorted view of their value and capabilities, they think they are superior to women because of the privileges that tradition confers them. This tradition makes them believe they are special, and they pursue irrational ambitions. Women are aware that we are finite beings and must play the cards we have been handed, and this determines the content of their dreams. They are also aware that dreams do not simply happen. Women are more realistic than men when it comes to dreaming.

In the Harland family, the absence of a woman was deeply felt in the raising of the family, and not only to put some order in the house. Madge, Clem's first wife listened to her husband's stories helping him in this way "over his time of useless yearning", believing that "the routine of daily existence, as it toughened and refined him, would bring him home at last to the actuality of things." (4) Madge's death by blood poisoning and, then, Clem's second wife's death by Spanish flu was a sign that the Harland family would have to do without the influence of a woman to put her husband and her sons' feet on the ground and, perhaps, provide them with another sort of life.

But it is regarding Phil's family that Nora Zeale Hurston's words are more appropriate. Originally from Gloucestershire, England, Jeff Vernont had gone to Australia to seek his fortune, spurred by the example "of a local publican" who, being just his age, "already owned a sheep station in New South Wales". He first went to Sydney but was followed there by two of his former cronies back from Gloucestershire who had cheated him "and whom he suspected of a local murder", and it was "to give them the slip that he had ducked over the border into Queensland" (67) and set himself "as a dandified and unsuccessful insurance-salesman." (64) It is there that he married his young wife, who was only sixteen. She and her parents were impressed by his "accent and good manners" (72): "'He was the handsomest man I ever laid eyes on, you grandfather,'" (132) Phil's grandmother will confide her grandson, years after her husband passed away. But soon after they got married, he wasn't able to find a proper job. First, she became "resentful of how little lay behind his fine exterior, how little, that is, beyond kindness and charm." But as Nora Zeale Hurston points out, as a woman she made the best she could of the situation. "With money inherited from an aunt and the advice of a clever lawyer – the first of several male supporters – she set her husband up in the wholesale fruit and vegetable business, then ordered him to stay out of sight." (72) In this way she could support her family and lead a reputable life.

Incidentally: Jeff retrospectively always ascribed his misfortunes in Australia to his mother refusing to bless him before his trip. And perhaps not fortuitously, we are told that he decided to

go to Australia to "break free of his mother." (67) When telling his grandson about his former life in England, he sometimes would grow somber, "brought up hard against his mother's silence and the unyielding severity with which she had set herself against Australia and all it stood for." More precisely, his misfortunes were ascribed to "her refusal of a goodbye kiss", "the denied blessing". Jeff also recounts to his grandson about an illness he suffered when he was a child. His family thought he would pass away and had given up all hope, but the girl who worked for them, "a country girl with only half her wits," (68) went to the woods to see an old woman who prepared an ointment with wild herbs wrapped in plastic that cured him overnight. When they went to see her soon afterwards, she looked like a witch taken from children's books, with warts all over her face and mitts from which dirty fingers stuck out. Whatever it meant, Jeff believed that the dark power of women had saved him from death when he was a child, and cursed him with the refusal of his mother's goodbye blessing kiss when he went to Australia.

The Vernonts, the characters and the roles that each member played within the family stemmed from this initial marriage. From the very beginning, Grandma Vernont had to take control, and this imbued her with a certain aura, a special beauty also that stemmed directly from the exercise of power: "What she had become in fact was a beauty; having discovered that beauty, in her case, was a natural consequence of the exercise of power." (72) In the same way that men in a position of power attract young and beautiful women, because they can sustain them and provide them security, women in a position of power exercise a similar kind of influence over men much younger than themselves. Malouf transvestites the stereotypes of male chauvinism by having Grandma Vernont play the role of female 'chauvinist': her fortune and position place her beyond good and evil. This can be seen in the rivalry between Grandma Vernont and her younger daughter, Aunt Roo, who "was fiercely jealous of my grandmother, whom she blamed not only for her failure to have a career but for having drawn away, with her assured and sensual beauty, the young men she had brought home", says Phil, concluding that his grandmother "could not bear to have a man in the room, if he was in any way attractive, who was not in her power." (88)

How did she coax them? Powerful women can offer material sustenance or the promise of promotion through their influence in the business world, like men do; experienced women can offer the promise of illicit pleasures and fantasies to younger men; Grandma Vernont adopted instead a "slight lassitude", "evoking an image of her body's easy inclination to the horizontal." (88) In spite of her age, influence and power, Grandma Vernont seduced by submitting herself to Aunt Roo's young pretenders, assuming therefore a classic passive stance towards members of the other sex. This didn't impede her exercising her ascendancy and power over all other matters.[54] If Grandma Vernont had lived in one of the big world metropolis, Chicago or New York, she might have build an empire. Phil sees that his grandmother belongs "to the world of big deals, of big desks, with a window full of skyscrapers at her back and a sense of real power under her fist." (71)

In the same way that the Harland family gravitated around Clem, who was the one who passed on to his sons his good things and bad things, and from whom they got a sense of who they were and what they wanted to be – Frank deciding to recover the family state for which his father yearned for, Pearsall expecting life to give him back what Clem regretted his family had lost just for the unfairness of things, Tam striving to keep the warmth of home on and that Frank missed so much during his spell with his aunt, Jim rejecting his father's negligence and indulgence, etc. -, the Vernonts gravitated around Grandma Vernont.

To start with, she is the one who set the family business and so relegated her husband to a secondary role. If Clem received his power from the patriarchal society in which he lived, Grandma Vernont had granted herself power by taking the reins of the family, setting up a business

---

[54] On the one hand, it may surprise us that Malouf didn't carry the reversal of roles all the way to the sexual sphere too. On the one hand, contradictions between biological sex, sexual orientation and gendered behavior always occur, so Malouf's inconsistency in his portrayal of Grandma Vernont is only apparent. It is known that Adolf Hitler liked to adopt a passive role in sexual matters.

and becoming her family's provider. How did she manage to assume this role, which was exclusively reserved to males by social convention?

David Buchbinder, in *Studying Men and Masculinities,* distinguishes between the patriarchal economy and the patriarchal order. The patriarchal order is the set of conventions that establish a relationship of hierarchy between men and women, for example by making men the head of families or turning them into the only gender liable to own land or make big deals in the market. On the other hand, the patriarchal economy is the set of relations that is established between men, for example in terms of social class, hierarchical position within a company or ethnic origin, and men and women, for example by not allowing women to vote.

> The patriarchal economy, determines the nature and the extent of the power available to men and women, both as a class and as individuals. Although it may be impossible to disentangle the patriarchal order from the patriarchal economy, it is useful to be able to distinguish at least conceptually between them. (Buchbinder)

It is in the interstices between patriarchal economy and patriarchal order that women may take advantage of the patriarchal economy in order to get to the top of the patriarchal order. Likewise, it is by venturing in these interstices how Barak Obama could make a political career and become the first black President of the United States, where the white heterosexual Caucasian male is the norm.

Grandma Vernont took advantage of the patriarchal economy in order to put herself at the top of the patriarchal hierarchy:

> With money inherited from an aunt and the advice of a clever lawyer – the first of several male supporters – she set her husband up in the wholesale fruit and vegetable business, then ordered him to stay out of sight. She kept him in well-cut suits and the best imported hats, used his presence as a defense against scandal,

> and devoted herself to the creating of one of the biggest marketing firms in the state. (72)

Second, the way she will manage the household and her decisions will be crucial in modulating her children's characters. From the very beginning, she implanted in the older of her daughters, Aunt Ollie "the notion of plainness in her as a way of making certain, once the other children began to arrive, that she would always be there to nurse them"; she made it happen that it "was her fate." (75) Eventually, Aunt Ollie would run the kitchen, taking care of all the family meals with the help of her serving girl Della. Her youngest daughter, Aunt Roo was her father's favorite, and Grandma Vernont always regarded her as the frivolous and girlish one, not to be taken seriously, in retaliation for the influence she exerted in her husband's heart. There was a war between mother and daughter over the influence their exerted on men, and Aunt Roo had always lost it (Phil is aware of what is going on between them: "Aunt Roo had developed her style because it was one her mother could no longer pretend to. It was essentially girlish.") Aunt Roo sought refuge in the phantasy world of theatre. Her failed ambition was to be an actress. She kept in her room "a stack of leather hat boxes" and "two vast travelling-trunks of solid hide that were crammed with costumes." (86) The stressful rivalry she lived at home with her mother and the oppression she was subjected to would translate into attacks of hysteria: "brutal speakings-out", naming "all the unnamables," (89) "sobbings", and "real pain and anger." (89-90) But Grandma Vernont would simply ignore her daughter, accusing her of "play-acting." (91) Then there was Uncle Gil. If Aunt Roo had wanted to escape reality by flying into the world of phantasy and illusion of theatre, Uncle Gil "had always been wild for adventure, and when war broke out he immediately joined the Air Force and was sent overseas." (94) He came back from war "shell-shocked" (93); had been "shot down over the North Sea" hitting his head and "jarring his brains, or had 'seen something' as a prisoner in Germany that defied imagination." (94) Uncle Gil went into rages, cursing "on his sisters and all women", also in savage resentment of his father, "or as a deep rage against life itself." (95) Uncle Gil resented his father in the same way that Aunt Roo

blamed her mother about almost everything. Phil believes that Aunt Roo and Uncle Gil "were substitute children". His father and Ollie had been born when their parents still loved each other, but Uncle Gil and Aunt Roo were born later on, when Grandma Vernont's illusions about her husband had vanished and Jeff, "astonished at what his child bride had become," (72) had had to accept a subsidiary role within the family and submit to his wife. Jeff used Roo against his wife while his wife used Gil against him, both husband and wife pulling out from their children the love and affection they could not find in each other and using their children to side with them against each other. Finally, Aunt Connie, who was in the middle, was simply ignored and she simply accepted the situation:

> Aunt Roo and Uncle Gil were substitute children. My father and Aunt Ollie, born when their parents were still close, had been left to themselves; they needed no one's special love. And Aunt Connie, lost in the middle of the five, was simply there. Tolerated, ignored, she was one of those whom life treats badly. She had come to accept it as her fate. (91)

Grandma Vernont's influence reaches down to Phil's parents. Running the family business with her only son, it is not in the hands of Phil's father to set free from her influence.

Phil's mother has "much to resent." Granma Vernont had not only delayed her marriage and the making of her own family because of the responsibilities her husband had had to assume with the family business, her mother in law's influence also polluted what should have been her unique relationship with her husband. Grandma Vernont was eclipsing her role within her own family considering her son "a second husband" and thinking it was their responsibility to take care of the others. Moreover, there was Grandma Vernont's beauty, which was legendary: "My Grandmother's beauty was a powerful legend that continued to convince people of the present

fact." (75) And Phil's mother could see the influence of her mother in law's beauty on her husband, which robbed her of her husband's full attention and devotion to her as a woman[55]:

> Her beauty mesmerized him because it had to do with her energy, which was quite undiminished and worked on everything it touched. There was something sacred in that. He must have thought at times, even after he was married, that he could not do without it. (92)

On top of it all, when Jeff Vernont passes away, having had to nurse him, Grandma charges against her daughter in law, accusing her of having tormented and humiliated her husband in his last days: "'He's suffered enough from her shamelessness, poor darling. He was too sick to complain (…). It was shameful! That woman has no shame!'" and ordering her out of her house: "'I won't go into the room till she's left it. I want her *out of my house*!'" (101)

One of the things that calls our attention is how Malouf presents the tending and taking care of a dying person as a rewarding and comforting act, which is something he had already experimented with in *An Imaginary Life*. Phil even goes so far as to say that his "Grandpa's dying" was "something positive and engrossing", and describes the state of decay of his grandfather as a transformative process that "would naturally reveal, it seemed to me, what it shared with other creature or with the earth"; the experience was not "frightening," but simply "uncanny" ("It was uncanny, that was all") and "mysterious."[56] (65) This description reminds us of Ovid's death in *An Imaginary Life*. We could say that *Harland's Half Acre* takes of where *An Imaginary Life* ended: Malouf resumes the process of death *Harland's Half Acre*, but this time in a more realistic and less figurative

[55] In the last instance, beauty remains a sort of empyrean of the cosmological order Malouf is trying to portray in *Harland's Half Acre*.

[56] Later on, Phil describes his Grandfather in similar terms after helping him sit properly on the bed and kissing him on the forehead: "The skin was paper thin. You were aware of bone. But there was nothing frightening in it, and I wasn't in a any way disgusted by the odor of decay." (70)

setting, as if he wanted to convey the message that death can be beautiful in our everyday lives as well, not just in the imagination.

Phil's mother and her father in law had developed a warm and trusting relationship during the months she had nursed him. No doubt Grandma Vernont had been weary of taking care of her husband herself and this had caused her to feel some remorse seeing her daughter in law taking on the responsibility that should have been hers. What she probably didn't expect, nor perhaps did she realize was that the special bond between her husband and her daughter in law would become a loving relationship, as if her daughter in law was making up things. If her beauty had robbed her daughter in law's husband's full attention, her daughter in law had taken the place she had left vacant in Jeff's heart.

Probably that is the unconscious reason for Grandma Vernont's irrational and unjust anger towards her daughter in law when Jeff dies.

This is how Phil describes the special bond between his mother and his Grandfather:

> Over the long months of his illness they had grown close, bound together in an intimacy that was founded on the regular physical duties she had to perform for him and which he had come at last, through touch, and murmured soothings and easings, to accept at her hands. She alone was witness to the worst indignities imposed upon him by his incontinence, and the agonies in which, for long moments, he became the merest racket meat and bone; and to the fierce wordless hissing that gave way at times to obscenities he would have been mortified to have her think capable of on saner occasions, and which she would have been ashamed to hear.
>
> Their life together in that sickroom had been a life apart. I came only to the edge of it, pushed out of sight and earshot of what she felt I should not bear. In their quiet times together all they had endured in extreme and barely tolerable passages of mere nerve, made an electricity between them that was like the flow of

> energy between lovers. I might have been jealous if Grandpa and I had not had our own relationship, and if my mother had not made me her only assistant. (100)

For his part, Phil's father was torn. He loved his wife but he knew what his mother had done to keep them all afloat. The memories of "the lonely, defiant and beautiful young woman his mother had been" collided with his duty to his own family, and he was always juggling to please both.

As we said, it is during this period of his life that Phil first met Frank Harland. In that first encounter, his father invited him for lunch, and as a result Frank developed a friendship with Aunt Ollie, with whom he shared a language that "was included in the patterns that unfolded out of Della's hands, or Aunt Ollie's." (84) Frank and Aunt Ollie were in tune, they both took responsibility of their respective families in their own terms, Frank sending money home and providing his sensible advice when he could, and Aunt Ollie raising her brother and sisters and cooking for the family when she grew up. For example, when Aunt Roo went into one of his rages, it was Aunt Ollie who embraced her "and murmured and soothed and tried to stop the ugly mouth from letting out the ugly, accusing sounds." (90) She did the same when Uncle Gil went into one of his rages: "undeterred by knives or rages, she would go down and sit quietly till he had shouted himself out or had run aground on the rocklike solidity of her calm." (96) Phil realized that his "younger aunts were jealous" of the time and devotion Frank showed to their sister, but he also saw what was about his Aunt Ollie that attracted Frank Harland: "Compared with Aunt Ollie, whose presence was monumental, they were lightweights. They did nothing in the house that was of use. Their sole contribution was to its weather." (86) When Frank decides to paint Aunt Ollie and he shows the end result to the family, everyone but him and Aunt Ollie are left flabbergasted. No one knows what to say, and Phil's father looks "embarrassed". He finally describes Ollie as "very strong" in the picture, which pleases Frank: "'Yairs,' he said very slowly, and grinned." Ollie also seems happy with her picture: "'It's the real *me*'." (85) Frank's art reaches Australian homes

capturing the ones who, with their everyday effort and constancy are the ones who raise their families.

It is also during a lunch with Phil's family that Frank meets Uncle Haro, the family's doctor and the intimate friend and confidant of Grandma Vernont. Their friendship can only be qualified in casuistic terms. Since Grandma Vernont had had to adopt the role of head of family and provider within a patriarchal structure, that is, assuming certain expected roles and qualities for someone in a position of power, her friendship with Uncle Haro could be described as bullying camaraderie and companionship among mates. Perhaps she simply felt she could relax, because the Doctor was no source of competition in the market world she was moving in and there was no point in competing with his masculinity for a position of power. With Uncle Haro, Grandma Vernont adopted a "light and girlish" voice, played "honeymoon bridge" in her office, and things were allowed that wouldn't have been coming from someone else in the house, for example, when Uncle Haro put a plastic turd in the lower step of the front verandah "and had everyone running about in circles and looking for the dog and wondering how it had ever got in (80)." They all found the joke hilarious, except Della.

The first time they meet, Uncle Haro wants to create an effect on Frank. Perhaps Uncle Haro quickly realized that Frank absolutely devoted himself to his art, first avoiding any emotional or sexual indulgence he might have had and then turning it into strict habit and self-discipline. That might be the reason why he asks Frank if he believes in angels, pointing out that "as a medical man," (80) he could bear witness to having seen several of them, and that what most characterizes angels is their "extreme sensitivity" (81) and the fact that they are sexless or both male and female. In order to support his description with facts, Uncle Haro recalls a particular story of a girl about twelve years old, whom their parents had her all day tied to her bed and who kept hitting her head against the bars of the cod and screaming and throwing things at everybody:

> One day when I was there the noise suddenly stopped and when I came to her the little thing was as calm as could be. Still with one eye set lower than the other and

> a warped lip and blackened teeth, but so calm that she was – well, I could see immediately what it was and would have given anything to know what her silence was trying to tell us, what tidings, what *gospel* she had. I say a little girl but that is only in a manner of speaking. Because her mother called her that. Claire she was called. At that point she was beginning to mature, she was getting a beard, and it was clear that she was a male – or rather both, it hardly matters really, one way or the other. (81-82)

This anecdote is illuminating in several respects. First, it describes a situation in which gender is blurred or suspended – neither male nor female, or both – in a novel where one of the main concerns of the author is to delve into male and female culture. The anecdote could not be anything more substantial; otherwise, the distinction that supports the whole project would collapse. Second, it comes at a point in the novel when a mainly male household has already been described in the first Chapter, and a household mainly made up of female members and where the members who hold power are female is being described. It is also important that a case in which the boundary between the male and the female is questioned appears in the Chapter devoted to describe the female culture, where the female body is already represented as fluid (menstruation, breastfeeding, arousal) and permeable, for example in sexual intercourse or childbirth, and unlike the male body, which is represented as self-contained, impenetrable and with clear boundaries. Being generally considered less than men in a patriarchal society, women are also therefore closer to what Julia Kristeva calls the abject of society: the crippled, deformed or monstrous of society.

In her essay *Powers Of Horror: An Essay On Abjection,* Julia Kristeva explains that identity is established by a careful process of distinction between the proper and the abject, the abject covering the entire range of entities (bodily, sexual, social, ethnic, etc.) against which the subject defines herself or himself. So far in *Harland's Half Acre,* we have seen instances of men behaving like women, for example when Clem nurtured and mothered his sons, and of women assuming roles usually reserved for men, for example Grandma Vernont as family head in charge of a major

state business. One of the major accomplishments of Malouf is having his characters swing from male to female, independently of their sex, natural to the reader, when it is the case that telling a man that he is feminine or suggesting that he has homosexual tendencies may be demeaning in a normal context, where heterosexuality is, generally speaking, the rule. In the context that concerns us here, the girl who Uncle Haro calls, perhaps ironically, perhaps with acute insight an 'angel' blurs the boundaries between the masculine and the feminine, therefore problematizing the naturalness of the association between biological sex, gender, and sexuality. In the eyes of society, where clear-cut gender difference and heterosexuality are the norm, Claire is a monster.

Hermaphroditism was not always seen as an aberration in the English-speaking world. For example, in seventeenth century England three sexes were accepted: male, female and hermaphrodite. This threefold division lasted for about six centuries. Nevertheless, sexual intercourse among them was strictly politicized:

> Seventeenth century England recognized two genders, but three biological sexes: man, woman and hermaphrodite. It was presumed that one had sexual relations only with the opposite gender, and only in marriage in line with Christian teaching limiting sexual relations to procreation. Hermaphrodites were quite accepted as long as they chose one gender permanently and took their sexual partners from the opposite gender. All persons were thought capable of desiring both genders and transgressions were countenanced as long as patriarchal domination was not overturned: any act of penetration of women or youths had to be by men. There was no loss in gender status for men who had sex with youths, as long as they maintained a dominant role.
>
> Scholars suggest that this six hundred year old system began to alter rapidly in the 1690s and into the first decade of the eighteenth century, resulting in the culture we recognise as modern Western society. (Moore 4)

Going back to *Harland's Half Acre,* it was also during this time of his life that Frank got acquainted and then frequented another character verging on the monstrous, albeit for different reasons: the antique-dealer Knack. Frank will consider his partner, Edna Byrne, a sister. Their story is recounted in Chapter 3, which bears his name, 'Knack'.

The Chapter 'Knack' is rather short – if the first two Chapters are a bit more than fifty pages and carry the weight of the novel (the development of its main characters with their ambitions and follies, the major knots whose unraveling will transform its characters and Australian values), this one is about twenty-five pages long, not even half the extension of the others.

In brief, this Chapter tells the story of Walter Knack and Edna Byrne, and their tragic death: "A death pact, that is what the newspapers called it: a lurid catch-phrase to cover love, pity, fury, terror – the unsolvable mysteries." (127) Knack had shot twice his partner in the chest, then put the gun barrel between his teeth and shot himself. As in *Johnno*, what is written in the newspapers is categorical and doesn't capture anything substantial about the facts.[57] The idea is

[57] In contrast to the matter-of-factness that characterizes the narrator Dante, Johnno believes that the true meaning of life resides in art. Hence, when Johnno wants to convince Dante of something, he finally resorts to the newspapers: "'Well, you can check the bloody papers", he said, "*The Courier Mail*, you'll believe that I suppose." (137) At the end of the novel, dubious of Johnno's death, Dante is ironically reassured by the newspapers:

> I turned again and again to that paragraph in the paper.
>
> "So – you don't believe me. *The Courier Mail* now, I suppose you'd believe *that*!"
>
> He too had submitted himself at last to the world of incontrovertible event. Johnno was dead. *The Courier* said so. It must be so. (152-153)

that art is always closer to the truth than the mere description of events. This Chapter aims at taking the reader a bit closer to the so-called "unsolvable mysteries", but without making a big fuss out of them.

The story is told from the point of view of the omniscient narrator – even if we could simply assume that it is Phil who continues telling us the story, as he will take this role again in two of the three remaining Chapters of the book, 'Nephews' and 'The Island'; the odd Chapter being only four pages long and quite oneiric in content, it describes Frank's state of utter distress after his nephew Gerald commits suicide. Phil will also increasingly become Frank's only and faithful confidant and one of the central actors of the novel. Phil briefly summarized Knack's story in Chapter 2, when telling about his first visit to Frank's improvised studio with his father in the Pier Pictures in South Port. At that time, Phil had the habit of collecting "treasures," (60) as he called them, and every now and then he would go to a couple of junk shop sellers in Melbourne Street in Brisbane to see what he could afford. One of them was Knack's shop. There, he would wait for Knack to leave the shop to go in, because the boy was scared of him. Phil describes Knack as a big man with a stoop, broad-shouldered and whose big head makes his boldness more prominent. Knack's effort to keep a smile on to please the boy and the fact that he normally carries a lovebird on his shoulder makes him appear even more frightening and bizarre in the eyes of the boy. This is how Phil describes Knack:

Dante summarizes Johnno's vision of life in the last paragraph of the novel (before the Epilogue), which can also be read as an artistic manifesto:

> For what else was his life aiming at but some dimension in which the hundred possibilities a situation contains may be more significant than the occurrence of any one of them, and metaphor truer in the long run than mere fact. How many alternative fates, I asked myself, lurking there under the surface of things, is a man's life as we know it intended to violate? (165)

> Difficult to think of Knack, with his immense stoop, and his accent, and a skull that looked as if it had never had hair at all but had always been polished and bald, as anything but a monster. He had a habit of standing in the doorway to his shop with a little zebra-striped love-bird on his shoulder or perched very prettily on the back of his hand, or (but I don't believe I ever saw this, I only imagined it) on the bald crown of his head, as on a monstrous egg it was trying to hatch. I used to watch him from the tram or from the other side of the street, and would go into the shop at last only when the woman was lolling in the deckchair and he was clearly away. He scared me; and when he smiled, showing all his teeth and adopting a pose that was meant to make him, in the eyes of a small boy, a kind of clown on stilts, I lost all power of speech and was more fascinated and frightened than ever. (61)

Once Knack was out of sight, he would enter the shop where Edna Byrne was lazily sitting in a "stripped deckchair," (60) crossed-legged, wearing a sleeveless dress in summer and the same dress with a cardigan on in winter. "She was a big, lazy, sad-looking blonde, very white, with painted nails and hair piled high on her head that was never quite tidy, and which she kept patting with a plump and rather grubby hand." (61) It was in the same humour in which he entered Knack's shop that Phil came across a painting of Edna in Frank's studio. His father and Frank were talking about their own business when he begun looking around and "drew from a pile of sheets against the wall the portrait of a woman", which "drew a gasp" from him, "perhaps even a little cry." He wasn't thinking about Edna and he couldn't suspect that Frank and him could have a common acquaintance. The memory of Edna was also inevitably linked to the horrifying act that put an end to her life. Hence Phil's breath-taking reaction. The painting in itself was figurative enough not to reveal anyone in particular, just the irregular features of a woman's face and her pose and attitude in front of life: "It was her attitude I recognized, rather than the face, which was

barely suggested by two or three pen strokes under a stack of wispy straw."[58] Frank's painting maintained Edna's memory brightly alive in another medium, the canvas: "It wasn't that. It was the woman, so largely and beautifully and warmly alive again in the striped deckchair," Phil says. (60) Frank quickly realized that Phil had recognized the woman in the picture, which meant that they shared a certain sensibility and that Phil suddenly held the key to Frank's art. When Phil and his father entered Frank's improvised studio, Frank was working on a larger picture, which contained reds and blues that Phil could not decipher. After seeing Edna's picture, he realized "what those linked figures were doing, what the red was, and the madness and pathos of those streaks of blue." The painting captured that instant of extreme violence that had so suddenly put an end to their lives. All in all, Phil and Frank shared a secret, an experience that could not be put into words: "None of this could I have put into words that day. I put it into silence. It was a silence, along with other things, that I felt I shared now with Frank Harland." (62) Phil's father "stepped forward", looked at the picture, but "it meant nothing to him." (60) So for all that and after analyzing this brief incident in Chapter 2, which acts as a preamble to Chapter 3, we simply assume that in Chapter 3, it is Phil who recounts the story of how Frank got acquainted with Knack and Edna and how he witnessed their tragic fate, delving a bit more into the characters and offering us another perspective on their tragic story.

When explaining the contribution of this Chapter to the main storyline of *Harland's Half Acre,* critics have exclusively focused on the character Knack. As we have seen, one of the main concerns of David Malouf when writing *Harland's Half Acre* was to investigate into the relationship and contrast between male and female cultures. If we consider that Knack and Edna share equal weight in the novel, the fact that Knack provides the title of Chapter 3 can be simply

[58] At this point in his career as artist, what Frank's art aesthetically captures is always an existential stance.

read as a sign that we are reading a story written by a male writer,[59] that is, if we do not leave Edna as subsidiary to Knack and we imagine that it is her story that is being recounted, Edna's homicide can be read as a paradigmatic case of domestic violence.[60]

The side effects of war hang over Chapter 3 from the very beginning and do not bode well for their main characters, Knack and Edna.

The atmosphere, the tone and the events recounted in Chapter 3 recall a story by Edgar Allan Poe: gloomy, foggy and nightmarish. We readers are aware all along that something terrible is going to happen. The Chapter starts with the description of Spring Hill, where Frank lives in a "workman's cottage", which "had been partly burnt out and was condemned." (104) The dew lit by moonlight gives the neighborhood "the look of turned ground in a bit of cobwebbed garden,"

---

[59] We refer the reader again to footnote 19 in the first part of this Chapter. Malouf's critical attitude is similar to that of Kant in his *Critique Of Pure Reason.* (Guyer 1-8)If Kant sets out to find out what the limits and conditions of human knowledge are, Malouf is aware of his limits when writing about gender. This attitude shows Malouf is respectful and attentive to gender difference.

[60] This is one of the themes that the opening Chapters of the popular novel *My Place* by Sally Morgan shares with *Harland's Half Acre:* the war traumas harvested in Europe and imported to Australia, ruining families and households.

In *My Place*, Sally's father, Arthur, repeatedly menaces killing his half-caste wife and children, until he commits suicide. The inclusion of ethnic issues in Sally Morgan's novel further complicates the emotional turmoil and the aggressiveness of male violence, but both novels share the same background. Sadly, the father's death is a relief for the family:

> Fear had suddenly vanished from our lives. There were no more midnight flights to Aunty Grace's house, no more hospitals, no more ambulances. We were on our own, but peace had returned. I was still afraid of the dark, but I didn't burrow under my pillow any more. (Morgan 51)

evoking an old grave. It is a dissolute and decadent neighborhood, filled with "shouting matches, drunken brawls, the soft crash of bottles on warm bitumen, …" (103) It was bad times. In a letter in which he promises Tam to send the bit of money the people in Sydney may advance him, we learn that Frank had been in the army and worked in an airplane factory for a very short period of time but had to quit for health reasons: "Since I was let out of the army myself I have been a bit crook – chest. Worked for a while in an aeroplane factory, but it was too much for me at that stage." (122)[61]

This led him to resume his solitary life as artist. But he found that it was more difficult than it used to be. During the day he painted, and when it was too dark to see he would sometimes go for a drink in order at least to observe what he was not a part of or what he was missing:

> It was a time of crowds, and more than ever now he knew what it was to be alone. Everyone else had been recruited into a company of one sort or another; they were living in events he was barely touched by. To settle among them for a while, to smell the powder, scent, lipstick excitement of it all, to be at the edge of brawls or tremendous bouts of drunkenness, made him feel cut off and out of his own times but gave him at least a glimpse of things (104).

Frank first saw Knack and Edna sitting in a corner in a wine shop in Wharf Street. They "exchanged looks, then nods," (105) grew acquainted and, finally, they invited him to the rear room of their shop in Melbourne Street.

The moment they enter the rear room a lovebird flies out and rests onto Knack's shoulder. Edna tells Frank that the bird's name is "Allegra", which means 'happy, content'. The

---

[61] Before being taunted by the cowboy of trucks, Frank had been described as "a lean figure who only a few months before had been in uniform like the rest, but had fallen back, as solitude remade him or rediscovered old lines that the rough army material had disguised, into his scraggier self." (123)

name of the bird contrasts with Knack's somber appearance. Edna offers them a glass of Horlicks, but before that Knack wants to have something "stronger": "'Hennesse,' he pronounced, 'Four star.'" (106) Knack has all the traits of a serial killer: a cold and rigid physical appearance, a striking face, a gloomy character and a weakness for alcohol. He fought in the civil wars in Poland and he is an intellectual: studied philosophy: "a student of philosophy in his youth," (113) plays the piano and knows Frank is a real artist when he sees his paintings.

More specifically, we are told that Knack "had been the citizen, successively, of three powers", and "a soldier in the civil wars." (113) By "three powers", it is likely that Malouf is referring to The May Coup d'État carried out by Marshal Józef Piłsudski between 12 and 14th May 1926, which overthrew President Stanisław Wojciechowski and put Kazimierz Bartel as new head of government. (*Wikipedia "May Coup in Poland"*) Similarly, it is likely that when saying that Knack was "a soldier in the civil wars", Malouf is loosely referring to the Lesko uprising (*Wikipedia "Lesko Uprising"*) in Poland between June and July of 1932 and the more critical battle that confronted Nazi Germany and Poland on Friday September 1st 1939, and that signalled the outbreak of World War II. (*Wikipedia "Polish Contribution to World War II"*) It took Germany about a month to conquer Poland, and perhaps it was during the war against Germany that Knack realized that he had not only lost his state, but also his humanity and himself, as he will recount it.

We have seen the effects of war on Australian society when, at the end of Chapter 1, Frank takes to the road and meets the wretched of society, including veterans from World War I and, then, the state of depression and recession that chastises Australia when it enters World War II. Chapter 3 is set in the early 1940s. On the way to Knack's apartment, waiting for a convoy of trucks to pass, "sometimes a figure would call out of one of the wagons, 'Look, a swaggie! Hey! Swaggie! And others would take up the cry till there was a regular hullabaloo of whistling and shouting and chucking off." (123-124) Frank could foresee their future as mirroring the fate of the Great War veterans. "Poor buggers, they didn't know it yet, but when they leaned out of the wagons and catcalled or chiaked, it was themselves they were jeering at." (124) When going back

to Australia, these men will find no recognition and most of them will come back too traumatized to resume a normal life. Like Uncle Gil, or Sally Morgan's father as she recounts it in *My Place*, they are too crazy or too far-gone.

War has a defining effect on Knack. He was born out of it. As Frank imagined that he had been born directly from his father's mouth, Knack tells his story as if he had been spat out directly from the bowels of hell. The womb of his second birth is nothing less than a body-disposal ditch. Malouf imagines Knack, literally and metaphorically, as a son born of what is perhaps the cruelest war in world history of all the wars that have been perpetrated by men, the outbursts of World War II, in the same way that Frank was a son of his father's stories and the receding patriarchal values they perpetuated. In this way, both Frank and Knack are at least metaphorically born from two powerful interrelated male symbols: patriarchy and war, respectively. It is the brutalities of war that are at the source of Knack's "wry cynicism," (112) scepticism and ironic detachment when he tells his story:

> When I got up of that ditch and found I had all my limbs, it was near dusk and everyone around me, under me, had stopped moving. Just a little warmth was still coming up, making a sort of fog. Body-warmth. Ah, well I thought, so this is the afterlife, is it hell then? It wasn't of course but it might be. So, I got a new life, a new country, why not a new name? Knack has the right sort of sound, eh? – short and sweet. It fits me better than the other long one, with so much family history, you know, and all the honors to be kept up. (111)

Having Germany invaded Poland and having his homeland become a place of death and destruction, Knack decides to leave in search of a new identity somewhere else, to the Antipodes. As Don Randall puts it in his *David Malouf,* he climbed "as if grotesquely resurrected, out of a Holocaust body-disposal ditch," and proceeded "from that horrific European point-of-origin toward his Australian life." (97) From the very beginning, Knack is presented as torn between his lost Polish identity and a new Australian identity he finds himself unable to assimilate into, but the

way Knack tells his story soon makes Frank realize that Knack's inability to assimilate into the Australian culture isn't simply a question of accent: "It is difficult not to appear a clown sometimes, when your head is in one place and your tongue in another. The accent!" (111) that is, a question of having a different language and having been brought up in a different culture. For all his scepticism and apparently ironic detachment, Knack is a broken man. Knack's inability to nourish a new sense of belonging and the fate of the character[62] are not accidentally linked in an author and culture that have made of the sense of place one of their main concerns and literary inquiries.

Similar to the character Johnno, Knack comes up with his own theories about when and how absolute evil entered the world. Johnno and Knack try to capture the world in a discursive net, which is their way to master and control the chaos and lawlessness that surrounds them. Holding the fisher's net means holding truth. This gesture replicates the patriarchal instinct to control and subjugate, it is what Derrida calls "phallogocentrism", the need of the male gender to monopolize the discourse on truth and close the free play of signification. Johnno imagines that the world is secretly run by some very remarkable men that act in a sectarian form, deciding where, when and how long the world wars and the civil wars will last, making all the decisions on who is to run what countries and for how long, controlling the vicissitudes of the economy, etc. His theories are sleuthing, political and, therefore, conspiratorial and confabulatory in kind:

[62] War is described as literally ingrained in Knack:

> The man had a visible fate. He had sucked it up with the fog that drifted in off his native lakes, or from exhalations out of flooded clalkpits where the dead would not lie still but breathed and gave off gases. It was in the dirt, of whatever colour, that had got in under his nails, and that no scrubbing could flush out; into the pores of his skin, into his footsoles, and was the thickness on his tongue, which would only imperfectly accommodate itself to local vowels. (118-119)

> 'Well then"', he whispers, 'it's the Organization, see? The big one, the one that's behind everything, wars, revolutions, depressions, the lot. We think they just happen. Twenty-four causes of the French revolution and all that bullshit. Trade barriers, currency restrictions, economics. Human nature! And all the time it's *them*. They're sitting around a table somewhere, or contacting one another by secret radio. Boom! There's a palace revolution in Jordan, someone's knocked off quietly in Colombia, the drachma collapses. A plane crash. A world war. It's them every time. (76)

But Johnno is carried away by the excitement of the story he is making up and everything gets out of hand. It is difficult to determine whether he himself believes what he says or simply pretending. But the world would be a much more interesting and fabulous place if things were as Johnno imagined:

> 'But that's not the whole thing, even yet. It gets better and better. Because the Big Ones, the ones who really matter, the ones who are pulling the strings and making it all happen – well, what's so enormous is that they aren't big people at all, or not the sort of people you'd *know* were big, with their names in history books or in the newspapers. They're the most inconspicuous people in the world. People you wouldn't tumble to in a million years. Like those old men at the Public Library, f' instance. Who'd suspect one of them? Or Stavros there.' Johnno jerks his hed towards him, sleeping, or pretending to sleep, with his arms folded on the bar. 'It's perfect, don't you see? It's – ' he searches for the word, "it's Copernican! Once you've been made to realize it everything suddenly makes sense.' (77)

In front of Dante's scepticism: "'you believe it then?'" Johnno asks, and Dante simply shrugs his shoulders: "I shrug my shoulders," Johnno's insistence borders on the farcical:

> 'But it's the only thing that would explain it all", Johnno insists. 'The unfairness of things. The absurdity." He gives a big guffaw, then covers his mouth

quickly with his hand. Stavros stirs and sits up. Johnno's voice becomes a steady hiss. "Can't you see what a joke it is? Those old men must be pissing themselves, sitting there in the library, watching us swallow all the garbage in those books. History, psycho-analysis, looking at the newspaper headlines! It's one huge, glorious joke." Once again he has to stifle a burst of laughter. "It's cosmic!" (77-78)

On the other hand, Knack's vision of history is apocalyptic, in tenor with the bellicose spirit of the times. Like Poe's, Knack's is a medievalist and gothic world. He gives the exact date and location when evil entered the world and the Dark Ages began. According to Knack, the volcano Hekla in Iceland is the "Gateway to Hell"; this is how the volcano was known in the Middle Ages. ("Wikipedia 'Hekla'") Supposedly, this gateway gave access to the Lake of Fire and sulfur where God had overthrown Satan, as recounted in the Book of Revelation in the Bible. (*The Bible, Revelation 20, The Defeat of Satan*) The exact date Knack provides seems to have coincided with the death of 79% of Iceland's sheep stock, due to fluorine poisoning. But there isn't a record of any eruption worth mentioning on that date. There is in the apocalyptic relation of events recounted by Knack the intermingling of more or less accurate fats with literary and poetic notions Malouf is fond of. We only need to think of *An Imaginary Life* and *Ransom*. But the way our psyches work in everyday life is also enmeshed in a sort of limbo somewhere between reality and fiction, for example when we watch on TV what is happening on Gaza, we might interpret it as the result of irrational and evil forces. We have a vague apprehension of it, otherwise we wouldn't be able to resume our normal lives or continue eating after watching these images during dinner. There is also in Knack's account a subtle critique of modernity and the idea of progress. The sulfur released through the throat of the volcano and the ash cloud propagated for days eventually got into peoples lungs and infected their brains with "sulphurous notions," which translated into a blind belief in reason, progress and the nation-State. The latter was built up on notions of ethnic and racial superiority. There seems to be in the discourse of Knack an implicit reference to the

Napoleonic Wars (these sulfurous notions "made men – dizzy – sent them whirling off to be demons themselves, organizing revolutions and wars"), Foucault's *Discipline and Punishment: The Birth of the Prison*, a critique of the increasing militarization of European countries in the nineteenth and twentieth century: "organizing… councils and model prisons, and new kinds of dances to get themselves more worked up," and even a critique of the Romantic poets and intellectuals that let themselves be too easily appropriated by National Socialism in Germany or other contemporaneous authoritarianisms "and poems and proclamations against this and that." Worst of all, these sulphurous notions do not come from the outside any longer. People have been transformed and now they rise in bubbles from their bowels, they have become evil and demons themselves:

> 'Did you know', he told them once, 'that we can determine the exact date, down to the hour, when our Dark Ages began? June the 8th, 1783. On that day the entrance to hell blew open and all the devils broke loose. It is quite scientific, you can read about it, I can show the place on the map. It is in Iceland. A great hot cloud spread out, all over the world. It was full of sulphurous notions that men breathed in with it – not germs but sulphurous *notions*. They got into the *bloodstream* and were carried in bubbles to the brain. They made men – dizzy – sent them whirling off to be demons themselves, organizing revolutions and wars and councils and model prisons, and new kinds of dances to get themselves more worked up, and poems and proclamations against this and that, and a terrible itch to know everything and be everything and cast off limitations. We've been breathing that new air ever since. We've got used to it. If we had a real sense of history we'd be measuring time by it, before and after: BH and AH. We've adapted. We've become new creatures and have stopped noticing that the breath is not out of heaven any more but thick, sulphurous, out of – what do you say? – the bowels is it? Is that right? We are under a new dispensation. This is the year one hundred

> and sixty-two,[63] AH, After Hekla.' His smile now was on the lugubrious rather than the comic side (Malouf's emphasis, 113).

Knack's discourse succinctly alludes to the postmodernist critique of modernism. He wants to escape from the hell of modernity, that is the reason why he has come round to the other side of the world and created a new identity that is meant to leave behind a preposterous belief in progress, reason and the nation. It is a matter of taking things easy, and a priori he could not be in a better place, since popular wisdom labels Australia as the "no worries" country. The first thing he does is changing his name. As he himself tells us, the name 'Knack' is a nickname he has given himself in order to do away with all the history and grandeur of his long and boring family name:

> 'Besides, in this place, the real name hardly matters', he tells Frank. 'It is Nestorius – a mouthful, eh? And who cares now that it goes back a thousand years in the one district, with a lake, forests, a kind of castle, even a crest. See?' He showed Frank a ring with a porcupine on it, in a raised shield. 'Might as well be Knack!' (111)

Malouf plays a bit with the names and nicknames of this eccentric character. Nestorius is his original name, he introduces himself as Knack, and his companion, Edna Byrne, calls him Walter. Nestor is a quite common name,[64] but Malouf seems to have been influenced by the close homophony between Nestor and 'nest' to create this character, or perhaps it was the other way around: the envisioning of the Knack with a huge baldhead resembling "a monstrous

[63] If we add 162 to 1783, Knack's present is 1945.

[64] Knack uses the Latin form of the name Nestor, Nestorius most likely in order to stress its long history. The name Nestorius has a reference in the Latin world in the figure of Nestorius (386-450), Patriarch of Constantinople from 428-431, who was condemned for heresy because he stressed the human nature of Jesus Christ when referring to Mary as Christotokos (bringer forth of Christ) instead of Theotokos (bringer forth of God). (*Wikipedia "Nestorianism"*)

egg," (119) always carrying a love-bird on his shoulder "or (but I don't believe I ever saw this, I only imagined it) on the bald crown of his head" (61) might have suggested him that name.[65]

We have seen that there is always a bit of a fuss with Knack's baldhead, which everyone believes resembles "a monstrous egg." (61, 119) Phil wasn't the only one impressed by it. When Frank and Edna sit and listen to him play the piano, Frank wonders at his head, which "shone with a gleam of sweat on the crown and was monumental and made up for the absence of columned and gilded halls." His body contorts in unison with the music, in order to make the piano reproduce the original score with the utmost precision, and Frank apprehends "in the raddled veins and greasy roundness of his skull as skin worked over bone" the distressing emotions, "the agonies, the unstillnesses and doubts and conciliations," the music conveys. (110) Frank cannot stop pondering, almost to the point of obsession, about it, as if its egg-form contained some essential truth that he could not fail to decipher. He even imagines Edna holding Knack's head between her breasts and believes that what keeps him and Edna together is its mystery, what it might mean, the experiences and silences it conceals.

Frank ruminates:

[65] The OED defines 'knack' as 'an acquired or natural skill at doing something', for example 'he had a knack for communicating' means that the person in question has the natural or learned ability at making him or herself be clearly understood. What Knack has a knack for is DIYs, seeming to imply that he is a handyman, working as he does as antique-dealer, where many things have to be amended and repaired. 'Handyman', as the word says, is mainly male occupation, which men can either hold as a hobby or a job, as the OED specifies. It is a low class man's job, and it contrasts with Knack's position back in Poland, where he had a long and old family name and titles.

> It was Knack's smooth bald skull, that impenetrable hemisphere with the thin membrane that shone, sweated, occasionally drew back in painful corrugations, that fascinated and appalled him.
>
> A monstrous egg. He would have liked to clasp it in his hands and feel what was hatching there, the warmth and the beat of the blood, since there was no way of getting to what it knew, or had seen and walked away from. He wondered – and shocked himself – if Edna, in their intimate moments, sometimes cradled the big stone egg between her breasts. How much did she know from Knack that she could never have grasped in any other way? How much had entered her – and entered her understanding – of what Knack knew?
>
> He understood that this was the real question between them… (119)

The egg is a symbol of fertility. It symbolizes birth and transformation, and it also most commonly refers to the female reproductive cells. Why does Malouf so insistently have his characters wonder about Knack monstrous baldhead and its resemblance with an egg? What strange symbiosis is there between Knack's tough and masculine physical appearance and this symbol of female fertility, between the masculine and the feminine? A little earlier in the novel, Knack tells us that he had lost his "manhood" back in Poland. He had left it behind in the ditch he so unsteadily stepped out of: "'I think sometimes that I got up too quickly, and left in that ditch my soul or is it my manhood?'" Knack tells Frank and Edna. "'Well, it is the same thing'", he concludes. In English, 'manhood' also means 'penis', so it is possible that Knack is confessing to Frank that he is either impotent or sterile, or perhaps both. Hence Edna's reaction, trying to comfort Knack: "'Walt, dear', the woman remonstrated, and took his hand." (112) In the comings and goings between different sets of oppositions and metaphorical displacements, Knack's impotence must find compensation in one way or another. Like Frank's father, who alternatively adopted a male and female role toward his sons in the absence of a female figure in the house, Knack's inability to have sex with a female counterpart and make her pregnant creates the need to

compensate this want by other means. Let's recall that Frank believed that his father, gathering "two forces, male and female" might have conceived him "by a process that was not to be referred to and which obeyed other laws than the ones he had observed among animals and learned from the brute facts of the school yard" and which he sometimes had a glimpse of, believing that "he could only have been breathed forth in a great bubble or spat bodily from his father's mouth." (12) Likewise, two antagonistic but complementary forces struggle to find an equilibrium in Knack: on the one hand, his monstrous head, which is a female symbol because it resembles an egg, and on the other hand his manly short, stout and strong physical appearance. That this is so can be further supported by another incident. Just before arriving at his friends' house and witnessing the horrendous crime, Frank recalls having seen a couple having sex in a corner under the rain, which in fact gave the impression of being a single being or entity from the distance. This is one of the most vivid scenes in the book and it contains one of its most enduring images: engaged in their own rhythm and hinging on the throbbing and spams of the sexual act, they resemble "a mythological beast". Like Knack's arrival to Australia, their encounter is also a result of the contingencies of war:

> A soldier in a long army greatcoat had a woman against the wall, with her feet in the greatcoat pockets and her bare thighs damp with moonlight. They moved slowly like figures in a dream, making a single creature with two locked and moaning heads, a mythological beast to which he couldn't have given a name, born out of the times, the war, as evidenced by the rough woollen material of the greatcoat with raindrops on its hairs. (123)

So when Frank imagines Edna holding Knack's baldhead between her breasts and everything they share in their moments of closest intimacy, why does he think Knack kills Edna? What inarticulate anger, what irremediable weakness or what intolerable evidence did she cast light on?

At this point, it is important to note that the real nexus to Knack in the story is Edna Byrne. Phil was scared of Knack; he would only enter the shop when he was away. The same was the case with Frank. Knack made Frank feel uneasy. Frank grew a close relationship with Edna, but Knack was beyond his reach. He was a foreigner, spoke with an accent, was a learned man and had miraculously survived the war in Europe. He had seen terrible things up there. Edna Byrne was the only one who had come close enough to Knack to be able to understand at least some of it. "Did she really understand it all, Frank wondered. He didn't. But then Knack had a head start coming from Europe, which must be an education in itself – a bitter one; Australians couldn't compete." (113)

Edna and Frank soon become friends and even accomplices. They share their love for "bread pudding", which they both like "real wet," (114) in the same way that Frank used to have it in his childhood home with his father and brothers. He might have recalled his father's words when eating the bread pudding with Edna: "'this is delicious bread pudding', the man announced from the bed behind them. 'It's a bit on the wet side, but Frank likes it on the wet side, don't you Frank? So do I.'" (32) They also feel attracted by the mystery of Knack, and Edna rejoices in the fact that she is the one who has come closest to him. When Frank and Edna sit and listen together to Knack playing the piano, Frank feels he cannot follow them far enough; the place the music is taking them is "too dark":

> Letting go of the other child's hand, Edna's, who was too entranced to notice, he felt back. It was too dark, all that. It was of a gloom he had never encountered in all his travels up and down the state, and might not exist on this continent or on this side of the globe. The mists here were not thick enough – not enough people. You needed centuries of breath; or maybe the sulphur-cloud Knack spoke of. (114)

Edna's rejoicing and excessive optimism leads her to confide the mystery of Knack to Frank, even if her confession does not make the mystery any less mysterious. In this way, she creates a special relationship with Frank, builds up an intimate relation with him that is based on

similarity and trust, and which contrasts with her relationship with Knack. Edna's relationship with Knack is based on admiration, but also on fearful mystery. The quality of this fearful mystery stems from an essential difference. First, it is a difference of character and a generational difference. Edna and Kanck have different experiences, the most important being that Knack has experienced war firsthand. Evil is difficult to resist, and the war put a lot of suffering and anger and evil in Knack. That was part of the fearful mystery that made up who he was. On one occasion, while Edna is talking about her sister and realizes how much she has changed over the years and how much she has moved away from her family by getting acquainted with Knack, Frank can see…

> …as through a half open door into an unfamiliar room, that corner of her being in which Knack stood tall, dark, dressed in a power that arose for both of them out of stories they had scared themselves with as children and whose fascination they had never thrown off – a gentle, mocking, ugly, clever, tormented *stranger*… (Malouf's emphasis, 120).

Second, Knack's difference is a cultural difference. Knack's entrance into Edna's world defamiliarizes Edna from everything that is familiar to her, most of all her family and her sister. The strangeness that characterizes Knack is bound to his place of origin and his people - their history, way of life, language, etc. "'Just think!'" Edna says. "'He's come from so far away, Knack; from such a *foreign* place, those forests 'n all. An' you know he was a kind of aristocrat there, he's told you the sort of life they lived, *his* people.'" (Malouf's emphasis, 120) Knack and everything he stands for alienates Edna from what is familiar to her, destabilizing and menacing her identity. That is the reason why she confesses to Frank that Knack made her see that she was not always sunny and that there is a lot of dark and "not nice" things in us:

> I'll tell you this, Frank, without Knack I'd never – I'd never of known even the half of what I *am*, I'd have missed myself – walked right past myself in the dark. It was like being turned round and seeing yourself for the first time what he could show me. Like there were things in me – not all good things even – I mean not *nice*

> – but me; and the same things in him as well, and when we came together they could flow out of me and I could stop being – I don't know – all loaded down with what I was scared of and ashamed of. People think I am sunny. I'm not. Not always. Not deep down. There's a lot of darkness in us. (121)

Finally, what is also a source of amazement for Frank and Edna is the series of random events that took Knack to Australia and that brought them all together. The realization that all that matters to them – their friendship, Frank's relationship with Knack and Edna, and even who and what they are – depends on things that they cannot control:

> An' it took all those circumstances – you know what I mean – civil wars, revolutions and then *this* war and all he's suffered, poor dear, to bring him to a place where we could just meet. I mean, all the chances were against it, but the wars and that happened as if they were just for that. (120-121)

In confessing all this to Frank, Edna has made him an accomplice of her relationship with Knack and a sort of triangulation between the three has been enacted. On the night Knack kills Edna and then shoots himself, when Frank tries to make his way through the crowd and bumps into a police officer, a female voice reveals his identity: "'He's sort of an artist. I seen him in the shop – oh, lots of times. With *her*.'" (125) People might think it is a crime of passion: Knack, jealous of the understanding between Frank and Edna, kills her and then kills himself. In a way, this is quite near the thruth. Whereas Knack made everything that was familiar uncanny in Edna's life, Frank made her feel at home. When she dies, Frank thinks of her as "his lost sister." (127)

After Frank had known Edna and Knack for a while and so as to thank them for their hospitality (we are told that "they had come to be the nearest thing he had, in this sprawling transit-camp, to a family", 106), Frank gives them one of his paintings, which they hang in the rear room wall opposite the window. Knack was visibly touched by it. The dark figure of Knack against the painting, from which emanated a dim light, highlights Knack's sinister aspect. The conversation that follows reflects the contrast between Frank and Knack's feelings: inspired by Frank's painting,

both men described their lives against the background of an ideal. Frank had painted the childhood landscape he hoped to regain one day for his family. Knack saw it as an ideal place that did not yet exist:

> Knack approved. He would stand before the picture with his hands clasped behind as before a window, his long, cloth-covered back making an impressively solid downstroke, black, against the pale rectangle of the frame and the flickering light within. He took a deep breath.
>
> '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. Perhaps it is there I should have migrated.'
>
> He gave a dark chuckle. It was one of his jests.
>
> 'But it is this country,' Frank said.
>
> 'You think so?'
>
> Knack looked.
>
> 'No, Frank, I don't think it is. Not yet, anyway. It has not been discovered, this place. The 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. And darkness. Only you have been there. You are the first.' (116)

Keeling over Knack's corpse, Frank sees that Knack "had shot the back of his head off. The bald dome was gone, it was all jagged bone." (125) He had shot himself with his back to Frank's painting on the wall. Looking at the picture from below, Frank realizes that "an area about the same size as his own painting was covered now with a mess of grey and red that was still sliding in wet trails to the floor." The new effect is flabbergasting. The shot through Knack's skull has transformed Frank's painting. Baldness being a sign of manhood (women do not usually go bald), Knack's baldhead had nevertheless been extraordinarily converted into a sign of femininity by its resemblance with an egg, which is a female sign of fertility. Now Frank could see what it had been

hatching, what it had given birth to. His art had been completely transformed: "Such reds! What painter would have dared?"

In a somewhat ghoulish interpretation of events, Frank is mesmerized by the possibilities the pattern of colors on the wall seem to offer. They put an end to Knack's suffering. First, to the conflict between his life in Poland, where he had held a long name full with family history, and his new identity in Australia, which was too casual and trivial to put together some sense of identity. A man must be strong, sure of himself, he must have a stable identity and personality, or otherwise he might be deemed too feminine, even light-headed. There was no way Knack, with his temperament could hold on to that. Second, Edna's presence put his manhood into question, since he had lost his virility down in that ditch in Poland. Third, perhaps it was really a passionate crime and he had found himself unable to cope with the jealousy and powerlessness he felt when seeing Frank and Edna getting on so well together, listening and holding hands[66] "like children" (127) to the music he played on the piano; perhaps he couldn't stand their intimate moments together,[67] the "kind of drowsy intercourse between them" (107) that was the background to their talk. Finally, we can imagine that the gunfire put an end to the indelible memory of the war. Frank could see

---

[66] "The music scared him, but was easier to follow, Frank found, than the talk. Under clouds on an impossible eloquence, all bannered flame, poisonous berries hung in clusters over a pool, great dolls rolled their heads, their eyeballs clicked. Letting go of the other child's hand, Edna's, who was too entranced to notice, he fell back, etc." (114)

[67] "Frank looked at her and wondered. She was no longer talking only of herself and Knack.
She lay her fingertips very gently on is arm. He raised his eyes, having lowered them; questioningly, as to an oracle. The light of the shop, with its free-floating chairs and other debris of ruined households, was strange at this hour just before sunset, with the traffic streaming home." (121)

the evidence of the suffering and agony and distress that was happening on the other side of the world there in front of him. Now, he was also part of it.[68]

Frank's art had just suddenly come of age, whereas Frank still had to catch up with the events that were overwhelming his senses:

> The 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? He was frighteningly dazzled by the possibilities, as if, without his knowing it, his own hand had broken through to something that was searingly alive, savage, triumphant, and stood witness at last to all terror and beauty.
>
> That was what shook him: the sense of triumph, over and above what he would let himself feel, in a moment, as sickening loss. He might be blinded for the rest of his life by the boldness of it. (126)

Most importantly, the events let him to ponder the "mystery of Edna Byrne". Knack had referred often to him and Edna as "children" (114, 120, 127), probably due to his

[68] At the peak of his artistic genius, Frank will conflate his second-hand first-hand experience of war with reminiscences from other European artists who had also famously represented the carnages of war, for example Picasso. By then, Frank painted on almost everything, including newspapers:

> Fresh occasions and immanent, uncarnate creatures swam to the surface of the paper as to the surface of his mind, pushing their way through street happenings and accidents, the rhetoric of public men, the columns of chanting students and of closing prices on the exchange, the horse's mouths and the mouths of murderers and their victims in great sweeps and slashes, as his hand obscured the regular smeared newsprint and restored it to the colours of the earth. (187)

different experience, age, pose and knowledge. Consequently, Frank perceived himself and Edna as brother and sister. If Frank was pondering over the mystery of Edna Byrne it was because he felt there was a special tie between them. They both were Australian, and they had set themselves up against Knack, who coming from another part of Europe was so different, so much more learnt and had been to so many places and had seen so many more horrible things than they could even imagine. But this was so up until the horrendous crime. Frank compares it to "a tide", impossible to stop. Nora Zeale Hurston talked about men's dreams coming true: "For some they come with the tide." Good things, bad things – sometimes terrible things come with the tide. "How had he failed to see the rising of *such a tide of red*?" Frank asks himself. The tide is a woman's thing, which is the reason why Frank ponders over "the mystery of Edna Byrne". He feels guilty about not having been able to stop or foresee what was going to happen. His blindness makes him mad and he turns to pieces all his paintings, "even those that were turned to the wall", because they "were an affront to him, being inadequate now to what he had perceived" (126):

> Where, he asked himself, had he been all this time, while the horrors were preparing? How had he failed to see the rising of *such a tide of red*? Most of all, he brooded on the *mystery of Edna Byrne*, who might have been his sister; they came from such similar worlds and had grown so close. Hand in hand, like children, they had followed a lean back into deep woods, licking from their fingers, and smiling, the remains of purple-grey bread pudding, the sweet fat. (my emphasis, 127)

Actually, Frank had had a glimpse of the tide, but he hadn't been able to make up the whole picture. It was in the movies. At that time in the cinemas they used to put up shows such as Tom and Jerry, interspersed with documentaries about the war. When watching these documentaries, "what he saw did not immediately explain itself." Skeletal figures, mounts of corpses in black and white, "all this had, in the stilled theatre, which smelled of cigarette-smoke and disinfectant, a peculiar unreality." But then, Frank saw something that by its utter familiarity transformed the quality of the film roll that was being projected – a sunflower.

As in Plato's allegory of the cave in *The Republic*, a semiotic element is compared to the sun, which in turn confers different levels of reality to everything the sun illuminates. The film roll is a copy of an original, but the copy does not transmit the idea of the original faithfully enough. Or, what amounts to the same thing, the strangeness and unfamiliarity of what is being recorded, is faithfully captured by the film roll, but the audience fails to recognize the reality of what is being shown. Nevertheless, the filmmaker has a strategy, or perhaps it was mere chance. A sunflower, which in its form, color and imaginary resembles a sun, provides the link between what is being shown and reality. Since the audience readily recognizes the sunflower, it serves to make the mind of the audience project an additional transparent film to cover the original one and turn it into flesh and bone. The sunflower illuminated by the sun ha the effect of making the sun father, so to speak, everything that is projected onto the film screen. What is shown in the film is no make-believe. It is reality:

> These events were actual but unreal. They belonged to the history of another planet that had its own weather and its own range of colors, grey-black-white. It was recognizable but remote, or seemed so. Till in one of the images a figure in the same grey striped-pajamas as the rest, shaven-skulled and with a shovel in his hand, appeared beside a sunflower. It was taller than himself and in full bloom. The great round head of the sunflower, with its circle of grey flames, dropped, and was turned towards what must, you saw with a little shock, be a blazing sun. So it could be hot there! Vivid yellow flowed out of the sun into the flamey petals, and as it did so the grey flesh too was touched with light and smeared with earth, blood, shit colors, and along with the color, sound, smells – it was intolerable!
>
> Frank begun to sweat. At last, when he could take no more of it, he got up and begun to push out past the real knees, and back, almost chocking, into Brisbane, into the airlessness and banked heat of Queen Street. (118)

Don Randall summarizes in two points the main contribution of this Chapter to the novel. On the one hand, he emphasizes that Knack is not "part of the complex web of family affiliations," (97) but this statement needs some qualification, because Knack is in a relationship with Edna, so they are family. When Edna confides Frank that her sister has asked her if she could move with them, she decides she is going to "put her off" because she doesn't "think she and Knack would get on." (121) Moreover, when Knack calls Frank and Edna "children": "But you don't know what I am talking about, you lucky children!" (114) perhaps in order to emphasize their cultural differences and what he probably considers the innocence of Australians regarding the civil wars and the World Wars going on in Europe, this expression shows that he sees himself as part of a larger societal structure in typical familial terms. Finally, back in Poland Knack was a member of the aristocracy and had a name heavy with family history: 'Not like us, Frank, not in the least", Edna tells Frank. "Fur coats in winter, servants – even a special maid to dress him and put on his little hand-sewn shirts," (120) which means that, however spectrally, he was still part of a large web of family affiliations. Otherwise, why would Knack have complained about his old name, "with so much family history, you know, and all the honors to be kept up"?(111) What Don Randall means is that he is a character that is not essential, perhaps, to the main storyline of the novel, except for the direct link he provides with Europe, as we mentioned.[69]

---

[69] Malouf describes Knack's antique-shop as "a parody of settled existence that suggested some final break in the logic of things." (105) This break is a constant possibility in all households. Malouf describes "the family" as a "close, disorderly unit, threatened by conflicts that might at any moment make it fly apart," (97) which means that "the break in the logic if things" is a constant possibility in family life.

Don Randall describes Knack as "contrapuntal" to settled family life. He tries, but he fails. His antique-shop is a symbol that reminds us of the fragility of habit and settled life. Grandpa Vernont's causes an earthquake in his family and changes everything, as we will see briefly. So,

On the other hand, Don Randall qualifies the link that Knack provides with Europe by highlighting the fact that Knack "powerfully associates modern Europe with terror and violence." (Randall 97) It is true that everything that comes from Europe seems to be associated with war and violence in the novel, for example there is a clear reference to how Europeans dispossessed the Aboriginal peoples from their lands already in the first page: "Possession was easy. One brief bloody encounter established the white man's power and it was soon made official with white man's law." (3) But, more specifically, the scattered references to Europe seem to serve the purpose of placing *Harland's Half Acre* within the area of interest of an international audience. The way the novel portrays gender, families and patriarchy points to concerns that are universal in nature. Even if there are scattered references to world affairs (for example, Frank's cousin Ned dies in World War I and his brother Jim in World War II), Knack is the only character actually born and raised in Europe. He is also important enough to provide the name of one of the Chapters. So, even if we might initially think that the novel could do without this Chapter without great loss regarding the main story line and plot, the truth is that it contains the key to the trust that Frank will put on Phil and to their future friendship. In addition, it is likely that *Harland's Half Acre* would perhaps be constrained to be a local piece of writing without Knack.

---

again, it is true that Knack is "contrapuntal" regarding the main story line, but this remark needs some qualification, because the Harlands and the Vernont's families and households are far from settled, steady and secure.

This is the fragment by Randall, which deserves some qualification:

> The curio-world of his shop presents 'a parody of settled existence', disturbingly affirms 'some final break in the logic of things' (*Harland's Half Acre,* 105). Knack, then, is not simply marginal to familial centrality; he is contrapuntal, a kind of antithesis to which the thesis of family-and-household gives rise. (99)

The two points noted by Don Randall in his analysis of *Harland's Half Acre* are inextricably linked and they represent a constant concern in Malouf's fiction: the devastating effects of war on families. Wars are essentially a male experience. It is men who have declared and fought wars in the battlefield throughout history. If we have a look at the main motives of Malouf's fiction, war is always present. In *An Imaginary Life*, Tomis was constantly under the threat of foreign hordes. *Fly Away Peter* and *The Great World* revolve around World War I and II, respectively. *Ransom* recreates what is perhaps the paradigm of all wars in Western civilization, the Trojan War. In Chapter 4, we will analyse in more detail the relationship between men and war in the novels *Fly Away Peter* and *The Great World*. Malouf's concern for war also covers other forms of conflict by non-governmental organizations, such as terrorism in *Child's Play*, militia war in *Conversations at Curlow Creek* and, of course, the colonization of Australia in *Remembering Babylon.* The strength of Knack is that he symbolizes the abominable effects of war on men's characters and its devastating effects on families.

Chapter 4 is where the tensions and contradictions within the novel are resolved and the main characters undergo a process of catharsis that will definitely transform their selves and settle their destiny. There are some similarities in plot and other specific thematic coincidences with Patrick White's novel *The Vivisector*, as we will see, but it is clear that Malouf's main concern in *Harland's Half Acre* is a critique of patriarchy. In *The Vivisector,* Patrick White also critiques patriarchy, but this is only a particular concern of a more general critique of the bourgeoisie of the mid-twentieth century.

The narrator again is Phil, who tells the story from the first-person perspective and sometimes assumes the role of omniscient narrator, since he sometimes tells us what other characters think, feel, etc. Things have moved on since the death of Grandpa Vernont. When he goes to visit her grandmother once a year, Phil tells us that the front bedroom where his

Grandfather had died "had been done up" and that it is her Grandmother who lives there now, barely leaving the room and still running her business:

> Soon after Grandpa's death she had moved back – it was after all the main bedroom of the house, in which her various children had been conceived – and eventually she too came to spend most of her days there, no longer able to go downstairs but still dealing by telephone with even the most minor details of the business, on which she had never relinquished her hold. (132)

This time, Phil is in his early twenties, studies law – "My nephew's a law student," (134) Aunt Roo says when introducing him to her acquaintances – and is in the process of finding out a place for himself in the world. I've noticed that before. He was like you at your age." (74) During his visits, Grandma Vernont indulges in telling her grandson stories about her youth: how she met his grandfather and fell in love with him, perhaps because she sees Phil as more mature and reminds her of her deceased's husband Jeff. As a boy, she had told him: "You've got your father's hands – your grandfather's. Since in the early days she had only let the others see her resentment towards her husband, not her love, Phil is now made aware of the contradictory nature of his grandparents' love.

From his present position, Phil sees that the story of the affection between his grandparents draws an arch, with the end marking the period of greatest affection. When they met, it was love at first sight. Jeff had good manners and experience, he was handsome and, Grandma Vernont being barely sixteen: "'Well, I was a silly schoolgirl, sixteen,'" (133) she was easily impressed:

> He was the handsomest man I ever laid eyes on, your grandfather. And I was – goodness! – such a plain little thing. He was very gentle and had lovely manners but there was a spark. You could see he had been a bit of a devil – back there in Gloucestershire. I liked that. (132)

But as years passed, she grew disappointed with him, and her love faded. It was in his absence and in her old age, when her children were making their own lives and she didn't have to play the role of household head and family provider, that she could relax and love Jeff again. Jeff had had to step aside and let her young wife do what he had proved incapable of, and this no doubt had been a blow to his pride. For her part, Grandma Vernont had seen her dream of being married with a man who could protect her and provide for the family finally drown. She had not been able to indulge in feminine coquetry and vulnerability; she had had to be strong.

This is how Phil tells about it:

> I had seen no resemblance between them when Grandpa was still living. They gave no sign, with their opposite and unaccommodating styles, of having shared a life. But they had, and my grandmother begun to speak of him now as if they had indeed been a couple. Her stories were often cruel and showed lingering resentment, but there were others in which she and my grandfather appeared as young people with a passionate affinity, and it was out of these, as they softened her mouth in the telling, that the likeness emerged. Freed at last of the threat posed by his weakness she let her own appear, and began once again, but shyly, to approach him. (132)

Phil is also aware that there had been other changes in Grandma's household since his grandfather passed away. Della was gone to Mullimbimby "where she had three grand-nephews to cook for"; Aunt Connie went back with her ex-husband; they had closed the big kitchen and now Aunt Ollie cooked for Uncle Gil and Grandma "in a modern kitchenette, which was all she needed to prepare invalid meals for her mother and a steak and salad for Uncle Gil." (133) Aunt Roo had made her dreams come true and had married a stockbroker, Harry Price. They lived in "a showy mock-Tudor house on Hamilton Heights", she had become "president of a little theatre group", appeared in the "society pages" and her husband had taken her twice to England. She comfortably lived in her new role, "perhaps because she had anticipated these events in the telling

by a round ten years;" she no longer had "bouts of hysteria, lost her sharp defiant look," and "continued to dress ten years younger than she was." (134)

Since Phil also lives in Brisbane, he assiduously attends Aunt Roo's parties. They are informal improvised gatherings. At the end of a play or rehearsal, these occasions are summoned up on the spur of the moment, and they include actors, occasional visitors – more or less anyone who happens to be there or is casually informed and cares to attend. It is during one of these gatherings at Aunt Roo's house that Phil finds himself sharing a sofa with a boy and a girl who are more or less his age and look quite alike. She is eating an apple and he is leaning onto her shoulder, drunk and sleepy. They both have red hair, even if his is darker, and she has freckles. Phil describes the girl, whose name is Jacky as "an intense girl with freckles", which suggests that he finds her attractive.

Phil and Jacky start a casual conversation, in which the coincidence of a family bond opens Pandora's box. That it provides the Chapter title also foregrounds its importance. Jacky complains that she hates actors, to which Phil asks whether she is one. She replies that she isn't and takes the opportunity to ask Phil who he is. Phil introduces himself as Aunt Roo's nephew: "'I am a nephew', I told her. 'Of Aunty – of Mrs Price. I'm Mrs Price's nephew. She's my aunty.'" Jacky finds it hilarious and explains that her friend is also a nephew: "He's a nephew too', she informed me. 'Of Frank Harland the painter – though I don't suppose you've ever heard of him." (136) Of course, Phil has, and perhaps moved by Phil's admiring glance when she pronounces the name of Frank Harland, the girl complains that Gerald has never introduced her to the painter: "Well I've never met him and Gerald won't take me there. I've asked him to, heaps of times, but he won't." (136) Apparently, Gerald does not want to introduce her his uncle because he is "ashamed": "I think he is ashamed." (136) Shame and disgust will play a key role in the unfolding of events. But so far, the fact that Phil admits to knowing Frank Harland and having met him is enough to bring them together and make them friends.

The figure of Frank presides the meeting between Phil, Gerald and Jacky. Frank not only provides the book title and is the main character of the story but has become a national icon by the time the events in this Chapter are recounted. Accordingly, the Chapter starts telling about the figure of the painter and the painting that Phil's father bought him. The painting has become a sort of a fetish that reminds the narrator of old times, when his grandfather was alive and how his death brought a change of patterns and habits, as if it had separated two worlds, with the same actors – except the grandfather - playing different roles. It is also described as having a light of its own which seems to replicate the atmosphere of Phil's memories:

> Frank Harland's landscape, which my father had acquired for two pounds on the day of our first meeting, hung all the last year of my grandfather's life on the wall of my parents' bedroom. Its blues and greens dominated the room, and I thought of it as casting its own light when at five-thirty each afternoon I went in, quietly called my mother, and was allowed to lie with her for a minute or two on the high bed, before she told me regretfully but with firmness: 'Enough now Phil, I must go to your grandfather, poor love. He'll wonder what has happened to us.' (131)

Unfortunately, when his grandfather died, "the picture got left behind." When Phil asks for it to his father, he replies that Aunt Ollie was fond of Frank and his painting, so that he didn't think it right to ask for it back ("'I don't think we could ask for it now'"). So, what Phil does every time he visits his Grandmother is go to his parents' room and stand in front of Frank's picture, as if it was an object of cult and religious veneration, and lets himself be taken in by memories and ghosts of the past:

> So each year when I went to visit my grandmother on her birthday, travelling down on the motor-rail from South-Brisbane and returning the following night, I would go at least once and stand before it, and though it bore no resemblance to the landscape of Southport itself, which was all flat water and liquid

sky, would find there the exact emotional equivalent of the place as I had known it in the days of my grandfather's illness. The atmosphere of that time, which I felt for and regretted, was so strongly present that I might have gone out to the front bedroom expecting to find him restored and upright among his pillows, with his mouth open and his eyes shut, snoring, or passed my younger self on the back stairs, slipping put to relive myself while I gazed through loquot leaves at the moon. (131)

The name of Frank having summoned the allure of his reputation, and being the only one of the three who has not had the chance of meeting Frank in person, Jacky immediately proceeds to point out the similarities between her physical appearance and that of Frank's nephew, Gerald, telling Phil about the complicities and sexual games they condescend to, and fantasizing with the idea of adultery, perhaps so as to make themselves more interesting in his eyes:

> 'Look', the girl said, leaning across and setting their two faces side by side – his tanned one, sullen in sleep, with very white lids and a mouth that was too full, and her own all cheekbones, sharply alert – 'don't you think we're alike? Everyone says we are. People just assume we're brother and sister. Or twins. But Gerald's nineteen and we're not even related. We go in taxis sometimes and start carrying on in the back – you know, cuddling and breathing hard and talking about incest. You should see some of those drivers, they can't keep their eyes on the road. Gerald's a terrific actor, even your aunty says so. I just look dumb and breathe.' (136-137)

Malouf invests the relationship between Phil and Gerald with similar elements he invests the relationship between Johnno and Dante in *Johnno*, where the two characters seem to complement each other and are the same age, and Ovid and the child in *An Imaginary Life*, when Ovid ponders whether the child is a reminiscence of his twin brother who died in *An Imaginary Life*: "I am reminded of my brother, and realize what he means to me this Child, what it might

mean to lose him," (112) Ovid tells the reader when the Child is sick and he is afraid he might die. Phil is aware that his friendship with Gerald is tainted with his childhood wish to have a brother: "Playing with an affection he had aroused in me that had to do with my longing not to be an only child, Gerald had made an elder brother of me," (157) enacting an unconscious play of substitutions that is the real drive of the novel.[70] This is an aspect that will recur in all of Malouf's novels: a male bond or friendship that fantasizes with the idea of brotherhood, sometimes even with the figure of the twin brother and the double nature (good and evil) of this soul mate that sometimes acts as a psychopomp, sometimes as a scapegoat and sometimes simply as a projection of some aspect of the main character. More often than not, this relationship can be described as uncanny.

What is outstanding in the relationship between Phil and Gerald is that it is initially mediated by Jacky, because it is the first and last time that Malouf will have a woman mediate a relationship between two male characters in his novels, following the stereotypical triangular relationship described by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick in *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire.* Nevertheless, in spite of the similarity, the triangular relationship Malouf portrays is most interesting if we analyse the way in which it deviates from the standard analysis carried out by Sedgwick. Sedgwick builds on René Girard's literary analysis in *Deceit, Desire and the Novel,* where he builds upon the folklore wisdom that structures erotic relations as love triangles. This is how Sedgwick puts it:

[70] It is in this regard that nothing 'is' or is what it seems, and that allows for the play of substitutions between family members and friends, but also among positions within the family and within the social order. David Malouf resorts to the literary devices of metaphor and metonymy to enact this play of substitutions, which will also make possible the mechanism of triangulation that we will describe

> What is most interesting for our purposes in his study is its insistence that, in any erotic rivalry, the bond that links the two rivals is as intense and potent as the bond that links either of the rivals to the beloved: that the bonds of "rivalry" and "love", differently as they are experienced, are equally powerful and in many senses equivalent. (Sedgwick 21)

Sedgwick prefers to talk about "desire" instead of "love" because she wants to describe not so much a "feeling" as a "structure". Desire is an "affective or social force, the glue, even when its manifestation is hostility or hatred or something less emotively charged, that shapes an important relationship." (2) Sedgwick says that desire "glues" people together, for better or for worse; we will see also how desire "sticks" people together and can make surfaces and relations suffocatingly "sticky". Likewise, Sedgwick prefers to omit any reference to male bonding, mateship or rivalry because of the stigma usually associated with homosexuality. Instead, she prefers the expression "homosocial" to cover all sorts of affection and relationships between same sex members within society, which allows her "to hypothesize the potential unbrokenness of a continuum between homosocial and homosexual." (1)

Having Sedgwick's scheme in mind and considering the ways in which Phil, Gerald and Jacky's involvements with each other sometimes follow and sometimes differ from it, we will be able to delve into the complex relationship Malouf portrays between them, and the important role that Frank Harland plays in their relationship. Being the main character of the book and an object of desire, since Jacky wants to meet him and Phil admires the painter and eventually becomes his lawyer, Frank Harland also plays a major role in this love triangle. We can say that Phil initially finds Jacky attractive, when he describes her as "an intense girl with freckles", (136) but we can legitimately venture that he does not feel the first stirrings of love until Jacky says that her best friend is Frank Harland's nephew. Phil cannot possibly have any positive feelings towards Gerald, but he certainly has them towards Frank. Whereas Phil stands as himself in spite of being Mrs Price's nephew, Frank's long shadow reaches Gerald when Jacky introduces the latter as Frank's

nephew: "He's a nephew too', she informed me. 'Of Frank Harland the painter." (136) In the eyes of Jacky, who obviously also holds Frank in high regard, otherwise she would not complain: "Well, I've never met him and Gerald won't take me there. I've asked him to, heaps of times, but he won't," (136) Gerald is Frank Harland's nephew, whereas Phil is simply Phil; Mrs Price does not mediate their relationship. Consequently, we can talk about two triangles and two mediators. First, Frank mediates the relationship between Phil and Gerald: Frank being an object of desire, Phil feels both attracted to Gerald, because he is a link to Frank, and weary of the familial bond between Gerald and Frank, which establishes a connection that he will never be able to aspire to. At the level of familial bonds, Phil cannot compete with Gerald. But he can do it by usurping his new acquaintance's girlfriend, Jackie. So, Jackie mediates the relationship between Phil and Gerald. This is how they both come to love the same woman. All in all, we can talk about two love triangles and two mediators – Jacky and Frank Harland mediate the relationship between Phil and Gerald in different and interrelated ways. Thus, through the mediation of Jacky the relationship between Phil and Gerald remains within strict heterosexual limits, and it also explains the eventual strong friendship between Frank and Phil.[71]

Frank's fame is both a magnet that allows Gerald to meet new people and a course on him. Aunt Roo quickly informs Phil that Gerald is having a hard time living with his uncles Frank and Tam and asks him to be nice with his friend: "I want you to be nice to him. Really, you must, I don't know why you've got it in for the boy. He's unfortunate. He lives with two awful uncles." (137) Imbued with Frank's allure, Gerald indeed quickly becomes a rival and a nuisance to Phil.

---

[71] As we will see, Phil will succeed in obtaining the favour, love and approval of Frank, but not of Jacky. Frank is an artist and, therefore, he can play a feminine role because artists are eccentric, volatile, passionate, and their imagination is as fertile as a woman's womb. Their relationship stays within strict heterosexual limits because Frank will employ Phil to secure Gerald's inheritance. In this way, Phil will also always maintain a link with Gerald.

The negative terms in which their relationship is defined might be due to the fact that closeness between males can perilously be confounded with homosexuality in a society with well-defined heterosexual roles and where heterosexuality is the norm, as Sedgwick points out. No sooner Phil and Gerald become mates than they engage in the mutual teasing and dragging that young men use to prove their manhood and stamina. Phil qualifies his relationship with Gerald as "the wary affection of young men who must test themselves one against the other, an uneasy thing, but passionate in its way and painfully real," which in their case is crueller because they compete for the same girl: "and more than all that, my devotion to Jacky." (172)

Phil falls madly in love with Jacky and cannot stand the games Gerald and Jacky indulge into and the way people conflate their names into a single Gerald'n Jacky, as if it referred to a single and unique fabulous creature. Again, we find the motive of two individual characters melting into one, first through their physical resemblance, as we saw above, and now as a unit that functions on its own, as if they were married or a couple, which they are not, in spite of appearances. The naturalness with which they get along with each other, the spontaneous chemistry and their childish games further infuriates Phil:

> I hated the ease with which their names, welded into a single breath, could be rolled off the tongue. As when they roared up on the CZ with Jacky riding pillion and people shouted: 'Here they are, it's Gerald'n Jacky!' Or when, glancing round the faces in a room, someone would look crestfallen and say 'But where are Gerald'nJacky?' This glib linking of the two, this creation of a joint person with a single being, maddened me. It was as if the names were themselves powerful, and once linked must inevitably bring their owners together as well. Each time I heard it, that single breath of five syllables, I would wince and feel betrayed.
>
> But this linking of names was only one of the conditions that made them one. They had a game they would play, and not just for taxi drivers, which involved the invention of a whole shared childhood of aunts, uncles, family anecdotes,

> illnesses. They vied boldly with one another in coming up with more and more outrageous memories, which they recounted with such mock-innocence and effrontery that even those who knew they were an invention were shocked; not by the events themselves, which after all had never really occurred, but by the power of their imagination. I was crazy with jealousy. (139-140)

Phil's confession that he feels "betrayed" and is "crazy with jealousy" gives further evidence of the essential role of triangulation in his dealings with Gerald and Jacky. In his *Deceit, Desire and the Novel,* Girard argues that in the cases of triangulation, the feeling of jealousy attests to the fact that the beloved object does not possess any intrinsic qualities that make it special, other than it is loved by a third party towards whom we hold conflicting and contradictory feelings (love, admiration, but at the same time envy, rivalry, etc.) Just in case there remained any doubt about the importance of the role of triangulation in Phil's feelings towards Gerald and Jacky, this is what René Girard has to say about jealousy:

> Like all victims of internal mediation, the jealous person easily convinces himself that his desire is spontaneous, in other words, that it is deeply rooted in the object and in this object alone. As a result, he always maintains that his desire preceded the intervention of the mediator. He would have us see him as an intruder, a bore, a *terzo incomodo* who interrupts a delightful tête-à-tête. Jealousy is thus reduced to the irritation we all experience when one of our desires is accidentally thwarted. But true jealousy is infinitely more profound and complex; it always contains an element of fascination with the insolent rival. (Girard 12)

What fascinates Phil is the fortunate stroke of luck that has put him in touch with his childhood again, and Frank is the link. As we said, Frank mediates the relationship between Phil and Gerald: Phil admires Frank, and Gerald is Frank's uncle. We have seen that when Phil reaches his twenties, Frank still exerts an influence on him and has already become an icon: he never fails to go to his old parents' bedroom and have a look at Frank's painting on his visits to Grandma

Vernont. But from the very beginning, Phil finds certain things about Gerald irritating. Phil does not like Gerald's arrogance and pretentiousness. Phil imagines Gerald thinking: "By your lights I may be all these things, and shallow too, but those lights, you know, are too crude to catch my particular star," (138) and he is convinced that behind Gerald's dejection, for example when he admits not being "a great shakes as an actor" and "an absolute no-hoper at the office", there is a "deep belief in his own superiority." Likewise, Gerald is good at sport and shows "a most intense desire to win" but still acts "as if competition was beneath him." (138) Phil notices that beneath this attitude there loom deep insecurities and a strong need to be liked and accepted but can't stand that these translate as a condescending attitude towards him. Generally speaking, Gerald is described as emasculated and sometimes with typical feminine attributes: he adopts a passive stand towards life that is only interrupted at sports, but his drive to win does not last long because in the end "competition is beneath him", so he is volatile (like women) and is not perseverant; he needs the approval of others and lives with his uncle, therefore appearing submissive and as Frank's ward; overall, he is weak. We could venture that he would be the perfect match for Phil if social conventions did not rule out this possibility, and that the tension between them arises from this attraction that cannot reach the level of consciousness because of the blinders social conventions impose on us. To further support Girard's insights, it must be pointed out that nowhere in the novel Jacky is described in positive terms. We are not told what unique qualities she possesses or in what ways she is attractive either to Phil or Gerald. On the contrary, all we know is that she physically resembles Gerald, which unnerves Phil: "they really did look like creatures of a magical oneness." (140) Jacky is so insubstantial and superficial that she can behave both in a silly and immature way in her games with Gerald and, at the same time, can appear as the most mature of the three when they argue about her, for example when Gerald wants to play a game in which he and Jacky have to pretend to be lovers or incestuous brother and sister and Phil has to play the role of the jealous fiancée, and she has to put order before things get a bit out of hand. (140-141) Finally, Jacky is like the name Robin: it is a name for both boys and girls (the French philosopher

Jacques Derrida was nicknamed 'Jacky' by his relatives and close friends), which suggests that we are mainly in front of an affair or love triangle between males. The way the names of Gerald and Jacky so easily mingle into one (Geraldn' Jacky), their physical resemblance, their close proximity and their similar temperaments (even if Jacky is portrayed as the more detached and mature of the three) makes the reader think that we are in front of one of these cases when a single person in real life has inspired two different fictional characters, and if we consider that neither Gerald and Jacky have strong and well-defined characters, perhaps the three of them were inspired by a single person, and everything at bottom is about Frank and Phil.

As months pass and in spite of himself, Phil realizes that he and Gerald are getting closer and that he has become Gerald's confidant: "What I failed to observe as the months passed was how close we had grown, Gerald and I; how much he had come to confide in me." (141) For example, Gerald confides Phil everything about his childhood, and especially excruciating are his childhood memories about the time when he and his mother had to move from house to house, as his mother got acquainted with different men that she asked him to call 'uncles'. The word 'uncle' was soon loaded with negative connotations. One of them was a carpenter and "had beaten Gerald once with a razor-strap for 'touching himself'"; another one, a railway worker, "had speared Gerald but beaten the woman; savagely, with his closed fists, for no other reason than that she was willing to go with him." (143) That is the reason why he and his mother "were always *abandoning* things" [Malouf's emphasis], leaving homes at night stealthily and in a hurry, fearing that, one day, he might be what got left behind: "I used to be scared that one day *I* would be left behind." (Malouf's emphasis, 138) One night, when Phil makes Gerald drink more than usual in the hope that he might "give something away – something that would incriminate him and justify my jealous suspicions or make Jacky entirely mine," (141) Gerald tells Phil that his Uncle has asked for him and wants to meet him. Gerald cannot keep to himself his feelings about Frank and describes him in the worst terms: he doesn't forget anything: "it's scary the way everything just *sticks* in his head", my emphasis), he "broods and glares –it's worse than talk," he always thinks no

one is doing the right thing, "he torments people", lends money to people but then complains about how everyone is "bleeding him dry" and "doesn't care about anyone really." Phil describes his relationship with Frank as "sticky" and slimy, his physical presence as nauseating: "'He disgusts me, I mean it!'" (142) Gerald's feelings for Frank are no doubt mediated by all the previous uncles he has had and the experiences he associates with them, even if they were not real uncles. What is a real uncle anyway? All of them were expected to replace his father, become the sexual partner of her mother and provide for the family, but they didn't live up to their role.

What Gerald complains about is an oppressive male presence in his uncles' house, where the role of both parents are played by males. Frank plays the role of the father, he rules, owns the house and provides for the family, and Tam the role of the mother: "There's only Uncle Tam to do anything – no woman – so nothing gets done properly. And he won't let anyone into the room *he* uses so nothing gets done there at all." The house is "a pigsty" Gerald warns his friend and adds: "we live like pigs." (144) He ascribes the mess in Frank's house to the absence of a woman ("no woman"); he is clearly disturbed: "He gave a nervous laugh and stopped himself but couldn't stop talking," (142) Phil says, and adds: "I was prepared to believe in his desperation and to believe as well that there was some essential instability in things that he knew of and which I, till now, had failed to perceive." (143) Having grown up with his mother, Gerald's description contrasts with the account of Frank's childhood. Glem Harland raised his children all by himself, with the only exception of his second wide, who lived for a few years. During that short spell, Frank was sent to his Aunt's house, so he will always associate home with his father and brothers and everything they shared back then. For him, that was home. And having known no other family than that, a family made up strictly of his brothers and father, he did not feel there was the need of a woman in a family.

They go to visit Frank and Phil discovers they live in a typical Brisbane weatherboard house on stilts, made of timber, with front and back verandahs and its open spaces. Before they enter the front door, Gerald stops and makes Phil peek through "a gaping hole in the verandah boards"

that someone had tried to close nailing "raw battens over it in an irregular cross." "'Isn't it scary,'" (144) he tells half to himself. Phil realizes that Gerald is terrified. Phil is used to these sort of elevated houses on stumps and their under-the-house, "but down in New England were Gerald came from, and in Sydney and Albury where his mother had taken him as a child, houses sat close to the ground and were of stone." (145) Nevertheless, as they walk into the hallway Phil can feel the "shakiness, a slight vibration of the whole structure on its supports, as uncanny," (144) and uneasily recalls the dark space under the house he has just been shown.

Tam receives them and Phil is surprised at recognizing in the timber of his voice Aunt Ollie's servant Della: "'Oh, it's you, love', he sang in his tenor voice. I was reminded immediately, and disturbingly, of Della." He looks feminine: "I saw him as womanish when there was no physical reason for it," receives them with a pan he had been rubbing in his hand and has a plump complexion. When Gerald shows Phil the way to Frank's studio, Tam comments about the weather: "'Ol' Thunder's in one of 'is moods,'" and Phil sees further similarities between Della and Tam: a childish stance, a servile attitude, a desire to please and "an air of solidarity, as between children against a tyrannous adult." (145) Tam's effeminacy is a result of his position of servitude first in his father's house and now with Frank. He was playing a role usually reserved for women, who were not considered full and mature citizens. Taken together with masculinity in a binary system of opposition, femininity covers a wide spectrum, that is, everything that is not male: women, but also children, emasculated men, servile men, etc. In the case of Tam, his effeminacy is a result of his cultural background; his lack of education and his position in the house – hence his resemblance with Della.

When Frank recognises Phil, the man undergoes a transformation. His mood changes, he cheers up and moves about in the room like a Satyr. "'Oh, I remember it all, I've never forgotten any of it. You'll see! I'll show you!'" he tells Phil. Not even Tam can conceal his surprise:

> He was dancing about on the linoleum, gaunt and awkward with his horny feet, in what Tam must have seen, with his mouth in a line of wary scepticism, as a new

> mood altogether, a transformation. *What's this, then*, Tam's look implied, *what's he up to now?* 'We must', he was telling Tam, 'have a celebration.' (146)

Frank shows Phil several pictures from the time he lived at Southport, where he had met Phil's father and got acquainted with his family, in particular Aunt Ollie. He shows them four studies of the boxer Phil and his father had met: "Was it the same boy? It must have been." They are all highly impressed: "Gerald let himself down the sill and came closer. He too was impressed," and Phil experiences the same chill crawling up his back he experienced when he saw the boxer for the first time: "There was an odd stillness in the room, and I felt again what I had felt years ago at the occasion itself, the presence of a darkness that the naked globe on its cord was powerless to dispel." (148) Next, he shows them a picture of his Aunt Ollie and Della, the "Two Fates" which also mesmerizes Phil. Not because he could recognize two people he knew and loved, or he might know anything about them that was not contained in the painting: "It lay in something purer than recognition or even knowledge. In the painter's joy in what *he* had been at work on: his 'Two Fates', as the picture was called, of which the unmade space the women were presiding over was the inchoate Third," (149) And, finally, he showed them a self-portrait, which was all in fragments and also defied a unitary presence and interpretation, because Phil could distinguish, in the background, another presence: a silhouette of Della's iceman. At Southport, Phil's Aunts had called Frank, humorously, "Ollie's Iceman." (84)

Suddenly, Frank concludes his show and decides to talk business with Phil, who realizes that Gerald had played the role of "procurer" all along. "There was," says Phil, "between them, a clear understanding about why I had been brought here and the conditions under which I might be tempted back. Gerald had left on cue." (150)

Once they are alone, Frank shows Phil a letter from Gerald's mother Hilda, and asks him to read it. The letter reveals Phil and the readers how Gerald came to live with Frank and the unbearable tension between Gerald's mother Hilda and Frank.

At the end of the previous Chapter, 'Knack', after the horrendous crime, Frank lies flat "on his back on a camp-stretcher" (126) for days, wondering how he has been unable to see what was brewing between his friends Knack and Edna for so long, "the rising of such a tide of red." (127) However, "he did get up again" (128) and resolved to move on with his life. The Chapter ends with a letter to Frank's sister-in-law, Hilda where Frank acknowledges that it must be accepted that not having had word from his brother for so long, they have to face the fact that he "is among the missing who will not come back" from war. He also confides her that Jim and him "were very close" and that they "had the same mother", even though it never made any difference "that the others were only half." In order to help, Frank says that he "would be happy for his father's sake to pay for the boy's schooling," (128) and commits himself to a long-term project with the mother: "I want to reassure you so that we can make plans. My friends in the south, who handle all money affairs, will keep in touch with you." When this letter is written Gerald is "only ten," (129) a couple of years younger than Phil at the time he was living in Southport with his grandparents. Let's recall that at the beginning of the second Chapter, 'An Only Child', Phil says "I was barely twelve." (49) So, the fourth Chapter 'Nephews' places the action about ten years later in respect to the second and third Chapters, and Gerald and Phil are in their early twenties.

In the time between the second and fourth Chapters, Gerald has moved in with Frank. We learn about the specific circumstances in the letter that the latter gives Phil to read. It might be inferred from the phrasing and tone of the letter that Hilda did it against her will and now regrets it, but she had to do it because she didn't have the means to provide for Gerald's sustenance and education: "I gave him up to you because I had no other way of keeping and educating the boy and you know that." (151) Nevertheless, Frank has a different opinion of why she gave up her son. According to Frank, she was glad to have Gerald off her hands so that she could "be free to see a bit of life" and "men": "I adopted the boy. Ten years ago! Not a squeak out of'er then. Only too glad to have him off of'er hands. So she'd be free to see a bit of life as she called it – men!" (152)

What their different versions about how it happened put into relief is the animosity between Frank and Hilda, but most important is the fact that Gerald was traded as if he was an object between them. The letter does not literally say that Gerald was sold, but the reader fathoms that this might be the case, since it is stated that the deal was sealed through lawyers: "that's why you had to steal and bring the law in and let the lawyers make a son for you", (151) and, hence, Hilda legally yielded all responsibility onto Frank, who needed a descendant to pass on the lost state that he was rebuying again for his family, and Gerald was the only one: "He's the last of us." (153)

As David Malouf has pointed out on several occasions, it was very difficult in the late seventies and eighties to be a writer in Australia and not be under the spell of Patrick White.[72] *Harland's Half Acre* was first published in 1984. Malouf was commissioned with the writing of the libretto for the adaptation of Patrick White's novel *Voss* to opera in the early eighties.[73] In return, it must be stated that Patrick White was quite fond of David Malouf and held his literary skills in high regard, using an inscription from *An Imaginary Life* in his book *The Twyborn Affair,* published in 1979.[74]

---

[72] Malouf reflects about his indebtedness to Patrick White as well as the similarities and differences between his work and White's in his interview with Ray Willbanks. He openly admits "I don't think anyone could be writing in Australia without negotiating that great presence." Ray Willbanks also tells Malouf: "I know you are friends." (Willbanks 16)

[73] The first performance took place in the Adelaide festival in 1986. (*Wikipedia "Voss Opera"*)

[74] Patrick White quotes the following excerpt from *An Imaginary Life*:

> What else should our lives be but a 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. (White *The Twyborn Affair* 8)

Harland's Half Acre is the novel that has more similarities with another novel by Patrick White, *The Vivisector*[75], (White *The Vivisector*) the most obvious being the fact that the main characters of both novels are painters and are obsessed with their work; they both are born in extremely poor families and climb the social ladder thanks to the success of their art work but still prefer to live in extreme austerity – actually, having devoted their whole lives to their art, they do not know how to live differently. They also have a particularly disordered childhood, albeit for different reasons: Frank loves his father's home and his brothers but has to escape his father's suffocating presence as he reaches puberty, whereas the young to-be-artist in *The Vivisector* is sold when he is eight years old to a rich family that has no male offspring. The parallelism we want to analyse in both novels concerns precisely the fact that both Gerald in *Harland's Half Acre* and Hurtle Duffield, the painter and main character of Patrick White's *The Vivisector* are sold when they are very young, the circumstances in which that happens, what it means and the consequences and effects this has on their lives. This event reveals an important insight about gender.

Hurtle is born Hurtle "Duffield". His name signals his unusual gift: "'Hurtle" was the name of a foreign woman that married into my granpa's family. Only it was "H-e-r-t-e-l", not "H-u-r-t-l-e". When I was christened the parson got the spelling wrong"', he tells people who show surprise at his name. The name Hurtle is a clue to his special gift, which he already displays in childhood - his ability to hurt people by showing them the truth about their weaknesses and deepest fears in painting. The Duffields live in extreme poverty. His mother is a laundress, who goes to collect the laundry to rich people's houses and washes, dries and irons it at home and then takes it back to their owners. At the time, clothes had to be washed in a copper that was heated with wood fire, scrabbled by hand, hanged on the clothesline hoping that there would be good weather and, finally, ironed, heating the iron in a stove. His father is a carter who collects empty bottles and sells them in the city, and "had no edgercation", as his mother tells him. They have six children: "Lena, Edgar,

[75] White, Patrick. *The Vivisector.* Vintage: London, 1994.

Will, Winnie and Flo," (White *The Vivisector 11*) apart from Hurtle and more are constantly on the way.

Early on in the novel it is clear that Hurtle is an exceptional boy in appearance (he has a good presence), intelligence and maturity. He is a curious boy, has some notions about social class. He asks his father: "'Is Mumma a lady?'" (White *The Vivisector 10*) and then his mother: "'Is Pa a gentleman?'" (White *The Vivisector* 13); learns to read all by himself: "'Readin?'" his mother asks him, "'You haven't ever learnt. You're still too young to read, love'" (White *The Vivisector* 15), and shows an interest in beauty his parents feel ashamed of in light of their destitute lives: "They talked about what was 'right' and 'honest', and the price of things, but people looked down at their plates if you said something was 'beautiful'" (White *The Vivisector* 18) Hurtle reflects. These concerns are the foundation of what he aspires to in life: climbing the social ladder: "'Will I be a gentleman?'" he asks his mother: "'and handsome?'" (White *The Vivisector* 14), and drawing. He is also more mature than his age would allow – at school, he gets into trouble for touching a classmate, Dolly Burgess: "Because Dolly told her mother, who went to Mumma, and Mr Burgess told Mr Boothroyd, the business caused him a lot of trouble." (White *The Vivisector* 45)

Their lives suffer a sudden change with consequences they could not foresee when his mother arrives with the news of a new job offer. The Courtneys want her to work for them two days a week, but she has to do all the work in their house. They are one of the richest families in the state: "'Washing Mondays, ironing Tuesdays. Courtneys is one of the best families. Money to burn. Do you hear?'" (White *The Vivisector* 19)

One day his mother decides to take Hurtle to Mr and Mrs Courtney's house in order to show the other maids and servants that, although she might be poor and common, she has a clever and handsome son. The servants do not think it is a good idea that Mrs Duffield has taken her son to the house, but Lizzie the housemaid is quickly fond of Hurtle and in the excitement of the moment offers to take them on a tour of the house: "'Come on, Duffles, I'm going to take you on a private tour of the millioneers' nest.'" (White *The Vivisector* 24) When Mrs Duffield shows her

concern that they might come across the Courtneys, especially Mrs Courtney, she reassures her: "'She'll be late back. I know.'" (White *The Vivisector* 24)

While they are exploring the house, Lizzie teases the nice-looking young Hurtle when they come across a picture of "naked ladies in gold frames," (White *The Vivisector* 24) asking him: "'And does Hurtle Duffield fancy the naked ladies?'" which he doesn't: "They were curious, the big bubs, but dead." Next, she shows them a magnificent chandelier. "'Bet you never in yer life saw a chandelier'", she taunts him, which he hadn't, of course. But it recalls him something, as if the chandelier offered him the vision of something he deeply wished for and aspired to, perhaps inspired by the impression the Courtney state made on them and the quasi religious reverence everyone showed in everything that had to do with the Courtneys: "He didn't answer. He hadn't, of course. But as he stood underneath, looking up through the glass fruit and flickering of broken rainbow, he knew all about a chandelier, from perhaps dreaming of it, and only now recognizing his dream." (White *The Vivisector* 25) However, it turns out that on his first visit to the Courtneys house Ms Courtney is back sooner than expected, and catches Lizzie showing Hurtle and his mother the house by surprise. It is no big deal, but she catches sight of Hurtle, and congratulates Mrs Duffield for having such "a handsome child": "'I congratulate you', she said. 'He's nice, isn't he?' she smiled '- a handsome child.'" (White *The Vivisector 27*)

The young desirable Hurtle and the exuberant chandelier are similarly alluring. They each exert their particular attraction as a compensation for repressed or unfulfilled sexual desire in the case of the women approaching Hurtle, and the longing for money and social status in the case of the chandelier.

Hurtle is not only appalled, he is obsessed with the chandelier. The vision he has of it changes throughout the novel as he finds out about the hypocrisy, misery and fear that lie behind the pretentiousness, sumptuousness and appearance of the bourgeoisie and their economic power. Whereas when he is a child he cannot bear to see his poor mother talking about the magnificent chandelier lest she should defile its perfect beauty with words, as he moves with the Courtneys,

gets to know them and matures, he is increasingly aware that they are no better than his former family and his perception of the chandelier changes. He also perceives himself and his own destiny differently. If at the beginning of the novel Hurtle tells himself that "he had inside him his own chandelier," (White *The Vivisector* 53) when he comes back from a trip to Europe with the Courtneys he notices that "the chandelier had dwindled and dulled above the hall," (White *The Vivisector 139*) and by the end of the novel he confesses that he "can do without chandeliers" and reflects that "people live differently, more honestly now" (White *The Vivisector* 440); in other words, the values of the bourgeoisie have changed and they do not have the need to show off any longer.[76]

[76] It would take us too long to trace the evolution of how the way Hurtle sees the chandelier changes as he changes. The chandelier is mentioned sixteen times in the course of the novel, and the word recurs twenty-six times, on pages 25, 28, 37, 47, 53, 66, 67, 70, 76, 112, 122, 139, 207, 234, 250, 440 and 605. In order to provide a glimpse of this progression, I will briefly provide the context and quotes from the most meaningful passages not quoted in the main text. The second time Hurtle visits the Courtney's house, he sneaks into the house, and stands "holding his face almost flat, for the light to trickle and collect on it" (32); on a third visit, his mother takes him with her so that he can take care of the newborn baby while she is working, but he has to see the chandelier again no matter what, "even if the baby got eaten he would have to see the chandelier – and Mrs Courtney" (47) – which he does; at school, he tells himself that he is not in love with Mrs Courtney, "he was in love with how she looked" (and adds: "each of her dresses was more than a dress: a moment of light and beauty not yet to be explained", 52), and that what nobody knows is that he "he had inside him his own chandelier." (53) After Hurtle has overheard his parents talking about the Courtney's interest in adopting him, "full of hope" and reviving "the words and silences of Mumm's own hopes for him, his memory glittered with the moods of Courtneys chandelier." (66) In the threshold of crossing to his new life, already in his new room in the Courtney's house, we are told that, overwhelmed with emotion, "he made a dash or two at

There is a passage in *Harland's Half Acre* that calls to mind the figure of a chandelier. When Frank moves to his Aunt's house, he comments that the place is colder than Killarney and that there are frosts. One day, on top of a broken pipe, there appears and grows a flower of ice resembling crystals, which evokes to the reader's mind the shape of a chandelier:

> It was colder here, there were frosts. On winter mornings the trough in the yard would have a sheet of ice floating on it as thin as glass, and once, when a pipe to the sprinklers leaked, a crystal bud appeared and grew each day till there was a flower with huge ice-petals, on a stem nearly a foot thick. (8)

Mrs Birdie Courtney's chandelier that wasn't between hollowing out Mumma's body he would have liked to creep inside to sleep tighter in warm wet love and white drool of hens if she would have opened to him she wouldn't." (76) Once settled, he moves around the house in complete synergy with the chandelier: "He went down, dawdling on the stairs, to feel each drop of crystal light trickle through him from the chandelier." (112) After he decides to go to war against the will of his family and when back never returns with the Courtneys, and recovering his original family name, Duffield, Hurtle meets a prostitute and they enter a distressful and sick relationship. While he shows her his paintings, he realizes that "what he wanted was not the common possessive pross [sic] he loved by needful spasms, but to shoot at an enormous naked canvas a whole radiant chandelier waiting in his mind and balls." (207) Before leaving his biological family, his father had given him a gold ring, which he kept to remind him of his origins: "It was his worst perversion: to have hung on to a ring, long after the money was spent, the five hundred they sold him for. Or pretension: worse than anything Harry and Alfreda Courtney had tried to put across, blazing with brilliantine and diamonds under the chandelier." (250) He throws the ring away. Finally, at the end of his life, the chandelier is simply the memory of one object among others in the frenzy of his artistic production: "While all the whirligigs of memory, aureoles and chandeliers, dandelions and tadpoles, pulsed and revolved." (605)

The comparison between the chandelier in Patrick White's *The Vivisector* and the "flower with huge ice-petals" in *Harland's Half Acre* reflects quite faithfully the literary differences in tone, imaginary and interests between the two authors. Whereas the chandelier symbolizes the prosperous bourgeoisie of the twentieth century and is a symbol of luxury, sophistication and taste, the crystal bud symbolizes the spontaneity and beauty of nature, which always imposes itself onto human artefacts (the pipe) and whose beauty the human intellect can only capture. Moreover, Frank paints mainly landscapes, which have been a major concern for David Malouf throughout his work and he has excelled in describing. (Nettelbeck) Even if Frank's art evolves, including portraits and, by the end of his life, "street happenings and accidents, the rhetoric of public men, the columns of chanting students and of closing prices on the exchange, the horse's mouths and the mouths of murderers and their victims in great sweeps and slashes," (187) it is always the natural and human nature that are at the core of his paintings and that he tries to convey. On the other hand, Patrick White is skilled at describing the Australian landscape, but he is not concerned in nature as a source of transformation as David Malouf is. In *The Vivisector,* Patrick White is more interested in delving into the individual's consciousness as that consciousness is shaped by the hypocrisies, insecurities and fears of society.

Mrs Courtney and Lizzie are not the only ones who are captivated by Hurtle's presence. His mother also realizes that her son possesses some gifts beyond the ordinary qualities that mothers may praise in their sons. When the Courtneys sound out the possibility of adopting Hurtle and ask to see him, the first thing that she tells her husband is that what stands out in Hurtle is his beauty:

> 'Hurtle's beautiful', she said. ''S'air's a lovely bright.'
>
> 'The boy's a boy.'
>
> 'A boy can be beautiful too. To anyone with eyes. Mrs Courtney's taken with Hurtle. Says 'e's adorable. And clever.

The issue about the Courtneys proposal is settled there and then:

> Then Mumma said, very distinct: 'I would give away any of my children, provided the opportunities were there. Blood is all very well. Money counts. I would give – I would give Hurtle.'
>
> Pa's snore came roaring back up his throat. 'Give away yer children?'
>
> Mumma laughed a rattling sort of laugh. 'Plenty more where they come from.' (White, *The Vivisector* 54)

Mrs Courtney's ascendancy over the Duffields and Hurtle stems from her social position and economic resources; she has a position of power. This is the confused origin of Hurtle's fascination with the chandelier and her. After that first visit around the house and their first meeting, Hurtle has an irrepressible urge to see "the chandelier – and Mrs Courtney," (47) even if he knows he is not love with Mrs Courtney exactly, "he was in love with how she looked." (52)

On his second visit, Hurtle manages to sneak into the Courtneys' house and meets Mrs Courtney in her studio. He takes her by surprise, but after the initial shock, they start talking. Taking a picture of her daughter Rhoda in his hands, Hurtle says "'you did right to take only her head'", and when Mrs Courtney asks why, he is bold enough to respond with all sincerity: "'Well, the back. You wouldn't want to see the back. The head is the best part of her.'" (White, *The Vivisector* 33) Rhoda is an emaciated girl with a dowager's hump or hunchback who is approximately Hurtle's age. When Mrs Courtney shows her surprise at the way Hurtle talks ("bookish"), Hurtle answers that he acquired it from the parson, who has been teaching him. As a result of having mentioned her daughter, Mrs Courtney starts telling him about the social work she does: helping girls "who have fallen by the wayside" and "cruelty to animals." At that moment, "her rings were shining fiercely in the sunlight, while the blue eyes had begun to blur," (White, *The Vivisector* 34) perhaps symbolizing that there was nothing that her money or social position could do to compensate her daughter for her deformity, and that her involvement helping girls fallen

from grace and trying to stop torture to animals was a subterfuge to escape her powerlessness in being unable to help her daughter.

Mrs Courtney smoothly changes topic and mentions that her husband is away in one of his properties and asks Hurtle whether he has any brothers and sisters. Hurtle answers that "they are just kids" and that "one of them is a bit simple", Will: "We sleep in the same bed." Mrs Courtney finds him extraordinarily sweet: "'How delicious!'" she exclaims, and compliments Hurtle saying that he "is a most handsome fellow", coming close to him and "ruffling his hair". She adds: "'Harry will love you'", and then: "'He loves a manly, forthright boy.'" (White, *The Vivisector* 35)

As they talk and get at easy with one another, there is an increase in the intensity of Mrs Courtney's affection for Hurtle, which in contrast to the disgust she feels towards her own daughter Rhoda only reveals the depth of her misery.

At the peak of her feelings for Hurtle, she exclaims: "'How your mother must love you!'" - at which Hurtle reacts by pulling away from her. It is at this point when he asks, contemptuously mumbling: "'Didn't you ever have another? Besides this Rhoda.'" Mrs Courtney's response could not be more straightforward "'Oh, yes – *no!* Impossible!'" looking "for the first time awkward: her mouth was pulled into an ugly shape; her hair was old." (White, *The Vivisector* 36)

What attracts them to each other? We may hypothesize that Mrs Courtney desires Hurtle because he is young and attractive, and a child anyone would like to have as his own. On the other hand, social status and money are like a magnet that Hurtle cannot resist, and that she will use to adopt and seduce him.

On his next visit, while they are talking amiably, there is a moment when Mrs Courtney cannot repress her desire anymore and pounces on him, hugging him close and kissing him everywhere as if he was her own child. This time, looking at a picture of her husband, Hurtle says:

> 'Is that your husband?' He touched the nose.
>
> 'Yes. It is.' She sounded very kind and satisfied.

'He looks strong for a gentleman.'

She gave, not a bit like her usual laugh, more of a hoot. 'I'll tell him that! He'll enjoy your opinion.' She had put down the hat, and came at him, her dress sounding like a scythe through grass. 'I could eat you up!'

And seemed to be going to try. Bending down, she drew him against her so close, so tight, he could feel the bones in her stays, and her own soft body above. He was looking right inside the little pocket, between where the skin was shadowy, or yeallower.

She went: 'Mm! Mmmm! Mphh!'

But he wasn't in the mood for kissing. 'Your jewellery's pricking me,' he said, and got away. (White, *The Vivisector* 49)

The first time they met, Hurtle had realized that there was a bee in her cup of chocolate: "It made you feel drowsy," (White, *The Vivisector* 33) he noticed, as if the feeling was a premonition of what would happen later on. When living with Mrs and Mr Courtney as their newly adopted son, Mrs Courtney's fondness of him will grow into a more intimate and slimy form of affection, asking Hurtle to get into bed and play "childish" games with her:

On one occasion Maman said: 'You're not so big, Hurtle, that you can't get into bed with your poor old mother.'

He couldn't say the idea made him sick. He wouldn't have done what she wanted if they hadn't been on their own: not let Rhoda watch him make a fool of himself.

Actually it wasn't so bad against Maman's silky side, and the hair, all around her on the pillow, smelling of washed hair. He closed his eyes and put his face in it.

'There!' she said. 'You're still my treasure. You know you are.'

In this darkness, of overflowing hair and pillows which softly gave, he had never been so close to what they probably meant by bliss.

> When he opened his eyes, Maman, who resisted chocolates now on account of her figure, was scratching in a box on the bedside table. She soon heaved back into their former soft position; she stuck the chocolate in her own mouth, and warmed it up till she had it ready to offer: or so he understood, from the bird-noises she begun to make. They were like two birds together, feeding on the same food, as they worked the chocolate, neither soft nor hard, neither his nor hers: the chocolate trickled blissfully.
>
> Suddenly Maman went: 'Mm – mm – hmmm!' rising to a high note.
>
> She sucked in the chocolate so quickly his tongue almost followed it.
>
> She sat up in bed. 'Oh, dear, what silly things we do! Childish things!' When she was the childish one: he wouldn't have thought of the silly trick with the chocolate.
>
> Gathering up her hair by handfuls, she was smiling; but it was not for him: more for herself, it looked.
>
> He got out of bed and began feeling for his slippers. He might have been treading on glass instead of the soft carpet. He straightened up, after spreading his hands to hide what he had to hide. (123-124)

This episode that verges on an incestuous relation between adult and child (Hurtle is in his early teens) repeats the structure subject/object that characterizes hierarchical and non-egalitarian age and gender relations in patriarchal societies; woman is an object for man in the same way that the child is an object for the adult, in this case an object to be abused and bossed around unceremoniously under the authority of parenthood. Hurtle has been doubly debased. Mrs Courtney, who derives sexual pleasure from her "childish things", abuses him sexually and he is traded as merchandise when his biological parents sell him to the Courtney family. When the deal is closed, he overhears his mother telling his father what his price was: "'Mr Courtney give me a check for five hundred pound.'" (White, *The Vivisector* 71)

It is not that in the first half of the twentieth century, when the events in the novel occur patrimony was strictly passed to male offspring and that a woman could not inherit and pass on her heritage by means of a good marriage. Nevertheless, it was still the case that woman played a mainly passive role within society, staying at home and letting the husband bring in the money and play the role of family head. Also, woman was still considered an object to increase or symbolically complement a man's state. The problem with Courtneys' daughter Rhoda and her deformity is that in the middle of so much affluence and sophistication, she depreciates her owners, that is, her parents. The prevailing moral of the bourgeoisie, their motto was "you are what you have", so that a possession of something filthy and ugly contaminated their possessors. As an object, Rhoda is not up to the status and sophistication of her parents, which is the reason why, in the hierarchical and exclusive nature of patriarchal societies, Rhoda is the one who suffers the most: she has a disability, she is a child and will never grow up and mature because her condition will always make her delicate, fragile and immature, and she is a woman. Even if it was not the only way, a male heir always meant the normal functioning of the transference of patrimony and increase of symbolic power through marriage to the next generation.

Buying Hurtle, a good looking and clever boy, the Courtneys aspire to fix this situation. But there is a dark side to Hurtle, which the Courtneys do not take into account because they think it will not affect their social projection. Like Frank, Hurtle is an inborn artist, but with the rare gift of being able to translate the ugliest side of people into painting, which at his best he draws quite unconsciously, as if possessed by a demon and in such a delirious state that he can only see what he has drawn after the fact. For example, when one of his tutors gives up his job and Mrs Courtney, Rhoda and himself start taunting him, he feels the sudden urge to go to his room and draw something, which in the frenzy of the moment turns out to be a painting of his tutor having jumped off the roof "sprawling in the coal dust". When his mother, Mrs Courtney finds out and asks him how he knew what happened to 'Jack' Shewcroft ("'You knew, then,' she said, 'all the time – that Mr Shewcroft had taken his life'"), he admits to himself he had just had an inkling:

"No, he only guessed – but because he knew. If she only knew, what he had painted on the wall was the least of what he knew." (White, *The Vivisector* 100) His biological mother metaphorically called his gift "'the Mad Eye – it looks right through you.'" (White, *The Vivisector* 76) Rhoda will be the one that will suffer the most from Hurtle's gift, as well as Mrs Courtney and, in a different way, Mr Courtney, because it is something that Hurtle himself cannot control.

As soon as he moves with them, Mrs Courtney asks Hurtle to call her husband 'father' and to call her 'Maman,' (White, *The Vivisector* 91) and they agree that once the contract is signed, he will adopt their family name as well: "'As soon as we adopt you legally,' 'Father' threw in, 'you'll take the name "Courtney."'" (White, *The Vivisector* 91) On the other side of appearances and legal contracts, Hurtle has become an object of possession, that is, he has acquired the same status as woman in patriarchal societies. When Mr Courtney takes him to Mumbelong in a visit to his properties, Hurtle has a glimpse of his status when he is introduced: "'This is the boy,' Father explained to Sid, making you sound more like a thing the Courtneys owned than their legally adopted son." (White, *The Vivisector* 103)

The French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1930-2002) has synthesized this logic succinctly in his book *Masculine Domination*, (Bourdieu) emphasizing the constructed nature of the hierarchical relations between men and women and the grounding of this relationship in the symbolic order of ritual and, in particular, the institution of marriage. As Lévi-Strauss points out, the objectification and instrumentalization of women serve to establish a relationship of equality between men that is essential to the functioning of the logic of the market. In his reading, Bourdieu puts emphasis in the function of women in increasing the political and social capital owned by men.[77] Studying the worldview of the Kabyles in the North of Argelia and the Béarns in the South

[77] Bourdieu explains the differences between Lévi-Strauss' semiological account and his sociological account:

of France, which he takes as representative of the patriarchal values of Mediterranean societies that still influence us today, Bourdieu makes a reference to a case that is not very different from the one we are considering here, the case in which a family with no male descendants may "*take* for its daughter a man" (Bourdieu's emphasis). It is the same structure but a different story:

> Thus, dispositions (*habitus*) are inseparable from the structures (*habitudines*, in Leibniz's sense) that produce and reproduce them, in both men and women, and in particular from the whole structure of technical and ritual activities that is ultimately grounded in the structure of the market in symbolic goods. The principle of the inferiority and exclusion of women, which the mythico-ritual system ratifies and amplifies, to the point of making it the principle of division of the whole universe, is nothing other than the fundamental dissymmetry, that of *subject and object, agent and instrument,* which is set up between men and women in the domain of symbolic exchanges, the relations of production and reproduction of symbolic capital, the central device of which is the matrimonial market, and which are the foundation of the whole social order – women can only appear there as objects, or, more precisely, as symbols whose meaning is constituted outside of them and whose function is to contribute to the perpetuation or expansion of the symbolic

---

> The incest taboo which Lévi-Strauss sees as the act founding society, inasmuch as it entails the necessity of exchange as equal communication between men, is correlative with the institution of the violence through which women are denied as subjects of the exchange and alliance that are set up through them, but by reducing them to the status of objects, or rather, of *symbolic instruments* of male politics. Being condemned to circulate as tokens and thus to institute relations between men, they are reduced to the status of instruments of production or reproduction of symbolic and social capital. (Bourdieu 43)

> capital held by men. The true nature of the status conferred on women is revealed *a contrario* in the limiting case in which, to avoid the extinction of the lineage, a family without a male descendant has no alternative but to *take* for its daughter a man, the awrith, who, in contrast to patrilocal custom, comes and lives in his wife's house and who thus circulates like a woman, in other words as an object ('he played the bride', the Kabyles say). Since masculinity itself is called into question here, both in Béarn and in Kabylia, the whole group grants a kind of arbitrary indulgence to the subterfuges that the humiliated family resorts to in order to save the appearances of its honour and, so far as it is possible, of the 'man-object' who, in abnegating himself as a man, calls into question the honour of the host family. (Bourdieu 43)

In Bourdieu's account, there is also at work the same logic we analysed in the light of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's book *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire*: women are treated merely as objects whose main function is to mediate between men. As an aside, and since we are in an Australian context, it is worth quoting a brief summary of the way the Aboriginal people living in what today is Sydney, the Iora people treated their women. In *The Fatal Shore*, Robert Hughes states that similar to patriarchal cultures in Europe, the Iora women had no rights and were the absolute property of their men. Since Aboriginal peoples have a very weak notion of property in terms of land, because they have a very clear awareness that they do not possess land but belong to it, marriage among Aboriginal tribes was not "to amalgamate property, as in European custom, but to strengthen existing kinship bonds by means of reciprocal favours." The desire to strengthen the bond between men was so strong among the Iora that they did not hesitate to offer their wives to honourable visitors, swap women before a special occasion, close a deal exchanging wives and even to try to settle a dispute with another tribe by sending their women to have sexual intercourse with the enemy:

> As a mark of hospitality, wives were lent to visitors whom the Iora tribesmen wanted to honor. Warriors, before setting out on a revenge raid against some other aboriginal group, would swap their women as an expression of brotherhood. If a tribal group was about to be attacked and knew where its enemies were, it would sometimes send out a party of women in their direction; the attackers would then show that they were open to a peaceful solution by copulating with them. But if the women came back untouched, it was a signal that there was no choice but battle. A night's exchange of wives usually capped a truce between tribes. (Hughes 16)

This detour has allowed us to consider from the point of view of another story the issues and concerns involved in male succession by blood kinship, and the subterfuges and ploys families had to resort to in order to carry it out, at the same time that it has allowed us to ascertain and exemplify the nature of power and hierarchical relations between men and women as well as between adult and child in patriarchal societies. These kinds of relations remain and are repeated by means of custom, ritual and social institutions to the point that they appear congenital and natural. Going back to *Harland's Half Acre*, the similarities in themes and concerns between the two novels might now be more easily appreciated. In particular, we may reflect on how the themes of male succession and inheritance were something that was in the atmosphere at that time in the Australian context, how they conditioned differently the lives of men and women alike and gave meaning to their lives. At stake was the need to act like a normal family and to be accepted, which means following the patriarchal scheme in effect, even if this meant doing it by writing checks in order to circumvent no matter what obstacles.

Delving into the origins of the coruscating tension between Frank and Hilda will also shed some more light on the differences between the male culture and the female culture. In her letter, Hilda accuses Frank of not being man enough to have his own children: "You had to steal the boy from me, right from the start, and make of him what you can't make yourself," and of tormenting

Gerald: "trying to twist him to the way you see things," basing her moral superiority on her natural right as mother against the power of the law: "This is a personal matter between us, not lawyer's business (…) I wrote as a *mother*!" (Malouf's emphasis). The letter ends with a litany of curses and insults. As it happened to Rizak in *An Imaginary Life,* Frank is "stricken", and cringes "under the woman's scorn." (152) The situation recalls the struggle between the power of men and the power of women we analysed in the first part of this Chapter, and that placed Ovid and Ryzak against Ryzak's grandmother – if Ryzak was the chief of the Getae, his grandmother knew everything about the dark forces that rule the world. The opposition between nature and culture, instinct and law appears again in *Harland's Half Acre* as the conflict between Frank and Hilda appears reflected in Hilda's letter and Frank's reaction to it. As in *An Imaginary Life,* women's power is represented as unbending and unyielding: "There is also nature Frank, you can't twist that." (151) As was the case with Ryzak and Ovid in *An Imaginary Life,* Frank can only lose the battle.

Gerald is not happy living with his two uncles Frank and Tam. He finds living with them suffocating, and what is suffocating is the manhood in the house. Gerald tells Phil that "living in a house of old men" is unbearable. Frank is the patriarch. Identifying with Lear, he tells Phil: "'Not to know Lear is to be unprepared for your own life,'" and his manhood is beyond question; actually, it is excessive, it is too much for Gerald because he not only supports the family, he also literally owns Gerald. Like the Courtneys, Frank holds the power that money and his reputation as artist has given him. Gerald tells Phil: "You know the sort of stuff the newspapers write. In the South, I mean, they never notice him here. It's all bullshit." (142) Moreover, Frank wants Gerald "to *be* something" (Malouf's emphasis) and to "make something of himself," (153) which means that he thinks he is lazy and does not think he will be able to support himself, that is, he implicitly calls his manhood into question. On the other hand, Gerald complains that Tam behaves and looks like a woman: he does the shopping, cooks, cleans the house, etc. When meeting him, Phil's first impression is also that there is something "womanish" in Tam, ethereal but unmistakably present: "there was something so comfortable domestic about him, he had such bleached wrists

and forearms, and such an air about him of soapsuds and boiled milk with a skin on it and sour water in zinc pails, that I saw him as womanish when there was no physical reason for it." (145) Gerald compares him to a nursemaid because "he has spent his whole life as a kind of nursemaid to my grandfather", and says he looks like "an old woman. Disgusting! – all that white flesh – the breasts!" (159) Gerald cannot stand the power that Frank has over him – he literally owns Gerald because he has bought him or adopted him through lawyers – and he cannot stand the patriarchal values that Frank wants to instil in him. Frank's excessive manliness does not leave him with enough space, he cannot breathe. As for Tam, Gerald cannot stand the queer feeling of seeing womanly outfit and traits (an apron, long hair, breasts) in a bulky old man, and to think that they are all family.

Hilda wants to help her son Gerald. The war that this situation triggers between the grown-ups Frank and Hilda can best be termed a gender war, and the stereotypes that structure the battlefield between the two worlds are clearly reflected in Hilda's letter: the mad,[78] emotional and passionate mother who appeals to the feelings of the heart against the cold, sensible and rational father that appeals to common sense, manliness and strength of character. The word 'heart' appears at least four times in the first lines of the letter, where Frank is first accused of not having his nephew's best interest at heart: "I've got no faith in your so-called *heart*" (Malouf's emphasis), and then, of having no "*heart*": "I wasn't writing about what the law says but about what my heart says and what you would say *if you had one,*" my emphasis). Finally, she refers to Frank's heart ironically: "Out of the kindness of your heart – what a joke!" (151) making her sarcasm more

[78] Hilda asks Frank in her letter: "Do you think I am a fool and don't know already what sort of position I am in?" (151) The sentence does the opposite of what it says. By invoking the typical sexist accusation against women herself, that is, the figure of the hysterical madwoman, she is at the same time dispelling the stereotype and using it to assert herself and the legitimacy of her reaction.

poignant. Consistent with the dominant social prejudices and linguistic conventions of the time, Frank does not make his case about his heart feelings. Women are emotional and sometimes emotions overrun them, whereas men are rational, and being manly means being able to control one's emotions, that is, one's heart.

Nevertheless, family is also a man's thing, and the same happens with love. Paying attention to Frank and his sister in law's views on family and love will help us dig up the differences between male culture and female culture. In spite of the differences, a blind devotion to the unswerving loyalty of blood ties remains invariable in both discourses.

In *The History of Sexuality,* (Foucault) Foucault recalls how in medieval and Victorian times not only sexual relations and legitimate offspring were restricted to the sphere of marriage – disputes over things such as honour, loyalty to social class and extended family, patriotism, etc. were also matters that could justify a bloodshed and, consequently, they were literally matters of life and death. In other words, what Foucault rightly calls a "symbolics of blood" does not only cover the legal fiction upon which patrimony is passed on from parents to their children by right of inheritance on the basis of bloodline succession. A "symbolics of blood" regulated and legitimated in medieval and Victorian times social violence, for example personal vengeances, and the violence exerted by states such as death penalty, tortures, terrorism and declarations of war against other countries:

> A society of blood – I was tempted to say, of "sanguinity" – where power spoke through blood: the honor of war, the fear of famine, the triumph of death, the sovereign with his sword, executioners, and tortures; blood was *a reality with a symbolic function.* (Foucault 147)

In the modern experience, when power obtains the monopoly of violence, all that remains from the "society of blood" that Foucault describes is the possibility of securing a blood lineage through one's own progeny and, therefore, its symbolic function gathers more intense and subliminal meaning. It also translates into sexual control, especially over women (even if now the

discovery of DNA can trace whether a child is his father's or not). One does what is necessary for one's own progeny and, by extension, ethnic group, country, etc. Let us recall that *Harland's Half Acre* is about Frank Harland's quest to recover for his family lineage the lost land. Gerald, the recipient of this dream is the son of Frank's only full brother, Jim, his closest relative down the line of succession. In the next Chapter, Frank will recall how his forebear, Gem Harland, lost his land: "You've wiped me out, fella (…) You've wiped me clean off the map," (175) and how his opponent in a card's game, a young fellow, couldn't believe his luck: his "loins stirred", thinking "he would found a dynasty" – but Frank is aware that this is "another story" and that it is intended for "some other cove." (176) A story worth telling is a story about a particular genealogy (from a more specific to a more general blood type: the family, an ethnic group, a nation as comprising a multiplicity of ethnicities or not, even a continent), but a story not worth telling is not worth of a story, that is, of entering history.

In her letter to Frank, Hilda does not question the primary importance of blood ties. Frank is Gerald's uncle and her deceased husband's brother. Frank's relation to Gerald is only second to the one that relates Gerald to his progenitors. We know that in primitive cultures, for example in Aboriginal cultures, (De Heer) a man had to take care and raise his brother's children as if they were his own in the eventuality of his death. Closer to us, Shakespeare's *Hamlet* also stages the figure of an uncle naturally replacing his deceased brother at all effects, usurping both his wife and social position. Therefore, it was only natural that Gerald's mother would turn to Frank when in need, as was natural that Gerald should have mixed feelings towards Frank, who plays the role of father and uncle at the same time. Frank taking responsibility for his nephew after his brother's death was and still is both natural and customary: "after all you were family", Hilda writes, "Jim's own brother, and blood is thicker than water, they say."

That is the reason why, in order to snatch Frank's hold on Gerald, Hilda has to bleed him dry, figuratively speaking, and the fact that she exerts this violence through language does not make it in any way less harmless or ineffective. This is a woman's power. If Frank has become a

bad influence on Gerald, it is because his blood has been corrupted or, what amounts to the same thing, because there is no blood running through his veins: "What I didn't know was that you haven't got any blood in you, Frank, not a drop!" What she means is that Frank is not real family, because he does not mean well for Gerald.

But Hilda has other and more critical arguments to put Frank in his place, and to claim that her side of the family will always have a higher ascendancy over her son than his. They are based on natural law and proceed by stages. An uncle will never be able to replace a father, and a father will never be able to replace a mother. Beyond the ties of blood there is the close contact of gestation, body within body and against body, for nine months. It is not just a matter of blood, she argues - there is also flesh:

> Gerald is my son – my son and *Jim*'s – nothing can change that. You had no part in it and never can have. Till the day I die it will make me closer to Gerald than you can ever be – and Jim too, a dead man, since he is the boy's natural father (…) Thirty-two hours of labour – that's what Gerald cost me. You wouldn't know but it makes a difference. Let alone the nine months. You will never understand that, no matter how hard you try. It's beyond you and always will be, flesh is flesh. (151)

Their different gendered views and cultures lead them to love Gerald differently. Hilda rails at the way Frank talks about his love for Gerald, that is, at the way Frank wants to educate and raise him. "As for your so-called love – and what you want to *make* of him – the boy himself has told me what that means, if I didn't know it already." Frank confides in Phil how he is trying to educate Gerald. He wants him to be responsible and be able to make a living for himself: "He thinks I am hard. It's because I want him to *be* something. To realize that life is serious. To make something of himself," (153) which Gerald's mother interprets as a form of manipulation - "trying to twist him to the way you see things," she says, "because you think you own him." (152) For his part, Frank believes that she spoils: "'She spoiled him silly as a kid,'" and indulges Gerald, making

him believe that he can get everything just for the asking and without no effort or conscientiousness on his part: "'Taught him to expect things, as a right, that you have to work and struggle for,'" and "by bribing him" and trying "to buy his affection" with sweets and presents "till he's come to think life is a sort of Christmas tree where gifts'll [sic] just keep falling at his feet." Frank wants to make a man of Gerald and believes that it is his mother's influence that makes him indulgent and melancholic, whereas Hilda disagrees with the way Frank lives and cannot tolerate that Frank is trying to put Gerald against her. Frank believes Hilda is making Gerald weak, vulnerable, melancholic, and easily distressed – "all sensitivity." He believes she is feminizing him. Against her influence, Frank has been trying for years "to put a bit of ordinary back bone into" Gerald, and doesn't want him "to trade on sensitivity and some belief he's got hold of that life is his for the asking and that he can miss out on the sweat and the grief." (153) Loving him means providing him with the character and tools to achieve things and do things for himself, to become someone – a man.

It is interesting that Hilda and Frank understand the family in opposing terms but following the nature versus culture dichotomy and all that stems from it to the letter. Whereas Hilda sees Gerald as her son and always closer to her than he will ever be to Frank, Frank sees in Gerald a means to regain the family honour and social status. Frank sees Gerald in societal terms and Hilda in natural terms, according to the equation between the feminine and nature on the one hand and culture and the masculine on the other. Nevertheless, Frank is aware of a danger, a curse than runs through his family: the sort of indulgence he sees in his nephew and that he resentfully sees his mother suffering from as well. At bottom, both Hilda and Frank share the same nature, but Frank consciously goes against it because he sees it as the origin of all evils. It ruined his family in the same way that it ruins Hilda.

Frank clearly saw his family's proneness to self-indulgence and melancholy in the figure of his father, Clem Harland, when he was a child. All his four brothers have failed in life in one way or another: Jim has been killed at war, Tam hasn't been able to escape his father's influence

and has become his nursemaid, Clyde committs suicide and Pearsall ends up disappearing with the down-and-outs of Brisbane. That is the reason why, early on in his life, we are told that Frank had "some obscure sense that his life was meant to go crosswise and be let in defiance of his nature rather than in the easy expression of it," (44) a thought that would eventually translate into a clear vision and even a philosophy of his own: "If you want to achieve anything in this world", he tells Phil, "you've got to go against nature. Your *own* nature." (167) Even if, as we have seen, Malouf doesn't want to extrapolate the contents of his novels or their morality onto the real world, because he claims that they have a life of their own, Frank's thought is an exception. That this is an idea that profoundly impregnates the novel and that Malouf intended as as overt or covert message to his readership is clear from what he has stated in an interview with Ray Willibanks:

> There is a passage in Harland's Half Acre about the artist creating himself by going against his nature. To go with your nature sometimes is too easy, too much a passive giving yourself up to what is acceptable, what is already there. You have to go against that to see what else you might be able to do or to see what happens, what comes out of the pressure of pushing hard against what you are. I have a great belief in the energy that comes through opposition. (Willbanks 13-18)

Chapter 3: The War Novels: *Fly Away Peter* and *The Great World.*

Malouf's war novels *Fly Away Peter* and *The Great World* were published almost ten years apart in 1982 and 1991, respectively. They stand out as his major literary contribution to the World Wars that shaped the history of the West and Australian national identity during the twentieth century.

The Great World remains the longest and most ambitious novel Malouf has written to date, whereas *Fly Away Peter* is less broad in scope and ambition. It resembles *An Imaginary Life* in length, lyricism and the role that intense idea-images play in the novel. In this respect, *An Imaginary Life* and *Fly Away Peter* are more *novellas* than works of fiction. If in *An Imaginary Life* Malouf tells the story of the poet Ovid in exile from the first person perspective, as Ovid's fictional autobiography in his last days in Tomis, *Fly Away Peter* tells the story of Jim Saddler, an Everyman working-class Australian from Queensland in the battlefields of France from a third-person perspective. Another important point in common is that in both novels Malouf uses contrasts as a literary technique to unfold the narrative of the story. In *An Imaginary Life*, the pivoting of images between an idyllic past and the harshness of life in Tomis for the civilized Ovid provides dynamism and tempo to the story. Similarly, in *Fly Away Peter* the contrast between the sunlight and the brightness of the swamp and the obscurity and pollution of the war trenches confers dynamic force and visual realism to the story. In *The Great World*, Malouf also uses contrast; though this time the contrasts are not between landscapes and feelings but between the stories of its two main characters. The novel weaves the different stories of Albert Keen (Digger) and Vic Curran. Whereas Vic embodies the spirit of the individualist, arriviste, entrepreneur and social climber, Digger stands for the stereotypical Australian character that has its origins in the bushman and will end up giving shape and substance to the typical Australian soldier, the mythology of ANZAC and the spirit of the digger – one of the aims of our analysis will be to show in what ways *Fly Away Peter* and *The Great*

World actively participate and shape this mythology. The suggestive language and vivid imaginary that conferred lyricism and a dreamlike quality to *An Imaginary Life* is now used by Malouf to place the profane world of fiction into the devout language of Australian's war mythology. Both *Fly Away Peter* and *The Great World* are replete powerful and vivid idea images that will linger in the reader's mind for a long time and with help confer a mythical status to the events recounted in the novels.

Another important point to consider regarding the development of Malouf's technique as a writer is that *Fly Away Peter* and *The Great World* are the first novels that Malouf writes exclusively from the point of view of the third person perspective. This achievement takes place in the early 80s. As previously mentioned in Chapter 1 on *Johnno,* Malouf had always wanted to be a short story and fiction writer, but had had difficulty in finding the right tone until he rekindled the tone he had used in his earlier poems (Spinks 7; Willbanks 17), mentioning "The Year of the Foxes" and "The Judas Touch." He followed a similar process when writing *An Imaginary Life* (see our analysis in Chapter 2) and, as we will see, in *Fly Away Peter.* But poetry is always deeply personal, and to move from the poetic voice in a work of poetry to the poetic persona in a work of fiction is not always easy – the natural thing to do is to keep the poetic persona in the work of fiction as personal as possible, that is, adopting the first person singular perspective. This is what Malouf did in *Johnno* and *An Imaginary Life*, and to a lesser extent in *Harland's Half Acre*, the first draft of which Malouf did just before writing and completing *Fly Away Peter.* We will recall that some Chapters of *Harland's Half Acre* are written from the first person perspective (those in which Phil narrates the story) and the rest from the third person perspective. Malouf was writing *Harland's Half Acre* at precisely the time when he was finding a third person perspective voice. Taking a look at the dates of composition and how Malouf conceived the works we are talking about would help us make our point.

Johnno, Malouf's first novel was published in 1975; *An Imaginary Life* in 1978; *Fly Away Peter* in 1982; *Harland's Half Acre* in 1984 and *The Great World* in 1990. *Fly Away Peter* and a first draft of

Harland's Half Acre were completed more or less at the same time. We can gather this from an interview with Lee Spinks. When asked about the date of composition of his autobiography *12 Edmonstone Street*, Malouf says the following:

> That book was written in 1981/1982. I was living in the house I had bought in a small village in Italy in 1978, had just finished *Fly Away Peter* and *Child's Play*, which were written more or less back to back, and we had to make the decision about which of them would be published first. And I had just finished the first draft of *Harland's Half Acre*…(Spinks 9)

In an interview with Candida Baker, Malouf specifies that he started writing *Harland's Half Acre* "in the middle of August '82, and did a very rough first draft which was only two thirds of the length of the final thing," and comments that it took him longer to write *Harland's Half Acre* than the other shorter books he had written: "Two books of mine I wrote very quickly. One was *An Imaginary Life* and the other was *Fly Away Peter* (Baker 236-237)". In another interview with Ray Willbanks, Malouf specifies that he wrote *Fly Away Peter* in one go while in Italy, and that when he went back to Australia he realized he had to do some research to provide the novel with "particular dates and days and battles for Jim Saddler to be involved in." It was while doing his research for *Fly Away Peter* that he came across the first materials for writing *The Great World.* More specifically, he mentions the "lunatic asylum" where Dig's sister, Jenny, is interned in for a time, and the "glue factory" that will be transformed into a soap factory in the Warrenders' house and will later turn into a margarine factory during World War II while Vic is at the front:

> I worked out what regiment he [Jim Saddler] ought to have been in, the 41st or 42nd, and I went to the RSA, the Returned Service Association, and asked if they had a battalion history for that regiment. Some very interesting material came out of that. Going past the lunatic asylum and the glue factory came straight out of that regimental history. (Willbanks 17)

It was during that prolific period in the early eighties when Malouf succeeded in finding the right tone to write his novels from the third person perspective, a technique he would continue to use from the publication of *The Great World* onwards in his fiction works: *Remembering Babylon* (1993), *The Conversations at Curlow Creek* (1996) and *Ransom* (2009). This change in technique also put an end to the influence of what we could call "the Brisbane years" on the content of his novels. As we have seen, with the only exception of *An Imaginary Life*, and however autobiographical this novel might be in other respects,[79] Malouf's personal experiences as a child growing up in Brisbane provide the basic materials for his novels *Johnno*, *Harland's Half Acre, Fly Away Peter* and *The Great World.*

The World Wars have a pervasive and recurrent presence in the novels from the earlier period before the publication of *Fly Away Peter* and *The Great World.* In *Johnno,* Dante tells us that, at his school, "the honour-boards in the Great Hall carried the names of seven generals", and recalls "the war dead, whose names were recited, alphabetically, to the assembled school on Anzac Day" (16); the lives of those men, most of them youths in their late teens and early twenties, became the benchmark against which they had to measure themselves, and the familiarity of their names and their presence in the school's Board of Honours was a reminder that war was a close reality and that one day, providing the circumstances were favourable and they measured up to it, they could aspire to a similar honour: "The dead had the same names as our neighbours, or boys in the class above us… They were noble, dedicated, remote, and too good for the rest of us…" (157) In his interview with Lee Spinks, Malouf comments that there had been "no generation in Australia since 1870 that had not been to a war" and that the question of "what kind of soldier you were going to make" (Spinks 11) was what they thought would give them a measure of their

[79]At the Sydney's Writer's Festival in June 2014, David Malouf admits that he was in love while writing this novel and that in this sense it is highly autobiographical, at least in its tone. (Bennet)

true worth in life. Dante also recalls the arrival of American soldiers in Brisbane during World War II: "my father took me one brilliant morning to see the first American warships come grandly upriver and swing at anchor off Newstead Park" (26); how his family followed each event of the war, placing them in the "wall-maps that came with *The Courier-Mail"* (23); and how his imagination would torment him with dark and sinister forms, fed by rumours and news of the war, and recalls nightmares these would provoke: "When I crawled into bed at night and my father came to put out the light the war took on its *real* form." (25) The war has a very solid and palpable presence again in *Harland's Half Acre*, influencing the atmosphere, the characters and the events of the narrative. At the outbreak of World War I, Phil's uncle Gil joins the Air Force and is sent overseas, from where he returns shell-shocked. Frank's cousin Ned dies in World War I and his brother Jim in World War II, and the outcome of the First World War, with thousands of civilian lives lost, is what causes the economic recession that takes Frank to the road and a wandering life which he will never completely be able to leave behind. One of the main secondary characters of the novel that gives title to one of the chapters is Knack. He fought in the civil wars in Poland and ends up killing himself and his partner, Edna Byrne, which profoundly shocks Frank and Phil. Finally, we must mention the recurrent appearance, in both of these novels of the veterans from war who went from house to house doing menial jobs in exchange for some food, who had fallen off the wheel of the smooth functioning of society, and were waiting for an opportunity to get back on again or let go once and for all. In *Johnno,* Dante recalls the "Depression", the "worn, shy-looking men… who came to our door for work… and were given food at the bottom of the stairs," (169) and reflects on how close his family had been to poverty. He tells us that his father "had come often enough to the edge, and looked over, to know just what the troughs were like." (170) In *Harland's Half Acre*, we are told that at one point the main character, Frank Harland, "had been adrift so long now that he thought he might never get back" (45) into a self-sufficient sort of living and, later on, when Phil and his father would walk about the city they would come across "the old-timers of the place", that is, the outcasts of society who repeatedly failed to succeed in life: "Some

of them were returned soldiers from one of the wars. Others had been boxers or footballers, and one was a politician who had suffered a fall." (51) In *The Great World,* while living with the Warrenders, Vic experiences the same anguish but multiplied a thousand fold. Vic's father is a veteran from World War I who eventually gives in to drink and ends up killed in a brawl. During the war, Vic's father had acted as "batman" for Captain Warrender, agreeing that in the event of his death, he would "act as guardian to any children he might have." (84) That is how Vic ends up with the Warrenders, but the memory of his father and his former life will always haunt him. The veterans from World War I that came to the Warrenders' house are described as "men out of work, battlers who came to the back door looking for any employment they could get: chopping wood, cleaning out gutters or drains." Meggsie, the housekeeper, would ask them to do some task as "a gesture towards their masculine pride and the insistence that they were after work, not charity," in exchange for some food (103). They "scared" Vic – "not physically… It was his spirit that shivered and got into a sweat. They were everywhere you went…" (104) This haunting feeling is the menace of failure.

Having reached Federation in 1901, the new century was to prove crucial in the role that Australia was going to play in world affairs, and the World Wars provided the ideal ground for Australia to test itself. A male living in Australia in the first half of the twentieth century, like Malouf, meant that the stakes were so high that you would have to be able to prove yourself at war and show the kind of man you were going to become.

We have seen that the World Wars are a permanent presence in the works of Malouf in the early period of his writing and, when these are absent, war and violence are nonetheless present and driving forces of the narrative: we only have to think that *An Imaginary Life* starts when the Roman Emperor Augustus banishes Ovid because of the subversive effects of his writings, or the constant threat that the Northern tribes represent for the Getae, who live within huge fortifications to protect themselves from the world. War and violence are always there lurking in the unconsciousness of the writer.

We have gathered enough evidence from the novels in that regard, but I would like to finish this point with a long quote from the interview between Lee Spinks and David Malouf, where the author himself synthesizes the influence of the war as he grew up in Brisbane, providing some important personal anecdotes and facts that will help us get an idea of what it was like living in Brisbane in the first half of the twentieth century. This excerpt is also interesting in another regard. It offers us a different voice from the voice persona of his novels, except perhaps the voice persona in *Johnno*, who after the attack of the Japanese on Pearl Harbor and the landing of about 200,000 American soldiers on the coast of Brisbane, sees the War as "exciting" and even "comic": "The war, now that it was with us, turned out to be quite an exciting affair. A bit frightening at times, but mostly comic and commonplace." (26) Whereas all of Malouf's novels provoke a reaction against the senselessness and brutalities of war in the reader, when we hear Malouf talking to Lee Spinks about his childhood in Brisbane and how the war was lived back then we can readily perceive a certain elation, a feeling of excitement and eagerness for battle in his voice. Of course, this excitement is a result of his reminiscences from back then, it does not reflect what Malouf as an adult thinks about war. These reminiscences are also intertwined with a boyish nationalistic pride. Going to war meant participating in world affairs, to become part of history and making Australia part of that history.

In this excerpt, Malouf speaks as if going to war was almost a moral obligation, and he mentions that World War II succeeded in placing Australia on the map and in making the Australian conscious of their place in the world. During World War II, the world landed on the Queensland coast of Australia and Australians opened themselves to the world – the 200,000 American soldiers that Malouf mentions amounted to half the population of Brisbane.

Since before Federation, Australia had always supported the British and the American troops, from the Boer War to the Vietnam War and more recently the Iraq War. Luckily, Malouf belongs to the "exact generation", as he tells us in the following excerpt that escaped the wars:

I was born in 1934 and my last year of school was 1950. At the moment when I was coming to be grown up, there was no generation in Australia since 1870 that had not been to a war and so going to a war and facing the test of battle was essentially what every male growing up in Australia expected. In 1950, the big joke in our year (the last year at school) was what career ("Korea") are you headed for, because the Korean War was on and we all expected, the moment we turned eighteen, to be inducted into the army and sent off to Korea. But that didn't actually happen. In fact, my exact generation became the only generation which did not go to war, because the next generation went to Vietnam. So it was a question in the society of almost masculine identity being determined in terms of what kind of soldier you were going to make and that is a big thing hanging over you. We went to war as always because, it seems to me, we did not want a war to happen without us. We always worried in Australia about being left out of history and so what we really wanted to do was always to be there in the center of it, and so we rushed off to every war because everybody else had and tried to establish, not only that we were there, but that we were the *best* that were there. So the kind of national platform was almost that war was what would put us on the map. We always say in Australia that we are "coming of age". Australians are *always* coming of age, endlessly coming of age. But really the first time that people started saying that was Gallipoli: that was the moment that Australia "came of age" and that was because it was the first time we made a big splash on the pages of history. But, you know, the First World War was incredibly destructive to Australia. Sixty-two thousand men were killed out of a population of three or four million. It was *huge*, and that is not just in terms of the fact that people, the flower of a generation, disappeared, but it was that… well, let's say that when I grew up in Brisbane I was *very, very* aware of World War I. First of all, every person who came to the house, every carpenter,

every plumber, every person knocking on the door asking for food (because it was the middle of the Depression), every one of these people had been in the First World War, and if you were a kid of five, six or seven that was the person they talked to about it, so people were endlessly talking to you about the war. But, also, every big house in Brisbane had two or three sisters and another woman living there who might have been an ex-wife or fiancée of the brother, but all the brothers had been killed. You also need to realize that in Queensland the only secondary schools were private schools, practically (there were maybe three or four private schools). That meant that all the people coming through the schools had been officers and had been killed at a much higher rate than private soldiers, so really most of the people who might have been the future professional people in Queensland were all wiped out in the First World War. And what that meant overall in Australia was a huge wound from which the country took a very long time to recover. It is a very, very *strange* period, the period between the two wars, because Australia cut itself off from the rest of the world, went inward, was very suspicious of foreigners of every kind, did not want immigrants of any kind unless they came from the British Isles, resisted modernism in all the arts. There were two factors at work here: one was the wound of the war, but the other was the fact that the country was essentially in a depression from the late 1890s to the outbreak of the Second World War so it was a very impoverished place as well. And so that is the world I really grew up in. World War II was in no way as traumatic as World War I and in some ways woke the country up. First of all, where I was in Brisbane (which had a population of about 400,000) 200,000 Americans were in that town from the end of 1941 until 1946. That place turned into an American town overnight. One of the things that happened then was this extraordinary thing which is that we always knew there was another twentieth century than the one we were

> living in, because we saw it up there on the screen all the time, then suddenly all these people who came from that other twentieth century were in the city. That really shot Australia from being still basically a pre-World War I place to being suddenly in the Fifties *in* the Fifties. Everything happened then. The whole world that America represented as another version of the New World kind of burst on Australia and Australia kind of exploded. (Spinks 11-13)

We can perceive Malouf's excitement in the figurative language he uses, which is not void of dark irony: Gallipoli was the first time Australia made "a big splash on the pages of history", the word "splash" visually evoking the blood of the 62,000 Australian lives that were lost in the war trenches in Europe, the officers who would have pursued professional careers in Australia having simply been "wiped out," and the image of Australia finally "exploding" and keeping pace with history with the new worldview that the American soldiers imported to Australia.

As Malouf himself puts it, growing up in Brisbane in the forties was about figuring out "what kind of soldier you were going to make", and that would give you the exact measure of your worth as a man: "So it was a question in the society of almost masculine identity being determined in terms of what kind of soldier you were going to make and that is a big thing hanging over you." (Spinks 11)

In this Chapter, we will deal again with some of the issues that we dealt with in previous Chapters, for example the conflict between the male and female cultures, the relationships between parents and children and especially between fathers and sons, and more succinctly even if no less tellingly, how women are used as objects of male bonding between men, similar to the way in which women acted as objects of exchange in the patriarchal societies that Lévi-Strauss studied. The context of war will bring the way Malouf contrasts male and female cultures into sharper focus, at the same time that, as war intensifies bonds between men, this will allow us to delve into the issues of male bonding and mateship in more detail. As David H. Morgan has pointed out, "combat and military experience separate men from women while binding men to men". This

separation and this bonding "reaches deep into a man's sense of identity," (Morgan 165) and it has a double effect. On the one hand, it leads men to reject anything that has to do with femininity, either their feminine side or provoking in them a fear of being feminized by being close to women, especially their mothers, because they will always remain boys for their mothers. On the other hand, the hierarchical structure of the military puts pressure on men because they constantly have to prove their valor and manhood to other males. In *The Great World,* we will see that Digger will only be able to find himself as a man escaping from his mother's grasp, and war will give him the chance to escape as far away as is possible from her; we will also see Vic's instinctual need to constantly and relentlessly prove himself in front of his mates, a need that will only end with his death. Moreover, as Harry Brod and Michael Kaufman put it in their introduction to *Theorizing Masculinities* "war and the military traditionally have had the strongest associations with masculinity and the wider gender order" and, consequently, in "these sites the male body is linked to the body politic" (Brod and Kaufman 8) in a way that reveals that gender relations between men and women and among men, on the one side, and political culture, on the other, are inseparable.

The analysis of gender relations at war will take us straight to the core of Australian identity: the Australian soldier, the digger, has his roots in the bushman pioneering tradition. As Seal has argued, there is a "fusion" of the "discourses of imperialism, pioneering and war" (Seal 1) in the construction of Australian identity.

A final note on what we believe is Malouf's main contribution to the history of Australia's military participation overseas in world affairs and the mythology that has been built around it. We will contend that *Fly Away Peter* focuses on and shapes the official mythology of ANZAC, whereas *The Great World* intervenes within the unofficial myth and legend of the spirit of the digger. Therefore, our reading of *Fly Away Peter* will be mainly political, whereas our analysis of *The Great World* will focus on the experiences of individual Australian men and the way they lived their masculinities. Thus, we will deal with the two main traditions that make up the Australian myth: "the folkloric tradition of the digger and the official tradition of Anzac." (Seal 1) Whether Malouf

purposely dealt separately with each of these traditions in the books under consideration might be a matter of dispute, but as we will see this distinction is not simply a handy analytical tool for us. Evidence from the novels will support our reading.

Reconfiguration of The Myth of Anzac In *Fly Away Peter*

The storyline of *Fly Away Peter* is quite straightforward and there are few characters in the novel. It tells the story of an Australian Everyman in his early twenties, Jim Saddler, in Queensland and, then, in World War I France. Jim is a born ornithologist, and one day the owner of the swamp where he is observing the birds, Ashley Crowther, who is in his mid-twenties, discovers his talent. He has a good feeling about him and offers him a job that consists in keeping a record of the avifauna of his lands with a view to its preservation. Ashley has studied in Europe, both at school and at Cambridge, and he has also studied music for one year in Germany, (9) bringing with him the idea of the need to conserve natural spaces from Europe – Nielsen states that "pioneering work was being done" in that regard "in Germany, Holland and England" at the time. (Nielsen 108) Soon after that, while he is observing a sandpiper, Jim glimpses Imogen Harcourt, who is taking a picture of the very same sandpiper he is observing. He goes to find her and discovers she has a talent for photography in the same way that he has a talent for birds. As the narrative unfolds, we discover that Jim has a difficult relationship with his father, who is sour due to the kind of life he has had and resents the fact that Jim might escape his fate by working for Ashley. When World War I breaks out both Jim and Ashley decide to enlist. However, since they belong to different social classes, Jim ends up as a foot soldier fighting in the trenches whereas Ashley is given a post as an officer. At war, Jim meets Clancy Parkett, an easy-going and humorous fellow, the typical Australian character, digger and mate[80], with whom he gets along very well, and Eric Sawney, an

[80]'Digger' commonly refers to the Australian soldier, and 'mate' in Australia means friend. We will deal at length in this Chapter with the meaning of 'mateship' in Australian history,

insecure and glum boy whom they fail to shake off. One day, Jim comes across Wizzer Green, about whom he feels an animal, blind antipathy, and they engage in a bloody fight for apparently no reason. Luckily, Clancy intervenes and nothing happens. Eventually, Clancy dies and Eric is severely injured – he loses both his legs. After that, Jim meets Bobby Cleese, a beekeeper, who is eventually killed by inhalation of phosgene gas. Finally, Jim dies after suffering severe injuries in the battlefield, and the novel ends with the image of Imogen on the beach reminiscing about Jim and observing a new phenomenon, the beauty of a man surfing in perfect harmony with nature – the final message being that after the war, life simply moves on.

The first idea of the novel is a young man interested in birds. Malouf already had a whole language and poetics of birds at hand thanks to the publication of Judith Wright's volume of poetry *Birds* in 1962. As he himself explains in an interview with Eleonora Goi, when asked about the importance of language and naming in *Fly Away Peter:*

> Judith Wright writes a whole book on birds through which all of those birds enter Australian poetry and in entering Australian poetry they enter the consciousness of Australian readers, which means we begin to possess those creatures, as we didn't before, so we are no longer strangers because they are now inside us. (Goi 112)

Malouf was interested in the idea of birds and migration because some species travel back and forth between the two hemispheres during the year, so that they necessarily have a vision in their heads of what the world as a whole is like. Malouf wanted to convey the idea of how some of the first generations of Australians lacked a global vision of the world they inhabited. In the

---

especially as it characterizes a defining feature of the Australian character and the way it has been embodied in the myth of ANZAC. What the myth of ANZAC is will also be clear at the end of this Chapter. We will leave for the next Chapter on *The Great World* an exposition in depth of the legend of the digger, which will help us analyze the particular configuration of masculinities in Australian history up until World War II.

novel, that is the case of Jim who, unlike Ashley, has never left Australia before the War, and the war will provide him with that vision. But the analogy with birds allows for further metaphorical possibilities. In the same way that some birds are local and some migrant, some "species" of men like to travel and are more cosmopolitan than others, who prefer to stay local and do not feel the need to travel long distances and discover distant places. Also, every now and then, a bird appears in a location outside its migratory route, out of place, misplaced. In another context, this could symbolise a Robinson Crusoe in a new land, but in the context of war this idea of the misplaced bird, out of context, seems to symbolise instead the idea of an interrupted life, the fear and anguish immigrants feel in an inhospitable environment when escaping their countries because of war, religion, ethnic conflicts, terrorism or lack of working opportunities. In this way, one thinks about Jim in the trenches in the second part of the novel, and also perhaps of Imogen, who refers to migrant birds as "refugees" (44), and who offers no explanation in the novel as to why she decided to "first follow her brother to the other side of the world and then failing to follow him home again." (26)

What are the birds that come from the other side of the world to Australia? The day they meet for the first time, Ashley scares a "Dollar bird", and Jim explains it is an "Oriental" bird that "'come [sic] down from the Moluccas.'" (16) When Ashley's friends come to visit him from Europe and Jim takes them on a tour around the swamp, they come across a "Sacred Kingfisher": "'Look, the Sacred Kingfisher. From Borneo.'" (33) And, finally, on the day that Jim and Imogen meet for the first time, the narrative voice tells us Jim is on his belly observing "one of the little wood sandpipers that appear each summer and come, most of them, from Northern Asia or Scandinavia, nesting away at the top of the world on the tundras or in the Norwegian snows and making their long way south." (20) A little later, Imogen tells him that the sandpiper is one of her favourite birds at home, in Norfolk, England, (26-27) which means that the sandpiper is native to both Australia and England.

Later on in the novel, as spring comes to Australia in late August and early September, Jim observes the arrival of the migrating birds, sharing the swamp peacefully with the local birds:

> Tree martins first, but they came only from the Islands and they came to breed; great flocks of them were suddenly there overnight, already engaged in re-making old nests; dotterel and grey-crowned knots, the various tattlers; once a lone greenshank; then sharp-tailed sandpipers, wood sandpipers from the Balkans, whimbrel, grey plover, the Eastern Curlew, Japanese snipe, forktailed swifts from Siberia; then much later, towards the turn of the year, Terek sandpipers and pratincoles, the foreign ones in the same flock with locals but clearly distinguishable. He filled book after book with his sightings, carefully noting the numbers and dates of arrival. (44)

One day at the end of November, Jim spots "a creature that he recognized and then didn't." (47) The next day, he decides to take Imogen to the place and see if she knows the bird. She recognises a "Dunlin", a bird that is as "common as starlings" (48) but uncommon in Australia. Jim cannot believe his eyes, aware that "some barrier" has been broken.

The sighting takes place at the same time that the first news about the war appears in the papers. The idea of the refugee allows Malouf to put together two events: the age that started in the Pliocene, which forced life to adapt to new hostile environmental conditions, and the War that is about to break out in Europe and that is producing the first refugees. The text seems to suggest that both disasters, one natural, the other human, will have similar consequences:

> 'But *here*,' he said.
>
> He raised the glasses again.
>
> 'It doesn't occur.'
>
> But it was there just the same, moving easily about and quite unconscious that it had broken some barrier that might have been laid down a million years ago,

> in the Pliocene, when the ice came and the birds found ways out and since then had kept to the same ways. Only this bird hadn't.
>
> 'Where does it come from?'
>
> 'Sweden. The Baltic. Iceland. Looks like another refugee.'
>
> He knew the word now. Just a few months after he first heard it, it was common, you saw it in the papers every day. (49)

We will see these metaphorical evocations and analogies between the world of birds and the world of humans throughout the novel.

Malouf explains how the idea of the birds and of a young man travelling to the other side of the world, against his will, came to his mind more or less at the same time, as an unconscious, immediate choice, in his interview with Ray Willbanks:

> I began with the young man with the birds. I was interested in the birds because here was a marvellous symbol but actual fact of the kind of world that Australians live in. There are the birds that go back and forth across the world, who do belong to both hemispheres and that have no doubt about what the wholeness of their life is and it is contained in their heads in the way of a map so that they do see the world as a whole as we who live on opposite sides of it don't necessarily. I then wanted the young man to go to the other side of the world in some way. Given the sort of person that he was, it seemed more likely that he would be sent there rather than choose to go like a Henry James character. And World War I seemed more useful than World War II. You really can't talk about these as conscious choices. All this choosing might have taken place in about twenty seconds. I can't remember. (Willbanks 17)

Bearing in mind that Malouf is a gifted writer of landscapes and nature, (Nettelbeck) and already having a language of birds at his disposal thanks to the publication of Judith Wright's collection of poems *Birds* in 1962, what Malouf needed then was to find the right voice to describe

the battlefields and the trenches in the second part of the novel. He found them in a heartfelt and personal poem he had written some years, entitled "Report from Champagne Country." The analysis of the poem will provide us with the background of the novel.

The poetic voice in the poem meanders in the battlefields of France, acutely aware that, underneath the green fields and vines he is observing, thousands lost their lives during World War II and, further below, World War I. He imagines the remnants of the war continuing, in slow motion, as in a nativity scene, the war in the dimension of memory, pushed by "an intelligence" of their own which keeps pace with nature:

> …. The vinestock knows
>
> what's here. Black pudding land, the sluice were an artery was drained,
>
> a whole generation in the field, two armies deadlocked
> still. They push an inch this way that way as earth resettles
> under them; and silence; shinbone, brain-pan, clavicle
>
> parting in the shambles. A cartwheel splinters; crossbow, rifle
> move off from the hand; the wars go on. From random shots
> in May 1940 through richer strata, chivalry
>
> and tribal skirmishes in woods ploughed under. Chantry chapels
> ride over their bones, the land is thick with minerals,
> an intelligence still active as chins tilt upward, lower ranks
>
> spring to the alert. (Malouf, *Poems 1959-1989*)

The poem is personal because Malouf mentions that he lost an uncle and another one was gassed in these battlefields during World War I. We recall Phil's Uncle Gil in *Harland's Half Acre*.

In *Fly Away Peter,* Jim's closest mates die at war, except for Ashley, who does not belong to the "lower ranks." Like Malouf's uncles, Jim's best friends suffer similar fates. Clancy is blasted out of existence and Bobby Cleese is gassed. Bobby dies a few days after he is gassed. One of Malouf's uncles died in the battlefields the poetic voice is describing, and another one survived the side-effects of being gassed just for a few years: "I've an uncle under here; / another uncle coughed all through my childhood the corrosive /airs of La Belle France, its gold light tickled in his chest." (Malouf, *Report From Champagne Country*)

"Report from Champagne Country" also describes the dichotomy between the youthful and injudicious appeal to battle, instigated by official and state propaganda, the celebration of ANZAC day at schools, public institutions and War Memorials, and the succinct and final judgment of the backward glance of the mature poet that we have already pointed out in the introduction *à propos Johnno*: "Hell's under here." The source of the youths' appeal to battle in the poem is the elation they feel when seeing the "honour-boards" at school, which the poetic persona describes as "manhood's rare, impulsive gift." According to the *Oxford Online English Dictionary*, "rare" might mean the intermittent occurrence of a situation or condition, or a valuable quality because of its uniqueness and uncommonness. Since the poetic voice describes the boys who sing and claim their willingness to go to war as "pissed off" and their gift as "impulsive", we can conclude that "rare" means intermittent and sporadic in the poem and, hence, that there is some irony and scornful mockery in the way the poetic voice refers to the calls to patriotism in relation to war.

Referring to how the uncle of the poetic voice died from gas poison, the poem reads:

He chocked at last

on his bawdy anecdotes; went back to the regiment; another

gold-leaf hero sunk in the minds of boys pissed off with honour

- boards and manhood's rare, impulsive gift. I come to judge

for myself. Hell's under here. (Malouf, *Poems 1959-1989*)

The second half of the last verse just quoted contains an "idea image" (see footnote 29) that will come back again at the end of *Fly Away Peter* and provides the novel with a quasi-mythical dimension. The verse reads: "I stoop and scrabble the earth." In the poem, what this verse means is that the poetic voice is digging the history of the war, looking for its remnants and trying to make sense of its senselessness. At the end of the novel it is the dead soldiers that fall on their knees and start to "knead the earth," (134) but they dig because they want to go back to Australia, where they belong: "the direct route – straight through." (135) In *Fly Away Peter*, this kneading and digging can be interpreted in two opposite directions. On the one hand, placing the action in the dimension of myth, it provides a powerful vision of redemption for the families and descendants of all of those who lost someone in the battlefields of Europe. The bodies of lots of soldiers who died in the trenches of World War I were never recovered[81] – there were so many and some of them were simply blasted out of existence, like Clancy in the novel. The image of soldiers' bodies going into earth and resurfacing on the other side, metamorphosed as nature, is a powerful one. On the other hand, one can see in the vision of hundreds of Australians clawing and digging in anguish to return home, the silent call of hundreds of men who will never find peace because they lacked a proper burial.

[81] In his book *Australia*, Philip Knightley gives some facts and figures about the Great War: "At least eight million soldiers had been killed and perhaps as many as 12 million civilians. All casualty figures are approximate because the bodies of over half a million men who fought in France and Belgium were never found, or if found, never identified. Australia had sent about 330,000 volunteers to the war and of those nearly 60,000 were killed, 150,000 wounded and 4,000 taken prisoner." (Knightley, Kindle File)

The poem is also a critique of the economic interests that were behind the war, and which were caused by the growing development of industry in the nineteenth century, the fact that modern economies could do without unskilled labour, the new bureaucratisation and technocracy that allowed the control and mobilization of large masses of population, and the emergence of a surplus of population that was dispensable. As Neilsen puts it, quoting Malouf:

> Malouf has described the war as "an extension of nineteenth century industrial activity", from which experience of the "management and deployment of men and the organization of civilian populations [resulted] on the one hand… the development of the welfare state, on the other… the totalitarian state." (Nielsen 115)

There are a couple of comments in this direction as well in the novel. The first one comes from the narrative voice: "Things were being organised, you saw, on a large scale and with impressive expertise, as in the interests of an ambitious commercial project, the result of progress, efficiency and the increased potential of the age." (69) Then, towards the end of the novel, Ashley Crowther will make a similar reflection, from the vantage point of his rank as officer. After marvelling at the army's "deep and awful wisdom" (114) that told him exactly how much a man could endure in terms of the minimum amount of food and rest, "three miles an hour, with ten minutes rest for every fifty moving," (113) he realizes that industry and war have become the same thing: "War was being developed as a branch of industry. Later, what had been learned on the battlefield would travel back, and industry from now on, maybe all life, would be organised like war." (117) Mankind was losing touch with its immediate reality: science and modern technology were alienating mankind from what it could immediately understand and manage.

During World War I, the resulting paradox was that men were defending their countries and proving their manhood in a war of trenches where they were mere cattle on their way to the slaughterhouse:

> … war economies

unloading here their surplus, thirty million factory-hands,

grey ghostly legions clubbed with sleep, sleepwalking…. (Malouf, *Poems 1959-1989*)

In the novel, the image of men either "yoked together in thousands like cattle" (69) or transported in "cattle trucks" (65, 66) recurs frequently.

Finally, the poetic voice compares the "no-man's-land" that is war to the "no man's land" of the city suburbs during the inter-War years, known as the Depression years. As we already pointed out in the introduction to this Chapter, most veterans from the War found themselves jobless and homeless or unable to go back home and face their families again after what they had experienced:

… At trench-rat level on their bellies or balanced over
a quagmire of bones, they dream their lifetime on the duckboards

in the jobless years, the dole and breadqueue cities, lose their nerve
and slip. Regulation boots, belt, helmet, tins of bully take them
down with the other faces…

… and death that faltered
once in no-man's-land surprises them in the no-man's-land
of suburban Sunday morning; they find their slow way back to earth. (Malouf, *Poems 1959-1989*)

Nothing could have foretold the fate that was in store for the European countries that fought in World War I. In his book *1914, el año que cambió la historia,* Antonio López Vega explains that at the turn of the century, Europeans thought they were walking towards a bright future. Aeronautics, the naval industry, Fordism, modern physics, psychoanalysis and literature were at

the peak of their possibilities. Louis Blériot crossed the English Channel by plane in 1908; the Titanic sunk in 1912, an important setback in the maritime industry that revealed the overconfidence of the sector; Henry Ford constructed the first car in an assembly line in 1908, the Ford T; Albert Einstein published the draft ideas of what was later to become his theory of relativity in the *Annalen der Physik* in 1905; Eddison had built the first power plant in 1885, and the new century was benefiting from all that stemmed from it; Freud published his *Interpretation of Dreams* in 1900; and Thomas Mann published the first book in which he more or less overtly told a homosexual love story in 1912, a time when homosexuality was a crime in all European countries, the autobiographical *Death in Venice.* Later on, post-war authors such as Stephen Zweig and T. S. Eliot opposed the blind faith in progress and science in their works, but before the World Wars, Europeans believed that they were heading towards a bright future, that Europe was the cradle of civilisation and that it was their moral duty to cultivate their colonies. (López Vega, Chapter 1, Kindle File)

What about Australia? At the turn of the twentieth century, life in Australia was still very much life in a colony. Philip Knightley makes a vivid account of it in Chapter 3 of his book *Australia*, entitled "Federation". Before Federation the country was divided in six states: Western Australia, South Australia, Queensland, New South Wales, Victoria and Tasmania, each going their own way and protecting their own interests. After Federation in January 1901, each state continued having its own foreign offices and competed to attract foreign investors. Colonial diseases ravaged the country. The bubonic plague that started in Adelaide and spread through Southern Australia reached Sydney in January 1900, and by August 103 people had already died. Typhoid fever hit Melbourne in 1889, killing 400 and incapacitating thousands, and Queensland's dengue fever killed 1 out of every 5 people. The problem was poor hygiene and lack of a proper sewerage system. They still relied on the "nightcart" to remove their affluent: the nightcart moved up and down the city retrieving pans of sewage in exchange for clean ones. Politically, Australians regarded the mother country with resentment because "her favourite child" was India (in *Remembering Babylon*,

George Abbot would have been happy to have been sent anywhere, except where he finally lands: Australia). Australia was also busy protecting itself from Asia. The Immigration Restriction Act was passed in 1901: any person incapable of passing a fifty-word dictation in *any* European language could be immediately deported. The Quarantine Act of 1908 backed the Immigration Restriction Act, and its aim was to prevent diseases from Asia extending to Australia. It is what is known as the White Australia Policy, the purpose of which was to maintain Australia's identity as a white Western post in the Pacific against Asia. New discoveries from Europe were also reaching Australia, especially those concerning technology, as it fitted the Australian pragmatic, hands-on character. For example, Fred Constance, a pilot from Adelaide, flew the first French-built Blériot monoplane in South Africa in 1910. (Knightley, Chapter 3, Kindle File)

Life in Queensland is described optimistically at the start of *Fly Away Peter*. The novel starts with Jim Saddler on his belly in Ashley Crowther's swamp, observing the birds, when suddenly a bi plane, a recent discovery of the period, flies over him. Jim has "a gift" for birds, he remembers and picks up their names easily. When asked about it, he has no words: "Jim found it difficult to explain it was almost a sense he had, inexplicable even to himself." The most he can say is that "you get to know some things and the rest you guess," (18) but Ashley sees in the way Jim mentions the birds "the fire of an individual passion;" he makes them sound "extraordinary." (16) Despite the difference in social status, there is an immediate understanding between them. Ashley has been educated in Europe: he has studied at school in England and Cambridge, then music in Germany, and in his mid-twenties, he has returned to Australia to take care of his parents' lands. But behind his sophistication lies a good nature, and someone for whom Malouf insists that Australia was "the first landscape he had known and he did not impose that other, greener one," (12) England, over it. Ashley is a mixture of innocence and virtuousness, and the passion of pioneers or the enthusiasm of children when they realize that everything around them is still a possibility. Standing at the balcony of "the big main bedroom since he was now the master," (11) observing the land that "he thought could accommodate a big deal… new things could enter and find a place here"

since "it wasn't as clearly defined as England or Germany," (15) Ashley rejoices feeling "the contentment of ownership and continuity." (12) Likewise, Jim is all innocence and boldness, but unlike Ashley, he is not sophisticated. He has studied at school in Brisbane, has never left Queensland, and we could say that he has a peasant's soul since his interests lie in the birds and he enjoys himself in the natural world – in the open swamps of Queensland. Jim has not been scratched by the harshness of a job or the frictions of society yet. On that first encounter, Ashley offers him a job as an ornithologist to keep a record and preserve the avifauna in his lands, and Jim accepts, feeling "his whole life change" (5). Importantly, the first thing that comes to Jim's mind is that he has been saved from the city and the harshness of menial jobs: "Jim, who till then had merely been drifting, and might have drifted as far as the city and become a mill-hand or a tram-conductor, saw immediately the scope of it and felt his whole life change." (4-5) The light and trust that spontaneously connect Jim and Ashley reflect a genuine Australian ideal, a classless view that is essential to the ideal of egalitarianism that defines Australian identity. A little later, Ashley considers that his duty as a learned and cultivated person will be to transform this spiritual ideal into a social reality: "He took a keen interest in social questions, and saw pretty clearly that in the coming years there would be much to be done, stands to be taken, forces to be resisted, changes to be made and come to terms with. The idea excited him. He approved of change." (9) Thus, from the start, *Fly Away Peter* exudes utopia.

Egalitarianism is a quality that Australians have used to differentiate themselves from the British, a markedly classist society. This difference emerges most clearly among the military, when British and Australian soldiers had to coexist and it was the British soldiers who wore the echelons. Australian soldiers commonly refuse to stick to military conventions or even to salute a superior, something that has given rise to a myriad of anecdotes about the battlefront. Many of these anecdotes concern Major-General William Birdwood, a gentleman whom the Australian soldiers loved. Seal records an anecdote worth mentioning. At Gallipoli, Birdwood is reluctant to wear his badges of rank, so that when a sentry fails to recognize him this is what happens:

> 'Do you know who I am?' asks the surprised Birdwood.
>
> 'No', says Digger, 'who are you'?
>
> 'I'm general Birdwood'.
>
> 'Struth', says digger, springing to attention; 'why don't you wear your feathers the same as any other bird would?' (Seal 41)

Knightley also records that British officials decided to follow Birdwood's easy-going style with the Australian troops – as they say, 'If you can't beat them, join them' - and recalls an anecdote in which a General wearing a monocle found the Australian troops waiting for him with a coin on their eyes. Undaunted, the General took his monocle, threw it onto the air and put it on again. Turning to the troops, he said: 'All right, you bastards, let's see you do that.' (Knightley, Kindle File)

This egalitarianism is the origin of another term that typically defines the Australian character, and that we could regard as egalitarianism's downside: larrikinism. The larrikin's disregard for convention verges on the offensive and bad taste, and he usually is a boisterous and troublesome person.

We have seen how Ashley and Jim trust each other at first sight, on the spur of the moment. Seeing Jim's skills and the opportunity that offers to keep a record of the avifauna in his lands, Ashley immediately offers him a job. In a similar feeling of elation, Jim readily has a positive feeling towards Ashley. Jim sees "a common ground" in the "silence that existed between them" that makes him trust Ashley and "take the risk." (7) Ashley having "that sort of power," (5) the deal is done when Ashley says "You're my man" (5,7) and they shake hands. From then on, there is an understated warmth and intimacy between the two men, similar to that existing between lovers. When Ashley's friends come over to visit from Europe and Jim organizes an excursion to show them the birds in the swamp, Ashley will join Jim at some point "and talk six to the dozen", share his "enthusiasm", Jim quietly, Ashley in a rush of words: he "chattered away, whistled,

chattered again, and then just sat, easily contained in their double silence." (35) Their understanding and the excitement they feel in each other's presence is beyond words.

Jim's father provides the contrast and casts the first shadows on Ashley and Jim's blissfulness and its implicit vision of an egalitarian, classless society. The first time he makes his appearance in the first chapter of the novel, it is to scorn the deal that has been set between his son and Ashley: "'Jim's a new man,' his father told his drinking mates up at the pub with studied gloom." (5) Jim believes that his father cannot accept the stroke of fortune that has given him the chance of a brighter future. He knows his father has had a tough life: he had been sent to work when he was ten by his old man, "put to the plough like an animal"; but he believed that "it didn't account for what the man was". After all, he had not treated Jim any better. Jim was scared of his father's anger, not in the physical sense – he had been its victim and it was "merely physical." There was a "savagery" in his father "that could blast the world", and he did not want to be "infected":

> 'You're a bloody fool,' the old man told him, 'if you trust that lot, with their fancy accents and their newfangled ideas. And their machines! You'd be better off getting' a job in Brisbane and be done with it. Better off, y'hear? Better!' And he punched hard into the palm of his hand. (6)

What Jim cannot stand is that his father talks as if they were a separate species from Ashley's. His father has the view that their kind, the working-class, will never have a happy and fulfilling life, and that there is no way to escape that. "He had projected for Jim a life as flat, save for the occasional down-turn, as his own. It was inevitable, he declared, 'for the likes of us.'" (5) As we have seen, Malouf often makes his main characters sever family ties so as to free them from their families and their destinies, thus offering them the chance to choose a better future for themselves, against their natures, as is the case of Frank in *Harland's Half Acre*. We will recall that in the latter novel one thing is clear to Frank: "If you want to achieve anything in this world you've got to go against nature. Your *own* nature." (167) In *Fly Away Peter,* Jim has felt that he can trust

Ashley and that the landowner did not look down on him on that first encounter. Ashley had even acknowledged that Jim had some rights to his land, the rights that come with the "knowledge of every blade of grass and drop of water in the swamp, of every bird's foot that was set down there" and "the power to give that vision breath; in his having, most of all, the names of things and in that way possessing them." (7) As we know, Malouf believes that true possession is of the spiritual kind.

The immediate and spontaneous trust between Jim and Ashley plays another chord that was essential to the definition of Australian identity of the time: Australian innocence. It is both Ashley and Jim's innocence that makes them trust each other and settle the deal of their contract so easily and quickly. And Malouf presents the issue in a way that links it to the Australians' belief that during World War I Australia came of age, that it had grown up.

Let us pick up our argument where we left it. At the beginning of the novel Jim firmly rejects his father's vision, without the issue being elaborated as extensively as in *Harland's Half Acre*:

> 'What does it mean,' Jim had wanted to ask, 'the likes of us?' Except for the accidental link of blood he saw nothing in common between his father and himself… But he had had enough cuffs from the old man, over lesser issues than this, to have learned that there were some questions that were better not put. (6)

Nevertheless, as the novel progresses, the reader perceives that Jim's vision is naive. When the war breaks out, Jim is sent to the trenches and Ashley to a post of command. This seemingly trivial distribution contradicts the egalitarian ideal of the Australian legend and its army. It is clear that the extension of this egalitarianism was relative to British society and its strict military class structure – Australian troops were egalitarian in contrast to the British troops, not *per se*.

According to Patrick Lindsay, the larrikinism of Australian troops

> can be attributed to the old British military class structure where the upper class dominated the top ranks and the lower levels came from the middle and lower

> classes. From the start, by necessity, the Australian Army had a strong egalitarian attitude. (Knightley 22)

What Jim's father's spontaneous resentment towards Ashley proves is that Australian society was still a markedly classist and elitist society, and that discrimination in terms of social class was not something that simply happened on the battlefront.

One can see the distance that mediates between Jim and Ashley, and that reflects their distinct social origins, in the kind of communication they have. Even if Jim and Ashley like each other right away when they first meet, all communication between them is at its best in silence. That first time they meet, "something in the silence that existed between them" makes them trust each other. When Jim takes Ashley and his friends on a tour around the swamp, they sit either end of the boat; "they held a balance," there is "no need to state" anything, all being agreed on without any need for words: "There was no need in fact to make any statement at all." There is a kind of mystical union between them. On the few occasions when they talk, Ashley speaks "in such an incomprehensible rush of syllables" that Jim can barely understand him; or talks about such unfamiliar things, for example Wagner, that when silence resumes, Jim "was glad to be relieved at last of even pretending to follow." Their mutual company is at its best when "easily contained in their double silence," (35) not in talk or in the stories they might want to share with each other – actually, they live in worlds apart.

That is the reason why the nature of the relationship between Ashley and Jim is difficult to qualify, but it does not respond to the easy camaraderie characteristic of mateship, which Jim will find among his equals in the trenches, among his friends Clancy Parkett and Bobby Cleese.

By the end of the novel Jim's vision has also changed. When he knows he is about to die, he reflects on how unfair it is for the lot of them, he could have used his father's expression 'the likes of us', meaning the men who belong to the lower classes and have been fighting in the trenches, to be part of all that. Jim dies a veteran of war – we are told: "almost everyone he had known well in the company was gone now and had been twice replaced." (104) It is at this point,

after all he has been through in the trenches and when everything is lost to him, that he complains for the first time about the lot that his kind, the working classes, must endure, and that his feeling of resignation equals his father's resentment.

Jim is in a tent-hospital. To one side there is a man working on a block, amputating, and to the other a pile of limbs:

> *I am in the wrong place*, Jim though. *I don't belong here. I never asked to be here. I should get going.*
>
> He thought this, but he knew the look on his face must be the same look these other faces wore, anxious, submissive. They were a brotherhood. They had spent their whole life thus, a foot from the block and waiting, even in safe city streets and country yards, even at home in Australia. *Is that it?* Jim wondered. *Is that how it must always be?* (128)

It is Jim's last thought, "Is this how it must always be?" that is just a step away from his father's resentment, the "kind of savagery" that Jim thought "could blast the world," (6) compromising the ideal of egalitarianism and, by extension, the whole of the Australian myth and its most cherished ideal: mateship.

As we have seen, "mateship" is a term that in Australia and New Zealand expresses a bond between male friends. But the term has a long and complex history that has evolved in unison with important issues about masculinity, social power and gender difference.

Linzie Murrie, in her article *The Australian Legend*, summarizes the history of the term mateship up until the 1970s. She explains that the idea of mateship goes back to pioneering Australia, the colonizers and settlers that lived in the frontiers and kept the unknown at bay or spread "civilisation" further and further inland. These environments were mostly male, and conditions were harsh. *Remembering Babylon*, as we will see, makes a good portrayal of what life was like in settler communities and the fears and perils that menaced its residents. Murrie specifies that the idea of mateship probably dates back to the 1800s. Originally defining "a bush working

relationship in an isolated and predominantly homosocial environment," by 1914 the ideal was already politicised: "The great strike of 1891, the depression and the political organisation of labour saw mateship come to express both solidarity and egalitarianism as the creed of unionised labour." (Murrie 73) In this way, at the turn of the century the ideal of mateship reflected the interests of particular social groups or the ideal of a universal brotherhood of men depending on the political agenda of who was using the term and for what purposes.

In *Fly Away Peter,* the "savagery" Jim describes in the tent-hospital does not stem solely from the unfairness of social inequality; it describes something more fundamental in human nature. After all, the war responds to the ineptness of those in power, the elite, to maintain peace or, worse still, to the fact that they make their economic interests prevail at the expense of the lower classes, which are the real cannon fodder of the war. In the same way that the relationship between Jim and Ashley demonstrates that there is a lovingness that transcends social class, there is a brutality and miserliness that transcends social boundaries.

We see this fundamental savagery exemplified in the encounter between Jim and another foot soldier, Wizzer Green. This encounter happens in a camp where soldiers are trained before being sent to the battlefront. The first time they see each other they do not talk, they have nothing and no one in common, nothing has yet happened, but their sole presence stirs within them an animosity and "black anger" that soon takes them to a murderous fight over a trifle: "Wizzer tripped Jim and then accused him of deliberately getting in the way". Filled with rage, Jim feels that this fight is about finding out who he really is; about defending something essential within himself that the presence of the other man, Wizzer, menacingly threatens. At the pitch of the confrontation, Jim reflects: "Enemies, like friends, told you who you really were." Implicit in Jim's thought is an important distinction. According to the political theorist and jurist Carl Schmidt, (1888-1985) one must distinguish the political enemy from the feeling of hatred towards someone you know; that is, one must distinguish the public enemy from the private enemy. One may be friends with a political enemy and hate his neighbour. A personal enmity can only end with the

extinction of one of the parties; the political enemy ceases to be one as soon as a peace treaty is signed or with genocide. (Derrida *Politics of Friendship*)

Most importantly, the uttermost hostility Jim feels towards Wizzer reminds him of his father's unfathomable anger, making the reader realize that, after all, his father's hostility against Ashley might have had nothing to do with class distinctions.

This is the scene:

> Jim had found himself defending whatever it was in him that Wizzer rejected, and discovered that he needed this sudden, unexpected confrontation to see who he was and what he had to defend. Enemies, like friends, told you who you were. They faced one another with murder in their eyes and Jim was surprised by the black anger he was possessed by and the dull savagery he sensed in the other man, whose square clenched brows and fiercely grinding jaw reminded Jim of his father – reminded him because he came closer to his father's nature at that moment than he had ever thought possible. (64)

The fight ends when Jim's best friend Clancy Parkett steps in and faces Wizzer himself. Then, the violence turns "ordinary"; there are rules. "The odd thing," we are told, "was that Wizzer seemed as relieved as Jim to have the moment defused." (65) From then on, Jim and Wizzer will avoid each other.

Later on, in the middle of a particularly perilous and bold advance, Jim and Wizzer have another disturbing encounter, even more unsettling and sinister than the first. It is dark, the soil muddy with water and rotting corpses, and Jim agitatedly advances under fierce enemy fire. Suddenly, he finds he has been advancing alone for a while, and the vision of a corpse shivering and shaking close by, propelled by enemy fire, makes him panic: "It was this sense of being alone out here that had broken him. That, and a renewed burst of machine-gun fire that whipped up all the earth around and made an old-corpse suddenly bounce and twitch." (92) He decides to go into a shell-hole and rest. Resuming his strength, and aware that "it was dangerous to stay here and be

left," he prepares to go back into the battlefield when, all of a sudden, "his heel was caught from behind him in an iron grip." A frenzied fight starts until Jim manages to see through the mud that covers his face and calls out "Wizzer!" Ironically, circumstances have broken through the terms of their hostility: "it's me, you mad bugger", Jim calls out. "A friend!" (93) They stop fighting, but then the unexpected happens – Jim finds out that Wizzer and he share something essential, and that the only thing that stands between them, that separates them, is the accidental unfolding of circumstances. They both start accusing each other of having gone into the shell-hole to escape from battle. Jim asks 'What are you doing here?' to which Wizzer replies 'What're you?' and, finally, Jim lies 'I sort of slipped'. But Wizzer has just arrived, whereas Jim has had some time on his own. Seeing the "mocking grin" on Wizzer's face, Jim remembers that "only a few moments ago he had been cringing at the bottom of the hole with his head in his arms like a frightened child." Having been caught out, Jim accuses Wizzer of having pulled him back into the shell-hole, "you pulled me back", and seeing that this quarrel will not get them anywhere and to put an end to the whole situation, he tells Wizzer that they have to keep moving, that they need to go back to the platoon. But Wizzer refuses to leave the shell-hole: "Not me." His decision is final. "Just that, but Jim saw that he meant it, was in no way abashed, and assumed in his own frank admission of cowardice that they were two of a kind." (94) When Jim sees that Wizzer believes fear identifies them, makes them "two of a kind", he is "alarmed," because "there were so many ways of being afraid; you couldn't be all of them at the same time", and "before Wizzer was on him again", he starts to get ready to get out of the hole. In the midst of enemy fire and the horrors of battle, Jim now fears he might lose something more essential than his physical integrity – he might lose his dignity, his humanness. "He wanted nothing so much now as to be back where he had been ten minutes ago, in the thick of it. Scared silly, but not yet sullied." Wizzer is no longer a menace because he is suddenly in the hands of a darker power; an "other" Malouf has no name for. Wizzer moves into a foetal position, like Jim himself had done a moment ago, and starts crying, shaken "by other, invisible hands." Jim then feels an irrepressible urge to join him, "a terrible temptation," but

"shame – for Wizzer, also for himself – held him back". Jim is equally unable to free himself from the spell that has caught him in its grip, look away, or go back into the battlefield. He is immobilized.

> Suddenly, alarmingly, Wizzer began to quake. His shoulders first, then his jaw. An odd moaning sound came from between the man's clenched teeth and Jim could see the whites of his eyes in the mud-streaked face. He had drawn himself up into a ball and was rocking back and forth, clenching his fists to his chest. His whole body was being shaken as by other, invisible hands.
>
> Jim could have scrambled away without difficulty then, but was held. He felt a terrible temptation to join Wizzer in making that noise, in adding it to the whine and crack and thump of shellfire beyond the rim of the pit; it would be so liberating. But some sense of shame – for Wizzer, but also for himself – held him back from that and made it impossible also for him to slip away.
>
> 'This is terrible,' he said to nobody, standing upright now, knee-deep in the mud they had churned up. He didn't know what to do. Wizzer had subsided into choking sobs. The other had let him go. (95)

Only when that invisible "other" lets go of Wizzer is the spell broken and Jim is able to leave the shell-hole, which he does, leaving Wizzer behind.

When pushed to the limit in the stress of battle, or when badly wounded, it is known that soldiers would psychologically break. At that point, they wish they were the closest possible to their mothers, in the safest and warmest place humans have ever been: in the intimacy of their mothers' wombs. Jim and Wizzer try to find a physical space, within the shell-hole, that resembles a womb, and a bodily position, the foetal position, that protects them from a mental breakdown or total extinction. In *The Great World,* Digger's father, Billy Keen, will tell him about his experience in World War I. One day, he warns him, he will have to make a place for himself in a man's world, and his mother will not be there to help him then. He has witnessed it with his own eyes: "Fellers

cryin' out fer their mothers in no man's land, with half their heads shot away or their guts spillin' out. They could cry as long as they liked but I never seen no mother turn up. It was a man's world you was in." (25)

What do we make of the relationship between Jim and Ashley, on the one hand, and the animosity between Jim's father and Jim, or even the deadly hatred of Jim's father towards Ashley, or Jim towards Wizzer Green? What role does mateship play in all that? Why does Jim say, when confronted with Wizzer Green for the first time, "enemies, like friends, told you who you were"? (64) Clearly, the quasi-erotic relationship between Jim and Ashley and the deadly and defiling encounters between Jim and Wizzer are a characterisation of the principles of *Eros* and *Thanatos* that Freud described in his book *Beyond the Pleasure Instinct.* They are the ultimate principles to which conscious activity can be reduced: the compulsion or instinct of destruction and the instinct of desire or union into a larger whole. We could say that Malouf has portrayed the two principles *between men*, Eros defining the relationship between Jim and Ashley, and Thanatos the relationships between Jim and his father on the one hand, and Jim and Wizzer on the other. Regarding mateship, during World War I and also when Malouf was writing the novel (around 1981), the two extremes he portrays, homoerotic desire and deadly hatred towards a fellow Australian, certainly fall outside this ideal. The male bonding and sexist discourse characteristic of the bushman type (Murrie 74-75) and soldiering (Morgan 167-168) were based on a deep-rooted sexism and homophobia, and the possibility of a deadly hatred among fellow Australians hit at the heart of the Australian ideal of nationhood and Australia's aspiration at the beginning of the twentieth century to become a nation.

Nevertheless, it would be wrong to suggest that the principles of Eros and Thanatos cover the whole spectrum of human relationships appearing in *Fly Away Peter.* Actually, these principles may hide the fact that Malouf is writing about the particular lives of imaginary men and women and their uniqueness, which is never reducible to two abstract principles.

We can clearly see this, concerning the birds, Jim's passion, and also, the way in which this passion translates into how Ashley and, especially Imogen Hartcourt, the only female character of the novel, relate to him. On that first meeting, when he asked Jim what he was doing and he had named the bird and where it came from in a way that made them sound "extraordinary", Ashley had seen "an odd interest" revealing itself, "the fire of an individual passion." (16) It is "extraordinary" because a "passion" always extricates itself from the normal functioning of things; it is itself. That the birds and their world set the normal functioning of everyday life apart is also seen in the term Ashley uses to refer to the swampland where Jim will work: "sanctuary." (19) A sanctuary, according to the *Oxford Online English Dictionary*, refers to a temple, and also to the holiest part or innermost recess of a temple. We could say that nature and the world of birds is the 'religion' Malouf defends in the novel. As we will see, the swamp and the world of birds constitute the aesthetic principle that redeems the atrocities of war in the novel. As such, it is a place of contemplation. By extension, at the beginning of the twentieth century the word will also mean a natural reserve, but the novel still echoes the original meaning. Last but not least, a sanctuary is a refuge, and while in the battlefront, in the battle fields of France and so as "to keep hold of himself and of the old life he had come close to losing," (111) Jim will seek refuge in the birds. The day Jim sees Imogen for the first time taking a picture of the same sandpiper he is observing, just before spotting her, he is absorbed, attentively observing the "sandpiper", with the binoculars "screwed firmly into his head", the bird "completely contained there in its small life," (20) both of them, Jim and the framed image of the bird in the binoculars, abstracted from everything else. When, later on, he meets Imogen Harcourt, a professional photographer, she shows him the photograph of the sandpiper they had been observing at the same time, he can tell she is a professional photographer and that she has a "gift" for photography because she has captured the bird's "unique life", its whole being in an image: "Did she know so much about birds? Or did some intuition guide her? *This is it; this is the moment when we see into the creature's unique life.* That too might be a gift." (28) Finally, when thinking about Jim's death, "the waste of it" in pursuit of a

"senseless and brutal extinction," (140) Imogen realizes that there is no possible use to life and that its beauty lies in the fact that it simply is, whether it is the case of a human life or a living being. She has these thoughts while reminiscing about Jim observing the picture of the sandpiper.

When Imogen thinks about Jim's invaluable worth, she explicitly mentions that no differences in class can taint the unique presence that makes every single individual unique, regardless of "birth, position, talent even":

> Her pain lay in the acute vision she had had of his sitting as she had seen him on that first day, all his intense being concentrated on the picture she had taken of the sandpiper, holding it tight in his hand, but holding it also in his eye, his mind, absorbed in the uniqueness of the small creature as the camera had caught it at just that moment, with its head cocked and its fierce alert eye, and in entering that one moment of the bird's life – the bird was gone, they might never see it again – bringing up to the moment, in her vision of him, his own being that was just then so very like the birds, alert, unique, utterly present.
>
> It was that intense focus of his whole being, it's *me*, Jim Saddler, that struck her with grief, but was also the thing – and not simply as an image either – that endured. That in itself. Not as she might have preserved it in a shot she had never in fact taken, nor even as she had held it, for so long, as an untaken image in her head, but in itself, as it for its moment was. That is what a life meant, a unique presence, and it was essential in every creature. To set anything above it, class, position, talent even, was to deny to all but a few among the infinite millions what was common and real, and what was also, in the end, most moving. A life wasn't *for* anything. It simply was. (140)

It follows from this analysis that in *Fly Away Peter* Malouf imagines the particular lives of men against the mythologising tendency of States and history books, especially of those who write history because they have won the wars. This myth making puts men under a lot of stress, because

it sets up ideals of manhood that are very difficult to achieve in ordinary circumstances. As Dante ironically puts it in *Johnno,* as he was growing up in Brisbane he became aware that "it was the little tests that would break us (not forgetting the wives and mothers) and there was no one to help us through." (58) It was during World War I that Australia reached the entity of nation and set up the main lineaments of the Australian character that persists until today. The event that condensed the myth of the Australian type and put forward the Australian nation in the world was the battle of Gallipoli, which today signals ANZAC Day.

The word Gallipoli only appears once in *Fly Away Peter*, but it is enough for its echo to modulate the whole story. It is shortly after a conversation with his father that Jim goes to Brisbane and enlists. News about the landing at Gallipoli is arriving from the War, and a new wave of patriotism is sweeping the country: "… news had come from the landings at Gallipoli and the slaughter of the following weeks. People's attitude to the war was changing." (55) In that last conversation, Jim's father reproaches him for not joining. "Jim was depriving him," he thought, "of his chance to reach out and touch a unique thing, to feel that he too had dug into the new century and would not be repulsed." (56) Taunting him, making an appeal to his manhood to provoke him, his father tells him he has heard that one of Ashley's friends took him for a ride in a bi-plane, and asks whether he saw any white feathers up there:

> 'I believe you been up in one a' them machines,' his father taunted. 'I don't s'pose you seen any white feathers flyin' about up there. If you did I'd ask you where you reckon they might'v come from. An' I wasn't thinkin' v' angels. Nor Mrs 'Arvey's chooks neither.' (55)

In English, similarly to Catalan and Spanish, calling somebody "chicken" means calling them a coward – they do not have the guts or they are not manly enough to do something. In Western cartoon movies, for example *Lucky Luck,* delinquents – the Daltons – are usually tarred and feathered so as to humiliate them. During the War, when casualties amounted and volunteering numbers lowered, Prime Minister William Hughes carried out two polls for

conscription. Those who were against it and "turned up in country towns to make their case were tarred and feathered" (Knightley, Kindle File) and sent back home.

Jim's father's appeal to manhood is not gratuitous. The next big figure that would synthesize the best qualities of the Australian national character was the soldier, and to be part of that mythology in the upcoming European war was perceived as something unique. As Linzie Murrie points out in her article *The Australian Legend,* the official war historian C.E.W Bean had already foreseen, prior to Gallipoli, "a natural development from bushman to soldier, and in terms of the masculine values which he represented, the bushman was indeed the forerunner of the digger." (Murrie 74-75) The word "digger" in Australia and New Zealand refers to a private soldier; it began to be used during World War I as an informal form of address, was in wide circulation in the interwar period and in World War II, it was part of the mythology of war.

As Garton has pointed out, "most combatant cultures, and certainly all those involved in World War I, sought to inspire enlistment with appeals to manhood." (Garton 88) In the novel, it is not just Jim's father that pushes him to war – it is the whole atmosphere of Brisbane at the time. Australia was proud that its army was made up of volunteering civilians and that it had never been short of them, that is, not until World War I. This defined Australia as a manly nation, ready for war whenever the mother country required. Australia had joined the British army against the Maoris in New Zealand, and also against the Dutch in the Boer war. The Australian character was bellicose when it needed be. In countries that lack conscription, any citizen may undertake the role of the soldier, and the qualities of the good soldier and the good citizen are coextensive. As Morgan points out, in countries where there is a lack of conscription "the image of the warrior will come to personify the society, and individual soldiers will be called on to identify their occupation with the core values of the nation," (Morgan 170) the military encompassing the whole range of possibilities of the masculine.

Being a young and lean fellow in his early twenties, when war breaks out everyone asks Jim whether he is going overseas, even people he does not know but comes across in the streets. First,

his father, as we have seen. Then, when he goes to Brisbane to buy a pair of boots and some photographic material for Imogen, the girl at the shop takes it for granted he will join up, and says that she would 'if I were a man'. Her words put together the feelings of excitement, adventure, war and manhood, the latter two being the binomial on which a man's manhood is measured in opposition to the world of women and femininity. In a way, she is telling Jim: I cannot go because I am a woman, what are you?

> 'Imagine,' a girl with very bright eyes said to him at the saddlers where he got his boots. 'I reckon you'll be joining up.'
>
> 'Why?' he asked in a last moment of innocence. It hadn't even occurred to him.
>
> The girls' eyes hardened. 'Well I would,' she said fiercely, 'if I was a man. I'd want to be in it. It's an opportunity.' She spoke passionately, bitterly even, but whether at his inadequacy or her own he couldn't tell. (37)

After that, escaping from the noise and the tumult of the youths who celebrate the news that Australia is at war, Jim goes for a drink at the Criterion and "slipped into the ladies' lounge", something "he had never dared before", as if the whole atmosphere of the war had already transformed him, making him braver and bolder, "a girl – a woman really – with buttoned boots and a red blouse", asks him: "Are you joining up too?" (39)[82] The new courage he feels inside him

---

[82]Randall argues that at this point Jim has already decided to go to war, however unconsciously (he responds to the girl: "I dunno", and the narrative voice tells us: "he lied", meaning that he had no intention of joining yet 39), because he spends the equivalent of a "send-off" gift on a prostitute, as was customary. It is an anecdote, but I think it is worth noting that Randall says that Jim spent the money on a "young woman", repeating the expression three times in one page. (Randall 85) What Randall does is follow the social stereotype that a man will go with a younger woman against what the text says: "a girl – a woman really". In the text, the woman is

is a sign that the war has already changed him, whether he likes it or not and even if he cannot tell exactly how yet. Finally, when Jim returns from the city, Imogen "looked concerned for a moment" and Jim thinks she will ask him whether he has joined, but finally does not ask anything. The question has been silently put, and he touches his upper lip, "where for two days now he had been nursing the beginning of a moustache." (43) Since it is inevitable to associate the growing of hair, in this case a moustache, with manhood, the transformation that goes on, both inside and outside Jim, will soon be complete. He will soon become a soldier, a real man.

Malouf uses a visual metaphor to describe the atmosphere in Brisbane that was pushing the men in Australia to join the war: the ground tilting and forming a slope in the direction of Europe. After speaking to the girl at the saddlers, back in the streets Jim feels

> …as if the ground before him, that had only minutes ago stretched away to a clear future, had suddenly tilted in the direction of Europe, in the direction of *events*, and they were all now in a dangerous slope. That was the impression people gave him. That they were all sliding…
>
> … youths… shouting one another rounds, swaggering a little, swapping boasts, already a solid company or platoon, with a boldness that came from their suddenly being many; and all with their arms around one another's shoulders, hanging on against the slope. (37)

Later on, after the conversation with his father, the image recurs again, this time presciently as he sees them all sliding into the pit, which in the text literally means hell:

---

the one who "handles" Jim: she approaches him, we are told that she was "inclined to jolly her young men along", and "was used to" dealing with "young fellows." (39) We have here a reversal of the sexism that characterizes the military. The young men who are sent to war, on their own, are mere kids, and their manhood is at least questionable. It is in the middle of the mob that they turn nonchalant and brave.

> Jim felt the ground tilting, as he had felt it that first day in Brisbane, to the place where the war was, and felt the drag upon him of all those deaths. The time would come when he wouldn't be able any longer to resist. He would slide with the rest. Down into the pit. (56)

The landing at Gallipoli has important connotations for an Australian readership that it does not have for a European one. In Europe, it is even more commonly known under another name: the Dardanelles Campaign.

In his book *Australia,* Philip Knightley concludes, "No wonder Gallipoli is hardly recalled in European accounts of the First World War" after considering the following figures:

> A total of 7,818 Australians were killed during the Gallipoli campaign. This pales in comparison to 45,033 Australians killed on the Western Front or the New Zealanders, of whom 8,566 served at Gallipoli, but who recorded 14,720 casualties because some of their wounded returned to action two or three times. The Turks suffered too. They lost 300,000 men killed, wounded or missing at Gallipoli. In Europe, after only eight months of war, the total number of German soldiers killed, wounded or missing was two and three quarters million. (Knightley, Kindle File)

On the 25th of April of 1915, a battalion of Australian and New Zealand Armed Corps, soon know by the acronym ANZAC disembarked on the shores of Gallipoli with the aim of defeating the Turks and open a route for French and British allied forces to attack Germany from the South. It was a plan conceived by the then First Lord of the Admiralty Winston Churchill. The attack was a fiasco because 200 Turks were enough to hold the position until the arrival of reinforcements. Eventually, the military campaign turned into a stalemate and by the end of the year the whole enterprise had been aborted. (Knightley, Chapter 4 "The War Years: Gallipoli")

But today, 25th April is the most important National Public Holiday in Australia, celebrated in commemoration of all those who have lost their lives in the Australian army.[83]

Like the Catalans, the Australians celebrate a resounding defeat as a National Holiday. Why? The reasons are numerous, even if none of them conclusive. First, the War had touched a patriotic cord and many unemployed Australians saw in the War their chance to prove themselves and to make a decent salary (six shillings a day). Nevertheless, an antiwar feeling and a feeling of rejection quickly spread among the population as volunteers produced altercations and even some riots in the streets of the major Australian cities. In *Fly Away Peter,* as soon as the War breaks out, the street is full of youths marching in crowds boasting, "with a boldness that came from their suddenly being many," (38) singing such tunes as "The Boys of the Old Brigade" or "God Save the Queen," (43) and "sweeping everything before" them. (42) Second, the rigid censorship at the front produced a distorted vision of what was really happening, forcing the war correspondents to balance the defeats of the allied troops with heroic accounts of the attitude of their soldiers in the battlefields. After a poll conducted by the Australian Journalists' Association, Charles Bean had been elected the official war correspondent overseas, and Keith Murdoch, later to father the media magnate Rupert, came second. Bean was a gifted writer and thought "it was his patriotic duty to write positively about the Anzacs." (Knightley) Graham Seal refers to Bean as "'the great inventor'" (Seal 7) – he puts the expression within quotation marks – of the ANZAC myth, even if he acknowledges that there were other "forces" behind the mythologizing of ANZAC. But Murdoch was the one who, after being put up to date on what was really happening at the battlefields of Gallipoli by the war correspondent for the *Daily Telegraph* in London, Ellis Ashmead-

[83]While I was carrying out my research in Sydney in August 2014, in the small bookshop at the entrance of the New South Wales National Library there were hundreds of books on display on the shelves with the words "Digger", "Anzac" or "Gallipoli" in the titles. That was because they were coming up to the centenary that year.

Bartlett, decided that this story needed to be known by the Prime Minister of Australia. Ashmead-Bartlett wrote the story, but Murdoch was intercepted on his way to Britain and he had to hand it over. It was then that he decided to rewrite it, producing an account that faithfully reflected the unstated feelings Australians had about the war: that the British were inept strategists and lousy fighters, and that they had been remorselessly sending Australians to a meaningless death. It was a case of fully-fledged "Pom bashing" and patriotism. In his account, Murdoch emphasizes the noble and masculine bearing and the beauty of the bodies of the ANZACS in a way that suggests a fashion show more than a description of men fighting in the battlefields: "It is stirring to see them, magnificent manhood, swinging their fine limbs as they walk about Anzac." (qtd. in Knigthtley, Kindle File) This description ignores the fact that one of every three Australians had been born in England, and that the ANZACS fought together with French, Senegalese and Indian troops at Gallipoli. Third, the Gallipoli campaign was over and it had been a big failure. Newspapers were soon flooded with the names of Australians who were falling in the trenches of France: "the scions of some of the country's oldest families, the best brains of the professions, and sturdy boys from the bush, the mines, the shearing sheds, the cattle stations – all dead" (Knightley). Consequently, enlisting numbers were drastically dropping, and the government began a campaign to reverse this tendency. It was then that the ANZACS were turned into a national icon and the date of the landing at Gallipoli into a national holiday. As Knightley puts it:

> By autumn 1916, the number of casualties in the AIF [Australian Imperial Force] demanded 7,000 replacement recruits a month and only half that number of men were coming forward. In view of this, was it coincidence that the government declared that henceforth 25 April would commemorate the landing at Gallipoli, would be a public holiday known as Anzac Day, and would be marked by a march? (Knightley, Kindle File)

It was then that the Prime Minister, William Hughes, carried a poll to put an end to what had been and would remain another distinct national feature: conscription. Australians voted

against conscription twice in two consecutive years, despite fierce propaganda for it coming from the government.

ANZAC, by metonymy, symbolizes the best of the Australian character as it is embodied by the military, the digger, which in its turn must represent the best and most genuine of the Australian character at large. We have already seen, when contrasting Jim's relationship with his mates at war with his relationship with Ashley and, later on, when analysing the differences in terms of social class between Jim and his father, on the one hand, and Ashley on the other, how Malouf questions the ideal of egalitarianism in the novel, and how mateship seems only possible among members of the same social class. Then, we saw how the relationship between Jim and Wizzer also radically questions the ideal of mateship among members of the same social class. Whatever the official rhetoric says, the ideals of egalitarianism and mateship do not hold water under close scrutiny, unless referred to as ideals to strive towards and be achieved in some remote future.

We will end our analysis of *Fly Away Peter* explaining how Malouf destroys another national ideal as it is embodied in the military, the ideal of the iron soldier whose sculptured, lean body represents the body of the nation. The undermining of this ideal might be something all novels describing war in the trenches and, therefore, the mutilation and debasement of bodies might have in common. What distinguishes *Fly Away Peter* is its lyricism in the way Malouf sublates the horrors of the trenches into a larger view of nature and its cycles of life and death, offering a transcendent interpretation of the value of life – as we have seen, at the end of the novel Imogen reflects that every living being is simply and absolutely unique.

In his article *Theatre of War*: *Combat, the Military and Masculinities*, David H. J. Morgan recalls that in most countries the warrior is "still a key symbol of masculinity", the image of the warrior being constructed on popular and institutional representations of masculinity and a representation of the military body as inscrutable and impenetrable. He mentions the comic books, the heroic representations of soldiers and military leaders in art and war memorials, and the representation

of warrior masculinities in films, pointing out the physical and psychological traits and attire that characterize them:

> The stance, the facial expressions, and the weapons clearly connote aggression, courage, a capacity for violence, and, sometimes, a willingness for sacrifice. The uniform absorbs individualities into a generalized and timeless masculinity while also connoting a control of emotion and a subordination to a larger rationality. (Morgan 166)

The uniform helps shape an abstract representation of the ideal social body, but the man wearing the uniform must have the features of the larger population or the ethnic group in power. The image of the ideal soldier maintains or establishes differences in terms of the ideal of masculinity, gender, sexuality and ethnicity that is the norm.

One might think of the comic book *Superman*, the man of steel, who embodies the North American nation and symbolically represents the right the U. S. ascribes itself to intervene in world affairs and to extent the ideals of freedom and liberty all over the world. His weapons are his capacity to fly, his laser and X-Ray vision, his immunity to firepower, and his superhuman strength. Another popular U.S. comic, *Captain America*, as the name of the hero indicates, allows us to see into the close relationship between the comic character, the military and the nation. His suit replicates the American flag, he always wears a shield, and he always leads foot American soldiers into action.

Todd W. Reeser elaborates on the relationship between cultural representations of masculinity and nation in the following terms:

> The borders of the male body are routinely and frequently established and re-established as solid, and we might assume that masculinity ends at the edges of the male body. Because of this particular similarity between masculinity and the nation, there are recurring representations of nationalized bodies in which national and gendered representation function in tandem. Superman's hard, muscular body may

be imagined as impervious to bullets or to other weapons, like the American nation which is also considered impervious to attack from the outside. (Reeser 176)

What happens when the military body at the battlefront is represented as vulnerable, mutilated, mortally wounded or as lying on the battlefields to rot, unburied, eaten by rats? What is the image of the nation that comes back from the battlefields in such circumstances, and what effect does it have on how the population sees itself and is perceived by other nations?

In the introduction to his book *Lo bello y lo siniestro*, Eugenio Trías quotes Kant's *Critique Of Judgment,* a passage where Kant mentions that art can represent anything, including wars, epidemics and the furies except one thing, the feeling of disgust, because we feel disgust towards something that firstly offers itself to our senses as something to be appreciated or tasted – in a similar fashion to how we talk about good taste or bad taste in art – but that we reject violently. Trías uses this passage to elaborate on the fact that the feeling of disgust is linked to a series of cultural prohibitions that constitute what is considered taboo in particular societies, and among the ancestral taboos in Western society he mentions the unburied body decomposing and rats. (Trías 27-28) It is difficult to imagine what World War I soldiers went through in the battlefields of Europe when they were fighting in the trenches, the horror they must have felt seeing the dead bodies of their countrymen and the enemy rotting in the mud, being eaten by rats, at the same time that death was permanently looming over their heads. It is also shocking to realize what the foundations on which the building of the nation and the mythical image of the body of the neat, muscular, impervious soldier are built on. The sacredness of the nation is paradoxically built upon the sacrilegious, the symbology that characterizes the Apocalypse: the return of the dead, rats, and the end of the world.

Malouf vividly describes trench warfare with historical faithfulness. In order to appreciate this, we will quote a short excerpt from Philip Knightley where he describes what the battlefields of France during World War I were like, and then a couple of excerpts from *Fly Away Peter,* which

describe the same events and which will allow us to point out the sacrilegious nature of war we just pointed out.

This is the excerpt from Philip Knightley:

> What could the correspondents have written? That human flesh, rotting and stinking, had become mixed in with the mud, and if the soldiers dug dipper to avoid shelling then their spades went into the soggy flesh of men who had once been their comrades. That soldiers knew their fate and sometimes marched towards the front baa-ing like sheep. That the French often threw black troops from their colonies into exposed positions in order to save white troops from slaughter; that the British High Command had tried to use Australians and Canadians in a similar manner so as to save British troops… (Knightley, Kindle File)

So much for the honour of battle. About the "soldiers baa-ing like sheep", Knightley also mentions that on 26th September 1915, Charles Bean wrote in his diary that Australian officers shot the soldiers that would refuse to advance from behind. Murdoch had also described British officers shooting soldiers who loitered in an advance in his famous letter. The last statement of the quote deserves some qualification: Stuart Macintyre points out that Australian casualties were "less than the British themselves suffered at Gallipoli." (Macintyre 159) Nevertheless, this was not so in absolute terms – before 1914 Australia had a population of about 5 million whereas Great Britain and Ireland had a population of about 50 million.

We do not see men loitering in an advance or having to be dragged into battle in *Fly Away Peter*. We see men paralysed and unable to continue moving forward in an advance due to dread and exhaustion, for example the episode we have described when Jim and Wizzer hide in a shell hole. No ethnic issues are raised in the novel either.

In the following passage, Malouf describes the nerve-wracking and horrendous conditions in which men fought in the trenches. Philip Neilsen points out that the scene being described must have occurred at the Somme, where "the infamous mud was largely a result of an error of

judgement on the part of British command, who shelled and destroyed the canal system which had been devised to drain the area and prevent it from deteriorating into a swamp." (Nielsen 117) The feeling of disgust caused by rats, which Malouf describes as "familiars of death, creatures of the underworld", and how this feeling defiles something fundamental in Jim, the transgression of a taboo – "to come to terms with the rats, and his deep disgust for them, he would have had to turn his whole world upside down" – are accurately described in the text:

> Water was the real enemy, endlessly sweating from the walls and gleaming between the duck-board-slats, or falling steadily as rain. It rotted and dislodged A-frames, it made the trench a muddy trough. They fought the water that made their food rot, and the earth that refused to keep its shape or stay still, each day destroying what they had just repaired; they fought sleeplessness and the dull despair that came from that, and from their being, for the first time, grimily unwashed, and having body lice that bred in the seams of their clothes, and bit and itched and infected when you scratched; and rats in the same field-grey as the invisible enemy, that were as big as cats and utterly fearless, skittering over your face in the dark, leaping out of knapsacks, darting in to take the very crusts from under your nose. The rats were fat because they fed on corpses, burrowing right into a man's guts or tumbling about in dozens in the bellies of horses. They fed. Then they skittered over your face in the dark. The guns, Jim felt, he would get used to; and the snipers' bullets that buried themselves regularly in the mud of the parapet walls. They meant you were opposed to other men, much like yourself, and suffering the same hardships. But the rats were another species. And for him they were familiars of death, creatures of the underworld, as birds were of life and the air. To come to terms with the rats, and his deep disgust for them, he would have had to turn his whole world upside down. (83-84)

In the next passage we see Malouf describing how soldiers got used to moving and fighting among the corpses. The taboo concerning corpses in decomposition is transgressed in the battlefields, and with it some essential poise and integrity is shattered. Just before the paragraph we have just quoted, we are told that once, a wall in the trenches "collapsed" behind Jim and "a whole corpse lurched out of the wall and hurled itself upon him"; from then on, he had to "disguise his tendency to shake" and the macabre scene would often come back to him in sleep. (83) There is a point when we are told "he had stopped being scared of the dead." (91)

> That night they went back into the lines, and for five days and nights they dug in and defended themselves against counter attacks and were bombed and machine-gunned from planes and lived in the stench of the German dead. Two weeks later they were back. For eighteen days. They were half-crazy that time, and once, digging furiously, while the sky cracked and blazed and men all round were being sliced with shrapnel or, with an entrenching tool floating high above them, were lifted clean off their feet and suspended a moment in mid-air, Jim felt his shovel scrape against bone and slice clean through a skull. He heard teeth scrape against metal, and his own teeth ground in his head. But he dug just the same, and the corpse, which had been curled up knee to chin and fist to cheekbone was quickly uncovered and thrown aside. (104)

As we can see, not only do the calamities of war damage men's manhood but they defile their humanity as well, as the transgression of all these well-established taboos in Western society implies.

A turning point in the novel is Clancy's death, and with it Malouf gives a final blow to the ANZAC myth. Clancy is the only character that fully incarnates this ideal in the novel. (Nielsen 113) He is an easy-going, autonomous, anti-authoritarian, practical, humorous youth, a bit of a larrikin, a ringleader and the ideal mate. Jim likes to hear his "ribald accounts of peace time philandering", which "did him good" because "it kept the old life real." (60) Clancy also steps in

between Jim and Wizzer when they are about to get into a murderous fight and, afterwards, teases Jim saying, “I’m wearing Jim Saddler’s black eye.” (61) Once, during a train stop, he pushes Jim into going for water and they both run up to the running locomotive to have it heated in a billy, being loudly cheered while waiting for their wagon and enthusiastically complimented when going back in and joining their platoon. We are told “Jim would never have done any of it alone; but with Clancy it seemed like an adventure.” (68) On the 23rd of December, before being sent to the front, Clancy urges him to go to a little “estaminet” and find a woman called Monique, who is already on his “List”; (72) when Jim objects and mentions the Captain, Clancy despairs: “Aw, bugger the Captain. D’y’ think he cares? He makes the rules with ’is tongue in ’is cheek, the way he expects us t’ keep ’em.” (73) He knows how to handle people and is good-natured, for example when the bore Eric asks them where they are going on their way to the little “estaminet”, Clancy humorously tries to get rid of him but, finally, gives in and lets the boy join them:

> ‘Shit!’ He said now, ‘it’s bloody Eric. I thought we’d lost ’im. They ought t’ make that kid a police-dog.’
>
> ‘Where yous goin’?’ Eric repeated.
>
> Clancy stood tugging his ear. ‘Nowhere much, mate. We’re just walkin’ down our meal.’
>
> ‘You’re goin’ into town,’ the boy said, ‘yous can’t fool me. Can’t I come?’
>
> ‘Now Eric. Town is out of bounds at this hour. You know that. What’d y’ mother say?’
>
> ‘I haven’t got a mother.’
>
> ‘Well yer auntie then.’
>
> Eric stuck. His drawn face, always pale, assumed a hard white look. He set his jaw somewhere between stubbornness and the sulks. Snow was falling.
>
> ‘You’re underage,’ Clancy said desperately. ‘I bet you’re not sixteen.’
>
> ‘I am so too. I’m eighteen.’

> 'Oh Jesus,' Clancy moaned. 'Come on then. But try not t' start a box on, eh mate? Keep that fierce temper a' yours under a bit of control.' (74)

Clancy winks at Jim and the three of them go to the "estaminet". Clancy admires the way Jim keeps "to the strict order of the book" when it comes to taking care of his material, "cleaning and swaddling his rifle, polishing his boots, laying out his kit", but warns him that to get on in the world you need to "go round the edge of things, the law, the rules", because "the straight way never got a man nowhere." (73) All in all, the narrative voice tells us "Jim had a great affection for him." (75) Clancy's death is a turning point in the novel because of the deep affection Jim has for Clancy and the fact that he is the character who most faithfully embodies the ideal of mateship and the ANZAC type.

The way Clancy dies reflects the fear World War I soldiers felt for the first time in military history to be simply blasted out of existence, without the possibility of being offered a decent burial – that their remains would not be taken back home to rest or at least offered a place to rest under the soil, a proper burial. This new situation was due to the new advances in military technology and weaponry.

The scene is gruesome and macabre because Clancy is blasted out of existence splashing onto Jim. They are not even at the battlefront – they are preparing to have afternoon tea. It is a scene in which they are getting ready to sit down and eat something as familiar as a piece of bread with butter and jam. We see Jim going through the whole ritual, while Clancy hurries towards him with a billy and a couple of mugs. Malouf is careful to focus the reader's attention on the food Jim is about to taste and enjoy, making the whole scene almost visible and the food palatable in the reader's mind:

> Jim sat astride a blasted trunk and was buttering slabs of bread, dreamily spreading them thick with golden-green melon and lemon jam. His favourite… Jim dipped his knife in the tin and dreamily spread jam, enjoying the way it went over the butter, almost transparent, and the promise of thick, golden-green sweetness. (84)

Sarah Ahmed, in her book *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, devotes a Chapter to what she calls "The Performativity of Disgust." She highlights the closeness between the organs of taste and disgust reactions, and how disgust works visibly and pre-eminently between cultures. She quotes an excerpt of Darwin's accounts in the Tierra del Fuego, where a native shows disgust for the kind of food he is eating, in the same way that their food disgusts him, and points out that these feelings are extensive to how the surface of the other, who is considered less and below us, causes similar disgust reactions, for example when the native touches Darwin's food, even when he is visibly clean. She gives a clearer example of the last case in Chapter 2 "The Organisation of Hate", where she recounts an experience the feminist Audre Lorde had when she was a little girl – aged five or six – in Harlem. She was riding a bus with her mother and she had a white old lady staring at them queerly when, suddenly, her knee touched the old woman. Her reaction made the young Audre think the old lady had seen a "roach" there, but when she looked down she could not see anything. Years later, she realised the old woman reacted that way because she had touched her, and this had made the old lady react as if she had been touched by a cockroach. The food of the other and the other can pollute us when they are excessively close. (Ahmed, Kindle File)

Ahmed puts food, disgust and the fear of contamination or pollution together in the following way: "Food is significant because it is not only a matter of taste as well as touch – as senses that require proximity to that which is sensed – but also because food 'is taken into' the body. The fear of contamination that provokes the nausea of disgust reactions, hence makes food the very 'stuff' of disgust." In this context, Ahmed points out that the distinction between metaphoric and literal disgust is not useful – they are one and the same. At this point, she also recalls Julia Kristeva's essay on abjection, *Powers of Horror,* where the French feminist theorizes that only what is already within can be exteriorized and demonised as "disgusting." The abject is what we exteriorize or do not accept about ourselves and project onto the outside, therefore defining us in a certain way:

> Kristeva shows us that what threatens from the outside only threatens insofar as it is already within: 'It is as if the skin, a fragile container, no longer guaranteed the integrity of one's "own and clean self", but scraped and transparent, invisible or taut, gave way before *the dejection of its contents*' (Kristeva 1982, 53, emphasis added S.A.). It is not that the abject has gone inside us; the abject turns us inside out, as well outside in. (Ahmed, Kindle File)

As we will see, Clancy is literally turned inside out, and Jim takes Clancy 'outside into' himself, upon the surface of his skin. His mate, his best friend has got too close. The enemy has got too close, has "got them", so to speak, and has killed one of them – the war and the enemy got Clancy and Jim close, so close that in the ultimate ordeal of death their closeness becomes disgusting, shocking.

It is a constant feature of jobs and organisations of high risk the intensification of male bonding, for example between the police or firemen. Whoever has worked with these men knows this – their lives often depend on how much they can take each other for granted, trust each other. In the military this is even more so, because death is their business. That is the reason why mateship in war implies a blind trust between combatants, and in military theory, the lives of many can depend on the skill or accuracy of one man doing a particular job or carrying out a particular task.

In this regard, let us recall that Graham Seal links masculinity, the nineteenth century bushman tradition, loyalty and the nation within the umbrella of mateship in the configuration of the myth of ANZAC during the twentieth century:

> The distinguishing characteristic of Australian masculinity was 'mateship'. Mateship was the unquestioning loyalty of a man for his 'mate' and is a familiar feature of the idealised bushman of the nineteenth century… Thus it is the concept of mateship that the national-military myth most powerfully incorporates both the imperatives of the warrior and of the nation. (Seal 78)

Likewise, and more explicitly, Patrick Lindsay quotes Peter Cosgrove when the latter explains that the core of mateship is his "reliability":

> If the fellow says I won't let you down, I'll be there or I'll guard this or I'll take care of you, then that's written in stone. And it's this bond of trust that is the core of mateship. Mateship can't exist without trust and reliability and we elevate mateship, but it must be built on the fundamental obligation felt by the individual to keep his or her word. (Lindsay 20)

In the closeness of war, what Clancy's violent death does, when he explodes and splashes onto Jim is to bring the two mates so intimately close that their mateship becomes disgusting, gruesome, nightmarish and horrendous. Again, the ideal of mateship is built upon an abject form of mateship that is a transgression of another taboo: a cannibalistic scene in which the "dreamily spread jam" on butter and the "thick, golden sweetness" transform into the warm insides of Clancy.

This is the scene, which Malouf describes with intense vivacity and unmatched rhetorical skill:

> Suddenly the breath was knocked out of him. He was lifted bodily into the air, as if the stump he was astride had bucked like an angry steer, and flung hard upon the earth. Wet clods and buttered bread rained all about him. He had seen and heard nothing. When he managed at last to sit up, drawing new breath into his lungs, his skin burned and the effect in his eardrums was intolerable. He might have been halfway down a giant pipe that some fellow, some maniac, was belting over and over with a sledge hammer. *Thung. Thung. Thung.*
>
> The ringing died away in time and he heard, from far off, but from very far off, a sound of screaming, and was surprised to see Eric Sawney, who had been nowhere in sight the moment before, not three yards away. His mouth was open and both his legs were off, one just above the knee, the other not far above the

boot, which was lying on its own a little to the left. A pale fellow at any time, Eric was now the colour of butcher's paper, and the screams Jim could hear were coming from the hole of his mouth.

He became aware then of blood. He was lying in a pool of it. It must, he thought, be Eric's. It was very red, and when he put his hands down to raise himself from his half-sitting position, very sticky and warm.

Screams continued to come out of Eric, and when Jim got to his feet at last, unsteady but whole (his first thought was to stop Eric making that noise; only a second later did it occur to him that he should go to the boy's aid) he found that he was entirely covered with blood – his uniform, his face, his hair – he was drenched in it, it couldn't be all Eric's; and if it was his own he must be dead, and this standing up whole an illusion or the beginning of another life. The body's wholeness, he saw, was an image a man carried in his head. It might persist after the fact. He couldn't, in his stunned condition, puzzle this out. If it was the next life why could he hear Eric screaming out of the last one? And where was Clancy?

The truth hit him then with a force that was greater even than the breath from the 'minnie'. He tried to cry out but no sound came. It was hammered right back into his lungs and he thought he might choke on it.

Clancy had been blasted out of existence. It was Clancy's blood that covered him, and the strange slime that was all over him had nothing to do with being born into another life but was what had been scattered when Clancy was turned inside out.

He fell to his knees in the dirt and his screams came up without sound as a rush of vomit, and through it all he kept trying to cry out, till at last, after a few bubbly failures, his voice returned. He was still screaming when the others run up. (85-86)

Clancy's death is a moment of inflection in Jim's experience of the war. He will never recover from it, and he will always feel contaminated, dirty, scathed. The trauma of his death will blur the boundaries between fact and memory, reality and dream. The scene will come back to him over and over again in dreams:

> That was how the war first touched him. It was a month after they came over, a Saturday in February. He could never speak of it. And the hosing off never, in his own mind, left him clean. He woke from nightmares drenched in a wetness that dried and stuck and was more than his own sweat. (87)

That is the reason why when it comes to disgust and stickiness, one cannot distinguish between the literal and the metaphorical. Clancy's death will stick to Jim. Sarah Ahmed quotes William Ian Miller to explain, summarily, how the horrifying sticks like "the strange slime that was all over" Jim: "Horrifying things stick, like glue, like slime." (Miller 26 qtd. in Ahmed, Kindle File)

Philip Nielsen reveals that Malouf got the idea for the scene we have just quoted from another war novel, Tournier's *The Erl-King*, but that Malouf disregards any reading of this scene as a "ferocious baptism", as Tournier does. (Nielsen 119)

Some time afterwards, Jim goes to see Eric in the tent-hospital and is struck by the boy's sulkiness and self-pity. He tells Jim that he will never learn to ride a bike now, and poses the question of his physical dependence in the bluntest possible terms: "Listen, Jim, who's gonna look after me?" Jim answers with an incredulous "What?" Jim sees then that Eric's question touches upon "the structure of the world they lived in and where they belonged in it, about who had power over them and what responsibility those agencies could be expected to assume." Eric was afraid that people now "might simply walk off and forget about him altogether" (88); he was aware of his utter loneliness. Jim answers, "Oh, they'll look after you alright Eric. They're bound to." But he knows Eric is not convinced. It is then that he wishes Clancy was there: "Jim saw that it was this capacity in Clancy that had constituted for Eric, as it had for him, the man's chief attraction: he knew his rights, he knew the ropes." (89) Eric makes Jim promise that he will visit him again,

which he does, but guiltily knowing that he will not be able to. He leaves and Eric continues asking "Wilya, Jim?", and Jim believes he is hearing "the voice of a child, and then, with hardly a change of tone, it was the voice of a querulous old man, who had asked for little and been given less and spent his whole life demanding his due"; (90) outside, Jim finally breaks down:

> Outside, for the first time since he was a kid, Jim cried, pushing his fists hard into his eye-sockets and trying to control his breath, and being startled – it was as if he had been taken over by some impersonal force that was weeping through him – by the harshness of his own sobs. (90)

Recalling Kant's assertion that the feeling of disgust is the only thing that cannot be represented in art, arguing that, however you approach the topic, if you succeed in transmitting the feeling of disgust you produce in your audience the contrary effect of the aesthetic experience, that is, an immediate feeling of repulsion from the stomach or the sense of touch (stickiness, slime, human flesh in the texture of wet bread crumbs and marmalade), then, what sort of experience can sublimate this ancestral repulsion, this shocking disgust? The answer is nature. Throughout the novel, nature provides the counterbalancing point of the horrors Malouf describes, especially Clancy's death, and Malouf provides a final redeeming image of the Australian soldiers excavating the earth with their hands wanting to go back home.

The scene is memorable, and it places the events of World War I in a mythical, epic dimension. When Jim is mortally wounded in the tent-hospital, and Ashley helps him get out of there, he glimpses in the distance some "figures, dark-baked and slowly moving" that "were on their knees between the plants, digging." He lets go of Ashley and walks in their direction, falls on his knees or dreams that he falls on his knees beside them, and starts digging himself:

> The earth smelled so good. It was a smell that belonged to the beginning of things… and the thought of filling his hands with its doughy softness was irresistible. To have dirt under his nails! Falling on his knees he began awkwardly

to knead the earth, which was warm, damp, delightfully crumbly, and then to claw at it as the others were doing. It felt good. (134)

Suddenly, he hears a voice that cheers him: "That's it, mate. That's the style! Dig!" He is surprised to see that the voice is Clancy's, digging next to him. "To give poor Clancy a decent burial, some wit had said, they would have had to bury the both of them." He has to "trust Clancy"; he knows all the tricks. Jim is about to join him, and follow him to the other side, until they reach home:

> 'I thought you'd been blown up,' Jim said foolishly. 'You disappeared into thin air.'
>
> 'No,' Clancy told him, 'not air, mate. Earth.' And he held up a fistful of the richly smelling mud. 'It's the only way now. We're digging through to the other side.'
>
> 'But it'll take so long,' Jim said reasonably.
>
> Clancy laughed. 'There's all the time in the world, mate. No trouble about time. And it's better than tryin' t' walk it.' (134-135)

When Jim stops for a moment and raises his eyes, he sees hundreds of Australians digging like him.

In this way, as we pointed out in the introduction to this section, Malouf recovers the image of the poetic voice in his poem "Report from Champagne Country", the poem that provided the tone to write *Fly Away Peter*, when he says: "I stoop and scrabble the earth." But whereas in the poem it is the poetic voice who goes on his knees in search of what happened in the battlefields of France, in *Fly Away Peter* it is the imaginary souls of thousands of deceased Australian soldiers who excitedly and as a people go in search of their roots in order to find a last resting place.

Australia is founded in this movement of the soul or the spirit.

In summary, in *Fly Away Peter* David Malouf offers a humble and humbling story with no epic battles or deeds, just the progressive wearing down of men's morale and resilience at the

battlefront. On the contrary, the most memorable and epic scenes of the book take place in the swamps of peacetime Queensland, and they all involve nature. For example, when Jim, Imogen and Ashley share their excitement at the sight of the migratory birds that have flown from the other side of the world to Australia. Malouf has not told us the story of World War I from the point of view of the official mythology of ANZAC, but from the point of view of what it was like to fight at the trenches in the frontline, its misery and horror as it can be sharply put into focus and moulded for greater effect in fiction. As we will see in the next section, in *The Great World* Malouf will counteract the mythology of the ANZAC building on the figure of the enduring, resourceful, robust digger of folklore tradition, adding to the legend his distinctive personal touch.

The Legend of the Digger and the Critique of Marketplace Man in *The Great World*

The Great World was published in 1990, eight years after the publication of *Fly Away Peter,* and soon was an international success. The same year it was published it was awarded the Miles Franklin Award, for being the novel that best portrayed Australian life and culture. The next year it was awarded both the Commonwealth Writer's Prize, which yearly rewards the best book published within the Commonwealth, and the *Prix Femina Étranger,* a French award in which the jury are all women and rewards the best foreign novel. As we pointed out in the introduction to this Chapter, despite the differences in length and scope, *The Great World* picks up where *Fly Away Peter* ended. It portrays life in Australia during the interwar years, also known as the Depression years; then, it tells about the experience of Australian soldiers in the concentration camps of Malaysia during World War II, extending into the post war economic growth up until the Wall Street crash of the late 1980s.

The novel tells two stories that converge in the concentration camps of Malaysia during World War II – the stories of the lives of Albert Keen, alias Digger, and Victor Charles Curran, Vic. They both are sons of World War I veterans, Billy Keen and Dan Curran, respectively.

In this way, by means of the ties between fathers and sons, *The Great World* delves into a deeper understanding of the war ethos, including the important link between masculinities, nationality, war and its consequences, the most readily visible for us being the strong bonds war establishes between men and the antagonism it places between the world of men and the world of women.

In this Chapter, we are going to proceed with our analysis of masculinities in the following way. First, we are going to explain the formal structure of the novel and how it shapes content. Then, we are going to provide a summary of the novel at the same time that we will point out salient aspects of the narrative regarding Australian manhood and other relevant gender issues. Finally, we will conclude the Chapter by elaborating on the important role of war in male bonding and in the construction of Australian manhood for the most part of the twentieth century.

The Great World is narrated from the point of view of an omniscient narrator that every now and then speaks for its characters. However, the story is not told in a strict linear sequence, even if the overall unfolding of the story is linear - the story is dotted with interspersed events from distant moments of the characters' lives in a way that keeps the reader's interest alive and provides each event with different layers of significance, depending on whether we are told something that actually happens, something remembered or a future event. In the absence of a strict linear account, the reader is left with the impression that past and future are mutually interdependent in the present, and that who we are depends on who we have been and where we are heading for. Sometimes the narrative technique of stepping into the characters' shoes and explaining things as they live them gives a more personal, intimate and realistic tone to the novel, whereas the imbrication of present, past and future events produces a destabilisation of linear time and subjectivity that gives the reader the impression that everything that happens coexists in a dimension that is more spatial than temporal. This is also a result of the fact that Malouf is more interested in describing what is going on inside his characters' heads than in action.

As is the purpose of all myths that tell about the origins of a nation, *The Great World* portrays a world that is meant to tell Australians a bit about who they are and what place they occupy in

the world, that is, to make them aware of their identity as Australians. Like the Iliad and other foundational myths, the novel tells the story of a great war without precedent in human history, that is, a story of loss and trauma and, like trauma, this experience repeats itself again and again, in the way it affects people's lives and defines their personalities and life-stories. The temporal dislocation of present, past and future also reflects this experience of trauma, the inability to move on and progress. Australian Day or ANZAC day is still the most celebrated national public holiday in Australia[84], and Richard Flanagan's novel *The Narrow Road to the Deep North,* inspired by the events in the concentration camps of Malaysia due to the fact that his father, Arch Flanagan, had been a prisoner himself (Flanagan, "Freeing My Father"), recently won the prestigious 2014 Booker Prize. Both Flanagan and Malouf's novels, in spite of their formal and thematic differences, are told in a non-linear narrative – a stylistic metaphor that represents the continuous flashbacks of the traumatic event in conscious life, the ever-present reminder of trauma and loss in the collective memory and culture that defines Australia.[85]

The Great World has six Chapters, untitled and numbered from one to six, and each Chapter is in its turn divided into sections, also numbered. Finally, each section is divided into parts, each part being separated by a double space. Every part describes a character, an event or a situation, or copies somebody's thoughts and feelings, and it comprises a thematic unity.

---

[84] In his *Official Anzac Day Address* in Washington, DC in 2003 Malouf refers to ANZAC day as "the one day that we celebrate as a truly national occasion." (Malouf *A First Pace* 236)

[85] If the formal structure of the novels portrays the a-temporal quality of myth, the stories they tell is yet another attempt to make sense and another step towards the path to healing the traumatic event. The paradox is that the cure – the narrative – repeats and keeps the trauma alive. Would the complete healing of the traumatic event mean the political death of what holds the nation together?

For the sake of analysis, we will occasionally use Flanagan's *The Narrow Road to the Deep North* as a point of contrast to Malouf's novel. It is not always easy to explain why Malouf is an author primarily concerned with the portrayal of men and masculinities, even if this is an outstanding feature of his work. The contrast with Flanagan's novel will help us highlight this feature. We will see how Flanagan's representation of the relationship between men and women is informed by romantic love,[86] whereas Malouf's novel is faithful to the Australian legend of the nomadic bushman and the first pioneers, which traditionally portrays an antagonistic relationship between the sexes.

We mentioned that *The Great World* tells two stories: the story of the lives of Digger and Vic. Chapter 1 mainly tells the story of Digger's formation years since his birth until he enlists in his late teens, and also the story of his parents. The story opens at Keens' Crossing in the 1980s, that is, towards the end of the novel we are going to read. The first character the reader comes across is Jenny, Digger's sister, whose truncated, fearful and superstitious view of life also sets the general tone of the novel. After all, it is a novel about the sons of World War I veterans who will take part in an equally destructive and violent war, or even worse. The first thing we are told about Jenny is that she is "simple," (2) meaning that she is in some way mentally retarded. In contrast to Jenny, as Chapter 1 unfolds the reader is made aware of Digger's extraordinary gift: a rare condition today known as hyperthymesia.[87] He can recite everything he has heard or read just once by heart, including endless lists and every single book he reads or speech he hears. His mother finds out about his gift when he is nine years old. One day, she can hear him "reading aloud" to her sister when they are supposed to be sleeping, but when she steps into the room she realizes that "he was

---

[86] As we saw in Chapter 1 on *Johnno*, Malouf deals sarcastically with romantic love.

[87] The earliest clinical studies of hyperthymesia were published in 2006. I myself added "Digger" in the list of fictional characters that suffer this disorder in the Wikipedia. (Wikipedia "*Hyperthymesia*")

reciting the pages off, sentence by sentence, out of his head." (31) If Digger lives in a sort of eternal present because he can recall everything at will, the same is true about Jenny, but she lacks the capacity to place everything in her head in a strict chronological order. For example, Vic once pays a visit to Digger with his son, Greg, when Greg is just a boy, three or four years old. Years later, in another one of his visits, Jenny defiantly goes to him and asks: "What've you done with that little kiddie?" Neither Vic nor Digger know what she is talking about, until Digger realises what is going on and reassures her: "'Jenny love', he told her, trying to pass it off, 'that was ages ago, you know that. That was Greg.' He shot a glance at Vic. 'He's grown up. Ages ago." Aware that she has missed something, she looks at Vic, who "had the oddest look on his face, like there was suddenly nothing to him", but far from feeling abashed, Jenny scorns him: "You poor bugger! Now what's gone wrong with *you*?" (68)[88]

In the first Chapter, we are also told the story of Digger and Jenny's parents. Digger's mother is an immigrant from England, whose earliest memories are of her childhood in an orphanage with her brother, Albert. She would sit in front of him and tell him what she could recall of "their real home" and "their mother," (12) so as to instil in him some idea of a home and some sense of belonging. When she is eleven she leaves the orphanage and goes into service. Years later, she goes back to the orphanage to find her brother but he is not there; he has gone to Liverpool to become an apprentice. Despite her attempts to find him, all is in vain. It is then that she decides to go to Australia, and while working as a bar tender in Sydney meets Billy Keen. What calls her attention about him is something she overhears: that he comes from a place that bears his name, Keen's Crossing. "The place he came from bore his name…. Family names on a map were solid; they rooted you in things that could be measured, so many acres." (14) Being an orphan and eager to belong and start her own family, she lets herself fall for Billy. On the other hand, Billy Keen had lied about his age when he was just fifteen so as to be able to enlist in World War I, and

[88] For Jenny, everything is now, like for the unconscious, and following the same structure as myth.

at eighteen he felt he had already put behind him the best in life. Back in Australia, Billy sets out to do what he thought every man his age "did": settle and marry. "It was what blokes *did*. What else was there?" Mumbling on these thoughts in a pub in Sydney and confident in his own possibilities, he seduced his wife: "he had taken a look at her and told himself: 'She'll do.'" What he likes about her is "her soft mouth with just a touch of colour to it. He had spent three years dreaming of that colour." Ironically, what Jenny likes about him are not his "military bravado" and "impudence," (13) for example his swagger or when he looks at her confidently and winks, thinking she is an easy girl. What she likes is something as petty as "the giveaway reddening of his ears", concluding that his ears make "such perfect shells." (14)

They have several children: Jenny, May, Pearl, Digger, Bill, James and Leslie, (12, 29) but only Jenny and Digger survive. She decides to name Dig after his brother, Albert, so as to carry something from her old family over to her new family. However, as soon as he becomes a toddler, Digger follows his father everywhere, "with a toy hammer in his hand, imitating the father's muttered curses and his way of holding his head to one side and sucking in his cheeks as he got set to belt a nail." (23) When he begins to talk, the father takes him fishing and they go together for wood. He starts calling him Dig, and the name sticks: "The name became Digger and stuck. After a time even the mother used it, since that was what he answered to, but she regretted Albert." (11)

Billy and Digger spend a lot of time together; they soon become mates. His father tells him stories about the Great War and, more importantly, Digger slowly picks up from his father "mannerisms" and "gestures" that do not belong to the man, but to his life as a soldier. However, Digger makes his own what for his father is second nature:

> Billy Keen, as a lad of fifteen, unsure of himself and eager to be recognized as a man, had picked them [his mannerisms and gestures] up from older fellows in the army in France. So at seven Digger had already the loose slouch that is the soldier's stance when he is off-duty or between moves. He would sit on one heel

> and narrow his eyes at the distance before there was anything much to be seen. (23-24)

Digger also inherits from his father his practical skills. Billy is good with his hands and with machines, and so is Digger. "It was a gift. Digger had it too, or by intuition had picked it up from him." (23)

After this brief summary of the lives of Digger's parents, we must look into the origins of the Australian character as it is portrayed in the novel. The first thing that calls our attention is the easy camaraderie between father and son, as well as the easy way in which Billy puts his son on his side, in spite of the fact that his wife had emotionally invested so much in him, naming him after her brother. Responding to a stereotypical feminine trait, she is generous and lets her first-born son go to his father's side: "Her heart got the better of her. She knew what loneliness was, and how this man she had married, this boy, longed for a sort of companionship that she could not give him or which he was not able to accept." (12) This form of comradeship is natural among soldiers in the absence of women. Spontaneously, Billy starts using the informal form of address among soldiers with his son, calling him "Dig" and "Digger." The expression "boys and their toys" recapitulates this idea of adult men behaving like boys when telling war stories, going fishing or repairing some piece of furniture or some machinery that needs mending, and explains the deep understanding between Billy and his son. The word "digger" originates among the goldminers in America first and, by transposition, appears later in Australia (Seal 19; Macintyre 159), but its specific use as an informal mode of address among Australian and New Zealand soldiers as well as an external form of recognition dates from the first months of 1917. Seal argues that the word evoked the egalitarian values of the Eureka Stockade in Ballarat, Victoria, in 1854, as well as the efforts of the first pioneers and hard work of the rural settlers in Australia; he also notes that Australian foot soldiers increasingly preferred the term "Digger" to "ANZAC," because the latter tended to exclude those who had not fought at Gallipoli. (Seal 19) Following Seal's line of argument, we could add that as the official and institutional discourses appropriated

the word "ANZAC," soldiers tended to prefer the term "Digger," faithful to their egalitarian and sceptical stance towards authority.

The first thing to note is that the idiosyncratic character of the digger has its roots in the first pioneers who settled in Australia and the nomadic bushman. Australians owe its creation largely to Charles E. W. Bean, the official war correspondent in World War I and, after that, Australian's official war historian. He made popular the assumption that "the bushman was indeed the forerunner of the digger." (Murrie 75) Macintyre quotes Bean as having already written in 1907: "the Australian is always fighting something… In the bush it is drought, fires, unbroken horses, wild cattle; and not unfrequently wild man", concluding that "the wild independent pastoral life of Australia, if it makes rather wild men, makes superb soldiers." (Macintyre 160)[89] In this way, according to Bean, there was clearly a natural extension of civil life into military life. In his "Official Anzac Day Address in Washington, D.C.", Malouf also recalls that it is Bean who retrospectively created the Australian legend that culminated with the ANZACs, writing as a war correspondent in France during World War I. He also mentions the journal *The Bulletin,* where the main contributors to the building of the unofficial Australian legend published, including Henry Lawson, Banjo Patterson and Edward Dyson. Last but not least, Malouf points out that the Australian legend was an "exclusively male one":

> As for C. E. W. Bean, his journalistic articles before the war, his vivid and inspiring account from the various 'fronts', the definitive history he wrote after the war, all created the Anzac legend as an extension of the national character, an exclusively male one as it had developed in the bush, and as it was vividly recreated in the 1890s in that central organ of Australian publishing, *The Bulletin.* In Bean's vision of things, this national Australian character had actually needed a war to find its highest and noblest form. (Malouf 241)

[89] Murrie does not provide a reference for his source.

Seal devotes a section of his book to "Masculinity and Mateship", recalling: "At the core of digger culture was the assumption and assertion of masculinity. To be 'digger' was to be male." (Seal 77) The fact that all soldiers were male reflected a strict social division between a male and a female world, in which women stayed at the home front and men went to the battlefront. Using the letters and diaries of soldiers at the front line, Seal describes the average Australian male as "patronisingly patriarchal, but not specially misogynist", and as naïve and shy in his dealings with women. (Seal 78) This conception of Australian masculinity at the front line reflects the patriarchal values and sentimentalism Australia inherited from Edwardian society in England. However, in a story that slowly links the birth of Australia as a nation with its involvement in World War I and II, and the nation to a male digger culture that has its roots in the pioneering culture of Empire and the nomadic bushman, women are simply being left out of the equation in the construction of the national character. When Garton studies the lives of returned soldiers to Australia after the Great War and their demands, deeply ingrained misogynistic and chauvinistic attitudes come to the fore, compromising Seal's stereotype and Australian society at large. Garton recalls a revealing anecdote. In a climate of fierce recession, returned servicemen complained about slow repatriation policies and lack of privileged employment opportunities, claiming that they deserved a special place and a say in the running of the country in their status as returned soldiers who had put their lives at risk for the nation. The anecdote involves John Price kissing a woman on the street and Eric Bannister, an ex-serviceman, punching him in the face and telling him "what right have you to kiss a girl when you haven't been to war." (Garton 89)

This incident reveals the prejudices of ex-servicemen, who thought they embodied the best of the national spirit of Australian society: a soldier was more than a civilian who had not been to war because he had proven his manliness in battle, and women are portrayed as mere commodities.

Moreover, we know it is simply not true that women did not go to war or did not do their share for the country. The early twentieth century still held the nineteenth century supposedly

"scientifically" proven belief that the difference in gender roles was a natural biological consequence of the difference between the sexes. Consequently, women were excluded from the armed forces so as not to impair their soft natures and their roles as mothers. Macintyre explains that that is the reason why their responsibilities were limited to voluntary tasks, and also the reason why the 2000 nurses who served abroad during the Great War were denied military rank. He further adds that many women worked in war manufacturing industries, and that many of them played an active role in the recruiting process under the banner "One Woman, One Recruit League." (Macintyre 162) In being denied military rank, Garton notes that women who had been at the front had no access whatsoever to returned ex-servicemen benefits. On the contrary, the claims of ex-servicemen not only had precedence over unionist claims, (Macintyre 173) but also precluded women's access to social benefits and deterred their legitimate fight for equal rights. The only women who were given any allowances were those who could claim dependence on an ex-serviceman:

> As Jill Roe has cogently argued, at the very moment when women in Australia achieved political citizenship their access to the benefits of social citizenship were denied. After 1914 the full benefits of citizenship were only available to those who had fought. And although women who served overseas were entitled to repatriation, criteria of 'active service' restricted their access to these benefits. More commonly, women obtained repatriation benefits as a consequence of being a dependant of an ill, injured or deceased soldier. (Garton 90)

On the other hand, the government was particularly severe with anti-war feminists and harshly repressed dissident voices in the national territory. Macintyre also points out that the spread of sexually transmitted diseases "became a metaphor for national insecurity, which in turn brought closer regulation on women." (Macintyre 164) In the battlefront, free access to women was accentuated and often led to open abuse. The sequels of war on ex-servicemen also led them to domestic violence. As we see in Malouf's novels and other writers of the same period, in a

patriarchal family sexual access to women is taken for granted, and husbands beat their wives with impunity. It will be the case of Vic's father.

Regarding the surrender of the Allied forces at Singapore, which plays such an important role in *The Great World*, the 22,000 Australian men who were taken captive and were recruited to build the Burma railway and the cruelty with which they were treated has often overshadowed shadowed the fate of nurses and the hardships they had to endure, with the only exception perhaps of the novel *A town like Alice*, by Nevil Shute:

> Those men put to work on the construction of a railway from Burma to Thailand were treated appallingly, while women army nurses suffered equal brutality. A ship evacuating army nurses from Singapore was sunk in February 1942. Of fifty-three who made it to land, twenty-one were executed and eight more died in captivity. (Macintyre 196)

These are the reasons why the exclusion of women from the national mythology of the digger and the construction of the Australian nation leaves out of the picture an important part of its history. To recover the important role women played in the wars is a necessary act of compensation and justice. As we mentioned, a foundational moment had been established in frontier and pioneering masculinities, and in the construction of the nomadic bushman. We should also add the campaigns of the Australian soldiers abroad in support of the British Empire before the World Wars and, especially, during those.[90] These were essentially men's worlds, men who were in constant battle with a hostile and unknown world. But these origins cannot account for the complete omission of women in the national legend, and compensation is due.

What were the specific male traits of the Australian type? In his "Official Anzac Day Address in Washington, D.C.", Malouf sets the good against the bad. The good were more or less the same that we used to describe the ANZAC in the previous Chapter: resourcefulness,

[90] For example, the Boer War.

toughness, inarticulateness, practicality (the ANZACs and the diggers were good at manual work, egalitarianism, mateship, humour and a healthy disregard for authority. But as Malouf points out, these positive epithets only referred to the ideal type, and they did not cover the whole spectrum of Australian men. Not every digger could measure himself up against the ideal, which did not escape its originators in *The Bulletin*:[91]

> In fact, the stereotype had never gone quite unchallenged, even by Henry Lawson who might be seen as its originator. It had been hard pressed by the ambiguities and the ironies we get in Joseph Furphy, and pilloried in the savage picture of the Australian bush male – cowardly, lying, lazy, exploitative, irresponsible – that we find in the stories of Barbara Baynton. (Malouf *A First Place* 242)

The exploitative type not only referred to avariciousness but often included a weakness for alcohol, chauvinism and racism, not to forget the most outstanding of the diggers' character traits: larrikinism, a rude disregard for authority. Seal also emphasizes this point: "Yes, the independence, resourcefulness and toughness were admirable, but there were also the potentially dangerous traits of anti-authoritarianism, alcoholism, crudity and criminality." (Seal 16)

---

[91] Knightley tells us that C. E. W. Bean was witness to similar paradoxes regarding the ANZACs, but his status as war correspondent and official historian did not allow him to make public the humane side of the ANZACs:

> Charles Bean's diary for 25 September 1915 says specifically that in some instances Australians had to be driven ahead by the threat of being shot from behind by their officers. He records one case he witnesses himself: 'I have seen it happen once to an Australian NCO whom Col. McCay threatened to shoot and I know that others have done the same'. (Knightley, Kindle File)

The fact that Malouf names his main character in the novel "Digger" has an important symbolic function. As a word used in everyday parlance to refer to Australia's national spirit and Australian soldiers, the common noun "digger" is a repository of folktales and, in the collective memory and imagination of Australians, the meaning of the word defines the lineaments of the ideal Australian and the ideal Australian foot soldier – they are the same. The word "digger" refers to the features of the Australian everyman. By making a common name a proper name, Malouf invests the main character of the novel with the aura of the folklore tradition at the same time that, through him, he can intervene in that ideal. We will see that the character Digger embodies the ideal digger sometimes contradictorily and sometimes not without struggle, and that by the end of the novel Malouf makes him love reading, which is at odds with the inarticulateness that typically defines the digger. Apart from that, when Malouf makes Digger suffer from a rare condition called hyperthymesia, there is no doubt that he seeks to emphasize the importance of memory in the building of the national identity.

As long as the legend of the digger is alive in the folklore tradition, his main character will retain an emblematic status.

To my mind, it is important to highlight at this point that Malouf has never wanted to tell "the" story of ANZAC or the digger, contrary to what the title of his *Official Anzac Day Address in Washington, DC* in 2003 might suggest: "The One Day". In his Boyer Lectures in 1998, entitled "A Spirit of Play", Malouf compares the Australian spirit to the role Falstaff plays in Shakespeare's *Henry IV*. (Malouf *A First Place* 227-228) I believe Malouf is right in stating that Falstaff is the most remarkable literary antecedent of the digger in the English culture. The English and the Scots are masters at sarcasm and irony, but for all that, they have remained snobs. In contrast, the digger's sarcasm and irony is not pretentious. At bottom, the digger is low class. "Falstaff", Malouf tells us, "and the disorder he represents, is what has somehow to be included in the world of Rule" (Malouf *A First Place* 228). Like the digger, Falstaff is a larrikin and a non-conformist, who looks at law and convention with scepticism. In other words, he is a free spirit.

The reference to Shakespeare's *Henry IV* might not be without irony, because Australians have felt betrayed several times by the English throughout history, due perhaps to their naiveté and excessive trust in their masters, like Falstaff is betrayed by Prince Hal, the future Henry V in Shakespeare's play.

Malouf reemphasizes this idea of freedom and contingent truths in his *Official Anzac Day Address,* reminding his audience of the plastic nature and dynamism of the phenomenon he is describing:

> The fact that Anzac Day is now in the hands of Australians at large, and their day to shape as they please, to make a focus of whatever feelings they need to express, privately or in common, means that what it is now is not what it is likely to be fifty or even twenty years from now. It has become a dynamic phenomenon, and insofar as it matters to us, insofar as we need what it can offer, will go on changing as we do. (Malouf *A First Place* 251)

After this brief detour on the origins, meaning and nature of the word "digger," we are now in a position to better locate *The Great World* within the framework of the gender politics of Australia in the inter-war years. The first thing we notice is how the narrative looks down on women. The first female character we come across in the novel is Jenny, who is slow, and the narrative voice manages to tell us the story of Digger's mother without telling us her name. It is not until the end of the novel on page 245, just before she passes away, that we learn that her first name is Marge, and her maiden name Gibbons. In contrast, we are told from the beginning her husband's full name: Billy Keen, which we will read several times during the first Chapter in its full length. The solidity of his full name is emphasized by the fact that it also names a place on a map: Keens Crossing. As Marge tells herself: "Family names on a map were solid; they rooted you in things that could be measured, so many acres" (14). When they marry, they go to live in Keen's Crossing. She clearly marries "into" her husband's family. Finally, she is even dispossessed of her

own child when the father prevails over his mother and their son becomes "Digger," at the expense of "Albert," which had been her choice. (11)

Needless to say, Billy embodies the spirit of the digger in several ways and his manhood is beyond question. Firstly, he is a returned serviceman, so he has proven himself in battle and turned out victorious. Secondly, he is practical: "He was good with his hands, Billy Keen." (23) Thirdly, when he returns from overseas he goes with the flow and marries because that "was what blokes *did*", adding to his sense of manliness. Finally, as the legend goes a digger is inarticulate because he does not speak much, except when he is in the mood with his mates. During the time Billy spends with his son in their outings, he teaches Digger that there are two worlds, the men's world and the women's world: "I mean they got *their* world, son, and we got *ours*, an' the two are chalk an' cheese, you can't trade 'em." (25)

It is also worth going back to how Billy and Marge get to know each other and end up together. When Billy and Marge first meet in a pub in Sydney, his stand is domineering and over-confident: "He had taken one look at her and told himself: 'She'll do'." (13) The expression 'She'll do' is blatantly proprietorial. She reacts defiantly at first: "she could take with a good deal of salt the sort of swagger, of inexperience too, that made him feel she could be caught (girls are easy) just like that" but, eventually, accepting, since she is also eager to settle and marry (14). Billy marries because that is "what folks *did*" and, eventually, will end up regretting it,[92] whereas Marge must marry if she wants to find a place in society.

However, as new historicism puts it, dominant ideologies and power structures have their dissidents and voices of resistance, and patriarchy is no exception. The narrative voice also describes the scene of Billy seducing Marge from her point of view, which is certainly comic and

---

[92] Drinking with his mates, he complains about the "haste with which he had put himself in harness", that is, he complains about having married so young: "What a fool! At twenty-one his life was finished!" (22)

puts Billy's inexperience and vanity in evidence. His strut and swagger remind the reader of a peacock: "He would look you straight in the eye with so much confidence in his own attractions that she was tempted to laugh outright. 'Yes, it's me,' the look said. 'I'm a bit of alright, eh?' He would wink then and you could see the utter satisfaction he felt in himself." When Marge sees that his swagger and strutting conclude with a condescending: "'Well, that oughta do it'", she goes mad. Marge does not fall for that. She is not stupid, nor an easy girl: "'Not me, m'lad,' she told him with a fierce look of her own and set her jaw'". Actually, it was Marge who probably told herself "he'll do" after considering that Keens Crossing "must be *something"* and that "the giveaway reddening of his ears" (14) revealed that he was not as confident as he pretended to be, so that she might be able to mould him when the time came. Likewise, when Digger is born, he soon becomes "another man about the house, a little offsider and mate" and, in the end, "the father's needs prevailed over hers," (11) but we are told that it is Marge who "had given in" because her "heart got the better of her." (12) Moreover, deep inside, Digger's extraordinary memory makes her believe that all she had shared with him while she was pregnant, plus all he remembered about his childhood and all he would remember that was going to happen and, therefore, pass on about their family, established a deeper bond between them than he would ever have with his father: "Let them be mates, or whatever it is these men are together!" she tells herself, "He is bound to *me*." (24) In his worst moments of fever at war, it is the thought of his mother talking to him that keeps Digger going, to the point that he ends up fearing his mother more than severe illness: "He began to fear almost more than the physical racking this having to face up to her each time the fever took him." (137)

We have seen that Marge is complicit in the social structure that puts her in a hierarchical position of inferiority regarding her husband. Her husband has a name and a bit of land, and she wants to be part of it. As Billy sarcastically puts it, she is a devotee of "the religion of *getting."* (21) Here, we come across again René Girard's logic of triangular desire. Let us recall that Girard states that all desire has a heterological origin: "At its birth, in other words at the very source of

subjectivity, one always finds a victorious other." (Girard 33) Marge desires the commodities patriarchy can provide and Billy Keen acts as mediator – she marries him so as to enjoy what he owns and can provide her with: a name, a bit of land, the support of a husband and the warmth of a home. Where does her desire come from? Girard emphasizes that the inception of desire does not respond to a cause-and-effect logic or to reasons. Desire is an effect of "the mystery, transparent yet opaque of human relations," (Girard 2-3) and as such it always involves a leap of faith. Therefore, it does not come as a surprise that Marge's desire originated in a sermon she had heard as a child in the orphanage, while the minister was lecturing his partisans on one of the basic principles of Lutheranism at the heart of capitalism: "It was this: what you got in the next life was neither more nor less than what you had gathered and made something of in this one." (20)

In other words, what was in store for you in the afterlife was a reflection of what you had accomplished in this life. She wants to have her own home and family, raise her kids, and die as an accomplished middle-class woman. The families Marge had worked for in England helped germinate and grow this idea of success in her heart.

This is her dream:

> Her vision was of a room with curtains, furniture, the smiling faces of children round a table piled high with food (including pineapples), and with good cutlery laid out and glass and plates such as she had seen in the houses she worked in. A German roller in a cage would be trilling away and ducking its head in a bath and shaking off brilliant drops. In drawers, if you opened them, would be aprons, tea towels, napkins, all neatly folded, and silver serviette rings with initials; plus sugar tongs and grape scissors, embossed. (20)

As it turns out, Marge and Billy's ideals of happiness could not be more at odds. After they marry, when they first arrive at Keens Crossing, Billy hopes she will be put off by the dreariness of the place and that they will go back to Sydney, where he really wants to be. However, this is the first point of strong disagreement between them. "She strode about looking, asking

questions. He fell deeper into gloom. She *liked* it. She was making plans" (16). So they end up staying. Another difference is that in contrast to Marge, who yearns for a family because she has never had one, Billy is completely detached from any familial affiliations. When they arrive, his brother Pete is in charge of the ferry that crosses the river. The two brothers behave like strangers, and Pete is utterly uncommunicative. He waits until the end of the month to collect his wages and is only too happy to leave the place. In spite of her vain attempts, Marge does not succeed at establishing a relationship with her brother in law. The house looks abandoned, there is only one room open where Pete used to live, and a boarded-up store. No sign anywhere that a family had once lived in the place. One day, when she comes across some pictures and asks her husband about the people in them, Billy just mumbles their names.

This is how Billy reacts when Marge hands him a picture of his parents:

> 'Yairs,' he said. 'That's dad.'
>
> He frowned, rubbed his chin with the heel of his hand, sounding resentful.
>
> He took the photograph and peered at it. 'Yairs,' he said, 'that's me *mother*', as if what she had been demanding of him was the identity of the woman at his father's side, rather than some living detail of her. 'When she was young.' (18-19)

Marge simply can't figure out what has dried up his family bonds of all feeling.

Things soon get worse between them. Their rows revolve around the fact that she wants to make a respectable home for both of them and Billy's inability to conform to convention, his desire to live without rules and do just as he pleases.

The stereotypical digger character we described above is easy-going, laid-back and unpretentious. Therefore, it is no wonder that Billy feels uncomfortable in a showy middle-class parade, which is precisely what Marge desires. Again, Malouf is directing attention to one of the major indexes of sexual difference at the time. When Murrie defines the Australian legend as different from the British "Imperial fathers," she observes that "women were particularly targeted as bearers of respectability." (Murrie 68)

The paradox is that Billy turns out to be a prisoner of the patriarchal system that should act in his own best interest. Being the first-born child, he has the right to inherit his family property, even if it is a small house in ruins in the middle of nowhere – a point that is emphasized by the fact that the house is placed at a crossing: not a destination but a point of trespass from where a ferry comes and goes every day. Moreover, once he marries, he is no longer master of his own house. Whereas by marrying, Marge has given up her maiden name and become a Keen, therefore renouncing any public recognition not mediated by her husband, Billy has delegated the running of his private life to his wife, who will run the house and raise their children. In this logic, Billy should also assume the role of sole provider. However, we know that the role of men as sole providers has been deeply contested; it was a myth. This conception overlooked the fact that women have played a crucial role in home economies, which did not involve a salary but often amounted to much more, not only by taking care of the kids and other dependant family members, but also including a whole range of household tasks and duties that helped save and also brought money into the house, such as making preserves, sewing, cooking and taking over the responsibilities of their husbands in their absence, especially in rural areas. Unfortunately, for a long time all these tasks carried out by women were not considered as work. On top of that, when Marge opens the store and starts making some money, Billy feels resentful and threatened in his masculinity. Marge's new initiative and autonomy unbalances the power relationship between them. As Billy bitterly puts it: "He had married a plump little girl with blonde curls and a bit of colour to her mouth and had ended up with a woman who could run things. She tried to run him." (21) Finally, having passed the universally acknowledged test of manhood in patriarchal societies at an early age also undoes Billy Keen. We are told that Billy Keen had lied in order to be able to enlist for World War I, so that when he came back, he had already experienced the frenzy of battle, had become addicted to adrenaline, and the monotony of everyday life is a torment to him: "He had known the full power of his own presence, breath and balls and fingers and the small hairs at the back of his neck. It had spoiled him, that glimpse of what a man might be. The life he was

living now was nothing." (22) When World War II breaks out he will enlist again, "changing his age again but putting it down this time," (57) get wounded in Crete (116) and, when the War is over, stay in Japan. (228) To Marge's despair, he will never make it back to Keens Crossing. He will probably follow war after war until he finds the one that kills him. What precociously had made him a man eventually destroys him.

Billy's inability to adapt to a routine, his anxiety in the role of family man is not something peculiar to a character in a novel. Malouf is synthesizing in his character a widespread feeling among ex-service men. As Stephen Garton puts it in his article "War and masculinity in twentieth century Australia":

> There is abundant evidence that many returning soldiers actually found the process of reassimilating to civil society unsettling. And structuring this condition was the feeling that home was 'unmanly'. Here war was experienced as intensity, excitement and adventure – life as it was meant to be, while home was mundane, boring, shackled and domestic. (Garton 92)

Like his father, Digger craves for adventure early as a teenager. He likes to wait in his room until everyone is asleep and escape to the city to follow the fairs. The lights, the atmosphere, the strange people and animals, and the shows and performances bewitch Digger. These included…

> …a pin-headed Chinaman, a strong man who also ate swords and swallowed fire, a couple of daredevil motorbike riders (a husband and wife team who three times nightly faced the Ring of Death), a fat lady and the Human Torso, a fellow who was just a head and shoulders on a mobile tray. (53)

It also included "a poddy-calf sad-eyed and huggable on its six legs." (54)

In particular, Digger feels attracted to the tent with the boxers, which is the main attraction at the heart of the fair. The descendants of the pioneers who conquered the land and cleared it of its native people saw in the black and half-cast boxing troop an opportunity to reassert themselves and appease their feelings of frustration. "The first time, carried away by the noise and excitement

and the certainty of his own skill, he had just gone up like any other mug and got floored. But he went two rounds and was good." (56) The manager likes him and offers him a job. All he will have to do is stand among the crowd, mix with his own, and encourage them to fight. If no one is on it, he will have to do it himself. Digger spends eighteen months travelling with the troop around the country, where he befriends the Aborigines and half-casts, but never truly becomes one of them. When the War breaks out in Europe, his father enlists, and urges his son to do the same: "You should be in this, son." (57) Influenced by the blacks, who had taught him to see things "from the side and a bit skew, but with a humorous scepticism," (57) Digger does not follow his father's advice. However, soon after that, he comes across a recruiting platform in Sydney, where there is a man who will later become one of his mates during the War: Doug, who is entertaining the crowd with his easy patter. Aware that he is different from the blacks and feeling a renewed sense of warmth in the company of these men who are his kind, he finally enlists.

In the underworld in which Digger's childhood and adolescence takes place, we can catch a glimpse of the elements that went into the construction of the ANZAC and digger identity that would translate into the national type. First of all, the fairs, which symbolize the threshold between the familiar and the ordinary, on the one hand, and the fantastic and uncanny, on the other. The first settlers and convicts in Australia would not be less bewildered when they came across marsupials, deadly predators such as the salt-water crocodile and the strange customs and unfamiliar physiognomy of the ancestral Aboriginal peoples than fair-goers at the sight of "the pin-headed China man drinking tea from a dolly's cup" (54) or the abominable Aborigines and half-casts of the boxing troop. The latter were a reminder that life was a permanent struggle against nature and the natives of the land. The colonizer had to overcome his fear of the unknown and impose its law onto the land's previous settlers, or negotiate his way around them when necessary. That demanded courage and skill. Apart from that, the fairs are also a metonymy for modernity. Science and technology were about to make us aware that our everyday lives depend on things which cannot be perceived by means of our ordinary senses, for example the discovery of viruses

and atomic energy, human knowledge finally becoming a matter of magic for the layman. We know that mass production provided the means and knowledge to mobilize thousands of people for war, that this new knowledge would be deployed in the construction of concentration and POW camps, and that eugenics would justify the politics of assimilation in Australia against Aborigines and of genocide in Nazi Germany against Jews, gypsies, blacks and homosexuals. In the first half of twentieth century Europe, a white heterosexual able-bodied straight man was always more than any other type.

In *The Great World,* Malouf intimates with the wondrous and the fantastic on several occasions, making the extraordinary coexist with the ordinary, for example in the description of the fairs we have just encountered. Malouf always finds a way into the humanization of the unfamiliar and strange. For example, in making his main character befriend the Aborigines, he makes the reader sympathize with them. He is allowing what at first sight may seem foreign and strange to Australians to enter their lives, teaching them to accept the unfamiliar. However, Malouf also uses this technique in reverse order. It is the Aborigines that teach Digger to see things "from the side and a bit skew, but with a humorous scepticism, as they did." (57) Malouf can surreptitiously make the familiar and ordinary turn into something uncanny, for example when describing the Australians as sharing a typical character trait with the Aborigines. The text suggests that perhaps Australians owe to Aborigines what they consider their most prominent character trait. We realize that there is nothing closer to the Aborigines' "humorous scepticism" than the diggers' disregard for authority and easy-going nature. In this case, he is making the familiar unfamiliar, which is the definition of the uncanny according to Freud, (Freud *The Uncanny*) in a way we can tolerate and accept but without denying difference, which would be equally pernicious. That is the reason why Digger gets on well with the Aborigines in the troop of boxers but does not feel one of them and, finally, decides to enlist. We will find this technique repeatedly deployed in the novel.

As we have pointed out, the narrative is interspersed with events from the distant past and the distant future all the time. As a result, Chapter 1 does not tell the story of Digger and his family. Interspersed within the general account of Digger's childhood, teenage years and the story of his family, we learn that Digger was one of the Australians that were taken prisoner in the POW camps of Malaysia; we are also told about the surrender of the Allied forces at Changi; how he met Vic there and how their shared experiences in the front line would mark their lives and friendship forever; and the personal favour that Vic will ask Digger and that will close the novel: it is in this first Chapter that we first see Vic embarrassingly asking Digger to let him make some investments under his name so as to get the upper hand in another one of his dealings in the stock market.

Chapter one ends with the story of Jenny, Digger's retarded sister. It is important to point out that, although *The Great World* tells the story of men at war and describes with vivid language and detail the suffering and hardships they had to endure in the POW camps of Malaysia, it also makes a poignant and accurate portrait of the kind of life women had to endure in Australia as a consequence of bush and pioneering mentality, a condition that was made worse by war. Jenny accepts that she is dependent upon Digger, who had been around the country and overseas, "to the war even", but in spite of that she believes that Digger did not know "what the world was" – only "she knew how cruel it was." (65) Why does Jenny think this way? We are told her story, about the time she spent in All Hallows Convent, and the beatings and humiliations Sister Francis of the Wash inflicted on her. She escaped countless times, jumping on trams, but when the tram reached the end of the line she would have to step down and would never know where to go from there. Once, at New Farm Park, she sat in a bench and a drunkard sat next to her. He tried to abuse her, she got away, but saw him so disappointed that went back and let him have what he wanted. They were together for a short time, living as derelicts. "But when he got on the grog he bashed her about, just like Sister Francis, and called her a dummy, so she went back." (67)[93] In the

[93] The "just like Sister Francis" suggests that masculinity is not an exclusively male characteristic.

Convent, she cleaned the floors while pregnant. When she had her baby, "they took it away without letting her see it even, to see if it had all its right parts," and they put her to work in the wash. After that, the blows were worse than ever: "they kept coming down just the same, all suds, over your left ear or across your face, with all the weight of a six-foot Irish virgin behind them, her temper got up by the fact that you had fallen, and been picked up again, and were *still* no good." (66) Coincidentally: face slapping was the Imperial Army's favourite form of punishment. She was aware of "The terror of what was possible out there, the cruelty of some people, and how helpless you were once they got stuck into you." (67) Jenny's incapacity is a hyperbole of women's submissive role in patriarchal societies. "You don't need all that much *experience,"* Jenny reflects: "Two seconds flat and she'd got to the end of her own power to bear it, that was the point." (68-69) That was the difference between herself and Digger. Digger had "never come up against whatever it was, out there, that could utterly flatten him," (68) not even when he was a prisoner in the POW camps and on the verge of death – not even then.

In a parallel fashion, Chapter 2 tells the story of Vic Curran and his formation years until he decides to enlist, and also the story of his parents. Vic's story is more linear and self-centred on Vic than Digger's – we are told the story from the third person point of view, but this perspective thoroughly coincides with Vic's. The important thing about Vic is that he does not let himself be carried away by the flow of things but acts at will. In contrast, Digger believes that it is chance and fate that governs our lives, and that we are bound to others by the imbrications of our own paths. "Chance, life, fate – whatever it was – chose for you," Digger tells himself, "connecting and binding you into the pattern of other people's lives and making that at last the pattern of your own." (252)

In this Chapter, we see Vic as a child painfully witnessing the slow destruction of his parents, Dan and Till Curran: his father becomes an alcoholic who lets his drinking fellows abase him for a glass of beer and, afterwards, projects his self-hatred towards his wife, humiliating and beating her. Eventually, his wife falls sick and Vic has to tend his mother because his father cannot

stand the horror of seeing his wife feverish and vomiting and slowly consuming herself to death: "her pain was like a wild thing in the bed between them, all teeth and claws." (78) At the beginning, Vic had to turn around not to vomit until he gets used to it. During his mother's sickness, Vic assumes the role of the grown up, tending her and taking care of the house as a deep resentment and hatred towards his father grows inside him. He cannot forgive his father his weakness for alcohol, his passivity in the face of disease, and his inability to play the role of father and husband. One day, he starts fantasising about the idea of killing him with the axe they use to cut wood. His mother can see what is going on, and tries to defend her husband: "You're wrong about your father, Vic," but to no avail. When his mother dies, Vic just lets everything go astray in the house. His father asks for mercy, forgiveness and a little understanding from his son, but Vic remains implacable: "I wouldn' wanna be in a world where you was God", his father tells him, "God help me if I was. There is no softness in yer. Not like yer mother." (78) Vic hates him even more when he asks him to be "soft," because Vic expects his father to man up and deal with the situation. Eventually, his father meets another woman and she moves in with them. She starts looking after the house and is nice to Vic, but one day, during one of his drinking bouts, Dan Curran decides to stand up for himself when challenged to a humiliation no worse than others he had consented to and gets himself killed. To Vic's surprise, his father had made a will. During the War, his father had been Captain Warrender's batman, and the former had agreed to take care of any children Dan Curran might have in the event of his death. The Warrenders adopt Vic. By force of law, a deal between men provides Vic with a new family. The Warrenders have two daughters, Lucille and Ellie. Lucille, the oldest, is Vic's age, and he falls in love with her, but being more mature than him this relationship becomes a source of agony for Vic. However, Mr Warrender treats him as if he was his own son and hints at the possibility that someday he might inherit the family business. Ma does the same. After all, Vic discovers in time that Mr Warrender had simply taken over his father-in-law's business by marrying his daughter. His wife had a brother, but falling victim to patriarchal ego battles, her brother and her father fell out, her side of the family inheriting the

family business. In Chapter 6, just months after having reunited with his family, Vic marries Ellie, running and making the family business prosper with the help of Ma.

Vic's story disputes the ideals of mateship and male bonding between men and between fathers and sons; enacts a clear case of male anxiety, which is perhaps the most pervasive of gender maladies; tells us about the social side effects of war, and shows us once again how patriarchy struggles to maintain its hegemony in exceptional circumstances. Regarding mateship and male bonding, it is worth comparing and contrasting Vic's story with Digger's. When Digger was a child, his father used to take him fishing or to cut wood, and he would sermonize his son to keep things for himself and not to listen to his mother too much. "On'y we don't tell 'em everything we do, you know what I mean? All the bits of fun we have, or what we're thinkin' sometimes," Billy tells Digger. "They wouldn't understand." Why not? When men get together, they like to banter, which is a safe way to display their masculinity. But women find such displays of masculinity boyish and infantile; they are not respectable and, as we mentioned before, respectability was considered a British quirk against the natural, easy going and genuine character of Australians. Respectability was considered effeminate. Moreover, Billy does not want his wife to feminize Digger in the sense that she wants to keep him safe, protect him. Billy says that Marge is a "worrier" and warns his son: "She wants to spare you from life. It's understandable. She doesn't want to lose you." In a strictly dual gender world, a man's world is a tough world, usually associated with danger and violence: at war, the mines, in pioneering ventures, etc. Digger will have to learn to deal with other men, and his mother is a bad influence in this regard. "One day, one way 'r another, you'll have to go out into a man's world," says Billy. "Believe me, son, yer mother won't help you then." War, which is the epitome of the world of men, has taught Billy a tough lesson:

> I seen all that. Fellers cryin' out fer their mothers in no man's land, with half their heads shot away or their guts spillin' out. They could cry as long as they liked but I never seen no mother turn up. It was a man's world you was in. It was

> other men you had to rely on. Stretcher-bearers, if you were lucky, otherwise just yer mates. That's the truth, Digger. (25)

From what we gather from Vic's story, we can imagine that in the early days, Vic and his father had enjoyed a similar relationship and trust as Digger did with his father, and that Vic's story picks up precisely where it deviates from it. Chapter 2 starts with Vic tending his sick mother, and as the story progresses we learn about Vic's deep grievance due to the fact that he has known better days: "They had both been easy-going, Dan and Till Curran, in the days when he was still in work and she was a big woman who liked a beer or two and a hand of poker." (75) Things go wrong when Dan starts drinking, but the saddest thing is when we learn that Dan used to inveigle Vic into getting him alcohol behind his mother's back, because he was betraying the trust between father and son. He was using him as a means to follow his addiction. So as to make the reader aware of the depth of Vic's distress, we are immediately told – and let us recall that the point of view of the narrative in this Chapter is Vic's - that Dan used "to take Vic fishing and tell him stories about the war", adding for further emphasis: "they had been mates." (76) Hence, Dan not only has let Vic down, which is no small thing. He has also broken faith with the Australian ideal of mateship. When one of their neighbours tells Matilda –Vic's mother – what is happening, she reprimands her son: "Didn't he know, couldn't he see what was happening?" (76) Circumstances make Vic take sides with his mother, which puts him in league with the wrong side of the gender division. Let us recall that, later on, Ma will be Vic's main confidant in the family business.

R.W. Connell has repeatedly stressed the fragility of the social construction of masculinity based on his readings of the early Freud. He argues that masculinity is something that has to be constantly proven, which does not simply come after puberty, or does not start when one has sexual intercourse or buys the first car. Among Freud's most important findings, he underscores the hypothesis that "humans were constitutionally bisexual" (Connell 9), because there is no correlation between sexual orientation and gender, since a large number of homosexuals are very masculine. In his constructivist or architectural approach to personality, Freud

distinguishes a key moment in the child's early phase of development, when it is five or six years old that fixes his heterosexuality: the Oedipus complex. The child identifies with the father and desires the mother, but fear of castration by the father represses the child's desire. The child overcomes this traumatic experience when seeking a substitute for the mother. Later on, when developing his theory of the structure of personality, Freud contends that the overcoming of the Oedipus stage results in the creation of the unconscious agency of the superego, which takes on the values and norms the child's father represents. Our morality resides in the superego. It judges us when we do something wrong, it censors us, and it tells us which ideals are worth pursuing and which not. Some years later, in *Civilisation and its Discontents*, Freud argued that the superego has a social dimension, with the state acting as a symbolic father figure that controls the means of violence. As R.W. Connell puts it, "Here was the germ of the patriarchal organization of culture, transmitted between generations through the construction of masculinity." (Connell 10)

We want to retain two things from our brief detour into the social construction of gender and patriarchy in psychoanalytic theory. Firstly, gender is not a fixed identity but an unstable and changing one that has to be constantly proven and acted out and, secondly, the importance of the role of the father in the cultural and individual construction of male identity. Considering Vic's case, we can imagine him cringing at his father's cowardice, inability to work, weakness for alcohol, self-abasement in front of his mates, etc. What is seriously called into question here is Dan's manhood. The extent of Vic's hatred towards his father is in proportion to the suspicions his conduct raises about his own worth as a man. As Freud puts it: "This is the natural love of the child for the father, not as the guardian of his sensuous well-being, but as the mirror from which his own self-worth or worthlessness is reflected for him." (qtd. in Bhabha 59) Perhaps more important than the legitimizing gaze of male peers and male authority, is the early authorising gaze of the father in the child's life, which marks him for the rest of his life.

It is clear that Dan's bad example as a model of masculinity will implant the seed of male anxiety at the core of Vic's personality, which will both make him uncomfortable in the presence

of other men and push him to overplay his masculinity. In *The Great World,* as well as in *Johnno* and *Harland's Half Acre,* as we saw in previous Chapters, Malouf shows a topical scene: the drama of unemployment in the interwar years. The test of manhood was a particularly neat one. Having a job was what the low and middle class aspired to. Not having one meant you were not on the swing of things – worse still, a failure. Everything else followed from it. As a child, when his father is unemployed and they live in extreme poverty, Vic observes "the lucky ones who still had work" with envy:

> At the weekends you could see them, in the same groups, walking to matches with their hands in their pockets. Younger blokes in flash suits, their girls in stockings and high heels, would be stepping along beside them, occasionally calling across to a fellow they knew, or the girl would call to a neighbour she recognised. They would have a fifth share in a lottery in their pocket, these youngsters, maybe a frenchie just on the off-chance.
>
> 'Doin' all right, are yer?'
>
> That question from an older man, with just a touch of envy in it, would satisfy in most of them the need for recognition. (74)

Later on, when he comes back from school at the Warrenders, he sometimes finds that Meggsie, the housekeeper, has employed an old battler or miner to do his job, chopping wood or cleaning the drains and gutters in exchange for some food. Meggsie could have given them the food for free, but that would have meant an offence to their masculinity, which again emphasises the importance of work in the construction of masculinity and the definition of man as provider: "The work was an acknowledgment that what they got they had earned, a gesture towards masculine pride and the insistence that what they were after was work, not charity." Interestingly, when Vic joined them, he was not welcomed, because "he didn't talk like a boss": "They were embarrassed. He didn't talk like a boss, but he was at home here. So what was he? What did he want?" (103) Having lived both lives a child – a respectable life when his father had a job and the

life of the abject when he did not have one and was humiliated by his peers – Vic moves in between two social strata at the bottom of the social ladder: the marginalised and those who have a job, even a meagre one, but that placed you at a human scale. Like Gemmy in *Remembering Babylon*, Vic is a troublesome, questioning figure. We learn from Gemmy's dreams that, back in England, he belonged to the abject of society, doing the jobs that required kids' hands in the factories. He is not simply in the interstices of culture – he has never been fully accultured to Western culture, the one he looks up to. Similarly, Vic seeks recognition from the upper class, which represents normative masculinity. But that first glimpse into his manhood that his father provided was a doomed one. He knows he is the son of Dan Curran, and that he carries the stain of emasculation. Vic is most aware of this when he joins them while they are feeding: "They scared him, these men. Not physically – there was very little that scared him that way. It was his spirit that shrivelled and got into a sweat." Vic sees in these men the ghost of his father – in Freudian terms, his alter ego – to remind him that "he had got off too easily." (104) In Malaysia, Vic will cause similar embarrassment among his mates Mac, Doug and Digger. They rightly believe he is "just out of school"; but wrongly assume "he has no experience of any kind," that being the reason why "he tried to hide it by speaking rough and making a big man of himself." The narrative voice tells us: "Digger couldn't stand him. Mac didn't think much of him either," (48) and elaborates on Vic's challenging demeanour: "… he was never easy. There was always some little irritation that pricked at him. Very aware of slights, he stayed alert and watchful." (50) When Vic learns from Mac that Digger is a boxer, a featherweight and that "No one can touch him", the familiar triangular desire starts to work between them. Vic admires Digger because he is the toughest of them, at the same time that he wants to measure himself up to him. Beating Digger means he is the toughest of all. "'Oh? Said Vic. You could see the little flicker of challenge and interest." (51) We know better: Vic feels insecure in the presence of other men, because he fears he will turn out to be a fraud, like his father. So as to dispel the ghost of emasculation, he needs to overplay his masculinity.

Vic is caught up in a vicious circle. The ghost of his father pushes him to seek legitimization from others, who do not confer it because they feel his insecurity, which leads him to try harder and so on endlessly. Insecure in his masculinity, Vic is always looking for the authorising male gaze of others. As Murrie puts it: "Men need to seek approval of their masculinity from other men. Their risk-taking, their exploits, their boasts, and their commitment to the male group are directed therefore at the authorising male gaze." (Murrie 74)

However, Vic will find it difficult to exorcise the ghost of his father. When he inherits the family business, and runs it with the help of Ma, Vic will become restless in his pursue of wealth and recognition. As R. W. Connell put it, masculinity is a fragile and tenuous construction that has to be constantly proven, but it is Michael S. Kimmel who has best worded the consequences that lead Vic to act the way he does: "masculinity must be proved, and no sooner is it proved that it is again questioned and must be proved again – constant, relentless, unachievable, and ultimately the quest for proof becomes so meaningless that it takes on the characteristics, as Weber said, of a sport." (Kimmel 122) Vic and Ma do not deal with the world of manufacturing and hand-made products any more, as the Needham's and the Warrenders used to do. The Currans speculate. As Vic tells Ma: "A millionaire isn't a man who's *got* a million. He's a man who *owes* a million, and if he owes ten million, all the better," (256) something about which Ma often broods over: "He had been a buccaneer, her father, but of shallow waters. They were in open waters now." (255) It is in this sense that Vic is leading the wrong sort of life. However, the image of threading a needle also evokes the sexual act of penetration. Vic will have constant affairs with women much younger than him. We find out during a conversation between Digger and Iris, who tells him: "He's a ladies' man," (293) but in spite of all his fortune and his affairs with younger women, Vic never feels manly enough. Nothing can fulfil him.

As we pointed out above, R.W. Connell emphasized that masculinity is "a complex, and in some ways precarious, construction." If it is complex, it is because the binary opposites along which we construct masculinity as opposed to femininity are never pure, but they always

contaminate each other. Masculinity is a conflict ridden, contradictory process. As R.W. Connell puts it, it was also Freud's initial findings that made him aware of that:

> The point he most insistently made about masculinity was that it never exists in a pure state. Layers of emotion coexist and contradict each other. Each personality is a shade-filled, complex structure, not a transparent unit. Though his theoretical language changed, Freud remained convinced of the empirical complexity of gender and the ways in which feminity is always part of a man's character. (Connell 10)

This is interesting because Vic and Ma discuss their strategies and business deals in markedly gendered terms. In one instance, Vic complains that his competitor "can't be *that* innocent. I thought he'd be tougher, a bloke like that," to which Ma tells him not to let himself "be fooled by all that soft talk. He's tough in the old way, like my father. You fellows are a different breed." Vic cannot get to terms with the idea that his competitor will lose control of the company, that he will be in Vic's hands: "What does 'e think we are? A charitable institution?" (254) The market is about control, and the one who controls the rest is the big fish, because he has power over them. One of the things that causes most anxiety to men is the men who have power over them. Vic presents himself as tough and daring, whereas his competitors are innocent, soft and have a good heart, like women.

We get a glimpse of Vic's ordeal in a final image at the very end of the book, in the last section of the last Chapter. The scene is idyllic; its naturalness reminds us of a pastoral scene. Vic and his mother are seated at the porch, his mother is sewing, and so as to keep Vic busy she asks him to thread a needle. Vic knows how it is done, but somehow cannot manage to do it: "She has given him a needle, wet the end of a piece of thread, and for the last hour, over and over, he has been trying to do this thing he knows is simple yet finds so difficult." (330) The novel emphasises it again. The admonition reminds us that Vic's affliction is not an exception, but a contemporary one: the gospels say that it is easier for a camel to pass through a needle's eye than for a rich man

to go to heaven. The "needle's eye" reminds us of the original tycoon in Vic's family, the Needhams, Ma's parents. There is no doubt that Vic's economic success is taking him to the wrong sort of life according to the biblical saying. However, there is more at stake in threading the needle than probing one's masculinity. While in the concentration camps in Malaysia, men used to trade the things they needed until there was nothing left to trade. Vic had kept during his internment "…two and a half yards of white cotton thread tied in a loop," first because it could be useful to knit his socks or used as a belt, finally just for its own sake, to feel he still owned something, believing that "if he lost it he would be done for." (151) The cotton thread had become for Vic the thread of life, bare and thin. In Greek and Norse mythology, the Moirai or Fates controlled "the mother thread of life of every mortal from birth to death." (*Wikipedia "Moirai"*) We have moved from a biblical image to one belonging to classical mythology. Michael S. Kimmel records that "men commit suicide three times as often as women" (Kimmel 133) due to emasculation.[94] Feeling manly and proving one's masculinity is a serious matter. This idea merges with the arising anxiety in Vic when he sees he cannot thread the needle. To make sure that it can be done, he brings the needle to his eye and realizes he can see everything through its hole, a house, and the sky. Vic tries again and fails and looks through the needle again. He can see his neighbours and, suddenly, something odd happens. He sees a boy learning to ride a bike. The bike wobbles because he has not learned how to steady it yet. "The boy is about a year older than he is, maybe six, even. It is himself!" (330) Puzzled, he looks at his mother, but she just smiles. It is getting dark, and as if to remind us of what is at stake, the narrative voice tells us: "men begin coming in from the mine." His father still works. Vic tries again to thread the needle. "He concentrates and holds his hands just so and draws his whole body together." What is going to happen? It is difficult to say.

[94] Perhaps to solve the issue once and for all we should follow Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's insights and stop viewing masculinity as an attribute pertaining exclusively to men, but to both sexes. (Kosofsky Sedgwick 12-15) However, that would be a topic for another thesis.

On the one hand, we could say that he will not thread the needle because he has not been able to do it before and it is getting dark. On the other hand, just before his last attempt he can see himself out of the corner of his eye riding the bike "easily" now, "hardly wobbling at all. He begins to show off, making figures-of-eight in the road, very pleased with himself and laughing." This new surge of confidence allows us to be hopeful. The novel ends with an optimistic "soon it will," (330) but we do not know what happens at last. Like the gender that defines us, we are left in suspension.

In Chapter 2, we also see that the cost of war does not only amount to its material costs and the number of casualties, but also to the way it impairs those who make it back. Dan is unable to work because of "an old war wound" (74), and in spite of the fact that he gets a pension there is something wrong with him. He has been seriously emasculated: he becomes an alcoholic, is unable to work, allows his drinking mates to abuse him, turns out a coward, etc. Moreover, we have already seen that when they came back, ex-servicemen would find it difficult to find a job because of the fierce economic recession. As Stuart Macintyre puts it in his *A Concise History of Australia:*

> War is sometimes regarded as a regenerative force, rather like the Australian bushfire that consumes energy, burns away the outmoded accretion of habit and allows new, more vigorous growth to occur. The Great War brought no such national revitalisation. It killed, maimed and incapacitated. It left an incubus of debt that continued to mount as the payments to veterans and war widows continued; even in the depths of the Depression of the early 1930s there were more Australians on war benefits than in receipt of social welfare. (168)

As we mentioned when analysing *Fly Away Peter,* the constant threat of death and the fact that soldiers must rely on each other performing their duty in order to survive strengthens male bonds. In extreme circumstances, men make blood covenants regardless of their social class or family background. It is in the exceptional circumstances of war that a pact between Captain

Warrender and Dan Curran could take place. Of course, once the war is over, social divisions abide. Ironically, Vic will finally have what he believes is his due in life thanks to his father, the person who unmanned him as a kid.

When Vic moves in with the Warranders, we get the chance to see how the patriarchal order works at the expense of blood ties, ability and family names. When the Warrenders adopt Vic, he becomes the man of the house, the unofficial heir, in spite of the fact that they have two girls of their own and that the older one, Lucille, has the right character to lead a family business: in Colorado in the U.S., she marries a lawyer older than her with children of his own and sets up her own business in real estate. (268) As a kid, Lucille reacts against the central role Vic takes in the family, thus replacing her, to no avail. Ellie feels the same, and like her sister she resists Vic's influence: "He was a boy, and they were astonished, angry too, to observe how this simple fact impressed everyone – Pa, Ma, even Meggsie, though she didn't *quite* give in to him." When Lucille emigrates to the U.S., Ellie and Vic get married. Not because they fall in love – there is no courtship and there are no declarations of love between them – but because it is the natural thing to do. The events in the narrative, metaphorically tell us how it is decided that they should marry. Vic has just come back from war and Lucille, who will soon leave for the U.S. to meet her fiancée, shows him her son Alexander. So Lucille has escaped him. They all have dinner, a nap and, after that, they indulge in playing hide and seek, as they used to do before Vic enlisted. It turns out that Vic is It, and moving around the house in the dark he finds Ellie in one of the rooms, hiding behind the curtains. Vic does not realize she is there, believes he is alone, and eases himself. Lucille looks into him, "a face he showed no one, and which even he had not seen." When Vic realizes there is someone in the room he regains his composure, unnerved. He knows he can trust Ellie: "She had seen him, he knew that, and for some reason it did not bother him. If anything he felt relieved, as if a weight had been taken from him." Vic only lets two people look into his real self in his life, Ellie and Digger: "Only one person had ever seen him like that, and that was different. It was a man. It put you at risk, of course, but Digger had not let him down." (224) The game seems to

metaphorically enact how life works in the universe of *The Great World*: we walk through life blindfold, and chance rules our decisions. With Lucille gone, the natural thing to do is to marry Ellie. The naturalness of their engagement is given further emphasis in that it repeats what happened to Pa before Vic: he had also married into his wife's family. By marrying Ma, Mr Warrender had inherited his wife's family business, whose brother had been disinherited because he had fallen out with his father in law. Paradoxically, the rivalry patriarchy sets up among men ends up confronting fathers and sons, the key to patriarchal succession by the first-born male child. Vic and his son Greg will also fall out. However, the gender order is maintained because it is always the men who own the business, at the risk of losing the family name and ensuring bloodline succession through women. In this case, the family name "Needham" will survive two generations. When Doug pays Digger a visit at Keen's Crossing and tells him that Vic is doing well, he refers to him as a "Needham": "Douggy laughed. 'Don't you read the papers? Needham's – that's him." (250) The gender order is a patriarchal order – above individuals, blood ties and family names.

Chapter 3 tells the story of Digger and Vic in the concentration camps of Malaysia, where they meet. Vic arrives just about to experience the humiliation of surrender before he has even had the chance of engaging in combat. After the surrender, Vic realizes that he will need to belong to a group in order to survive. Digger already has his mates, Doug and Mac, and they have already engaged in battle, which makes Vic feel inferior. Vic joins them because when he joins their battalion the only person he has something in common with is Doug: they both come from the same neighbourhood in Sydney. No one likes Vic, but Doug settles the issue when the others complain: "Oh, Vic's all right." (48) Even if the events in the novel take place within a specifiable historical period, roughly comprising the span ranging from the early twentieth century until the early eighties, it is the events in Chapter 3 that effectively anchor the novel in concrete historical fact: "By eleven o'clock it was official. In a meeting with the Japanese commander, General Yamashita, the commander of the Allied Forces, General Percival, had signed an unconditional

surrender, to be effective from 10 p.m. Japanese time." (43-44) The exact date of the surrender of the Allied troops to the Imperial Army was Sunday, 15 February 1942 (163), and it was an important setback in the morale of the Allied forces and an episode of shame in the history of Australia's involvement in World War II.

In *The Great World,* Malouf portrays with vivid detail and powerful imagery the hardships the soldiers had to endure in a hostile and foreign environment, in the POW camps, and in the building of the Burma railway between the Malay and the Burmese borders, not to mention the mistreatment they suffered at the hands of their captors and the diseases they contracted: "amoebic dysentery, malaria, including the cardiac variety, typhoid, beriberi, pellagra and cholera." (132) Knightley points out that in Malaysia "for the first time white Australians were caught up in the expression of man's inhumanity to man, something they thought only happened to others in far-away places." (Knightley) Some of the most memorable scenes in *The Great World* take place in the construction of the Burma railway, in scenes of great attachment and intimacy between Digger and Vic that will end up saving their lives. In contrast, no such redeeming and life saving experiences take place in Flanagan's *The Narrow Road to the Deep North* – the most intimate and sensual scenes are reserved for the love story between its main character, Dorrigo Evans, and his lover Amie before the War.

In Chapter 3, we see that Digger transfers the special relationship he had with his father to his mates Mac and Doug. What Digger likes about Mac is his "self-possession", which he considers "to be the one true ground of manliness." (116) Mac introduces Digger to the world of music and we learn that, like Digger, he is an avid reader. He enjoys listening to Digger recite his favourites by heart: *Hamlet* and *Henry V*. Mac tells Digger that when his brother died he moved in with his sister-in-law, Iris, to help her with his nephews. He reads and rereads to Digger the letters Iris sends him, and Digger accepts the "solemn offer" Mac makes him: "'If anything happens to me, Digger,' he said once. 'I'd like you to have 'em.'" (116) Like Mr Warrender and his batman Dan Curran, Mac trusts Digger with his most precious possessions. Mac tells Digger everything about

Iris and about his huge library, and they enjoy themselves in the simple act of reading and telling each other about life back in Australia so as to escape their current condition. On the other hand, Doug is an easy-going, cynical and humorous fellow. He resembles Clancy in *Fly Away Peter*. He embodies the ideal of the Digger more than Digger himself. Doug gets along well with Digger, but accuses Mac of being a pessimist and a "black-stump philosopher", which matched his "long-faced, half-woeful, half-comic look." (117) They get along well until Vic appears. They find his restlessness contagious. As we have seen, at the beginning they try to shake him off, especially Digger, but at the end Doug intercedes and they accept him. One of the things they do not like about Vic is that he takes things and himself too seriously. As a consequence, his conversation is most times forced. For example, when Doug mentions that it is said that one of the generals escaped with a rowboat after the surrender, Vic starts doubting it to the point of getting on Doug's nerves:

> 'Well, would you?'
>
> Doug laughed. 'Are you barmy? Of course I wouldn't. But I'm a bloody footslogger, I can't just piss off home. Haven't got a bloody rowboat for one thing. Neither can Mac here, or Digger. Neither can you. But who's t' say what I might do if I was a general? Or you either – well, not *you* maybe, but I wouldn't like to swear what I mightn't do if I had half the chance.' (50-51)

Talking to himself, Digger complains that since Vic arrived they had become an "uneasy foursome", and regrets the discomfort Vic causes among them: "Forever looking about to see what you might be thinking of him, Vic was all little burrs and catches, always uneasy with himself, yet at the same time cocky, and anxious at every opportunity to put himself forward or to get the better of you." (113) Digger complains that Vic "spoils things", and wishes he would leave them alone: "'I wish he'd bugger off,' Digger was thinking. 'Can't he see we don't want him? He spoils things.'" On his part, Vic can feel their resentment against him, in spite of his efforts to be on good terms with them. Sometimes he can see "the smiles between them" when he fails to get the

irony of a situation like the one just quoted above. They are on a different wavelength. He also soon realizes that Digger will be the most difficult to win over: "Digger was the one he would have trouble with. He looked like nothing, there was nothing you would notice about him; but of the three, he was the one who considered longest, said least, and would be hardest to win." (49)

Life as a soldier involves a special sculpturing of the masculine body, which requires training and discipline. War consists in wearing out or simply killing the enemy, and the outcome of battle depends on that. It is true that we can talk about undermining the enemy's morale, but, at the front line, classical war was a physical matter. A soldier kills and has to avoid being killed, that is what soldiering amounts to. As Morgan puts it, "physicality may become finality in the remains enclosed in a body bag" (Morgan 167). Being an author especially concerned with the body, it is not surprising to find Malouf at his best when describing some of the experiences of the POWs in Malaysia. In the midst of battle, where training and discipline are put to the test and when every second is a matter of life and death, there is a continuous instinctive reaction to the environment that coexists with the person and, sometimes, takes him over. In his novels, Malouf refers to it as the "animal" part of the self, which sometimes can encompass several selves – that is, several people. He most often refers to it simply as the body. For Malouf, the body has an intelligence of its own that is free from social prejudices and convention. In prolonged periods of battle at the trenches, or in POW camps as is the case in *The Great World*, where the soldiers' morale and physical strength are increasingly worn out the last thing that is left of them is their body. Prisoners are tortured, starved, and constantly exposed to infections and diseases. Being able to rationalize one's food or avoiding an infection becomes a matter of life and death. Malouf creates some scenes that border on the mythical in this regard, offering us a clear insight into his anthropology. The lyricism of his prose also confers a mythic character to the scenes, aggrandizing at the same time the myth of ANZAC and the legend of the digger.

We will analyse three scenes in this regard. The first scene has to do with Mac's death. The second is an unsettling vision of the plasticity and intelligence of the body. Finally, the third scene has to do with the special relationship that, against all odds, is established between Digger and Vic.

One day, the Japanese officials start recruiting a regiment to go to the docks to do some really hard work, and Mac, Doug, Vic and Digger eagerly volunteer so as to escape from the lethargy and boredom of the POW camp. Once they settle at the docks, hard work begins. At one point, they have to move two hundred-pound heavy sacks. The men make a circle: they put the sacks on their shoulders, carry them to the other side, throw them off, and continue in single file to get another one and so on. Under the scrutiny of the guards, who would hit them with the back of the rifles every time they raised their eyes from the ground, they catch glimpses of each other and feel reassured. That day, in spite of the heavy work, Vic feels particularly high-spirited: "He was lit up with the assurance of his own invulnerability," even though he is also aware that "there was no reason for it." (119) Knowing himself, Vic remains particularly alert not to say or do anything he may regret. But after a while, this positive energy translates into resentment: "If there was a girl here his energy might have been taken up in some other way; but there wasn't. Each time he straightened he felt a surge of exultation and the bitterness of having to reign it in." (120) At a fateful moment, a "guard, idly, almost indifferently, leaned out and jabbed at him very lightly with a cane." To emphasize the wretchedness of the moment, the narrative voice adds: "There was no contact." (121) In spite of himself, Vic stops, turns, and spits at the guard. No one knows what happens next, except that Mac is behind Vic and pushes him, taking his place and dropping the sack, which explodes when hitting the ground. In the middle of the confusion and trapped in a cloud of dust, several guards stab Mac with their bayonets. Hearing the turmoil, Digger remains in mid step, slightly turned, to see what is happening, "in a passion like nothing he had ever known." (122) Later on, Digger would go back to that fateful moment, never sure of whether he was imagining it or remembering it. He would see Mac at the instant of his death, at the exact

point when he became aware that he was going to die. What he saw was Mac's face in its sheer individuality, synthesising everything that was peculiar to the man:

> It was Mac's sad-faced mournful look, as Doug would have put it, which they had seen him wear on a thousand occasions, only raised now to the highest pitch, so that everything that was personal in it was gone, and yet it was utterly his own look that you would have known everywhere. (129)

As we mentioned above, the scene where Malouf narrates Mac's death is imbued with lyricism and poetry, in spite of the fact that he is narrating a painful and macabre scene. The lyricism has to do with the multiple perspectives he offers of a single event, the detachment his characters feel from what they are living and that allows them an a-temporal, poetic perception of what is going on, and with his choice of words and the stylistic devices he uses. Most importantly, the lyricism allows Malouf to have his narrative voice tell the story on a double plane: a straightforward, temporal and prosaic narrative of events and a lyrical, detached and a-temporal narrative of feelings and impressions. The latter is the mind's plane, whereas the former is the body's plane. Let us analyse more closely the independent lives of bodies in this scene.

While they are carrying the sacks around, Vic feels alienated, unable to "convince himself that the conditions he was under held force." He feels elated, happy in spite of the circumstances: "All morning his spirit was light and he swaggered", as if his body was taking over because his mind was faltering. It is not that he cannot see what is really going on, but he feels beyond and above everything that surrounds him. Something he cannot recognise but is really him manifests itself, something no one can touch: "In brute fact his back was bent and he was tottering like the others in a dense haze, choking, streaming with sweat, feeling every ounce of the two-hundred-pound sack on his neck, but his spirit was coltish. Nothing could touch him." The alliteration of the plosive unvoiced and voiced sounds /p/ and /b/ suggests the trotting of soldiers and the sacks bumping, whereas the sibilant /s/ suggest the sounds that the effort of the prisoners carrying the sacks make. Moreover, the onomatopoeic effect of the word "tottering", which refers to the pace

of soldiers, where the unvoiced /t/ tremulously repeats itself in the middle of the syllable, suggests that the soldiers make short, quick steps, and that they feel weak and move more like marionettes than like real men. The onomatopoetic sound of the word "chocking" also suggests what it means, that is, the heavy weight of the sacks and the dust particles they let go asphyxiating the soldiers. The "chocking", the "dense haze" and the sweat all over them emphasize the burden they endure and the suffocating conditions of the atmosphere they move in. In contrast, the words that define Vic's spirit are lively and loose: "All morning his spirit was light and he swaggered." The [i] sound suggests joy, and the [l] in "all" and "light", the [m] and [n] in "morning" and "and", and the [g] sound in "swaggering" suggest an effortless movement to and fro. The short sentence that closes the paragraph and that comes after a long one-sentence digression, which pushes the reader to read it slowly so as to catch air and, hence, emphatically, also highlights the neat distinction between the two planes in which Vic is moving: "Nothing could touch him." (120)

The detachment is complete when the guard pretends to hit Vic with the back of his riffle and he spits at him: "his spirit acted in spite of him." He is so detached that while he fears the consequences of his act, his body is overcome by a kind of euphoria: "Even when he saw it happen he was not dismayed. Some part of him was, and he went cold at the enormity of it; but in the other part, in a kind of triumph, he was exultant." (121) When the guards start stabbing at Mac in the middle of the confusion and the cloud of dust, Vic realizes that he should act, but something restrains him. It is his body: "But always it was his body that had the final word, and his body thought differently. It lived for itself and did not care." (124) As a result, he will have to carry the burden of Mac's death for the rest of his life. Vic feels guilty, but the word he uses, twice, is "shame". His body had saved itself "shamefully", and he was ashamed to have to live with it. That is the worst thing that could happen to Vic because the opinion of his mates is what he cares about the most, as we have seen. Worst of all, he will have to face Digger! Finally, the narrative voice also tells us that it is his body that tells him the outcome of the situation before he can figure it out for himself:

> … His body saved itself, *and* him, but shamefully, leaving him with a lifetime to face of the life it had bought for him. And the most shameful thing of all was that he could live with it. He was breathing hard. All his blood was pumping. He was full of the smell of himself.
>
> His body was driving it home to him. You won't die, son. Not of this. (124)

Like Vic, Digger also feels alienated, but is aware that it is because he has become part of something larger than himself. The turmoil has given birth to a monster they cannot control, and all are part of it. It is a new body made up of different selves, following its own logic and taking a semblance of its own.

Interestingly, Digger compares what is going on to a sort of "dance", as if to remind us that war and death also follow their own destructive ritual, where everyone is required to play his role. It is a sort of primal scene, where the actors dance "in animal fury and darkness, in blood", and the song they sing is "a thick-throated roaring before words", before the beginning of culture. Digger is acutely aware that his self and his bodily organs are not his anymore, that he is part of something larger than himself:

> It was a kind of dance, in which he shouted ecstatic syllables that passed right through him, lungs, mouth, consciousness, as if he were no more than the dumb agency of the rhythm he was pounding out in the dust of the godown, beyond smashed bones and the gushing of blood. The cries that came heaving out of him belonged to a tongue he did not recognise, and for all his gift (he who knew whole plays by heart), when his foot came back to earth at last, and the seconds linked, he could not recall a single one of them. They were in a language that his mind, once the moment was gone, no longer had the shape to receive. (122)

It is also Digger who realizes what is at stake when everything gets out of control. As we mentioned earlier, in the last instance, the reason d'être of a soldier is to expose himself to deprivation, injury and eventually death in order to win a war. When they are on the ground and

the Japanese guards walk around them shouting incomprehensibly, Digger knows that he cannot raise his head, that he cannot move if he wants to live: "To show the guards something as alive and jelly-like as an eyeball might be to set them off again." (122-123) And he tells himself: "He saw very clearly what they were at this moment: meat, very nearly meat. One flash second this side of it." (123)

After the incident that kills Mac, Digger is surprised at his own "vindictiveness", the fact that he could feel so much hostility against one of his own: "the wish to see Vic pay for the events in the godown to take a different turn and for *him* to be the one, scared Digger." But most importantly, Digger also feels responsible for his death: "'Where was I when Mac needed me?'" he asks himself. "'What did I do?'" (128) Digger feels guilty at the same time that he blames Vic, so that, at bottom, he feels they are both responsible for Mac's death and that, therefore, they will have to carry the burden together. Vic is aware of Digger's thoughts, which he can read in his contempt. "What it said was: for me you are not there, you're dead; you died back there where you ought to have done, instead of *him*." (126) Paradoxically, this is what actually happens. Mac's death represents a turning point in the novel and it changes the nature of the relationship between Vic and Digger. Mac and Digger were very close, and the fact that Vic is responsible for Mac's death intriguingly binds them. In Digger's eyes, Vic has replaced Mac.

One of the most shocking moments in *The Narrow Road to the Deep North* is the death of Darky Gardiner, who is tortured by being slapped in the face for hours, as a reprimand for having hidden in the jungle so as to avoid working on the construction of the railway and joining the company on their way back. The scene is charged with intense pathos because Gardiner has been presented as a cunning and likable fellow, who would steal from the Japanese what was needed in the camp and give it or barter it. Dorrigo Evans, the only one who could have saved him from the beating, cannot interfere in time because he is trying to save the life of Jack Rainbow by amputating his leg at the hip. It turns out that he made the wrong choice, because both men end up dying.

(Flanagan, *The Narrow Road to the Deep North,* 253-264) Years later, Dorrigo Evans learns that Darky Gardiner was his nephew on his brother's side. (363)

Darky Gardiner's death shocks the reader because of the circumstances that surround it: how it happens, to whom it happens, and who he turns out to be. As readers, we are astounded at the cruelty of the guards and the indifference of the other prisoners in the face of the suffering of one of their own, once they get used to the slapping and they believe they are safe. But nowhere in the novel do we come across something like the deep and personal affection there is between Digger and Mac. Rodrigo Evans, the main character of *The Narrow Road to the Deep North,* is a moral person, but his affection and his loyalty are for his family and the love of his life, Amy. In contrast, in *The Great World* we are aware that Digger and Mac were more than friends and that there was a deep affinity between them that transcended friendship – Mac's existence in itself was a source of happiness for Digger. Now, he was deprived of it.

So far we have seen how the body takes over the individual under stress. We have also pointed out the lyricism in Malouf's prose, something he owes to his work as a poet. In poetry, it is not uncommon that the narrative voice inhabits some element of nature or, less frequently, some inanimate object, in a way that it transcends itself, producing some kind of catharsis on the reader. For example, in *An Imaginary Life,* we recall that there is a moment when Ovid transforms into a lake and, reflecting the sunlight and feeling its warmth is overcome by "the suddenness of wings." (55) What is less common is to find the body undergo such permutations, that is, to undergo such changes that it no longer recognises itself. The body may sometimes possess the mind; sometimes transform itself; sometimes both. In all instances, we are terrified.

We find the most amazing things the body can do in Chapter 3, section 7. The narrative voice tells us how some men would suddenly fall asleep from exhaustion before they "had taken a single mouthful" from the bowl they were holding in their hands after a hard day's work. Sometimes, some men would say something that was meant for somebody back at home in sleep. The narrative voice tells us: "That was one of the things the body could do." (139) More

dramatically, when a man caught a deadly disease, the body did worse things. We are told how Clem Carwardine, a learned but humble fellow, suddenly turns mean and starts bullying Ern, a good lad who is as thick as a brick with a loose tongue: "'I thought a chook was the most brainless object in the universe, but compared with some of you blokes, a chook is Einstein.'" They are all shocked by the tone of his voice, and Doug wittily tries to pass it off with one of his ironic remarks: "'That your last word on relativity, is it Clem?'" (139) but no one is fooled. Clem's look is "murderous" and he seems to despise them all. Suddenly, he throws his head back, his feet out and falls dead on the ground.[95] "Cardiac malaria." Again, the narrative voice tells us: "The body could do that too." (140)

Following on Clem's example, that is, when due to some deadly illness the body was done for and, before it died on its feet, turned mean and edgy,[96] the narrative voice elaborates on how they have to take special care of the body, handle it "with so much delicacy" (141). Their flesh has fallen away and they are skeletons. The strongest and fittest of them are the first ones to go. A simple scratch can turn into an ulcer and, eventually, kill them. Digger remembers the talk he had sometimes had with the blacks in the boxing troop, how they had ironically told him: "'Maybe yer a black feller, Digger, on the *inside*." Now, the body seems to have "an imagination of its own", turning them inside out and black: "It had an imagination of its own, and fellows who had none at all, or not of that sort, looked on astonished at the horrors it could produce, stared in amazement as the first brown patch appeared, then spread, and they began to go black." (141) Their bodies sometimes also inflate like balloons:

> …He saw fellows now turn inside out. He saw the skin of a man's face grow thick as elephant hide. He saw thin boys blow up till they were the size of the fat

[95] In Spanish, a synonym of dying is "estirar la pata", that is, "to stretch one's leg".

[96] Again, when somebody is irritable and speaks aggressively, we say: "suelta bilis por la boca", which literally means that the person spat bile.

> lady, though no one would have paid to look at them – there was no market for it, not up here. They got so big at last that they couldn't move, even to turn on their pallets. Two of their mates would have to roll them; but gently, like a two-hundred-pound drum full of some dangerous fluid. Their balls would be the size of footballs, their dick eight inches round; but no one laughed, it wasn't a joke. (141-142)

However, once again the narrative voice manages to make the uncanny familiar, the horrendous amiable. Some days later, it is Doug who undergoes the transformation. At the beginning he is in terror, but they have to take him with them so as to make up the numbers. So as to feel part of the group and entertain his mates, he amuses them with his easy chatter:

> They rolled him like a drum when the time came and carried him out on work-parties to make up the numbers as the Nips demanded. It was, all the time, a question of numbers. The Nips were fanatical about it.
>
> 'Watch it, fellers,' he joked as they laid him beside the track, 'I spill easy.'
>
> He lay there all day, patient and uncomplaining, every now and then shouting across to them just to keep himself in the swing of things and one of their number – the living. Then at nightfall they carried him back. (142)

Finally, we mentioned earlier that Vic is always on a different wavelength, specially regarding Digger. Vic likes Digger, but Digger cannot stand Vic, not even before he accidentally killed his best friend Mac. When reflecting on what is left of them and how low they have come, Vic tells himself: "'If I have to live like this, right through to the finish, on nothing but will, I can do it.'" When he was a kid, he went through something similar. There was nothing, and he had to live through sheer will power. In contrast, he realizes, Digger is a dreamer. "I know what *real* is. I'm not like Digger. I don't need dreams.'" (143) What Digger tells himself and others is that soon they will leave that place and go back to Australia. In other words: everything about Vic is about will power, whereas everything about Digger is about imagination.

This does not prevent them from taking care of each other when they alternatively fall prey to their bouts of fever, acknowledging that, in spite of everything, they are bound together in more ways than they can summon up. Months after Mac's death, they are sent to Thailand, to a place called Hintock River Camp, where they have to build the line between the Malay and the Burmese borders. It is then that Digger and Vic discover that, in spite of Digger's dislike of Vic and Vic's unshared respect for Digger, their bodies are synchronised in a way that they can help each other survive. Every ten days, they fall prey to a fever in turns, so that when Digger is down Vic takes care of him and the other way round. The first time, in between his bouts of fever, Digger catches a glimpse of Vic eating his rice and cannot help accusing him for that. But he also notices that Vic's look when he catches him is not apologetic. It captivates Digger: "There was something in that look Digger did not want to let go of. Some truth he needed to hold on to. He worried at it." Digger realizes that the look on Vic's face is not "sly" or "calculating"; what he is looking at is the animal side of him: "It was an innocence of a purely animal kind, that took what it needed and made no apology, acting on *that,* not on principle." (133) Again, we see a clear-cut division between mind and body.

This split portrayal of Vic highlights Malouf's anthropology, which we could summarize as follows: the body is wiser than the mind. Why? The mind is always embedded with social and cultural prejudices whereas the body, through the primary impulses of the need for safety, hunger and desire is always more truthful to the individual's true nature and needs.

Shortly before their release, when their platoon has practically disappeared, Digger finds out that he is a cholera carrier. He is charged with the task of cutting wood, taking the dead on makeshift bamboo stretchers to a clearing in the middle of the forest and burning them. He is still in "reasonable shape, except for his ulcer." (156) Some days later, we come across Digger on the brim of consciousness, awakened by Vic. They are in the hospital tent, and Vic tells Digger that he has "heard about something" that might work for him. He urges Digger to stand up. We learn that Digger's ulcer has gotten worse and he might lose a leg or, as was common, die. "Get up?"

Digger tells himself, too weak to respond to Vic in words. "He would never get up, that's what they had told him." (158) On the edge of consciousness, Digger realizes that the tone of Vic's voice is the same as his mother's. Vic talks to Digger the way a father spurs on a child: "'Hang on, eh Dig? Digger? Dig? (…) It will hurt, Dig, I know that. I'm sorry. But it's the only way. You ready now? (…) Digger? Are you OK, Dig?" (159) When they finally descend to the river, we discover that it is filled with doctor fish or Garra rufa, which soon start eating away the rotten meat from Digger's leg. At first, Digger is scared. After all, he is being physically devoured. But soon panic turns into a gratifying experience, which he shares with Vic and saves his life.

The scene recalls the scene in the lake in *An Imaginary Life* we just mentioned. In that case, when Dante dreams that he is a pool of water, the pleasant experience of the deer drinking from him is followed by the fear that a wolf might come to drink from him as well, menacing, "rough and greedy." (55) Now, the pleasant experience will stop as soon as the fiddlers draw blood:

> Vic too was in a kind of wonder at it. The idea of it had sickened him at first, jus the idea: of being fed off by greedy mouths. But in fact it was soothing. The stars high up, so still; and underwater there, in what seemed like silence but wouldn't be, close up, the jaws fighting for their share of the feast. And all you felt from up here, from this distance, was a pleasant *contact*. The touch of their savagery was soft.
>
> 'It tickles,' Digger said foolishly.
>
> 'Yair, they're just tiddlers,' Vic told him, and he was laughing now. It was so weird, and he had such a sense of the good they were doing him. 'It'll be over in a minute.'
>
> It would be over when they drew blood. (161)

This is one of the most emblematic scenes in the novel. First, we see a digger helping his mate and saving his life, perfectly embodying the ideal of mateship. Secondly, it is a scene full of sensuality and intimacy between Digger and Vic. Thirdly, the fact that the scene takes place in a

river suggests a "baptism." That is the word Digger uses when he is led into the river, unable to find the right word for the experience he is having: "The word that had come into his head – it was a word he had never used as far a he could recall – was baptism." (161) At this point in the novel, the idea of baptism might suggest several things. Firstly, the river might represent a symbolic rebirth. Vic saves Digger's life. Secondly, the river might exercise a purifying function, cleansing Vic and Digger of everything they have endured. Finally, it might also play a political symbolic function. Vic and Digger being baptized together might symbolize the birth of one people under one flag in the eyes of the world: Australia.

Chapter 4 resumes Digger's life back in Australia once the war is over and tells about the period of adaptation he needs before he goes back to Keens' Crossing and reunites with his family. Chapter 5 does the same, but recounting Vic's life. In both cases, the time it takes them to resume their former lives where they had been truncated by the War has to do with physically and mentally recovering from what they have gone through in the POW camps. Digger takes it easy: "He was putting it off, that's all; enjoying himself, getting back into the stride of things," (177) whereas Vic consciously wants to put together his old self before reuniting the Warrenders: "… he also chose, out of pride, not to let the Warrenders see him like this… When he saw them again it had to be in his old self as he was before he went away." (204-205) On the one hand, they need to recover their bodies, that is, it takes time for their bodies to put on flesh, become alive and take a recognisable human and social form again. It is the only way they have to put them back in harness again. On the other hand, as Doug foretold when the first news of the surrender reached them: "It always comes down to the same things in the long run, belly, dick or feet. There won't be too much dick in it this time, I reckon. It'll be bellies, you watch, an' feet." (46) They need time to change their mindset to a different condition, and slowly built their existences with higher levels of meaning.

As pointed out, Chapter 4 focuses on Digger. He rents a room in Sydney at the Cross, the rowdiest place in town, and soon gets a job as a bouncer in one of the clubs. Digger and his mother start writing to each other weekly. The writing slowly builds him back into his older self as she

urges him to go back home. However, when he feels ready he does something else first: return Mac's letters to Iris. When he does, they fall in love at first sight, and start dating soon afterwards. Her devoutness makes their relationship ambiguous, since she will never stop wearing her alliance, except when sleeping with Digger, and they will only see each other once a week, on Thursdays, when Digger goes to Sydney and stays over. What's more, to her children he will always play the role of an uncle, thus replacing Mac, even if the kids will always call him "Ma's friend" and love him like a father. The Chapter ends when Digger goes back to Keen's Crossing, and he sees his mother from afar, pegging clothes on the line. If Digger finds that nothing much has changed when he goes back with his family, in Chapter 5 we see that Vic experiences just the opposite. Back in Australia, Vic first travels out west and, for six months, just picks up any job he can get: "as a greenkeeper in one place, a fencer in another" (204) until, eventually, he rents a room at a men's boarding house in Surry Hills, Sydney. As in the case of Digger, he gets in touch with Mum but takes some time for himself before he reunites his foster family. Interestingly, it is the mother figure that gets in touch with the 'lost' son so as to bring him slowly and tenderly home. While in Sydney, Vic works "as a ganger of the roads" (204) and goes and finds Digger at the Cross. These encounters unsettle Digger, who once even goes into a fever and needs some days to recover. Under the heat of summer, Vic's job is tough, but it balances the resentment and frustration inside him. All this time, Mum calls him every Friday and they talk when he is in the mood; otherwise, he simply does not answer the phone. Finally, he gathers enough strength to go back with the Warrenders, who give him a warm welcome and behave as if nothing had changed. But it has. During the War, Lucille fell in love with a marine and has already had his child, a boy.

This rampant act on the part of Lucille reflects a typical historical situation that Stuart Macintyre elaborates on in his *A Brief History of Australia*. During World War II, when US soldiers frequented the cities of the East coast of Australia during their periods of leave, Australian soldiers would resent their higher wages and, particularly, their higher appeal for local women. It was not

at all uncommon that Australian women would sleep, fall in love with and marry American soldiers, leaving for the United States. This is how Macintyre puts it:

> The Australian soldiers envied the Americans' higher pay, superior conditions and access to luxury goods. There was particular resentment of their attractiveness to local women, and the image of rampant sexuality was explicit in wartime fiction and art. In occupied Australia the fickle female was the fifth columnist; the war brides who left for the United States were regarded as defectors. Brawls between American and Australian soldiers attested to local sensitivity to the friendly invasion. (Macintyre 197)

The case of Lucille testifies to the accurateness of Malouf's portrayal of wartime Australia during the war. Likewise, Malouf portrays the scene in a way that summarizes his view of the fact that the important things most people do in life, such as marrying or enlisting come about by accident and thoughtlessly, varnishing them with his usual irony. At the peak of Lucille's excitement, when she rejoices with the child that she carries within herself and that she fantasizes will metamorphose her into a woman, Malouf describes Virgil Farson, the father, as "a big slow boy of less than twenty", completely unaware of the consequences of his acts: "At that moment three thousand miles away in the Islands he was lounging about an Air Force base reading his Felix the Cat comics, quite ignorant yet of what he had done." (210)

In the broader context of the representation of men and masculinities across nations, this scene illuminates the fact that the perception of a country influences the representation of their men – since World War I, the United States was considered the most powerful country all over the world, both in military and economic terms. The bombing of Pearl Harbour and the consequent participation of the U.S. in World War II meant certain victory against Germany. Everyone was aware of that. The Australian soldiers, representing a country of just about seven million, could not compete with a large British and American army and their sophisticated technological war weaponry. No wonder, then, the aura American soldiers had for Australian

women and the resentment of Australian men. Moreover, as Knightley puts it: "Between the wars Australia had run down its defence capacity in the belief that the Royal Navy was the key to its security." (Macintyre 191) In face of the invasion of Singapore in the Pacific, the raid attacks on Pearl Harbour and Darwin, and the Japanese submarine sightings in Sydney's harbour, the Australians realized they had made a mistake. If only they had known that Churchill "had agreed with the Americans that it was necessary to beat Hitler first and then worry about the Pacific" (Macintyre 193) behind their back, they would have known how big a mistake they had made.

In this broader context, it is also worth noting the representation Western countries had of the Japanese at the time. This representation took into consideration ethnic and racial differences. The Japanese were perceived as fanatics to the point of inhumanness, a superstitious and evil race. For the Japanese, the Emperor was a demigod, whom they would never dare speak to or look in the eye. At the end of World War II, the Japanese surrendered on the condition that the Emperor would be respected, and it was only when the Emperor himself addressed the country to let it be known that Japan had been defeated that the war was officially over. It was the first time that the Japanese heard their Emperor's voice. Losing a battle was a humiliation. The figure of the kamikazes emerged from the Japanese belief in the divine nature of their Emperor - they willingly and proudly died for Him. A Japanese soldier would fight to the death; nothing could stop him. Apart from that, the different physiognomic traits of the Japanese made them apparently inscrutable and irredeemably foreign to Western eyes.[97]

Therefore, the Allied forces, especially Australians, were not only fighting against men, but against their representations of the Japanese. If we think of the racist policies and attitudes against

[97] Needless to say, this just involved the representation of the Japanese by Australians and Westerners. The personal accounts of Japanese soldiers fighting in World War II shows them scared of dying and breaking under the stress of battle.

Aboriginals at the time, we can have an idea of the panic they might have felt at the idea of a Japanese invasion. Knightley's account is illuminating in this respect:

> When the South Australian government was warned to expect about two thousand evacuees from the north, the state Premier complained to the Prime Minister that he did not want any half-caste Aboriginals. His telegram read: 'Their presence likely prove source of infection to contacts. Most undesirable further parties half-castes be sent south.' So ninety part-Aboriginal children from Croker Island, near Darwin, had to walk right across Australia, north to south, hitching Hits in cattle trucks and with military convoys, living on goannas and lizards and whatever they could scrounge, until two months after setting out they arrived in Adelaide. (Knightley)

The dread of the Japanese, the poor management of Australia's military bases in the North, and the unheroic attitudes of Australians in the face of imminent danger become clear in Knightley's account of how the Australians evacuated Darwin:

> For the Japanese, bombing Darwin was a textbook operation. In 45 minutes, they sank eight ships, set eleven on fire and forced four to beach. A total of 243 people were killed, 160 of whom were on ships. The Japanese lost five aircraft. Jack Mulholland, an RAAF anti-craft gunner, remembers, 'All hell broke loose. The raid was planned to the minute and brilliantly executed. The Neptuna, a merchantman, was tied up at the wharf discharging their cargo, which contained a large supply of ammunition. Several bombs hit her and she exploded. The Lewis gunners on the oil tanks nearby saw some strange objects flying through the air, including a whole locomotive which had been deck cargo'.
>
> But it was the aftermath, which turned the attack into Australia's day of shame. Panic swept the city. Everyone thought the raid was a prelude to an invasion and that Japanese troops, portrayed in Australia war propaganda as sub-human,

> would soon be wading ashore intent on rape and murder. There was a stampede to get away. One Greek businessman, however, kept his head. As civilians from town streamed south, the Greek stood on the roadway with a wad of cash offering to buy the house of anyone prepared to accept his ludicrously-low offer. Many did.
>
> Some officers behaved the worst. They commandeered cars, trucks and jeeps and headed south, turning up days later in Alice Springs, Adelaide, Sydney, Melbourne and Brisbane. Their men did the best to follow their example. When the army arranged a train to evacuate women and children, able-bodied men tried to force their way on board. Then an air-raid alarm sounded, so everyone got off to take shelter and to allow the train crew to drive the train out of the station to avoid being bombed. The alarm turned out to be false but the train failed to come back to collect its passengers – the crew kept it going until they were a safe 300 miles away. (Knightley Kindle File)

The paralysis and powerlessness of the ANZACs in front of the Japanese can only be explained by the frightening representation they had of the Japanese. But this representation was not without its paradoxes as well. On the one hand, as Knightley reports, the Japanese were seen as racially inferior and incapable of "waging war against Western invasions like battleships, submarines, tanks and aircraft". On the other hand, the representation British and Australian troops had of the Japanese as a subhuman and merciless race weakened their morale and their capacity for action. The Allies surrendered in Singapore in what Churchill considered the most shameful defeat in his career.

Following Knightley's account, we can venture that in Malaysia the Allied troops surrendered to their worst fears, not to the superior firepower of the enemy:

> There followed a series of disasters exacerbated by incompetence, failure to communicate, poor equipment, and plunging morale. British troops retreated from positions the Japanese were not attacking, disobeyed orders to counterattack and

failed to follow up advantages obtained by the rare ambush… On 8 February, the Japanese crossed the narrow channel from Johore to Singapore. Once the Japanese were ashore, the outcome was never in doubt. Seven days later a British army with ample ammunitions surrendered to a Japanese force barely one-third its strength and down to its last hundred rounds of ammunition per man. (Knightley)

So much for manhood.

In *The Great World*, Malouf captures the feeling of despondency of Australian POWs for having been captured by a primitive and technologically inferior culture. Hatred and disgust towards the Japanese and Tamil guards recurs as frequently in the novel as distrust and condemnation of those in authority who had surrendered. The later built on Australians' scepticism towards those in authority.

The Australian prisoners refer to the Japanese and Tamil guards as "coolies", an offensive term used to refer to South and East Asians. Their most prominent feature was their slanted eyes. Since the prisoners of war are mostly fed rice, Malouf often has his characters fear that, by eating rice, their eyes will "go slanty" and they will become "coolies." A man at the cue while they are waiting for their bowl of rice tells Digger: "'If they keep feedin' us this muck, and we keep eatin' it, our eyes'll go slanty. Dja Know that? This professor tol' me. It's what the bastards want! T' make fucken coolies of us. They hate white men.'" (113) Later, Digger will recall the man's words and his utter indignation at the situation they were in, as if some natural order had been violated when the whites had become prisoners of the Asians:

> He thought of the look of that fellow's face who had told him once, 'They wanna make coolies of us': the savage indignation of it, at the violation of all that was natural in the world, their unquestionable superiority as white men; but there was also the age-old fear in it of falling back and becoming serfs again.' (152)

We have seen above how Vic doubts the rumour that one of their officials, Gordon Bennett, has escaped in a rowboat just after the surrendering. Sore, it is Doug who tells them news:

"'Typical,' Doug said, and spat.'" The narrative voice tells us what Doug feels, putting into words a general feeling Australians had towards authority, and that we discussed largely in our previous Chapter on *Fly Away Peter*:

> He had a poor view of anyone in authority; officers, bosses, little jumped-out clerks behind a desk who hum and ha and make you feel like shit before they'll stamp anything for you; all of them eager to lick an arse or kick one according to whether it's above or below them; all of them determined, like the bloody second lieutenants here who would soon be strutting about in their shoes, to hang on to every last little sign of privilege. (50)

The real test of racial superiority was to be a technological one, and at stake was the construction of the Burma Railway. In 1885, the British had decreed that it was not possible to build a railway joining Burma and Thailand. When the Japanese seized Burma from the British in 1942, they realized they could not safely supply their new colony by sea, undertaking the construction of the railway. (*Wikipedia "Burma Railway"*) The Japanese were aware of their inferior technology. They had to disassemble train tracks from other parts of the country because they lacked the technology to build new railway tracks for their new, more urgent railway. The locomotives they used were also British. In spite of that, they believed that if they succeeded in constructing the Burma railway against all odds it would be thanks to the indomitable Japanese spirit, which would rocket their morale and spirit, and lead in its turn t o a Japanese victory at war. In the event that the Japanese won the war, they would immediately acquire the technology and science of the English and soon become the first world power and economy.

In *The Narrow Road to the Deep North,* Colonel Cota explains our point above in conversation with Major Nakamura. Notice Colonel Cota's ethnocentrism, similar to that of the Australian soldiers who were afraid of developing "slanty eyes" when he talks about "we and our outlook", thus juxtaposing Asians to all other races:

> Exactly, Nakamura said. One cannot distinguish between human and non-human acts. One cannot point, one cannot say this man here is a man and that men there is a devil.
>
> It is true, Colonel Kota said. This is a war, and war is beyond such things. And the Siam-Burma railway is for a military purpose – but that's not the larger point. It is that this railway is the great epoch-making construction of our century. Without European machinery, within a time considered extraordinary, we will build what the Europeans said it was not possible to build over many years. This railway is the moment when we and our outlook become the new drivers of world progress. (Flanagan, *The Narrow Road to the Deep North* 104-105)

The nations who win the war will prove their racial supremacy, which will bring about a cultural and technological superiority in its turn. As we saw in our reading of *Johnno*, war is the ultimate test of manhood. Why? War and manhood are about domination. We see that Nakamura and Colonel Cota talk about war as a means to win the technological and cultural race. In *The Great World,* the narrative voice explicitly makes the link between manhood and technology. Not without irony, it says that for some men learning to drive is the first test of manhood, more important than sexual intercourse: "Learning to drive was the second goal of manhood – the first for some." It goes so far as to say that once you have made technology part of yourself, you have become a "new species":

> Fooling about under trucks and cars, tinkering with motorbikes and boat engines, rigging up crystal sets – all this had become second nature to them, a form of dream-work in which they recognised (or their hands did) an extension of their own brains. It had created between them and the machines they cared for a kind of communion that was different from the one they shared with cattle and horses, but not significantly so. For most of them machines were as essential to the world

> they moved in as rocks or trees. (…) Once you have learned certain skills, and taken them into yourself, you are a new species. There's no way back. (131)

The narrative voice's ethnocentrism is best summarised in the following passage in the novel. This time the focus is on what the soldiers have carried with them from their previous existence, before they became prisoners. The identification between the soldiers and their "miscellaneous oddments," is "very nearly mystical" in a way that reveals the characteristic over-confidence of ethnocentric discourses:

> These miscellaneous oddments, the detachable parts and symbols of civilised life, were all they had now to reassure themselves of where they had come from and what they were. What was contained in a set of surgeons' knives or a pair of pliers and a coil of wire – and in a way that was very nearly mystical – was the superior status, guaranteed, of those who had invented them and knew their use. Civilisation? That's *us*. Look at this. (45)

The last Chapter binds together again the narrative of the lives of Vic and Digger, as happened in Chapter 3, which narrated their meeting and experiences in the POW camps in Malaysia. However, it focuses more on Vic's life. It is the longest Chapter – more than a hundred pages in a book that is nearly three hundred and fifty pages long. Whereas the previous Chapters cover a span of less than thirty years, from the early nineteenth century until the end of World War II, this one covers as many years as the other five together, from the mid-forties until the mid-eighties.

Back in Keen's Crossing, the first thing Digger does is finding out where his sister Jenny is and get her back home. He finds her at a place called All Hallows Convent, in Brisbane. Reunited with her children, Marge is contented. However, the gender war with her husband is still going on in her head and it is worse than ever: "he was a more powerful presence to her now that he was gone than he had ever been." She is still mad at her husband's "refusal to knuckle down to the hard truth of things: which for her meant marriage, home, family, all she had spent her spirit over

the years in amassing and preserving, and which she had expected they would share." (228) Digger turns a deaf ear to his mother's complains. To add to her despair, when Digger comes back home he is already dating Iris, a widow who is twenty-years older than him and has two kids of her own, so that it is unlikely that they will marry, have children, and lead the kind of life she had aspired to herself. Even though she tries to hook him up with a local woman, Digger remains loyal to Iris. She is aware that she will not be able to change his mind: "She wanted him married. She wanted grandchildren. But she knew too well his capacity for loyalty, for sticking at things, to challenge him." (233)

Towards the end of her life, a late August day, she gets out of bed in a fit, tries to set the house on fire but fails, and climbs up a hill from which she can see where she has been living for the last thirty-three years. She realizes Sydney is closer than she thought it was when she first arrived there; that the city expanded in their direction. As a young woman, she had arrived with a clear vision of what she wanted her life to be. It was not what she had. Now, in the twilight of her life, she faces the hardest truth: "She did not want her life – the fifty-four years, so many days and days and the disappointments and defeats and little silent triumphs…" That is the reason why she tries to set the house on fire. Even if she fails, in her head she has "already burnt the evidence of it", so as "not to have, forever, to sit at the centre of it." It is when she believes she has got rid of her dream that her mind leaps over more than thirty years and her maiden name suddenly comes to mind for the first time in the novel: "Gibbons. That was the name she had been born to." It is also at this point that we learn her first name, Marge. Nostalgia overcomes her. She tries to visualise herself and her brother Albert at the orphanage, but she can't "get past all the things she had accumulated that shut them out." She is disconsolate. Then, her husband's last name interrupts her thoughts: Keen, "she would be buried under it." Her husband is somewhere in Korea, and she realizes now that he will not come back. The scene ends with Jenny, disconsolate, pulling at her mother. "The big blubbery girl found her and kept clutching and clutching and would not let her be." (245) When Digger gets back home she is sitting in an old cane chair under the clothesline in

the yard, her back to the house. He tries "to tempt her with things she had once cared about," but nothing works. She wills herself to death. Digger had seen this before in the POW camps of Malaysia, and thought these things could only happen there. He did not know she was under such distress: "He had not known she was in such despair." (246) How is that possible?

The day Marge goes into a fit and gives up on life is a "blustery day." It is windy, and "high up, flat-bottomed clouds were in flight, sailing fast around the world." (243) There is a continuous reference to the wind throughout the scene. We are told that the "wind was up," (244) and that once on top of the hill she started pecking at her pink wool dress, the little fluffs mixing with the pollen and the seeds in the wind gushes. "The wind could not tell the one from the other of them." The scene brings to mind *King Lear*, which we already analysed in Chapter 2 à propos *Harland's Half Acre*. Lear represents the old patriarch that wants to preserve his power and respectability against old age. He wants his daughters to profess they love him above all else, just before he is about to distribute his kingdom. Goneril and Reagan lie and tell Lear what he wants to hear. Cordelia remains true to her heart, saying that she loves him as a father, but that she also loves her husband. Against common sense and the advice of Kent, Lear disinherits her on behalf of her sisters. When he has given his possessions and is no longer in command, Goneril and Reagan turn against him, treating him like an old and whimsical fool. Likewise, Marge represents the matriarch who dreams that by marrying Billy and leading a respectable life, imitating the lifestyle of the families she had served for back in England, "when she was dead she would sit grandly and content and justified in the midst of it, her children and grandchildren about her and each item at last in its place." (20) But her dreams crash with the typical Australian character. "He didn't want to be cleaned up and made respectable, it didn't suit him." (21) Later on, Billy reenlists and never comes back. Digger does, but when he does he leads his own life in his own terms. Both Lear and Marge stick to an ideal of patriarchal society that is unattainable, Lear as an old man and Marge in a new continent that has placed new demands on men. In Australia, men have had to develop features

of their own in order to survive and to adapt to the land. In the society that *The Great World* portrays, the Australian legend has replaced the traditional family patriarch.

Marge's story echoes an important literary antecedent in the legend, Edward Dyson's short story "The Conquering Bush". Murrie calls our attention to this story in her article "The Australian Legend," (Murrie 72-73) but she does so in the context of an intellectual controversy in the *The Bulletin* at the turn of the nineteenth century, what was called the Paterson-Lawson 'verse debate' between the urban, romanticised representations of the bush and the harsher and more desolate representations of those who had experienced the outback themselves. Lawson accuses Paterson of romanticising the bush, which he believes is the result of ignorance, because he has never been there, and of the feminising influence of city life. It is at this point that Murrie brings up Dyson's short story, which emphasizes the dichotomy between city and bush life, at the same time that it strengthens the idea that the city has a feminising influence whereas the bush represents and fosters manliness.

"The Conquering Bush" tells the story of Ned Darton, a middle-aged man who lives in the bush. During one of his trips to the city, he meets Janet Black, a lively and good-natured young woman. Like Marge, who met Billy and went to live with him at the Crossing, Janet marries Ned and she goes to live with him in the bush. They have a baby, but Janet soon starts feeling alone and estranged. The desolateness and mysticism of the bush and the taciturn and silent nature of her husband is too much to bear to someone who has been raised in the bustle and lively atmosphere of the city. She goes mad and, one day, when Ned arrives home, he finds his wife and baby drowned in a waterhole near the house. In the text, the reason for her madness lies in the city/bush chasm, which in its turn reflects the irreconcilable nature of the bushman and his wife:

> Darton did not pause to consider the possible results of the change he was introducing into the life of his bride—few men would. Janet was vivacious, and her heart yearned towards humanity. She was bright, cheerful, and impressionable. The

> bush is sad, heavy, despairing; delightful for a month, perhaps, but terrible for a year.
>
> (…)
>
> Man and wife settled down to their choking existence again as before, without comment. Ned was used to the bush—he had lived in it all his life—and though its influence was powerful upon him he knew it not. He was necessarily away from home a good deal, and when at home he was not companionable, in the sense that city dwellers know. Two bushmen will sit together by the fire for hours, smoking and mute, enjoying each other's society; "in mute discourse" two bushmen will ride for twenty miles through the most desolate or the most fruitful region. People who have lived in crowds want talk, laughter, and song. Ned loved his wife, but he neither talked, laughed, nor sang. (Dyson)

The breach between men and women could not be more absolute than it is configured in the Australian legend. As Linzie Murrie puts it in her article *The Australian Legend*: "The masculinity celebrated in the legend was located outside of the family and the broader society and positioned within a nomadic fraternity." (Murrie 69) This nomadic fraternity was configured far from civil life, in an ideal society of men that could meet the challenges and dangers of the bush, its fauna and its peoples. That is the reason why it was so easy for C. E. W. Bean to reconfigure the bush legend into the legend of the heroic Anzac. "According to the legend," says Murrie, "the 'heroic Anzac' takes over from the 'noble bushman' as the embodiment of the typical Australian. The frontier masculinity is merged with that of the warrior, and mate-ship is reconfigured for the trenches." (Murrie 74)

In view of the Australian legend, it is not surprising that Digger does not realize how desperate his mother is until it is too late. It is not surprising, either, the fact that he falls in love with Mac's sister in law, Iris, his best friend's closest relative. When describing the intellectual urbanites of *The Bulletin* behind the Australian legend, Murrie explains that women were often used

as a way to strengthen male bonds: "Where marriage did occur, it was often with the sisters of fellow bohemians, suggesting something of an act of exchange between the men." (Murrie 71) Finally, it also helps explain the easy-going relationship he and Iris establish and that will last for over twenty-five years. They follow a routine by which Digger visits Iris at Bondi Junction every Thursday. He arrives by train early in the morning, buys what he needs, picks her up at the cake shop where she works, and sometimes they go to a show in the evening. "But more often than not they just sat like a long-married couple and listened to the wireless, while Iris mended socks or did a jigsaw puzzle, and Digger took a toaster to pieces and put it together again." (230) Digger gets on well with the boys, but he will always be Ma's friend. After some time, Digger stays over at her place but sleeps in the sleep out, and she will go and join him there once the kids are asleep. Before lying with him, she undresses, starting with her jewellery and rings: "the pearl-and-diamond engagement ring first, then the wedding band." When they get up, she gets dressed following the inverse order. "Only when she came to the earrings, then the engagement and wedding ring, was she no longer his." (190) What to most of us nowadays seems a cold and distant relationship, to Iris and Digger is normal, and does not betray the deep and authentic relationship they have had since the first day the met: "'Oh, I saw you coming,' she laughed. 'Saw you a mile off.'" (183) In spite of being a digger, Digger is very much in love with Iris: "He had felt such a warmth of life in her. He was chilled to the bone sometimes, for all the strong sunlight here." (184) The formalities Iris follows might respond to her sense of propriety, but Digger's acceptance responds to the strong homosocial environment where he grows up. In a certain way, Iris keeps alive the memory of Mac in him. At her house, reading Mac's books in the sleep out veranda, Digger "could feel the other man's presence as a physical thing, a heat in him that was different from his own." (231) There is no reason to be jealous of the band she keeps wearing and that ties her to Mac's brother. Moreover, his relationship with Iris, circumscribed to Thursdays, does not compromise his masculinity. The clear distinction between the world of men and the world of women is maintained. Digger lives in the bush while Iris lives in the city, which is where they can be at ease

with their masculinity and femininity respectively. The contrast between the ways they see the world is also repeatedly reflected in what they see of the world that surrounds them. For example, when Iris tells Digger that Vic has a love affair, which is all over the news, Digger is thunderstruck. "How did she know these things?" Digger asks himself, to which Iris responds: "You can see it right off. Any *woman* could." (294)

In contrast to Digger, femininity plays a key role in Vic's life. Vic is also in possession of this characteristically female trait, intuition, which he will use in partnership with Ma to make a fortune, most often at the expense of his business competitors. In its productive moments, this faculty will work mainly during his sleep, his plans revealing themselves to him in the interval between sleep and wakefulness: "mere childish daydreams they were at this point, cloud-doodles, that he would knot out later and present to his more active self as proposals, then hard plans." (259) The partnership between Vic and Ma turns out to be very fruitful. She had seen the potential in Vic when he was a child, and now that his potential has been realized she is aware of how much she depends on him:

> Part of what sustained her, but forced her too, was the need he had to take her with him. What came back to her then was the times she had paced his room, all anxiety, and he had sat so stolidly on his bed – how old was he? Thirteen? Fourteen? – and she had relied on him. What she had seen in him then was increased now a hundredfold. (257)

Vic feels the same need for Ma. Some people thought "that his consultations with Ma were a charade, an act put on to reassure the old girl that she still had a hand in things." However, she was necessary to bring to fruition Vic's plans and gather the necessary force in him to bring them to fruition: "something in Ma too, was necessary to the release in him not of the insights themselves but of his power to believe in them, and in his power to make them real." (259) Their partnership is a success until the end of the novel, just before they go broke, when Ma is "nearly ninety" and Vic does not want to trouble her with his insights and plans. During one of his visits,

he confides Digger that the market is "nervous," (312) but ignores his gut feelings because of its complexity:

> There was a time, a while back, when he would have followed his own hunches, tuning in to the small hairs at the back of his neck. But the market forces these days were too complex for one man to grasp. Even he had to admit that. What happened here was dependent on what they did in Tokyo and New York. You needed advice at every point. Still, it went against the grain in him. (314)

Why is their partnership such a success? Michael S. Kimmel has contended that in the mid nineteenth century the means and relations of production changed giving birth to a new type of manhood, what he calls Marketplace Manhood. This new man replaced what he calls the Genteel Patriarch, who was a landowner and whose higher ideal was freedom, and the Heroic Artisan, whose economic activity was based on the production of goods and services and who embodied the republican values of equality and democracy. The Genteel Patriarch and the Heroic Artisan coexisted peacefully because their ideologies were compatible and mutually reinforcing. Marketplace man competes for wealth, power and status in an exclusively homosocial arena, from which women and everything that is feminine is excluded. The Genteel Patriarch and the Heroic Artisan were family men, but Marketplace Man is not; he devotes himself exclusively to his work in a highly competitive, homophobic and misogynist atmosphere. The new market economy also transforms the old relations of production, turning the Heroic Artisan into a proletarian who does not own his force of labour, and compromising the liberty of the Genteel Patriarch. Finally, the market is also an extremely competitive field, where, as the saying goes, he who has the most toys wins. (Kimmel 122-124)

In *The Great World,* we see how Vic's family gradually leave behind the manufacturing of goods, which involved chemists, packaging ladies, transportation, etc. first in the production of soap and, later, margarine, and gradually enter the speculative market under the auspices of Vic, who makes all decisions with the help of Ma. Vic embodies the Marketplace Man that has replaced

the Heroic Artisan and who moves in a strictly homosocial environment. Paradoxically, Vic seeks the help of Ma because to show another man that he is not autonomous and independent in his decision taking and dealings with others would expose him; it would have made him seem vulnerable in the eyes of other men. Let us recall that people thought that his consultations with Ma were "a charade", a mere formality. The narrative voice emphasizes our interpretation: "He accepted criticisms from her that, if a man had made them, he would have felt bound to reject." (253) On the other hand, Vic is always very suspicious not only of his competitors in the market, but also of those who work for him, including his nephew Alex. "Alex he told as little as he could get away with." (310) In public, in the market arena, he always acted decisively and on his own: "When he was sure of what was happening he took action but told no one, acting as he always had done, alone." (311)

Therefore, the reason for his success is that he is in league with Ma, so that he benefits from the feminine qualities of nurture and tenderness she provides his thinking, helping him balance the aggressive demeanour he needs to assume in his public life and in business. The pervasive homophobia of his business colleagues do not let them see that he is actually benefitting from his meetings with Ma. As is the case in Poe's *The Purloined Letter,* the best way to conceal something is to expose it.

However, if Vic acts in league with Ma, who holds the male gaze Vic needs to affirm his masculinity? As we have seen, Digger is the only person Vic cares about, and it is from Digger that Vic seeks recognition: "The one person he could be open with was Digger…" (312) But this openness needs some qualification. Vic does not tell Digger everything, least of all what worries him, his vulnerabilities and his defeats. Digger is there "to tip the balance" between the ruthless world of the market and his other self he was most comfortable with in the presence of Digger. Regarding Digger, he is aware of his role in Vic's life. It confirms that men need the approving gaze of other men to feel valued and affirmed in the masculinity. This is the moment when Digger realizes what Vic wants of him:

> It was a moment Digger would remember; when he saw clearly, and for the first time, what Vic wanted of him. He was to be one of the witnesses to his life. Not to his achievements, anyone could see those, which is why he hadn't bothered to draw Digger's attention to them; but to those qualities in him that would tip the balance on the other, the invisible side. (251)

Ma and Digger are key to Vic's individual quest for manhood. Even if Vic will never cease to climb the social ladder of success – that is, until the end of the novel when the market collapses and he goes broke – it does not mean that he is exempt from the ordeals and anxieties of the market, and this is where Ma and Digger are backing him. As Michael S. Kimmel puts it à propos the American society, which capitalist Australia emulates:

> The story of the ways in which Marketplace Man becomes American Everyman is a tragic tale, a tale of striving to live up to impossible ideals of success leading to chronic terrors of emasculation, emotional emptiness, and a gendered rage that leave a wide swath of destruction in its wake. (Kimmel 124)

Vic not only allies himself with Ma to make his business deals prosper, he also gets married to Ellie, as we saw, not out of love, but out of family loyalty. Vic is between six and seven when he goes to live with the Warrenders, so Ellie and Vic grow up as brother and sister. Initially, he wants to marry Lucille, but when he comes back from War Lucille has already had her baby and soon, she will leave for the U.S. It is also during his absence that Mum replaces her husband as head of the family business, deciding to manufacture margarine instead of the glamorous "Sunshine" soap: "War economies had put a premium on local products. Ma, seeing the opportunity it offered, had acted and made a killing." (215) In the meantime, Pa is able to devote himself to his lifelong passion: writing poetry and essays, which he does, soon acquiring a reputation. Interestingly, war has liberated Ma and Pa from the gender roles society imposed upon them. The story of Ma is similar to the story of Phil's Grandmother in *Harland's Half Acre*. In his novels, Malouf tends to portray men who do not have what it takes to succeed in life, for example

Frank's father or Phil's Grandfather, Jeff Vernont, in *Harland's Half Acre*, as we saw in Chapter 2. In the case of Phil's Grandmother in *Harland's Half Acre*, she has to surmount the courage to set up a family business when she realizes that Jeff will not do it, because she has to maintain a family. Jeff Vernont and Mr. Warrender have married smart, clever women who know how to run a business. In the case of Vic's Ma, it is something natural in her. Mr. Warrender soon realizes that his wife takes after her father and that running the business, she has finally found a way to unleash her potential: "She was a Needham, and her father's daughter, that's what it was." (215) What is noticeable is that Malouf has some of his most important female characters embody typical masculine social roles, for example the entrepreneur or the businesswoman, thus detaching these roles from a particular gender. As a result, Mr Warrender also realizes himself in an activity which is considered feminine – let us recall that the digger, the Australian ideal of manhood, is inarticulate – and emasculating, but that constitutes his lifelong passion: writing poetry. It is precisely during Vic and Ellie's wedding that Mr. Warrender reads one of his poems, which will have a profound effect upon the audience, especially on Digger, Iris and Ellie, in particular the verse in which he speaks of marriage as a "mixed blessing." (237) Marriage, the sacramental union of a man and a woman is defined as a "mixed blessing". What interpretation are we offered as readers of this contradictory formula, "mixed blessing", in the context of the symbolical union of the genders? Iris comes up with her own reading of the poem. This interpretive act defines a poetics, what we might term Malouf's poetic principle at least since *An Imaginary Life*: there are facts, but it is the power of the imagination that enlivens facts, and the poet has the responsibility of inspiring his readers with the necessary tools to make sense of their lives in a creative, fulfilling way. There are no givens in life, but countless possibilities of inhabiting the world imaginatively:

> 'The mixed blessing'. That was one of the things that had puzzled her. It had seemed out of place, suggesting as it did a kind of doubt rather than the easy conviction that is usual to such occasions. But she had come, in time, to see that it said several things at once – that was just the point of it, and she saw then what it

> was in Mr Warrender that had struck her. He did not take things for granted or just as they appeared. What he said was: 'Yes – but', in this way allowing for what really was, as well as what you might want life to be. (237)

Talking about marriage as a "mixed blessing" may seem a bit optimistic if we bear in mind the marriages of Billy Keen to Marge Ribbons, Dan Curran to Matilda, and even of the relationship between Digger and Iris, especially in the light of the Australian legend and its concomitant exclusion of women. We will see that Vic and Ellie will not fare much better. It is surprising that after all we have said about the world of men and women being at odds, especially when we consider everything, we have said about the Australian legend that Australian society still holds the belief that men and women are meant for one another.

However, *The Great World* is not a novel about men and women, but a story about men and war. Nevertheless, it is not a story about men because it is a story about war. Richard Flanagan also writes about the experiences of POW Australians in Malaysia, but he makes his story bounce between his main character's Rodrigo Evans experiences of the war and his memories of his relationship with Amy Mulvaney, the love of his life. It is as much a love story as it is a story about war. Similarly, *The Great World* is as much a story about war as it is a story about mateship. In the same way that we say, rightly or wrongly, that men and women are meant for one another and that they complement each other, men have their mates and, most often, soul mates that complement them.

When we think about hegemonic masculinity in Australia we usually think about a middle aged and well-built white Caucasian, married with children that practices sport regularly. However, we now know that the real grounds of manhood are not any one of those things, but other men and their mutual acknowledgement of their masculinity; in other words, the real ground of masculinity is homosociality. That is the reason why the bushman, the soldier, the sportsman, and similar exclusively male institutions represent the paradigmatic forms of masculinity in society.

The relationship between a man and a woman cannot be that different from a relationship between two men, especially when we consider that according to Freud's first findings "humans were constitutionally bisexual." (Connell 9) When Doug introduces Vic, the latter can see that Digger and Mac are clearly best friends. Vic is the youngest and inexperienced: "He was just out of school and had, so far as Digger could see, no experience of any kind," (48) which makes him look effeminate. He tries to compensate for it acting boldly and with some bits of "self-promotion," but they can see through it. When they tease him, Vic can see Digger's "scornful" look, but he sets his mind to win him over. (49) Vic is probably jealous of Mac, especially when Doug mentions that Digger is a featherweight– undisputedly possessing the quality of manliness, he bestows it on those closer to him. In contrast, Digger is the one who feels most aversion towards Vic, probably because he is young, insecure and inexperienced – not manly enough, something he might pass on. Like the relationships between men and women, the relationships between men are relations of power, but they are subtle in different ways; they are most often mediated by a mixing of rivalry and desire. When Doug mentions Digger is a featherweight, they all can see "the little flicker of challenge and interest" (51) in Vic. In the godowns of Malaysia, the fever took Digger and Vic in turns, they not only needed each other; the narrative voice tells us: "they were made for one another." Digger is surprised by the "tenderness and concern" with which Vic tends him when he is down, which becomes reciprocal: "under the influence of all this, there grew up between them a relationship that was so full of intimate and no longer shameful revelations that they lost all sense of difference." There are also days when they cannot stand one another, of mutual rejection and loathing. It had to do with how they saw themselves: "The petty irritations and suspicions they were subject to in their intense preoccupations with themselves made them spiteful and they would lash out in vicious argument." (134) Vic is probably happy to feel this sense of brotherhood with Digger, in spite of these moments of mutual loathing and, eventually, even Digger himself acknowledges that he is closer to Vic than he has ever been to anyone:

> 'It's amazing,' Digger thought after a time. 'I never meant to be, but I'm closer to this cove than to anyone, ever. Even Slinger. Even Doug.'
>
> Then another thought would hit him: even Mac. Mac wouldn't be as practical as this bloke is. (135)

The fact that the narrative voice cannot find a name to describe the relationship between Digger and Vic deserves our attention: "It wasn't a friendship exactly – you choose your friends. This was different; more or less, who could say? There was no name for it." (134) The important word here is "choosing" – you choose your friends, but who is it that you do not choose and, in spite of that, becomes a part of you? That is the question that Digger and Vic's relationship answers to.

Likewise, in *The Narrow Road to the Deep North,* a similarly excruciating experience binds the main characters of the love story in the novel, Amy Mulvaney and Rodrigo Evans. Rodrigo is engaged to Ella, whom he will eventually marry, before he meets Amy, who is married to Keith, a relative of his. Rodrigo and Amy love each other, but something refrains them from being together and being happy. They cannot choose to be with who they want to be with all their hearts:

> He didn't understand and he couldn't understand. Nor did he understand why if he wanted her, and the more he wanted her, the more he allowed himself to become tied up with Ella. He couldn't understand how what she had with Klein was *love* but it only seemed to make her miserable and lonely, yet its bonds were somehow stronger than their love that made her happy. And as she went on talking, it was as if everything that was happening to them could never be decided by them, that they lived in a world of many people and many ties, and that none of it allowed for them to be with each other. (Flanagan 128)

The case of Vic and Digger is the opposite, but it has a parallel structure: they would rather not share so much intimacy, but their bodies and circumstances know better. At some instinctual level, Digger does not trust Vic; he gives him the creeps. When the War is over and they go back

to Australia, Vic looks for Digger and finds him in a bar. Digger is startled: "Digger felt a jolt of panic. It was uncanny the capacity this cove had for unsettling him." (191) Digger is so shaken that when they depart, he falls sick with fever. "It was the malaria. A return bout." (193) Even years later, at Vic's funeral, Digger recalls the first time he saw him in Malaysia and is overcome by the same wave of repulsion: "He got a flash of him as he had appeared, hovering about behind Doug, in those last days before the surrender, and experienced again, and with a force he wouldn't have thought possible, as if time had no meaning at all, the immediate aversion he had felt." (327) When thinking about it more closely, Digger realizes that their friendship was synchronised by a double cog mechanism. Their bodies worked clockwise while their instinctive natures worked counterclockwise:

> A sense of their being, in their deepest natures, inimical to one another; in some part of themselves that was not accessible to view, or to reasoning either, though they were both aware of it, and would trust it too. Except that they had not, not in the long run. What they had done instead, since they could hardly do otherwise, was let the spirit of accident lead them. First the monstrous accident of Mac's killing, then the stranger one of their physical dependence on one another in the coming and going of their fevers, till what was revealed was something stronger even than their first instinctive hostility; unless that had been, from the start, only the negative sign of a deeper affinity. (327-328)

Digger's final thoughts at the funeral are that he and Vic "had, after all and despite all, been as close as any two men could be." (327)

Vic spends his life trying to exorcise his father's ghost, and he projects his life as a quest to escape from the kind of life that was in store for him. Several times in the novel, Vic imagines himself in the shoes of the old battlers or men out of work wandering the streets, which remind him of the destiny he is flying from. Despite the fact that he tries to show his brighter self and start from scratch when he goes to live with the Warrenders, when he is alone in his room, he feels

the existence of that other boy continuous with his own, and as real as himself. "Another boy, with his sour miseries and anger deep hidden, had come along with him, and would push his feet each morning into the new shoes, leave dirt marks round the collar of his shirts, soil the bed, these clean sheets, with the sweat of his dreams." (87) Vic is so obsessed that he believes that what happens to him in Malaysia merged him with his other self, the other boy within him. "Thailand was different," he tells himself. "That *was* intended. At that point the two lives somehow crossed." (317) He will never speak of his life as a POW as he has never spoken of his childhood and his parents, because these have been humiliating and emasculating experiences: "He would not speak of this either, once it was over; since it was pretty certain now that it would be. He would push it deep down into himself, face it on his own, and deny, if asked, that he had ever been there: 'No, mate – not *me*'." (168)

The POWs who made it back to Australia after the war were psychologically damaged, physically maimed and socially stigmatised. In his article "War and masculinity in twentieth century Australia", Stephen Garton explains the deep sense of wounded manhood of the POW veterans in Australia, which he compares to what Vietnam veterans felt like:

> The return of the prisoners of war in 1945 compromised the masculine ideal of Anzacs. Here starved and tortured men, rendered passive by internment, received enormous public sympathy but could not fit easily into the manly Anzac ideal. Nor could veterans of Vietnam. Their return was compromised by the fact that their war had not been 'won'. (Garton 88)

The narrative voice tells us that none of the three friends make it back whole. Digger "had lost all his teeth," (167) when teeth are a sign of strength and health. The others do not fare much better. Vic is the worst of all. Talking about Digger, Vic reflects: "He [Digger] was gummy. Doug had lost an arm. He himself *looked* whole but felt that he had lost everything." (168) Even if Digger feels whole, he looks much older than his age. The years he spends at war and the fact that he has grown up in the outback make him conscious that he might look old-fashioned in the eyes of Iris

and her friends. "The only thing that worried him was that he might be too old-fashioned for them, for *her;* too out of it." (185) Socially, a man's manhood is measured by his skills at courtship and by the attractiveness of the woman he is dating or his wife, the younger and more beautiful she is the better. When they start dating, Digger is very conscious of himself because he is only twenty-five and has no experience in "courtship and that", but is confident that if he shows her the "great tenderness in him," (184) which is a very feminine trait, he will make up for it. On the other hand, Iris is a middle-aged woman who is twenty years older than him: "'I am a middle-aged woman', she told Digger lightly. 'Forty-three.'" (190) As they grow old, Digger catches up with her until it looks like they are the same age. At Mr Warrender's funeral, Iris realizes Vic has not changed much since she last saw him at his wedding, about eighteen years ago. "'They go fast,' Iris thought, 'when they go, that sort.'" Then, she reflects on herself and Digger: "Digger was of the other kind. He was spare and leathery, and under the hat was very nearly bald. She no longer felt any embarrassment when they were out together. He might have been sixty as she was. (Sixty-seven, in fact)." (289) What this tells us is that Digger's manhood had been compromised in the POW camps. On the other hand, as he himself puts it, Vic looks whole but is afraid all his life that others will see through him and expose him as a fraud.

Michael S. Kimmel argues that manhood does not reflect an inner core, a transcendental essence or a state one reaches after he has gone through a certain ritual ceremony or performed a particular act. Manhood is a social construct that changes through time and that means "different things at different times to different people," (120) which means that manhood has to be constantly proven and acted out, and this is an impossible feat. Hence the constant anxiety men feel at being found out as a fraud. "What we call masculinity is often a hedge against being revealed as a fraud, an exaggerated set of activities that keep others from seeing through us, and a frenzied effort to keep at bay those fears within ourselves." (Kimmel 130-131) Vic keeps at bay his other self "by sheer willpower," (316) the one that is a reflection of his father and who embodies all that is low and shameful in him. The name "Vic" means "victory", and it stands as a metonymy for his

character. His name also resounds in the word will. The ship that takes him to Malaysia, he beats a guy at a game of droughts and he jumps with joy. The other guy had been "dead sure when they sat down that he would win," which multiplied Vic's satisfaction a thousand fold: "'Only I was surer,' Vic thought" (40). Vic constantly needs to beat other men, even at something as trivial as a game of draughts, to prove his manhood. We learn from Digger and Iris that he is a womaniser, which is a sign of manhood, but that is all that we hear about his casual affairs, which means that for him they mean nothing. He is overplaying his masculinity but everything is a façade. Vic accumulates wealth and power all throughout his life to compensate for his ancestral fear, but he never feels he has enough. "Such a model is, of course, unrealizable for any man." (Kimmel 126)

The ghost of the father reappears in Greg, Vic's son, giving him away and exposing his fears so that everyone can see them. When Vic is young and Greg is little, his father talks proudly of him and enjoys his every eccentricity and peculiarities, but when he grows up and starts to become his own self in the house, Vic starts to panic. He looks like "a smaller version of the father," (262) but in a way that exposed Vic's other self, the one he wanted to keep hidden from the world. Greg embodies his *dopplegänger,* his uncanny double, and the harbinger of truth that will reveal him: "But the likeliness was unnerving. It showed up in a naked, even shameless way – though only perhaps because the boy was too young as yet to have learned how to disguise it – all that he, Vic, had taken such pains to conceal." We return here to the leitmotif of male succession and inheritance we have been analysing in the previous Chapters. Vic can see the continuity between his father, himself and Greg, the latter embodying those traits he has worked so hard to control and rectify, because he had seen what they led his father to. Now those traits come back in his son Greg, and he feels "powerless" to confront them. Vic stands between the real presence of his son and the ghost of his father:

> He looked at the boy, saw his contemptuous smile and the likeness between them, and on the other side saw his father; and there was likeness there, too. This

> was what Ellie and the others could not know. He felt powerless, and at a time when power was just what came to him so easily, and publicly, elsewhere. (263)

Vic is also upset by the way Greg emulates his friends' communist ideals and despises everything that he represents. Ellie tries to calm him down, arguing that boys grow out of things, but Vic will not argue with her, hurt that she has taken the boys' part. Vic and Ellie fall out. It also hurts Vic that Greg is copying as a mere pastime what for him had been necessity. "Rags, cast-offs, the stink of other people's sweat – all that was horrible to him. Because for him, and for so many others too, it had been necessity." What Greg is doing reminds him of a shameful day at school when he was nine years old. A group of well-meaning ladies had taken the poorest kids at school to a hall, where they were offered "a pile of clothes that had been tipped out of bags onto the floor" (273) to choose from. Ashamed, Vic had taken a sweater, quickly and stealthily, so that they would let him go. At Mr Warrender's wake, Greg and his cousin Alex argue all the time and make a show that embarrasses everyone. (285) If Vic would talk proudly about Greg to Digger when he was a kid, as he grows up he never mentions him again. But after a row no worse than others they had had, Greg took the money his grandfather had left him, and left. "It was from Ellie that Digger heard of the break with Greg." (289) What Greg had wanted to say was quite different from what he did say – he wanted to ask for love, but thought that his father would have scorned him if he had shown his need for affection, so "out of the sort of pride too that his father did not credit him with," he had said something else entirely. Vic had wanted to talk about the "panic" in him when he saw his father's shadow projected onto his son, but was afraid that "if he put his fear into words he might, in some magical way, give it a place in the world," (290) and bring about the very things he feared. He also "believed that in his son's eyes he ought not to appear weak" and vulnerable. That is, they were both afraid to show their compassionate and tender side – that is, their feminine side. We are told that Vic "tried to talk to the boy man to man," (263) but they found no common ground.

There is no limit to the anxiety and fear Vic feels with his son. At stake is his identity, the very thing that keeps him together. Losing it means losing everything, the dissolution of the self. Let us recall that Vic fears being discovered as a fraud, that people will see through him into the other boy who carries all his humiliations and defeats: "The desire to keep it inside, where he alone knew what it was and could control it, was enough to keep him silent, even at the risk, as he saw now, of his losing control of the very thing that lay at the heart of his panic – his vulnerability through Greg." (290)

Vic comes across Greg years later, at the Cross – a crossroads of urban cultures. Vic is entertaining some visitors, "two Japanese with whom he had just signed a sizeable contract, and a Swede." (305) They have a drink at a terrace, taking in the squalor and queerness of the place: "the walking wounded, girls in boots and tights, some of whom were no longer girls either, and some of them not *quite* girls, and in the park around the fountain, or in the bar at the Rex, the boys in T-shirts and parachute pants." (305) Interestingly, Vic's wealth has some connection with the place. "The big men who lived off it were out of sight. They were, if the newspapers were right, some of Vic's business acquaintances – they did not show up here." (305-306) Suddenly, in the distance, they notice "a commotion." A derelict young man dressed "in heavy boots, a T-shirt and braces with a little black-and-white terrier at his heels, was clod-hopping about on the pavement playing a little mouth-organ;" (306) the vivid image of a mythological Satire. Three young men in leather jackets were harassing him. They kicked the dog and one of them took the coins from the cap on the floor and distributed them among his mates. The merry Andrew just kept dancing, ignoring them, while his girl companion, who was lying on the floor, "swore at them" and kicked him in the legs for not doing anything. Even the dog goes after them and barks. Once the commotion is over, the boy and the girl argue for a while, until they stand up and walk in their direction. "Vic then saw who it was." (309) It was Greg. He looked battered, wore an earring, his hair was bleached, and he had lost his front teeth. When Greg notices his father, grins "in an insane, rather mischievous way" and puts forward his cap. Dazed, Vic takes off his wallet to give

him some money. His visitors do the same, reluctantly, because the hands of the clown are filthy, and give him their spare change. Unexpectedly, Greg takes his father's wallet, "flipped it open, extracted two, three notes – twenties they might have been, no, fifties!" and throws it back to him. The Japanese and the Swede do not know what is going on. Close by, there is a police station, but Vic does nothing; neither does he care about what they might think. When Vic observes Greg, he is abashed – he looks like a marionette, "weightless," as if "he was not attached to anything," like there was no gravity to him. "'But he is attached to *me,*'" Vic shouts in his mind, and tells himself: "'This is the thing I was in panic about, that I knew was on the way and knew I had no power to prevent. Now it is here.'" (309)

When discussing Chapter 1, we mentioned that Vic asks Digger a favour in a business deal because he wants to make a major bid in the market. Basically, he wants to buy shares using Digger's name, because there is a limit to the number of shares he can buy in the market every six months: "'All we'd be using, Digger,' and he paused a moment before he could get it out, 'is your name.'" Digger at first feels uneasy, but when Vic mentions his legal name – "'Albert, isn't it?'" – he feels alleviated: "The unfamiliarity of it was at this moment a relief." (37) Digger accedes, but he will never feel at ease about it. Metaphorically, when Vic asks Digger this favour, he is corrupting the spirit of mateship they have been building over the years, and that had its grounds in their heroic survival in the POW camps in Malaysia. What Vic is doing, blinded by his need for recognition and success is using Digger as a means to achieve his chrematistic goal at the expense of their friendship. The spirit of the digger is finally tainted by Vic's materialism in an ultimate attempt to prove his manhood to the world: "It was a big gamble. He needed it. He needed the excitement, and the chance it offered to show, once and for all, what he was worth. When all was ready, fixed and about to go, he would lay his hand down and watch their faces." (311)

Digger realizes that there is a difference between the way he and Vic see the world. Vic sees the world as "a nail to be struck squarely on the head," but he does not believe in it. "His capacity to deal with it had to do with his conviction that it was there only insofar as he could act

on it." (297) On the other hand, Digger believes in the world as a complex entity that he cannot fathom. "A nailhead. That was clear enough," Digger tells himself. "Round, flanged, with ridges that allowed the hammerhead a grip. The weight of the hammer, too." But he can never see the world "steady enough or at a sufficient distance to comprehend what it was, let alone to act on it." (296) Vic catches a glimpse of what the world might actually be on the day of Mr Warrender's funeral. He is surprised to see so many people in it – after Greg and his nephew Alex had read some passages from the Bible, even a young scholar had delivered a touching speech in his memory, and he starts having a nagging feeling that he might have missed something important about him. During the wake, Greg and Alex start arguing, and Vic goes to see Ma, who had also excused herself. Remembering Pa's oddities, they cannot avoid feeling cheerful and even laughing at them. Cheered up, Vic goes into Mr Warrenders office, sits at his desk, and starts reading his poetry, something he had never done before. After an hour or so his head starts spinning. He does not understand much, but he is suddenly overcome by the "panicky sense of having missed the man entirely." This is how the narrative voice puts it: "What he felt in a quite physical way was the spinning of the earth under him at the very moment when he could also say to himself: 'But the room is still.' And then: 'If the world is like this and I have never properly got hold of it, what *have* I got hold of?'" (287) At this moment, Vic has a glimpse of Digger's vision on his own accord: "Digger was dizzied by the world," because "he had long since come to the conclusion that his perplexity about life, which did not prevent him from living it, was essential to him." (296)

As the novel ends, metaphors and images accumulate, making a lasting impression on the reader and increasing the suggestive effects of the novel. The last Chapter, Chapter 6 has 20 sections, each one numbered. Sections seventeen and eighteen happen exactly during the same day, from early in the morning until the evening, intertwining Vic's death with Jenny's remembrance of the child that was taken away from her in the Convent. In section nineteen, we learn that more or less on the same way of Vic's death, the market collapses and he goes broke. A

cataclysm of huge proportions puts everything in its place, impoverishing him and closing the novel.

Section 17 starts with Vic, waking up in fright, the first of a series of minor strokes that will assail him during the day and that will culminate in a heart attack: "The jolt he felt had taken place in his sleep." This first stroke leaves him with a sensation of estrangement from his own body: "He came back to earth now but the sense of strangeness he felt, of estrangement even, was of being in a body that was not his own." (313) This sensation of estrangement also leaves him sensuously and emotionally hypersensitive. First, we are told about the sensuous hypersensitivity: "For whole minutes at a time there was a luminosity round the edge of everything he looked at or touched, even the most ordinary objects, a coffee-machine, a polystyrene cup," (313) and then, we learn that the stroke has also emotionally unsettled him: "He felt a tenderness in himself that was childish since it attached itself to things it was foolish for a grown man to feel so much for. The propelling pencil he took up, for example, and the way it fitted his hand, the sun rings thrown on his desk by a water glass." (314) This sensation of elation continues all morning, while he checks prices in the stock market, calls Alex in an unusually good humoured way and jokes with him, which puts Alex on his guard, and calls Ellie for no other reason than he is happy, even though he decides to keep that for himself not to look foolish. In the afternoon, he decides to go to see Digger at the Crossing. But somewhere during "the fifty-kilometre drive the light changed, his mind darkened," (315) and the condition he had been in all day suddenly vanishes. He has a second stroke, the pain now exclusively physical: "His heart tightened, till the cramp in his chest was so painful and his arm so numbed that he could no longer trust himself to keep hold of the wheel." He gets out of the car and he starts raving. He realizes that what he had been dreaming that morning was not a dream "but an actual moment of his boyhood he had come back to," one of those moments when he thought he could bow like an arch and jump into the future on a life of his choosing. If Marge realizes before her death that she had not let the life she had wanted to

lead, and that she did not want her life, Vic feels, also just before he dies, that he has lived a estranged life, that the life he has lived is not his own:

> …But he must have come down that time, *one* of those times, in the wrong life. That was the only way he could explain now the otherness he felt in himself. *The wrong life.* So that everything that had happened to him, from that moment on, all of it, had occurred in another existence from the one he had till then been moving in and was intended for.
>
> Was that possible? Everything? (316)

Like Marge, Vic returns to his old, frightful self before he passes away. As the child he imagines falls back on earth again, Vic returns to the present, so that he regains consciousness at the exact same moment that the child, the other child he had carried all his life within him, touches ground. The full force of his descent throws him to the ground, and even though he tries to keep standing he succumbs. After an entire life, Vic is whole again:

> Once again he felt the force of things take hold and tug him down. And the time he came back into was the one he was in. He took the weight of it again, against his chest, in his belly and groin, and fell with the full force of his body on stones, little sharp-edged ones, and it stayed with him. (317)

More or less at the same time that this is happening, Jenny goes through her own ordeal. Section eighteen starts with a tableau of everyday peasant life. It is ten in the morning and Jenny is preparing scones, her long suit and, like Vic in the morning, she also feels particularly elated and good with herself, which is unusual: "The range was drawing just right, making a good heat, and Jenny was feeling unusually pleased with herself, which in her case meant pleased with the world, the way it settled around her this morning as if she was, for once, just right for it." But when the scones are ready and she takes them out of the oven, she is startled – there are thirteen. Jenny believes it is someone else who put the thirteenth scone on the tray – "She was always that careful" – and that it is prefigures a bad omen: "It was still thirteen. How? How had it happened? She was

always that careful. Someone – but who? – must have slipped the extra one in while her back was turned." (320-321) This meant something bad was going to happen to someone or something. "So who was it *for*? That was the question. Whose bad luck was it? And which of them was it?" (321) Jenny hesitates between throwing the scones to the magpies and trying to figure out which scone is the odd one out. If she makes a mistake, they will suffer the consequences, but if she throws the whole tray of scones to the magpies, one day they will have to starve for them: "*Waste not, want not*, that was the rule. If you did waste, then one day you would remember these scones and starve for 'em, and serve you right!" (321) Apprehensive about making the wrong choice, she closes her eyes, picks up a scone at random, and throws it to the magpies. She stays a while to make sure that one of the magpies eats it. "'Which one of you greedy buggers is gunna swaller bad luck?'" (321) Jenny asks. The word greedy comes up several times in reference to the magpies struggling to get the scone, which reminds the reader of Vic, the big shot of the novel. Finally, one of the magpies gets the scone and eats it, the greediest; the narrative voice confirms Jenny's view: "Greed had chosen. The greediest and strongest of them had got it." (322) She stays in the yard to see if the bird chokes with it, so as to make sure that she has got rid of the cursed one. However, she has things to do and, trusting her instincts, goes inside. About an hour later, while Jenny is pegging clothes out the clothesline, she hears a commotion in the scrub. Startled, she finds a feral cat suffering terribly, with half its head cut off: "Someone had sliced it away with the edge of a shovel." (322) When she starts looking for a rock to finish it off, she notices a human hand and sees Vic. The first thing that comes to her mind is that there is a relationship between the thirteenth scone and what has happened to him, even though she discards the possibility because she saw one of the magpies swallowing the scone: "Was he poisoned? Had *she* done it? But she'd given that scone to the magpies. She'd seen one of them eat it." When she eases Vic's collar and takes his hand, she realizes he was holding a stone in his hand. It is warm, as if he had vomited it: "About the size, too, of a scone. It was warm." (323) Jenny takes Vic in her arms, and starts rocking him, which reminds her of the baby that was taken away from her exactly forty-three years ago. Jenny is disconsolate and

starts crying. "Forty-three years old he would be now, wherever he was. And now, forty-three years later, *this*." (324) Jenny stands up and goes to get Digger.

What we have here is Vic's death contingently associated with the superstitious and magical world of women, the same juxtaposition of worlds we saw in *An Imaginary Life* concerning the world of Ryzaks' mother and the world of Ryzak and Ovid. Vic represents the world of the self-made man that, against all odds, succeeds in life, overcoming his insecurities and his fear of emasculation. He was the Man in the world of business in Australian society, all over the papers whenever his business made an impressive deal and the legend kept growing. Vic's life has been exceptional, but it was not meant to be. That is the reason for his final vision, when that other boy who was headed towards a hard and miserable life finally catches up with him, at the moment of his death. The appearance of Jenny and the kind of power she involuntarily sets in motion with the scones metaphorically puts Vic in his place, in the world of men where he belongs. Let us recall that Vic had taken his mother's side against his father, and that the success of his business was largely due to his intuitiveness, which is a female trait, and his association with Ma. Getting rid of the scone number thirteen, Jenny has felt "a kind of satisfaction at playing with such powers, bad luck and the possibility of a choking or worse, and of setting things right as well, getting them back into order again, since that extra scone had definitely been a mistake." (322) As in *An Imaginary Life*, it is finally the power of women that prevails and restores the natural order.

So, Vic finally finds redemption. It is in the last section that we see Vic as a child trying to thread a needle, when we know that he dies poor.

In the second last section, we come across Digger and Ellie at Ellie's place, walking in the gardens holding a cup of tea. Iris has been long dead and, unbeknownst to Vic, they have been friends for many years now. Digger used to have morning tea with Ellie on Thursdays, during his visits to Iris, but when Iris died he had seen no point in going down to the city any more, or it was too painful, so they had not seen each other for ages. However, they had kept a correspondence. First, it was postcards Ellie sent him from wherever her trips with Vic took her, and then it became

a serious correspondence where they would tell each other almost everything about their lives. Not everything, though. Digger notices that Ellie walks with a limp, and this little detail makes him wonder at the things their correspondence might have left unsaid: "This little change in her, and it wasn't, as he saw after a time, the only one, alerted him to how many things in her life their correspondence might not have covered. But all that meant was how much more there was to come." (325) It is now that we learn that Vic has died hours before the markets have collapsed. Ellie tells Digger, calmly now, that "in the evening they had been besieged by reporters," (326) but that later that same day they had all rushed to cover the news of the economic crash. We also learn that "The Needham's Group had been hit and hit badly." The narrative voice also lets us know in passing that, if you looked carefully in the papers, you would have been able to trace the "rise and fall from nothing to nothing" of Albert keen, a "phantom dealer in millions." Digger jokes that he is a ruined man, and Ellie does not know how to explain what Vic was up to: "'He was doing something, I don't know what. Alex knows. Something crazy. It wasn't illegal – or not quite, he wouldn't have done anything like that" (326). They sit for a while holding hands, and Digger asks her whether he can pay her a visit or she would prefer to continue with the letters. Playfully, Ellie asks him to ask her in writing: "'I don't know,' she said quietly. 'Why don't you *write* and ask me?'" (326)

The novel leaves us with a bitter taste. Vic dies, and Digger and Ellie will soon start dating, probably when a reasonable amount of time has passed to keep up appearances. We mentioned that the word "digger" is also the common noun used to refer to the Australian and New Zealand soldier, so that the character that bears this name is probably meant to shed some light upon this legacy. In his patriotic account of the Australian army, Lindsay emphasises that mateship is the spirit of the digger: "Mateship is the essential binding force of the Digger." (Lindsay 16) For Digger, dating Iris is a way to keep the memory of Mac alive in him, and probably Iris feels the same way – dating Digger is a way of keeping the memory of her first husband, who died in World War I, and his brother Mac alive. There is a continuum between Iris' first husband, Mac and

Digger, each successive male accumulating and embodying the qualities of those who preceded him. Likewise, Digger replaces Vic when he starts dating Ellie, so that there is continuity between Vic and Digger when the former dies. However, we have also seen that this legacy is a traumatic one. War has made its mark on the nation, an injury that will need time to heal. Digger is a cholera carrier and has lost all his teeth when he comes back from the front. Iris is more than twenty years older than him when he starts dating. Vic seemed whole but felt an emptiness inside that nothing could fill, and when Digger starts dating Ellie she has a limp. Digger is a compact character, but a compact character in the context of war. The life he leads, the women he dates are mediated by his war experiences. It is also a way of keeping the memory of war and the spirit of the Digger alive. In the POW camps, Digger was given the responsibility of storing in his head the names of the soldiers in the camp. If one name skipped his memory, he would disappear forever. There would be no trace left of him; he would be condemned to oblivion. "He wanted nothing to be forgotten and cast into the flames. Not a soul. Not a pin." (179) Digger lives as much in the past, in the company of the ghosts of his mates, as in the present. The digger "stands in" – in the double sense of this word – for his mates, sometimes literally, sometimes metaphorically.

Chapter 4: The Colonial Period: *Remembering Babylon* and *The Conversations at Curlow Creek*

After the publication of the novels about the Australian participation in the World Wars, Malouf decides to dig deeper into the roots of Australian identity, writing two novels about the origins of Australian colonisation. The first one, *Remembering Babylon* is set in the second half of the nineteenth century, and *The Conversations at Curlow Creek* in the first half. Even though there are references to the Aboriginal peoples of Australia, especially in *Remembering Babylon*, Malouf's novels are about the colonizer's experience in Australia. *Remembering Babylon*'s main character, Gemmy Fairley, is a white man who has spent several years among an Aboriginal tribe.

In the context of a patriarchal society that is based on hierarchical and binary relations of gender that are mutually excluding, both novels question the distinction between, on the one hand, Europeans, property owners and those who remain within the law and, on the other, the Aboriginal peoples, the dispossessed and those who transgress the law.

The "white black man" in *Remembering Babylon*

Three years after the publication of *The Great World* in 1990, David Malouf published what was to become his most successful and internationally known novel, *Remembering Babylon.* The same year of its publication it was shortlisted for the 1993 Man Booker Prize, and in 1996 it won the inaugural International IMPAC Dublin Literary Award.

The novel is set in a white settlement in the north of Queensland in the mid nineteenth century. The idea of the novel, that is, the character Gemmy, who is cast overboard from a ship at the age of thirteen near Bowen in the north of the Queensland coast; the brilliant words he utters at first contact with a white settlement after a spell of sixteen years among Aborigines: "Do not shoot, I am a British object;" some botanical descriptions from the flora of the place recorded at the time, and some details regarding the life of the Governor of New South Wales in Brisbane

are based in fact, but all else is the product of Malouf's imagination, as he himself is careful to warn the reader in an endnote at the end of the book:

> The words Gemmy shouts at the fence in Chapter 1 (the seed of this fiction) were actually spoken at much the same time and place, but in different circumstances, by Gemmy Morril or Morrell, whose Christian name I have also appropriated; otherwise this novel has no origin in fact. E. Gregory wrote a brief account of Morril's life from which I have taken the three descriptions of local flora at the beginning of Chapter 14. The Herbert letters in Bruce Knox's *Robert Herbert*: *Premier* provided some of the detail for Chapter 18. (183)

Malouf places *Remembering Babylon* in an earlier context than any of his other novels set in Australia. It begins in the mid nineteenth century, the action of the novel comprises no more than a couple of years, and ends with a Chapter in the distant future – more or less at the beginning of World War I.

Remembering Babylon was a timely novel. The story it tells would make a lasting echo and release much needed reconciliatory energy in Australia, especially in the mid 1990s and onwards into the twenty-first century. In 1992, Australia's highest court declared that the British government had discriminated and acted dishonestly against the Aboriginal peoples of the land when it declared Australia *terra nullius* and, upon this premise, declared it British national territory. Consequently, the by then Labour Party Prime Minister Paul Keating publicly acknowledged responsibility for the harm inflicted on Aboriginal peoples, the decimating of their population and the erosion of their ways of life and traditions: "'We took the traditional lands and smashed the original way of life,' Paul Keating stated. 'We brought the diseases. The alcohol. We committed the murders. We took the children from their mothers. We practised discrimination and exclusion.'" (Knightley 5) It is estimated that there was a population of about three quarters of a million by the time Arthur Phillip entered today's Sydney Harbour – then Port Jackson – in 1788, with a fleet of eleven vessels carrying about a thousand people, including the first cargo of convicts.

By 1900, there remained little less than a hundred thousand Aborigines. The original population will not be recovered until 2021. (*Wikipedia "Aboriginal Population in Australia"*) However, in spite of the massive evidence, when the Liberal Party candidate John Howard was elected Prime Minister in 1995, ruling for eleven years, he refused to acknowledge the validity of a report on the Stolen Generations – the Aboriginal children who had been taken away from their mothers and interned in State and Church institutions – and took back every proposal suggested by the Reconciliation Council which his predecessor had accepted. David Malouf took an active role in contesting the Liberal Party's new policies regarding indigenous peoples. He drafted, together with Aboriginal activist Jackie Huggins, (McGonegal 76) the apology contained in the Declaration of Reconciliation with indigenous peoples presented to the nation at the Sydney Opera House on Saturday, 27 May 2000, gathering more than half a million people on Harbour Bridge, (Kiernan 15) which culminated in the much celebrated Official Apology by the Prime Minister Kevin Rudd just a year after the Labour Party was re-elected into office, on 12th February 2008. (Rudd)

This revision of its past put Australia in line with a more global and widespread movement of reconciliation in which former colonial powers apologized and in some cases more or less successfully made up for conquest, expropriation and genocide of native populations on a world scale. The most popular of these movements took place in South Africa, when Apartheid was officially abolished in 1994 and a Truth and Reconciliation Commission was created to symbolically heal the nation by means of the acceptance of crimes against humanity by perpetrators and absolution on the part of its victims. Around more or less the same time, First Nations Peoples in Canada were involved in a similar process, struggling for recognition and for their legitimate rights over the land. As the title of the novel suggests, *Remembering Babylon* puts in the spotlight Australia's colonial past, thus inspiring a wave of critical reactions on the part of Australia's mainstream literary culture. According to Stuart Macintyre, Australia had to come to terms with the history of the country and the legitimate claim of its original inhabitants if it had to gain any

real sense of itself as a nation: "By embracing the Aboriginal past, non-Aboriginal Australians attached themselves to their country." (Macintyre 4)

Remembering Babylon was also a timely novel for a set of reasons of another order. In mainstream European culture, poststructuralist theories had been in vogue for about thirty years. The flag bearers Michael Foucault and Jacques Derrida in France, echoing in their works the civil rights and emancipation movements in the U.S. and Europe in the twentieth century, disentangled in the main threads of history and high theory sophisticated forms of oppression and ethnocentrism. Their work gave rise to a myriad of discourses, which aim was to deconstruct philosophical idealism, positivism and liberal humanism: post-structuralism, deconstruction, feminism, gender studies, postcolonial studies, new historicism, etc. As Jean-François Lyotard argued in *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, it was the end of the grand European narratives of emancipation and unrestrained progress, and time for revisionary metanarratives and to listen to the voices of the oppressed and minorities. (Lyoard) In the sense that *Remembering Babylon* is a novel set in the margins of Empire that deals with Aboriginality, it raises important issues of identity and questions familiar modes of representation that had always gone unchallenged in white European mainstream culture, including masculinity, sexuality and social class.

What about the new land the first settlers discovered? What did the first European settlers find out about the flora and fauna of the place when they landed on the shores of Australia? What about its indigenous peoples? On the one hand, Europeans came across Eucalypts for the first time in Australia, with its peeling bark and the blue haze it releases under intense heat. The rough bark of the Eucalypt is a protection against fire, which it stimulates in order to get rid of competitors for soil and nutrients. The marsupials, such as the several species of kangaroos and the koala, and the platypus and the echidna must have been a puzzle to early colonizers. The latter were somewhere in between the reptiles and the mammals in the evolutionary scale, the platypus having beak and feet similar to a duck's, whose offspring fed licking the milk from the skin of their

mother's belly. On the other hand, the Aborigines are considered the oldest living population and culture on the planet; archaeologists found out that they practiced cremation and ritual offerings as long as thirty thousand years ago, and that they might have been living in the continent of Australia for as long as sixty thousand years. There were about two hundred and fifty different Indigenous language groups in Australia at the time of colonization, and even if there was some basic trade among some of them, others remained remarkably isolated, for example the Ioras described by Robert Hughes in the opening Chapter of *The Fatal Shore,* with the consequent important differences in customs and habits that ensued. Generally speaking, the Aborigines were nomadic peoples without notions of agriculture, private property and kingship or similar power authority. This gave the impression to early settlers that the Aborigines were mere savages with no history, culture, politics, etc. They failed to recognize that they had other, more effective forms of socialisation better adapted to the landscape and the country than its colonizers. Regarding kingship, Hughes explains that all men, once initiated, held the same rights as any other elder, even if their elders held a special status as bearers of the folklore where their knowledge and traditions survived. In spite of that, the harshness of the nomadic lifestyle of the Ioras, which suits Hughes's lugubrious book title, did not prevent them from leaving their old men behind, in the same way that they got rid of any unwanted children by smashing their heads with a rock, or did not hesitate to make their women abort by punching them in the stomach in case of a surplus of population. (Hughes 1-18)

In contrast to Hughes' sombre description of the traditions and lifestyle of the Ioras, Stuart Macintyre presents a vision of Aboriginal culture in more positive terms, using the findings of more recent and exhaustive research. We might suspect him of doing so at the cost of subsuming some of their customs and traditions to contemporary Western values:

> Prehistorians (though the persistence of this term indicates that the new sensibility is incomplete) are struck by the remarkable longetivity and adaptability of hunter-gatherer societies. Demographers suggest that they maintained a highly

successful equilibrium of population and resources. Economists have found that they produced surpluses, traded, made technological advances, all with far less effort than agriculturalists. Linguists are struck by the diversity and sophistication of their languages. Anthropologists discern complex religions that guided such people's lives and movements, encoded ecological wisdom, assured genetic variety and maintained social cohesion. With their egalitarian social and political structure, far-flung trading networks and above all their rich spiritual and cultural life, the celebrated French anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss described the Australian Aborigines as 'intellectual aristocrats.' (Macintyre 11-12)

The uncanny, the familiar unfamiliar flora and fauna and the familiar unfamiliar presence of the Aborigines mould the profiles of the characters and taint every event in the novel. Most disturbingly, as the narrative voice tells us in *Remembering Babylon*, is the presence of Gemmy, not Aboriginal, but not white enough either to keep the settlement at ease: "It was the mixture of monstrous strangeness and unwelcome likeness that made Gemmy Fairley so disturbing…" (39) It is in this ambiguous conceptual territory where poststructuralist and postcolonial discourses conflated, and where *Remembering Babylon* was a very local and a very global novel at the same time.

In his speech "Australia's Postcoloniality" at the 1999 Modern Language Association Convention in Chicago, where he quotes Malouf's Boyer Lectures "A Spirit of Play" at large, Brian Kiernan expressed his concern about the complexity of articulating a nationalist discourse which was not chauvinistic or blatantly jingoistic that at the same time transcended the merely local:

Some postcolonial critics – I have in mind particularly some contributors to *Identifying Australia In Postmodern Times,* (1994) edited by Livio Dobrez and Bill Ashcroft – deplore the continuing concern with issues of national identity in contemporary politics and indeed in public consciousness. Inasmuch as they are opposing the poor old racist, sexist, and xenophobic Australian Legend one can only agree. Their post-structuralist, or post-modern, premises valorise diversity and

> plurality, hence multiculturalism – but then multiculturalism has been official policy for successive governments over the past quarter of a century. (Kiernan 14)

We can consider Malouf's *Remembering Babylon* an achievement in this regard.

In the course of our analysis on gender and masculinities in *Remembering Babylon*, we are going to use other novels to emphasize some points and better put our arguments. However, it is also important to bear in mind some referential narratives so as to better have an idea of the meanderings of the history of ideas from colonial to postcolonial discourse. After all, *Remembering Babylon* is a postcolonial novel about colonial Australia. In this sense, it is important to bear in mind that Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* is the paradigm of the adventure novels of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and Robinson Crusoe the paradigm of the outcast having to survive on his own on a deserted island. *Robinson Crusoe* portrays the moral obligation of Europe to civilize and convert to Christianity the heathen and barbarous Indigenes, symbolized by Friday. Interestingly, Friday is easily converted. In *Robinson Crusoe,* there is not the insurmountable abyss between European whites and natives that we will find in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, which reflects Victorian values whereby Empire justifies colonisation by placing Westerners and Africans at opposite, irreconcilable poles. *Heart of Darkness* is an ominous novel because it is the Dark Continent that finally conquers the European mind, as Kurtz finds out too late. Since it is greed that takes Western men to the heart of Congo in their search for white ivory, *Heart of Darkness* is already a critique of colonialism, and this in spite of the inherent racism of the novel in its portrayal of natives, as Chinua Achebe contends. (Achebe) Another landmark text in the allegorical discourses of the encounters between civilisation and nature is Rudyard Kipling's *Jungle Books*, because it offers rich allegoric and metaphoric insights into what it means to be human. Even if Kipling always believed in the moral and cultural superiority of the British, his heart always lay with the Hindus he had grown up with in India, and this relationship with India contains powerful elements of subversion. We are going to see that this is the case of Gemmy. At the end of *Remembering Babylon,* when Janet and Lachlan think about Gemmy and do not find words to define

him, they simply say "Gemmy, someone we loved." (177) Another landmark text is J.M Coetzee's *Foe*, which revisits *Robinson Crusoe* from the point of view of feminism. In this novel, Susan Barton lands on Robinson Crusoe's Island, to find an apathetic Robinson and a Friday who has been castrated, perhaps by Robinson himself. When they are finally rescued, Robinson dies on the way back to England. Susan Barton wants to tell her story, but Daniel Foe distorts it in a way that she is completely erased from the novel. Thus, the novel neatly conjures up the two issues that will be at the centre of our analysis: sexism and racism. (Coetzee) Finally, we are going to put the story of Gemmy in *Remembering Babylon* in dialogue with the story of Bobby Wabalanginy in *That Deadman Dance*, a beautiful novel of first contact written by Kim Scott, an Australian writer of Aboriginal descent that fictionalises the story of his people, the Noongar, in Albany, Australia. Kim Scott's story is postcolonial in the sense that it is a novel written by a self-acknowledged Aborigine who voices his people's side of the story, telling about their culture and traditions in a way that contests the colonial doctrine of *terra nullius* and claims a legitimate place of his people in the land.

We can gather from what we have just said that there is a distinction between colonial literature, for example *Robinson Crusoe,* which legitimizes the colonizers right to colonisation, and postcolonial literature, which questions this legitimisation or straightforwardly contests it in the name of First Nations Peoples. As a result, postcolonial criticism is concerned both with the literature written by European colonists, whatever their origin, for example Kipling in India and Malouf in Australia, and the literature written by indigenous peoples from the point of view of their native culture, for example Kim Scott's *That Deadman Dance*. In spite of the fact that cases such as Kipling's and Malouf's need some qualification – Kipling was born in India but educated in mainstream England, and Malouf's father is of Lebanese origin but he was born and raised in Australia and never learnt Arabic –, what is important is that these distinctions delineate distinct narrative voices. However, it is also important to bear in mind that these are provisional distinctions, because they depend to a large extend on the assigned intention that the critic gives to the narrative voice in each case. Thus, Abdul R. JanMohamed, in his article "The Economy of

Manichean Allegory: The Function of Racial Difference in Colonialist Literature," argues that on some occasions, native writers, such as V.S. Naipaul, "fulfil the author function of the colonialist writer," (JanMohamed 82) whereas Homi Bhabha has acknowledged Naipaul as the true inspiration for his subversive thinking: "It was the Indo-Caribbean world of V.S. Naipaul's fiction that was to become the diversionary, exilic route that led me to the historical themes and theoretical questions that were to form the core of my thinking." (Bhabha xii)

Remembering Babylon opens with the statement "one day in the middle of the nineteenth century." (1) What vision did the British have of the native peoples around the globe in general? Patrick Brantlinger, in his article "Victorians and Africans: The Genealogy of the Myth of the Dark Continent" surveys Victorian England, its abolitionist and Imperial policies, and the accentuated racism that ensued during the time. The views he presents in his article reflect the views the settler colony has of Gemmy in the novel.

Brantlinger argues that the slave trade required an objective knowledge of native peoples to ensure their control and subservience, and that his kind of knowledge extended well into the beginning of the nineteenth century. (Brantlinger 191-192) Britain was the first European country to abolish slavery by Law Decree, in the Slave Abolition Act of 1833. (*Wikipedi "Slavery Abolition Act 1833"*) According to Brantlinger, several factors contributed to create a favourable public opinion and official policy sympathetic to the abolitionist movement in the eighteenth century. Firstly, the Romantic vision that primitive peoples lived happily and freely in a bountiful Eden before European colonisation. Secondly, in the Enlightenment precept according to which all people should be treated equally before the law. Thirdly, the active attitude of denunciation by several Romantic poets, including William Wordsworth, William Blake, Samuel Coleridge, Lord Byron, Shelley and others. And, last but not least, in an attitude of denunciation of the atrocities and cruelty of slavery that was fed by sensationalist images of tortured and mutilated bodies, and

that was reinforced during the Victorian period, extending well until the end of the nineteenth century. (Brantlinger, especially 189-192)[98]

However, the fact that Britain bore the flag of abolition does not mean that this policy did not benefit its economic and strategic interests abroad, or that it viewed primitive peoples without prejudice. Indeed, Britain would become the leading Imperial nation in the nineteenth century, accentuating sexist attitudes at home and racist stereotypes abroad. How was that possible?

Brantlinger cites Eric William's thesis in *Capitalism and Slavery* that the slave trade allowed Britain's Industrial Revolution to take off and that, after Britain lost its colonies in the American Revolution, it was in its own self-interest to support abolition so as to weaken its competitors, whose economy still depended largely on the slave trade and plantation economy. Still, he contends that the abolitionists and explorers' will to civilize was genuine. (Brantlinger 186)

Two new factors contributed to the Imperial turn of British expansion and the recrudescence of racist stereotypes. On the one hand, Britain felt the moral duty to bring light into darkness, which meant that it had to portray the African continent as increasingly corrupt and evil in order to justify itself. Like explorers such as Livingstone, "missionaries were strongly tempted to exaggerate "savagery" and "darkness" in order to rationalize their presence in Africa." (Brantlinger 197) Moreover, the initiative was doomed to failure because the British simply wanted to import their own system of laws and customs. As Homi Bahbha contends in *The Location of Culture*, it is a bit preposterous to replace a native culture's customs and traditions with the British Constitution and pretend they can become an independent state on that premise, when the true aim is that they simply become a British colony. (Bhabha, specially Chapters 4 and 6) On the other hand, the findings in the new science of evolutionary anthropology led by Darwin caused mixed feelings among the population at large, even among scientists themselves. Some scientists of the

[98] More generally, the abolitionist movement was documented by non-conformist Eighteenth and nineteenth century poets, including Hannah More, Anne Yearsley, Laetitia Barbauld, Amelia Opie, and William Cowper.

Ethnological Society split from the Anthropological Society on the premise that the Negro was a different species. But even Darwinists made some rationalisations in order to justify their own views: "Evolutionary anthropology often suggested that Africans, if not nonhuman or a different species, were such an inferior "breed" that they might be impervious to "higher influences." (Brantlinger 201) These views would inevitably disembogue in the first eugenicist theories applied to human populations, for example the Australian assimilation policies carried out during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries we can witness in the movie *Rabbit Proof Fence*. (Noyce)

We find an echo of this uneasiness in the following excerpt from *Remembering Babylon*, when the narrative voice tells the reader what it was like for the settlers to stand in front of an Aboriginal:

> What you fix your gaze on is the little hard-backed flies that are crawling about in the corner of its bloodshot eyes and hopping down at intervals to drink the sweat of its lip. And the horror it carries to you is not just the smell, in your own sweat, of a half-forgotten swamp-world going back deep in both of you, but that for him, as you meet here face to face in the sun, you and all you stand for have not yet appeared over the horizon of the world, so that after a moment all the wealth of it goes dim in you, then is cancelled altogether, and you meet at last in a terrifying equality that strips the last rags from your soul and leaves you so far out on the edge of yourself that your fear now is that you may never get back. (39)

In his book *Men and Masculinities,* Stephen M. Whitehead has emphasised that the roles of conquest and Empire building have been reserved to men, as the sphere where they can prove their masculinity and avoid emasculation. What he calls "the heroic male project" projects onto these male endeavours an aura of mysticism from which women and children are excluded, and which confer on men a certain status. In fact, the insatiable quest for an unattainable ideal of manhood based on individuality, endurance and conquest ends up revealing a vicious circle: a human need for nurture that is repudiated because it effeminates. We will recall the case of Patrick White's *Voss,* who organises an exploration party in search of pasture that ends up in tragedy. In

the middle of their journey, Voss declares himself to Laura, a weak and lonely figure herself whose only purpose is to sustain Voss in his delusions of grandeur. At bottom, the inscrutable and cold-hearted Voss cannot keep it together without a connection to his feminine side. (P. White, *Voss*) Whitehead also contends that the men who aspire to the heroic ideal of manhood often end up caught in a vicious circle of escape and return, what we could call the Ulysses syndrome. He cites the example of the narrator in Jack Kerouac's *On the Road*, and it was also the case of Digger's father Billy Keen. Finally, Whitehead highlights the fact that explorers and Empire builders construct a certain idea of the nation that privileges certain ethnic groups in detriment of others at the same time that politically and culturally marginalizes women. (Whitehead 117-123)

In Victorian England, the heroes of the time were the great explorers, such as Livingstone and Stanley. Their explorer diaries, in spite of not appearing in literary Anthologies, were best sellers for contemporary standards. They had the same status as today's rock stars:

> …Livingstone's *Missionary Travels* sold seventy thousand copies and made its author wealthy and so famous that he had to avoid situations where he might be mobbed by admirers. If Livingstone was already a national hero in the late 1850s, he was a national saint by the time of his last African journey in 1872. (Brantlinger 195)

The business was so lucrative, that an explorer literature quickly emerged. This literature reflects the subservient role of women and natives, whose roles perfectly adapted to the megalomaniac fantasies of men. In the novel *Ulu: An African Woman,* written in 1888, Kenyan explorer Joseph Thomson tells about a Scottish explorer in Kenya named Gilmour who initially gets engaged to an African girl, Ulu. However, when he meets the young blonde and blue-eyed daughter of the local missionary, he realizes his error. Gilmour and the missionary's daughter are meant for each other, and they adopt a paternalistic attitude towards Ulu, whom they try to civilize. One day, the ferocious Massais capture Ulu and the missionary's daughter. When Gilmour rescues them, Ulu conveniently sacrifices herself so that the two white colonizers can finally end up

together, which they were meant to since they had met. Likewise, in Haggard's *King Solomon's Mines,* written in 1885, Captain John Good has a romance with a native, Foulata, who also conveniently dies at the end of the novel. (Brantlinger 208-211) Intermarriage was perceived as something unnatural.

As we have done in previous Chapters, we provide a summary of the novel as we go along, analysing its most salient points concerning gender and masculinities. In this way, first we will enquire about the ontological status of Gemmy from the point of view of the colonizers – his presence is a malaise in the colony. Then, we will summarize the gender issues that come up among the characters in the novel. After that, we will revisit Gemmy's ontological status from his point of view and from the point of view of those who get closest to him: the McIvor family and Mr Frazer, the minister. This new vision of Gemmy will humanize him and show the injustice of which he is a victim. This will lead us to the analysis of the male anxiety that Gemmy raises in the colony, especially among the most vulnerable and wicked, and the difficult position he places the McIvor family in. After that, we will open a brief parenthesis to analyse the importance the British novel has had in propagating the values and culture of Empire, and its responsibility in carrying out a psychic colonisation more effective than the territorial one. In particular, using Edward S. Said's *Culture and Imperialism,* we will analyse how Ms Hutchence and Miss Leona Lopez rewrite the values portrayed in novels such as Jane Austen's in the colony, and how the story of Gemmy back in England before he embarks on a ship to Australia revisits the society of Charles Dickens' novels. Finally, we will join Lachlan Beattie and Janet McIvor fifty years later at the end of the novel, when they recall the figure of Gemmy, cross- and Christ-like on the fence, the first time they caught sight of him.

The novel opens with Lachlan Beattie and his cousins, Janet and Meg, playing at the confines of the fenced settlement. Lachlan imagines they are explorers somewhere in Russia, following the track of wolves, after the explorer adventures he has read about at school. He is holding a stick, which he pretends is a rifle, and their dog tries to follow his game even though he

does not quite get the gist of it. The girls, especially Janet, are not much into it. Suddenly, the dog smells something and runs towards the fence, where all of a sudden they can make up a figure running towards them. Lachlan panics: "A black!" he tells himself. The man, thin, long and odd-limbed climbs the fence and stands balanced with his feet on top of it at the sight of Lachlan's "gun" and of Flash jumping at his heels. Not knowing where the percipient words come from: "'Do not shoot,' he shouted. 'I am a B-b-british object!" (3) Unable to keep his balance, he finally falls on his fours. They take him to the settlement, Lachlan in front, menacingly pointing him with his stick, even if they both know it is pretence. In the settlement, Gemmy causes a commotion. They are not used to anything much disturbing the ordinary lives they have. By means of gesticulations and the little English he remembers, with the added difficulty of his stammering, and showing them the worn-out jacket around his waist, Gemmy lets them know that he is one of them. However, he is so emaciated, grotesque – made odder still by the limp in one of his legs –, and his facial features and expressions so distorted, that all they summon up is that there is something terribly wrong with Gemmy: "Bad enough if he was what he appeared to be, a poor savage, but if he was a white man it was horrible." (12) During the guessing game, he takes a hammer from a youth called Hector Gosper, and they engage in a tug of war. When Hector finally lets go off the hammer, he resents that some of his friends cheered for Gemmy. At the beginning, Lachlan is proprietorial about Gemmy. Janet complains about it, claiming that it was Flash who first spotted Gemmy and that it was the three of them who found him. When Gemmy gesticulates and mimics, Lachlan is one of the quickest to guess what he wants to say and the word he needs, so that when the Minister in the settlement, Mr Frazer, and the schoolmaster, Mr Abbot, sit Gemmy at a school desk so as to write down his story, they take Lachlan with them. However, Lachlan soon becomes so boisterous that they send him out, humiliating him in front of his classmates, who are watching what is going on inside through the windows of the school building: "Deeply humiliated before so many witnesses, who were only too happy to see him brought down, Lachlan departed, but comforted himself with the thought that in dismissing him they had lost

their one chance of getting at the truth." (14-15) Mr Frazer figures out that Gemmy was sent overboard a ship about sixteen years ago at age thirteen, and that he has lived among Aborigines all this time. Under the intense heat and the theatricality of the situation, Mr Abbot soon feels aggrieved at playing the role of mere clerk to the minister, introducing one or two words of his own to the account Mr Frazer makes him write down. When he realizes that the minister does not notice his insubordination when checking on what he has written down, he is bold enough to alter some minor facts. "The thought of this scrap of mistruth, deliberately introduced among so much that was mere guesswork on the minister's part, not to say sentimental fantasy, appealed to his sense of the absurd; he delighted in it, even if he was the only one who would ever know it was there." (17) At the end of the session, when Mr Frazer lets Gemmy hold the seven pages where they have written down his life, he feels exhausted. Gemmy believes sorcery has been the essence of the occasion, and that the seven sheets contain the essence of his own life. "Was that the smell of his life, his spirit, the black blood they had drained out of him?" Gemmy tells himself. "No wonder he felt weak." (18)

As it is often the case in Malouf's novels, the first Chapter already contains the seed of all the important elements in *Remembering Babylon*: the uncanny figure of Gemmy and the uneasiness he causes among the men in the colony; the gender war between Janet and Lachlan, and Lachlan's natural exertion of force and authority towards his cousins on the grounds of his being male, even if he is just a boy; bullying as the main sort of socialisation between men and boys, reflected in the hurt pride of Hector and Lachlan, which tells us that everyone is very sensitive to slights in front of their peers; the frustration with authority, reflected in Mr Abbot's rebelliousness; the innocence of the McIvor children when they claim Gemmy for themselves in contrast to the repulsion he causes among the grown-ups in the colony; the power of writing over Gemmy, etc.

In the next Chapter, we are told Gemmy's story among the Aborigines, from the moment he was left stranded on the shores of North Queensland until he joins the white settlement. An aboriginal tribe picks him up and looks after him until he recovers. The first impression the natives

have of Gemmy highlights his liminal nature. "What was it?" they ask themselves while tending him. "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?" (20) However, their first impression will endure. When the Aborigines apprehensively listen to his cries in sleep, they believe that he is suffering because, although he looks like a man, he still does not look like one of their own: "He was a tormented spirit. The cries he uttered in his sleep, the terrors that assailed him, were proof that although he had the look of a man, he was not one, not yet." (25) Due to his liminal status, the Aborigines are always reluctant towards Gemmy, but he always fights to make a place for himself among them, and when they leave on their nomadic journeys, he simply follows them. "Since he had somehow found his way into the world, his object, like any other creature's, was to stay in it and by any means he could. He had a belly to be fed." (23) The Aborigines will cunningly try to leave him behind on several occasions, unsuccessfully. Slowly, he immerses himself in their culture, even though they always deal with him "guardedly", in "a half-apprehensive way that was proper to an in-between creature." (25)

What is salient about the second Chapter is that the story is told from the point of view of Gemmy and the Aboriginal people he lives with, giving the reader an insight into their point of view. Thus, the narrative voice decentres the colonial gaze, alternatively putting the reader in the shoes of the native other and the marginalized Gemmy. In contrast with *Robinson Crusoe,* for example, whose story is told from a Eurocentric, paternalistic and factual first person perspective in order to emphasize the verisimilitude of the events he is recounting: "I Was born in the Year 1632, in the City of York, of a good Family, …", (Defoe 5) *Remembering Babylon* is a polyphonic novel that delves into the visions, dreams, longings and fears of its characters, whose voices are moulded differently depending on their age, gender, social background and ethnicity, if we include the second Chapter, where the narrative voice takes us into the thoughts of the Aboriginal people. Regarding the last point, there was some controversy at the time of *Remembering Babylon*'s publication, on the grounds that portraying the Aboriginal peoples' thoughts and culture the

author had overstepped the bounds of legitimate representation. However, the critics finally gave the novel the credit it deserved. (Randall 126-127) Retrospectively, we can argue that imaginatively inhabiting the Aboriginal world and speaking for it, Malouf was giving the Aboriginal people a voice in his own fiction, opening the doors to dialogue and looking for common ground between the two cultures. Moreover, there are few instances when the narrative voice speaks for the natives: in the second Chapter, which is one of the shortest Chapters and, later on, very briefly in Chapter nine, when two Aborigineees visit Gemmy to let him know that they are leaving on one of their nomadic journeys. Finally, some of Malouf's critics did not take into account that Gemmy is not Aborigine: he is a European who after spending a seventeen-year spell among Aborigines, returns among the English.

Living among Aborigines, Gemmy soon loses the poor English he has and is incorporated into the Aboriginal worldview by means of storytelling. It is interesting to compare the similar terms in which the McIvor children and the Aboriginal tribe register the foreign presence of Gemmy. In both accounts, there is an emphasis on his liminal status. We have seen that the Aborigines cannot clearly distinguish whether Gemmy is a "sea-creature" or a "half reborn" spirit – a pale, feeble one. The narrative voice engages in an imaginative recreation of the way the Aborigines incorporate Gemmy into their culture, their stories about the Dreaming time, which uncannily resembles the way Lachlan Beattie sees Gemmy for the first time.

This is the way the Aboriginals see Gemmy:

> How, when they found him he had still been half-child, half sea-calf, his hair swarming with spirits in the shape of tiny phosphorescent crabs, his mouth stopped with coral; how, ash-pale and ghostly in his little white shirt, that long ago had rotted like a caul, he had risen up in the firelight and danced, and changed before their eyes into a skinny human child. (25)

And this is what Lachlan Beattie sees as soon as he recovers his senses while Gemmy is standing on the boundary fence:

> But it wasn't a raid, there was just one of them; and the thing, as far as he could make it out through the sweat in his eyes and its flamelike flickering, was not even, maybe, 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, was hopping and flapping towards them out of a world over there, beyond the no-man's-land of the swamp, that was the abode of everything savage and fearsome, and since it lay so far beyond experience, not just their own but their parents' too, of nightmare rumours, superstitions and all that belonged to Absolute Dark. (2)

Like the Aboriginals who first come across Gemmy, the McIvor children are not sure they are seeing a man when they see Gemmy teetering on the boundary fence. Again, the narrative voice turns to the supernatural and to the continuities between nature and mankind when describing Gemmy as a being who has no identifiable shape or identity, someone who has been caught between different orders of being. If, when he arrives among the Aboriginal people Gemmy is compared to a sea calf that has not successfully transformed into a human, when he stumbles upon the McIvor children he is similarly compared to a scarecrow, then to a bird who has transformed into a human but whose process of transformation has not been completed. The comparison to the scarecrow reminds us that the colonial encounter is never far from parody.

Let us raise some objections now. Isn't Malouf succumbing to an ethnocentric bias when he describes with almost identical terms the way the McIvor children and the Aboriginal peoples see Gemmy? Or is Malouf, more profoundly, subverting Western traditional modes of representation and advocating a more imaginative, fresher, and playful vision of the world? A world not seen through the eyes of adults, but through the eyes of children: a world rich with possibilities. After all, when Gemmy joins the settlement, the adult settlers see a white man who has been made hopeless and execrable after his sixteen-year spell among Aborigines. When the

Aborigines find him on the shores of Queensland, they see a pale, half-sea calf, half-human creature in between two worlds. As a truth-value, there is not much difference between a vision of Gemmy that sees him as undernourished and mistreated and one that sees him as a pale, tormented and feeble spirit, not fully reborn.

At the core of these notions there are Western distinctions based on age and gender at play. Privileging the point of view of children through rich metaphors and visual images and linking it with the way the Aborigines see the world, Malouf is turning upside down prejudiced forms of Western representation according to which primitive societies were perceived as children. In patriarchal societies, there is the implicit belief that a man is more mature, rational and self-possessed than a woman, and this distinction is transposed into the difference between adulthood and childhood, civilized and uncivilized, etc. When analysing *Johnno*, we saw how problematic these distinctions are, because they discriminate between mainstream society and its other. That is the reason why Dante feels that he does not fit socially at the end of the novel; that he grows old but that he will never grow up, like "an aging child." (144) In the same vein, *Remembering Babylon* suggests the possibility of another scale of values in a colonial context. First, privileging the point of view of children and making a parallelism between the way children see the world and the Aboriginal people see the world. Secondly, humanising Gemmy through a rich narrative and presenting him as a child although he is almost thirty when he reaches the white settlement. By the end of the novel, when Lachlan and Janet look back on their childhood, they realize that as they grew into adulthood, they distanced themselves from Gemmy, "someone we loved." (177) As a postcolonial novel, *Remembering Babylon* responds to colonialism, subverting the hierarchical relationship between civilised and primitive societies. We will see as we proceed how colonialism is entirely informed by gender relationships and a martial definition of masculinity.

Chapter 2 ends when Gemmy joins the white settlement. After living with the Aboriginal people for sixteen years, there is the rumour that a white colony has settled on the coast, and one of the old women who knows the country takes Gemmy as close as she can to the coast. Gemmy

spends a few days spying on the settlement, listening to their talk, stealthily taking the food they give the chickens, remembering words of suddenly familiar objects. Perhaps influenced by the vision the Aborigines had given him of himself, he acknowledges the existence of another self within him, someone he had only come across in dreams, and whose ways and speech strangely resembles the people he is observing. One day, impulsively, he makes for the settlement, and when he climbs the boundary fence is confronted by Lachlan Beattie's stick gun and Flash jumping at his heels. Believing that words would save him – "It was the words he had to get hold of. It was the words that would recognise him." –, Gemmy exclaims, astonished at what he hears himself saying: "*Do not shoot. I am a British object.*" (29)

One of the objects that Gemmy sees while spying on the settlement, and that symbolically suggests the chasm that separates him from the white settlement is an axe: "The word flew into his head as fast and clear as the flash and whistle of its breath. *Axe. Axe.* Circles of meaning rippled away from the mark it blazed in the dark of his skull." (27) It is ironic that a little later, when Gemmy is running towards the settlement, he naively believes that all that separates him from the small colony is a distance that can be crossed, a difference that can be bridged: "He was running to prove that all that separated him from them was ground that could be covered. He gave no consideration to what might happen when he arrived." (29) It is ironic because the distance will turn out to be insurmountable. The difference separating "us" from "them" seems to be neatly partitioned.

Whoever has read *Remembering Babylon* has been captivated by the powerful image of Gemmy standing at the boundary fence, arms outstretched, the clear sky behind him. The image, like first contact stories and Hollywood Westerns is another cultural allegory all on its own – the white or human who has accumulated a special knowledge or skills after a spell with natives or in the jungle, for example Nathaniel Hawkeye, also called Natty Bumppo in *The Last of the Mohicans,* or more recently Hugh Glass in the film *The Revenant*; or, perhaps more pertinently here, since the first ones who get a glimpse of Gemmy are the McIvor children, Tarzan and Mowgli. Gemmy is

a white that has been assimilated into the Aboriginal culture, and there he stands on top of the fence, his head thrown back in silent agony, the perfect birdlike silhouette against the sky. However, the figure of Gemmy deconstructs the colonial allegory. What we have here is a postcolonial allegory – a harmless and naive creature or a fearful monster, we will have to see, in between two worlds, looking for a recognisable shape and a stable identity that permanently seems to elude him. Like Tarzan and Mowgli, Gemmy has been transformed by his spell among the blacks. However, he does not come back a hero; there is nothing to commend and no special aura around him. On the contrary, what the colony sees in the figure of Gemmy is that such a spell may dehumanize a man in the eyes of his native culture. As one of the settlers puts it after observing Gemmy for a while: "Could you lose it? Not just language, but *it. It.*" (36)

What is "*It*"? "*It*" means everything that can be predicated of the subject of the sentence, in other words, the character speaking. As such, it comprises an unlimited number of propositions, some of them contradictory and, consequently, this "*it*" is difficult to grasp. Needless to say, this attitude reveals the most blatant form of ethnocentrism. Nevertheless, it is worth delving into the mystery of it, not so much to dispel its mystery as to get a glimpse of David Malouf's literary skills in creating such an iconic character as Gemmy.

One of the first things we notice about Gemmy is that he does not stand his ground; he is timorous; he does not act like a man. Hence, when he falls from the boundary fence, fails to face the kids and the little kelpie, and starts whimpering and hopping about, Lachlan feels "disturbed and a little disgusted by this display of unmanliness." (5) In effect, a thirty year old who does not act like one – that is another bias: age bias, with which we will deal in the last Chapter – that is, sure of himself, in control, reasonable, brave, etc. and lets himself be bullied by a kid, provokes contempt. Secondly, Gemmy does not look like a man, in particular regarding some facial features and his way of being: "The man… showed his blackened teeth, which were ground down to the stumps, and did a little lopsided dance, then looked foolish." (5) He also has an eyebrow missing, which further estranges him. The narrative voice emphasises how Gemmy's facial features

defamiliarise what we take for granted in our dealings with others: "one of his eyebrows was missing. Strange how unimportant eyebrows can be, as long as there are two of them. It gave his face a smudged appearance." (7) Gemmy does not behave like a normal person either. When he is under stress, he hops about, whimpers, grins, recoils and raises his arm to protect himself; otherwise, he may pay attention for a while but soon looks foolish or distracted; anything but keeping his composure. Gemmy has an infirm hold on the world. Sometimes, he seems to have lost all notion of his existential coordinates, of who or where he is: "He screwed his face up, grinned, looked interested, then, in a lapse of courage or concentration, went mute and glanced about as if he did not know, suddenly, how he had got there or where he was." (7) Thirdly, the poor hold Gemmy has of the English language. The first words he utters on the fence come from deep inside him, but he has no control over them. Later on, in the colony, when he wants to show that he knows the language, he embarks on a random series of words that lighten the situation but prove, yet again, Gemmy's peculiarity. The words come to his mind spontaneously: "he banged his head with the flat of his hand and 'H-h-head' he hooted, then looked alarmed as if the word had popped out without his will." (12) As he keeps trying, more words come to him. They have no connection, they are mere occurrences that make the children laugh and infuriate the adults: "'B-b-beard' he yelled – again, it was with him now, and would not go away – 'foot', holding one up and dancing awkwardly on the other; then, with an appeal to what he knew was the comic side of things, 'arse,' and slapped his meagre buttocks." (13) But as he finds the words, Gemmy notices insecurity, a tremor that overcomes him: a symptom that he is not his whole self when speaking this language. He stammers: "It belonged to someone he had thought was gone, lost, and here it was on his lips again. (…) A weakness that was inseparable, perhaps, from the tongue itself. It dampened him a little. It set him back. But he swallowed hard and defied it." (12) Finally, there is the issue of Gemmy's whiteness. This is perhaps where his figure is most troubling. He is referred to as "the black white man." (9, 63) We know that he was born in England, where someone had already said about him: "'Imitation of a boy it is!'" (110) which means that even in England, his

hometown, as a kid, Gemmy had no secure identity. He was not perceived as another boy, one among many. He was queer. Twenty years later, the people in the colony perceive Gemmy as worse than that, as "a parody of a white man" and an "imitation gone wrong":

> … He was a parody of a white man. If you gave him a word for a thing, he could, after a good deal of huffing and blowing, repeat it, but the next time round you had to teach it to him all over again. He was imitation gone wrong, and the mere sight of it put you wrong too, made the whole business somehow foolish and open to doubt. (35)

The fact that Gemmy was born white and they don't recognize him as one of their own raises profound anxieties among the men in the colony. Clearly, in their eyes Gemmy's case proves that race is no guarantee against abjection and savagery. Even though there is abjection and savagery in England, as a result of extreme poverty, in a colonial context its manifestation in a white man who has acquired an Aboriginal look and customs means something completely different. Or, put otherwise, it means that both cultures are not so different, jeopardising the whole Imperialist project. However, the colonisers cannot see that because their superiority and self-steem, what keeps them going is precisely this difference. The mere thought that they or their children could be in Gemmy's shoes makes them shiver:

> He had started out white. No question. When he fell in with the blacks – at thirteen, was it? – he had been like any other child, one of their own for instance. (That was hard to swallow.) But had he remained white?
>
> They looked at their children, even the smallest of them chattering away, entirely at home in their tongue, then heard the mere half-dozen words of English this fellow could cough up, and even those so mismanaged and distorted you could barely guess what he was on about, and you had to put to yourself the harder question. Could you lose it? Not just language, but *it*. *It*. (36)

One last note: the presence of Gemmy proves *a contrario* Homi Bhabha's claim in "Of Mimicry and Man" that there is no origin of presence that the colonial subject – or text – can imitate, because the whole notion of an original that can be repeated and represented is a contradiction in terms. If they cared enough to look, the British would feel their own selves tremble and unhinge in front of the abject and poorest in London. There would be no need for the specular glimpse of the colonial subject: "I want to turn to this process by which the look of surveillance returns as the displacing gaze of the disciplined, where the observer becomes the observed and 'partial' representation rearticulates the whole notion of *identity* and alienates it from essence." (Bhabha 127)

Later on, we will come back to Gemmy's ontological status in positive terms, but this negative description from the point of view of the colonisers strategically places us in the right theoretical framework to analyse the gender biases that the novel denounces.

But before we analyse gender as it is represented in *Remembering Babylon,* I would like to take a brief detour. The image of Gemmy standing on the boundary fence of the settlement, symbolically separating or bridging two worlds, the familiar and secure world of the settlement from the unknown and fearful world of the outback, has had a lasting impact on Australian postcolonial criticism and literature. Most recently, Kim Scott has his main character, Bobby Wabalanginy in *That Deadman Dance* assimilate to the British culture, and play a similar symbolical role on several occasions in the story.

Kim Scott sets the action of the novel near Albany on the West Coast of Australia, the dwelling place of the Noongar, his Aboriginal forebears, and where first contact was initially described as "friendly", as he himself points out in an interview on the ABC News on occasion of *That Deadman Dance* being awarded the 2011 Victorian Premier's Literary Award. (Scott, *Interview with Author Kim Scott*) Bobby is conceived at the time of first contact, so that he grows up between two worlds, becoming Dr Cross's apprentice as a child, helping him and learning the ways of the white man. Dr Cross is a sensible man with principles who is the major landowner of the area. He

is aware that they need the Aborigines to survive and to help them in the colony, so that he does whatever is in his hands to create a friendly atmosphere between the two cultures. The first occasion in the novel that recalls the image of Gemmy standing on the boundary fence involves Bobby, whose parents die of flu and, having caught the flu himself, dawdles into the white settlement, enters one of the soldiers' tents, and lies there. When a soldier goes into the tent and sees Bobby, he believes he is dead, and when the word goes around, the Noongars believe one of the men of the settlement has killed the boy and, following native custom, they expect to spear one of them in return. Dr Cross tries to avoid the worst, but at the climax of the tension between the Noongar and the white settlement, Bobby suddenly recovers consciousness and steps on his uncle Wunyeran and Dr Cross' shoulders, bringing about a catharsis that symbolizes the brotherhood of the two peoples:

> Those two men, with the tiny boy on their shoulders, walked away from the barracks with the soldiers and wives, their children and the prisoners, too, on one side, and the Noongar men on the other. People had stretched out in a line each side to see the boy and the two men, and spears and the rifles pointed up to the sky as Cross and Wunyeran carried the boy who came to be known as Bobby on their shoulders, carried him between them. He stood high in the sky for everyone to marvel at, and he stood on their shoulders. (Scott, *That Deadman Dance* 113)

The next time Bobby stands on a settler and a Noongar's shoulders has to do with sickness and death as well. One of Bobby's uncles falls sick, and when they have Dr Cross examine him he regretfully tells them that there is nothing he can do about it. Again, some Noongar believe the white settlers are to blame for this, and want to spear somebody as payback, even if Dr Cross himself is crying at their loss. Suddenly, Bobby touches his uncle and he resuscitates. Bobby briefly takes his uncle's place, and when Menak – one of the eldest of the Noongars – and Dr Cross touch

him, he opens his eyes and climbs onto their shoulders in celebration of the miraculous recovery again:

> And then Bobby touched the dead man, and the dead man sat up. He came alive and got to his feet, saying how very tired he was, and went to his woman. Her hair was wet with blood and her face smeared with tears and he took her hands in his.
>
> Menak cried out because where the dead man had been there was a little boy, Bobby Wabalanginy. And now he seemed like the one who was dead. But as Menak and Dr Cross touched him he sat up like a sleepwalker, and the two men lifted the boy as they rose to their feet together, and Bobby Wabalanginy climbed until he was standing on their shoulders with a hand in each of theirs. All the people at the camp moved into two lines and joined their voices together and raised their eyes to Bobby as he went between them. (Scott, *That Deadman Dance* 131)

Finally, as the novel unfolds, Bobby comes across an ominous brief re-enactment of the meeting between cultures he had triumphantly staged twice. He sees two women on a cart driven by two mules, and sitting behind, two Aborigines like himself, a white boy sitting in the middle with both his arms around their shoulders, who mocks at him: "Standing between them, bracing himself with a hand on each of their shoulders, was a boy not much older than Bobby himself; a red-haired boy who poked out his tongue. Frowned." (Scott, *That Deadman Dance* 159)

As long as he is a child and the settler community small, Bobby can move easily between cultures. One of the characteristics that Bobby and Gemmy share is their ability at mimicry. When Gemmy arrives among the Aborigines, we are told that they are astonished at Gemmy's "gift of mimicry," by which they mean that they were "astonished at the swiftness with which he learned their speech." (23) Likewise, Bobby has a special gift at mimicking people's voices, sometimes to an uncanny degree. When Dr Cross dies and the new governors' wife Mrs Chaine takes over the responsibility of his education, this is what she notices about Bobby:

> Quiet, but sometimes she heard him speak and it could have been Dr Cross. It frightened her to hear a voice from beyond the grave. He had a remarkable ability to mimic, and this came through in his anecdotes, when he was recounting dialogue. She had heard him reproduce her husband's voice also, swearing and all, conversation overheard at the public house no doubt. (Scott, *That Deadman Dance* 148)

Bobby's ability at mimicking is so acute, that he can even imitate the subtlety of people's social class. Listeners cannot avoid succumbing to the power of Bobby's talk when hearing the inflexion and sound patterns characteristic of the upper class, which distress and enrage them:

> Jack Tar knew how Bobby could move into performance, how he could give a recitation, foregrounding and mimicking the speech patterns of others. Jack Tar felt himself begin to tug his forelock, to bow to this voice of the ruling class. His reaction angered him. Was he bred to obey that sound? And angry with himself, he was also angry at Bobby. And he was Bobby's friend. What would it do to others, such a voice coming from a black man? (341)

Unlike Gemmy, Bobby is not simply good at learning the settlers' tones and accents when they speak. He quickly learns their skills and customs and can conduct himself like one of them at will: "Heads snapped up when he sang like that. Surprise, and hurt, too, shows on their faces when we walk like them, fold our arms, cross our legs. Speak their way. When we be like a looking glass, and show their way back at them." (Scott, *That Deadman Dance* 120)

It has often been pointed out that children have a special ability at moving between cultures and learning new languages, because they have not been completely cultivated into a particular culture. Bill Ashcroft, in his book *On Post-Colonial Futures*, interprets the characters of the Child in *An Imaginary Life* and Gemmy in *Remembering Babylon* under this guise: "Childhood has an important function in these novels because the child, in whom boundaries are unformed, reveals the provisionality of those boundaries which are crucial to imperial discourse." (Ashcroft 55)

However, what Ashcroft overlooks is that Gemmy is thirty when he arrives in the settler colony; he is not a child anymore. Since Gemmy looks like an Aborigine (some critics sometimes forget that he is actually white), the oversight might respond to a pervasive colonial prejudice by which primitive cultures at a prehistoric stage are perceived as children. Gemmy cannot speak English properly when he goes back to the colony perhaps because he is no longer a child. Still, Gemmy's maladjustment to his native culture might also be a narrative technique to extend his childhood regardless of his age. If children often resemble clumsy adults, Gemmy looks like a clumsy child, thus benefitting from the naïve and yet unprejudiced child's worldview and opening the possibility of intercultural exchange. This possibility is not realized *de facto* in the novel, but like the possibility of a genuine intercultural association in *That Deadman Dance*, it is there and, therefore, it always remains a present possibility.

The cases of Bobby and Gemmy draw a neat deconstructive reading. On the one hand, Bobby can speak and behave like a European: he can almost pass for a white man. The experience is uncomfortably uncanny for the white settlers; they shudder at the mere thought of it. On the other hand, Gemmy is uncanny because, being white, he does not look or act like one: "He was imitation gone wrong, and the mere sight of it put you wrong too, made the whole business somehow foolish and open to doubt." (35) What *is* then a white man? In good deconstructive fashion, *nothing* guarantees the existence of a "superior" European identity – nor race, language, or demeanour.

How are gender relations portrayed in *Remembering Babylon*? What norms and conventions has Gemmy acquired during his spell among the Aborigines? What do we notice about gender relations in the settler society? How do these gender codes inform the way Gemmy perceives the McIvor children and the men and women in the colony? How do they inform the way they see Gemmy? Delving into these questions is crucial to understand the links between colonialism and gender, and the novel provides us with a precious thread.

The first clear display of gender identity appears in the opening scene, when Lachlan, Janet and Meg apprehend Gemmy and take him to the settlement. It is a sort of literary lesson on male identity. Before they see Gemmy, it is Lachlan who imposes on Janet, Meg and even their dog Flash the nature of the game they are playing: they are in the snowed forests of Siberia, on the track of wolves. The fact is that Janet and Meg have never seen snow and are unimpressed by the explorer adventures they have read about at school. But still, it is Lachlan, their cousin, who asserts his will. Then, when Gemmy makes his appearance, Lachlan takes a step forward in his direction and, still under the spell of the adventure he is imaginatively pursuing, but suddenly transported from the forests of Siberia to the Australian outback, points his stick at Gemmy and confronts him. Once on the ground, Gemmy starts mumbling in some "blackfeller's lingo," and it is Lachlan, a twelve-year-old kid, who orders him to be quiet: "'Stop that,' he yelled. 'Just steik yur mooth.'" (3) The dog stops barking, and recognising a commanding tone in Lachlan's voice, Gemmy remains lying flat with his nose on the ground. Feeling that the stranger is no longer a menace, Flash starts licking Gemmy's legs. He stands up and reacts whimpering and hopping about. The narrative voice tells us that Lachlan feels revulsion at Gemmy's reaction because it is unmanly. We are told literally that he is "a little disgusted by this display of unmanliness," and mercifully tells Flash off. Then, Lachlan orders Gemmy to walk in front of them and tells his cousins to safely stay behind him. The man of the hour, he feels his manhood inflate his chest and expand his ego: "He had a powerful sense of the springing of his torso from the roots of his belly. He had known nothing like this!" To wrap this scene up, we can say that Lachlan embodies the typical masculine traits of his society, which are characteristic of Western societies. Firstly, he decides the nature of the game they are playing, even if he must overexert himself to keep his cousins and his dog in the game: "They complained and dawdled and he had to exert all his gift for fantasy, his will too, which was stubborn, to keep them in the game." (1) Secondly, he is also the one that first confronts Gemmy when he appears on the horizon. In contrast, Janet and Meg remain spellbound and passive. They let Lachlan take control of the situation. Thirdly, he instinctively assumes an

aggressive, authoritative, violent stance. The way Lachlan acts reflects the world of his elders, which is based on, like the role of explorer he was previously indulging in, the power of imagination: "He had known nothing like this! He was bringing a prisoner in. Armed with nothing, too, but his own presumptuous daring and the power of make-believe." (4) What would happen if, at such an early age, it were Janet and Meg who assumed such an active role and stance? Interestingly, we can see that the make-believe of the world of children, that is, the nature of the games they entertain, and the world of adults is contiguous, proving the performative character of gender as we analysed it in Chapter 2. Finally, Lachlan is a boy who behaves like an adult would in the face of danger, but he is not an adult and Gemmy is harmless. The whole scene is a parody of the domineering and confrontational role of men in society.

The adrenaline rush violence provokes in children – "he had known nothing like this!" –, even when it is only a pretence game, reappears towards the end of the novel, when some schoolboys make fun of Gemmy to bully Lachlan. They ask Lachlan where Gemmy is and, noticing that he is nowhere to be seen, one of them starts mimicking Gemmy's lopsided walk, while another raises an invisible shotgun and kills him. The kids watching are thunderstruck. It is a powerful scene because it shows the allure of violence for children. Again, a child's game, which ought to be harmless, emphasises the cruelty of the world of adults with the extremely vulnerable, in this case Gemmy:

> 'So where's your mate,' Jeff Murcutt asked, 'yer shadow?' And then, looking about with mock surprise, 'Oh, I didn't see 'im!' Leo Corcoran had begun a little lopsided walk around them, with an expression so like Gemmy's that three or four younger boys, who were watching, rolled about in the dirt at such a show of brilliance.
>
> 'Shut your jaw,' Lachlan hissed.
>
> 'An' if I don't? What'll you do, eh? Get Gemmy t' set 'is blacks on us?'
>
> He turned at that.

> 'You should hear what my Pa says. It's a wonder someone don't do the right thing, one a' these nights, and pot the bastard!'
>
> Leo at that begun his lopsided walk again, and Jeff Murcutt, with a grin, brought his arm up like a shotgun and followed Leo round the circle. There was a breathless moment in which boys of ten, eleven, some of them almost thirteen as Lachlan was, were soul-struck as he himself had been, that first day at the fence, by the evocation of arms. Jeff Murcutt stood empowered in the midst of them, actually changed, himself impressed almost to awe by what he was reaching for, and Leo hovered. Then Jeff's lips moved. 'Bang!' he said, not loud.
>
> The puff of air out of his mouth struck Leo in the chest. He hung in the air, mouth open, head thrown back, one hand at his breast, and they watched him, slowly, buckle at the knees and fall. (144-145)

In Chapter 3, we are told that, on the same day that he arrives in the colony, Gemmy goes to live with the McIvor family, and the narrative voice embarks on a digression of the kind of relationship that had been established between the McIvor children and Gemmy that first day at the fence. The digression is carried out in exclusively gender terms. When Lachlan points the stick gun at Gemmy, even if "it had taken him only a moment of course to see that it was just a stick," (32) Gemmy instantly realised the kind of power the boy was laying claim to: manhood. It put Lachlan "in a special light for him," (31) meaning that Lachlan assumed a legitimate claim to authority: "What it stood for, and the boy's fearful but fearless stance, was more important than stick or gun, and had made an indelible impression on him." (32) It is the kind of power that makes Lachlan assume a superior stance towards his cousins, and that makes some men have authority over other men. It is also the kind of power that sends men to the battlefields against all odds in the heat of battle, encumbering them with their martial ideals. The special light Gemmy sees in Lachlan justifies the special ascendancy the boy has on the man, feeding Lachlan's ego and making Gemmy wary of him.

However, it is also interesting to notice that Lachlan is hostage to a role his society expects him to play. Otherwise, when he is on his own alone with Gemmy, he appears as a good-natured, sensitive boy. The proprietorial and aggressive stance he takes with Gemmy vanishes when they are on their own. This is how the narrative voice describes how differently Lachlan behaves when he is with Gemmy in front of his peers from when they are on their own:

> But he kept a watch on Lachlan, ready always if necessary to appease; and the boy, because he was very quick in his perceptions, felt it and knew his power. He led the man on an invisible leash, swaggering before the other children of the place, and only when they were alone together let out his natural affection. (32)

Later on, we will discover the painful consequences of having to prove one's manhood in front of others. In the long run, what starts out as a pose, becomes character. When he is no longer a novelty in the colony, but a source of contempt, Lachlan does not allow Gemmy to follow him anymore. This hurts Lachlan, but he ascribes the pain he feels to his soft side, a feminine one he must repress in his journey towards manhood: "…he saw now that having set his face in the direction of manhood, he could not turn back. What he distrusted in himself was a tendency, a girlish one he thought, to let his affections rule. It was a weakness he was determined to stamp out." (144) What if he had decided to love Gemmy and give his back instead to the bullies of his friends?

We can elaborate on where Lachlan's character and strong will come from. We are told Lachlan's story in Chapter 5. Jock and Ellen are from Scotland, and Ellen often indulges in telling her kids stories about home. In this sense, Ellen reminds us of Marge, Digger's mother in *The Great World*. Ellen had four brothers, and the four of them worked in the mines. They were very poor. Her husband used to hang out with them, and that is how she met him. Her older brother died in a "pit accident, leaving five weans to feed," (48) and Lachlan is her deceased brother's older son. When they hear about Lachlan, Janet and Meg are eager to meet their cousin, believing that he will tell them many stories from Scotland. They can't wait to show him their little treasures and secrets,

but when he arrives, he looks down on them and never stops talking about the superiority of where he comes from. Janet is mad at him for his ingratitude. What she does not know is that Lachlan is protecting himself. Having lost his father and having had to move to the other side of the world on his own, he is scared and does not want to let go off the memories he has of the place where he has grown up. He wears a suit of armour not to show his vulnerability:

> But when he arrived he showed no gratitude for the chance they were offering him, and wasn't at all pleased to see them. He was a stocky, tough lad of nine, a town boy. Airdrie, he told them loftily, was a *toon.* The bush – it wasn't even country – was of no interest to him, and Janet saw, because he set out in his superior know-all way to make her see it, that the things they had been saving to show him, all their little treasures and secrets, were in his eyes poor – she had not seen till now how poor. She felt humiliated, as if the poverty was in them. It did not occur to her that he might be protecting himself; that his refusal to enter into their world might be a fear of losing, more than he had done already, the one he had left and was heartsick for. He scoffed and swaggered. Nothing here was good enough for him.
>
> He began every sentence with 'At hame in Scotland' – yet at home, as she knew from her mother, they had been starving. (49-50)

Lachlan maliciously rejoices himself talking about home with his aunt in front of his cousin. Janet sometimes can not even understand what they are talking about, which infuriates her even more, but will not show it so as not to give Lachlan the satisfaction of seeing her suffering. She is furious: "Her fist ached to wipe the smug look from his face, and he knew it, and was more cocky than ever." When Meg complains that she does not understand what they are talking about and demands an explanation, Janet simply keeps silent: "But *she* would not ask." (50) Janet exerts an autonomy and shows a pride that are not typical of her sex but is typical of some girls her age. Sadly, this is something she will have to grow out of in her path towards womanhood. This will

give her an insight into social conventions that will expand her self-awareness and spare her the competitive and destructive spiral of violence characteristic of the world of men.

However, Lachlan soon realizes that if he wants to get on he will have to know the terrain and make himself useful. Eager to be liked and impress his elders, he soon excels in the "skills and tricks of bushcraft." His uncle Jock is proud of him, and even some of his uncle's friends admit his outstanding skills. This recognition, as we have seen in the previous Chapter on *The Great World,* confirms him as a man: only men grant men manhood, the acknowledgement of their masculinity, the quality of being masculine. He also learns the body language and bearings of manhood from the men in the settlement.

Soon, Lachlan bears himself in a knowledgeable, easy-going, confident and manly way. He is inflamed by his new skills:

> But he saw after a time, for all his stubbornness and pride, that if he was to get on here he would have to know the place. He set out, in a dogged way, to learn all the little skills and tricks of bushcraft, and because he was quick and had to be first in everything was soon as much a bushman as the best of them, with a grit, and a fierce little-mannish tenacity that even Jim Sweetman grew to respect. Jock McIvor was proud of him. They tracked and hunted together, shot scrub turkey, and bronze-wings and topknots and fruit pigeon, and in the ti-tree forest on the margin of the lagoons a dozen varieties of duck.
>
> It was a flame in the boy, this power he had acquired over the world they moved in. He gave up being contemptuous, since he was the one who 'knew things', assumed an easy, masculine air that he had picked up by imitation from his elders, and was so good at it that it looked like nature. (52)

This "flame" is the special light Gemmy sees on Lachlan. He cannot show his feelings, must know his way around, and must look brave and independent. The "masculine air" he adopts

provides him with a neat, masculine identity. The special light that Gemmy sees is him is the light of manhood.

In contrast, the first eye contact between Gemmy and Janet – "Something, in that moment, had been settled between them, as it had between him and the boy." – establishes a kind of communication that suggests communion, understanding, and even love. The intensity of her look at first startles Gemmy: "He was surprised. If anyone else had looked at him that way, he would have felt his bowels go soft." However, there is no threat in it. It is a welcoming, exposed look that by being exposed fully captures what it sees, thus returning to the observer his/her own reflection: "But her gaze was so open and vulnerable that he felt no threat in it, and in himself only a stillness, a sense of tender ease at being exposed a moment – not to her, but to himself." (32)

Same as before, the narrative voice steps into Gemmy's shoes in order to tell us how, already on that first encounter, he perceived Lachlan and Janet differently. It comes closest to an objective account of gender difference in the settler community because Gemmy is an outsider and he is at the bottom of the social ladder – as a foreigner as well as an abject, he is especially sensitive to violence and kindness. Like Janet, he has to keep himself safe from masculine violence. But unlike Janet, he has to make a place for himself in the settler society. It is in this sense that the weak and the dispossessed have a privileged access to social knowledge.

The narrative voice provides a summary of this difference that Gemmy perceives in a way that defies commentary because it is itself a commentary of gender difference in the settler society, where men hold public power and take delight in its exhibition whereas women hold an intimate, private power set apart from the public sphere. The consequence is that men control the political sphere and women the domestic sphere. Nevertheless, the commentary refers to the basics, to gender difference in nuanced terms. Women's power having a discreet and secret nature, Gemmy defines it in a couple of lines (the first and the last in the quote below), whereas the description of men power rejoices in its exhibition:

> She was a puzzle to him. He could never be sure what she was thinking. He knew the boy's thoughts because he wanted them known. His power lay in your recognising that he possessed it. It was the power that belonged to him because he was a boy; because, one day, the authority he had claimed in raising the stick to his shoulder would be real. It made him both easier and more dangerous. There was always in your dealings with him something to be taken account of: his concern for those whose eye he was trying to catch. The girl's power was entirely her own. She needed no witness to it. (33)

Shortly, women's secret power is revealed to the reader in parallel to how Lachlan grows into adulthood. It has nothing to envy men's power. Even though at the beginning it seems that Janet has much more to lose than Lachlan, things turn out otherwise in the long run. Inequality makes men lose as much as women.

We have seen how Janet, Meg and their mother were looking forward to the arrival of their cousin, but that when he arrived he was distant and he even cruelly despised his cousins. At the beginning, Janet would pay his cousin back in his own coin. But whereas Lachlan felt cocky and triumphant when he humiliated Janet, she would soon regret her retaliations and feel bad about it. For example, when they show Lachlan their treasures and he makes them feel small talking about Scotland, Janet mocks him, imitating his accent – which she loves! Moreover, in spite of her brief triumphs, she will always regret that Lachlan has been in a place that means so much to her. She knows that he will always have that over her:

> She would harden her heart and mock him. 'Oh, at hame in Scotland,' she would sing, imitating his accent, which she also loved. He went red in the face and could barely hide his tears.
>
> She had her triumph. But seeing it she felt ashamed, it was so easy. And Scotland, home, was sacred to her. She was going against herself when she mocked it.

> There were times when she felt helpless against a place which, as her parents evoked it in every word they uttered, belonged so much more strongly to all the highest emotions in her than the place she was in. And he had seen it, and she had not. He would have that over her forever. (50)

The gender war between Janet and Lachlan is a war about identity – "the struggle between them was fierce" – and what unleashes it is the fact that Lachlan has replaced Janet in the house as leader, just because he is a boy and in spite of the fact that he is younger and a cousin. Gender discriminates over age and direct blood ties. Before, when it was only Janet and Meg around the house, Janet was free, confident and happy: "Till Lachlan came she had been used to going her own way, unconditioned and free. She had no limit to herself." (50) She had her younger sister to impress and her parents' full attention. But when Lachlan arrives the mere provision of being a boy puts him on a higher plane. Regretfully, she realises that in a few years the difference between them will be unbridgeable.

Lachlan's advantage will not only affect the way they deal with each other. It will change Lachlan's character. It will make him harder. It will also provide him with a particular physical appearance. It will expand his chest, change his voice, give him scope and project him towards the public arena. Conversely, the changes Janet notices on Lachlan produce the inverse effect on her. Slowly, she will become insecure, physically fragile, and she will eventually withdraw into herself, which are traits that define the feminine character in a culture that defines gender difference in mutually exclusive binary terms:

> She resented bitterly the provision his being a boy had made for him to exert himself and act. He had no need to fret or bother himself; only to be patient and let himself grow and fill out the lines of what had been laid up for him. The assurance of that, and of his own will, gave him a glow you might never have guessed at from the thin-faced, thin-shouldered town lad he had been when he first

> came to them. He would grow quickly now. The vision of what lay before him would square his shoulders, deepen his voice, give him room.
>
> She had no such vision of her future. All she saw laid up for herself was what her mother presented, a tough pride in competence, in being unflagging and making no fuss. She admired her mother but the narrowness of it was terrible to her. (52-53)

Dejected, Janet muses on these thoughts while helping her mother in the kitchen, projecting her frustration and anger onto a lump of dough. Her mother sees through her contempt, but there is nothing she can do to help her. They do not even talk about it:

> All silent mutiny, she would stand punching at a lump of dough at her mother's table, and might have gone on doing it for ever – stood there with one bare foot on the other on the dirt floor, punching away at her own dull lump of a soul. He mother watched and was concerned. She looked up and smiled, a wan attempt. Her mother was not fooled. (53)

Janet would like to be able to follow Lachlan's process of maturation, what she perceives as a path towards a "presumed" independence and self-sufficiency; "presumed" because men need the validating look of other men. Lachlan has made himself strong and capable as was expected of him. He has put so much effort into it that everyone in the colony praises him. However, what is expected from Janet is something else entirely.

Ironically for us readers, but painfully for her, Janet envisions the angel of the Last Judgment checking on the menial daily tasks her gender is required to do. The tasks are so degrading that a mistake can only betray the incompetence of the sinner:

> She sat over a piece of simple needlework, and worked as if her life was in every stitch; as if one day the angel of the Last Judgment would hold up the pot-holder with its design of forget-me-nots, point to a stitch that was too small, or not

> straight, and say for the whole world, all the gathered souls of all the ages to hear: 'Janet McIvor, did you do this?' (53)

The vision is revealing because Janet is judging her life from the point of view of the world of men. Janet cannot yet conceive of the possibility of the existence of another scale value that will give meaning to what lies ahead of her. Its discovery will transform her completely, physically and mentally, in the same way that masculinity, whose consistency lies in belief, makes men assume a certain stance and behaviour that becomes natural through habit.

Juxtaposed to the vision she has of the angel of the Last Judgment checking on her knitting, Janet entertains an insubordinate, rebellious one. It is a response to the secondary, marginal role her society relegates women to, judging them on their physical exterior, without looking inside, at their personality. Tearing the scab of a wound, she discovers that underneath her ordinary self, lays another self, a tenderer and fragile one. Its skin colour is pink. It is interesting to notice how Janet lives her emotional pain as a physical pain, and that once she is cured a finer, more beautiful but also a stronger self emerges and replaces the old one. As we pointed out before, the world of men is essentially social. Janet will find in the world of nature the symbols and the subterfuges she needs to get in touch with her inner self. It is also nature that provides her with the imagery she needs to envision a kinder future – the transformation of a larva into a butterfly.

This is how the narrative voice explains her vision:

> One day, hunched in the shade of a scrubby lemon tree, picking idly at a scab on her knee, she was amazed, when the hard crust lifted, to discover a colour she had never seen before, and another skin, lustrous as pearl. A delicate pink, it might have belonged to some other creature altogether, and the thought came to her that if all the rough skin of her present self crusted and came off, what would be revealed, shining in sunlight, was this finer being that had somehow been covered up in her.

> When she got up and walked out into the paddock, and all the velvety grass heads blazed up, haloed with gold, she felt, under the influence of her secret skin, 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. (53)

When analysing Malouf's poetic principle in Chapter 1, in our reading of *Johnno*, we quoted an excerpt from an interview with Ray Willbanks where he defines this poetic principle in terms of a tension between two opposites: a desire for stability and to be centred, and a desire for anarchy and chaos. This is the excerpt, where Malouf sees the two competing principles as embodied in the characters of Dante and Johnno, respectively:

> The powerful attraction and rejection between those two characters is a way of working out my own swings between a kind of recklessness and anarchy and a wish to be centered and not to move. I think all the writing I do has to do with this sort of opposition between the two complementary or opposition types, involvement and withdrawal, action and contemplation. I go back and back to that kind of opposition. (Willbanks 14)

In this regard, *Remembering Babylon* signifies a break with Malouf's previous fiction in more than one sense. To begin with, it is less autobiographical than Malouf's other novels. That could have to do with the fact that the novel is set, except for the last Chapter, in mid nineteenth century Australia, before Malouf was born, so that he had to recreate imaginatively what life was like for the first settlers. But there is a more important difference that has a more direct effect on our analysis of gender in the novel. As Neilsen points out, this is the first of Malouf's novels that is not organized around two dual characters. (Nielsen 201) However, this statement needs some qualification. When we analysed masculine and feminine traits in the characters of Johnno and Dante in *Johnno,* Dante and the Child in *An Imaginary Life,* Frank Harland and his father or Phil and Gerald in *Harland's Half Acre,* Jim Saddler and Ashley Crowther in *Fly Away Peter,* and Vic and Digger in *The Great World,* we saw that gender difference was not fixed between these characters,

that the masculine and feminine principles sometimes coexisted, sometimes shifted between them as the occasion or circumstances required. In contrast, in *Remembering Babylon*, gender difference is fixed, as we can see in our analysis of Lachlan and Janet, who grow into a pre-established mould they have to fit in order to be accepted socially. It is as if Malouf had decided to contradict or bracket the poetic principle he had acknowledged as defining his poetics in his interview with Ray Willbanks in 1990, three years before the publication of *Remembering Babylon*.

What new poetic principle organizes *Remembering Babylon*? What gives dynamism and rhythm to the novel is not a principle of contrasts and parallelisms but a principle of repetition that entails a revision, with the aim of providing a sense of legitimate origins, depth and continuity. This is no minor achievement if we consider that, as we pointed out at the beginning of this Chapter, Malouf's novel was written at a time when Australia was coming to terms with its Aboriginal past so as to legitimately claim a future for itself as a nation. As Don Randall puts it in his study *David Malouf*:

> … *Remembering Babylon* distinguishes itself through the intensity of its genealogical concerns. As the title suggests, the book strives to initiate a remembering, an ethical and instrumental process of memory and also a recollecting of that which has been dismembered. The work opens upon the acknowledgement that the formation of the national body has entailed the cutting off, the exclusion, of elements real and present, yet disavowed by the dominant forces informing the nation's self-imagining. If Australia is to be experienced coherently as a modern *and postcolonial* homeland, the excluded elements must be rediscovered and restored – this is in brief Malouf's position. (Randall 125)

The elements that have been excluded and cut off, as we will see when analysing the ethnic and racial elements of the novel, also include violence against women. Ethnocentrism, racism and sexism are all part of the same equation that places white man at the top of the social ladder. In other words, gender discrimination in patriarchal societies afected the way colonizers viewed and

dealt with native peoples. It also informed the sort of violence and contempt towards the poor and the underprivileged. These elements come up in the novel. We will analyse them later on.

We have already seen some scenes that are paired with other scenes in the novel, and that provide a sense of continuity and depth. For example, we related the opening scene, when Lachlan points at Gemmy his imaginary gun and the kind of intoxication that results from that sort of power, with the scene towards the end of the novel when Lachland's friends bully him and pretend they kill Gemmy. This repetition points at the addictiveness and pervasiveness of power and violence in Australian society. Even the victims aspire to it, having felt its devilry. It is the case of Andy McKillop, as we will see in a final display of gratuitous violence that will precipitate the outcome of the novel. It is a sign that, in the short term, things will not change, and the martial values of patriarchal society will prevail – the novel ends at the outbreak of World War I. We have also seen the scene of Gemmy on the rail fence. Gemmy himself goes back to it several times in the story, analysing how he felt, and we have seen at length how Lachlan and Janet saw him differently on that day. Towards the end of the novel, Lachlan and Janet will also go back to that scene, to the image of Gemmy on the fence, unable to fully grasp its meaning. It suggests that what Gemmy stood for on the fence has not been resolved, that a possibility he represented has not been materialised – perhaps the ideal of full equality between men and between men and women regardless of their ethnic background and sex, or perhaps a multicultural ideal? Perhaps. And, finally, another scene that is repeated in the novel is the image of Janet's transformation. We have already seen the first scene, when Janet picks a scab on her knee, discovering a kinder, tender, freer, pink self underneath her skin, and imagines she metamorphoses into a bird or a butterfly.

The second scene takes place towards the end of the novel, in Chapter 15, but before we recount it we need to put it into context. It takes place in Mrs Hutchence's property. Mrs Hutchence is introduced in Chapter 8, when Mr Abbot, the schoolteacher, bumps into her. He was going in search of a quiet place in the woods to read a book in French under the shade of a gum tree so as to escape from his heavy existence in the colony, when the old woman, carrying a

sack and dragging a twelve foot long fallen branch, asks him to help her. Mr Abbot is a stiff-necked lad of eighteen who pretends to be a few years older than he is, always wearing a suit with cuffs, even under intense heat. He thinks his status as schoolteacher and public worker will exempt him from such treatment, even with someone like Mrs Hutchence, but he is mistaken. She also addresses him by his first name, George. It is now that we learn that Mrs Hutchence lives in a proper house, apart from the settlement, "three miles out on the Bowen road," (75) with a young woman called Leona, "Miss Gonzales." (78) No one knows much about them, where they come from, the kind of relationship they have, or where their fortune comes from. However, they are portrayed as two average, likable, easy-going women:

> Though she had too much of the domestic about her to be a source of mystery, he could see quite well that she might present a puzzle. No one knew where she came from – that is, she had vouchsafed no information – or how she could afford to build a real house, or why of all places she had chosen to do it here, or what relations she bore, if any, to the young woman who lived with her, whose name, he knew, was Leona. They had come down, it was said, from the Islands, from Macao, or maybe it was Malacca… (75)

When they reach the house, Mr Abbot is moved. He had not been in a real house since his arrival in Australia. But when he is led into the kitchen, he is shocked to find there, having tea in the most casual manner, the McIvor girls, Gemmy, and one of his pupils, Hec Gosper. Mrs Hutchence introduces him, and asks Janet to get him a cup. Mr Abbot swiftly perceives Hector's hostility towards him, and Mr Abbot is happy to see that whereas Janet gives him "a good teacup and saucer," (78) Hec Gosper is drinking from a "tin mug." (79) Miss Leona conducts and handles the antagonism existing between them, who vie for her attention, while Janet looks at the scene unfolding in front of her stupefied. A little later the small group dissolves, and it is then that we learn that Mrs Hutchence cultivates bees and Janet helps her: "Mrs Hutchence and Janet went off to attend the bees." (82)

The McIvor girls had come across Mrs Hutchence through Gemmy. Mrs Hutchence wanted to cultivate local bees together with her imported ones, and had asked Gemmy for help. At this moment we also learn that Australian bees are stingless, because we are told that Gemmy had provided some "swarms of the little stingless native bees" (127) for her hive.

So it is that in Chapter 15 there is one of the most well-known and celebrated metamorphoses in Malouf's fiction. It has also often been used as a counterargument to the thesis that Malouf's fiction is concerned exclusively about men and masculinities. Janet is at Mrs Hutchence's, and they are working with the bees. Janet describes their routine. Mrs Hutchence, while working with the bees, engages in a soft and calm talk which translates into a humming noise that soothes the bees: "a soothing noise in which the bees, Mrs Hutchence herself, and she as Mrs Hutchence's helper, were gathered in a single breath." Mrs Hutchence was always unaware later on of what she had been telling. Then, when Janet made a comment on something she had been saying, she would look surprised. Sometimes it was the other way around – she thought she had said something that, in fact, she had kept to herself.

What attracts Janet about bees is their communal activity, the fact that they subsume their individuality to a common intelligence with a purpose to which she and Mrs Hutchence must submit and work with: "She loved the way, while you were dealing with them, you had to submit yourself to *their* side of things." While working with the bees, Janet puts her mind to sleep – the opportunity of a brief respite from her daily routine refreshes and renews her spirit.

Janet compares the group activity of the bees to what it must feel like to be an angel. The simile is relevant because it reconciles Janet with the angel of the Last Judgment she imagined judging her womanhood: "If she could escape, she thought, just for a moment, out of her personal mind into their communally single one, she would know at last what it was like to be an angel." We have seen that Janet has her visions, for example when she imagines that beneath her skin hides a purer, softer self, which someday will outgrow her girlish and incomplete body. But the nature of her obsession with the bees comes from within herself, from the very roots of her being,

and is more reliable and corporeal than her visions: "This thought belonged, yet did not, to what she thought of as her 'visions' but was more reliable than those, more down to earth. They had a worked-up quality to them; she worked them up out of *herself*." (128)

On a particularly heavy steamy day, when they have finished their work with the bees and taken off their protective clothing, Janet feels a gush of wind in the distance and, suddenly, a swarm of bees engulfing her by surprise: "She just had time to see her hands covered with plushy, alive fur gloves before her whole body crusted over and she was blazingly gathered into the single sound they made, the single mind." The experience is overwhelming. She surrenders herself and stops breathing. She is no longer herself. "Her own mind closed in her." All excitement, she feels she is the brain shining within the larger mind of the bees. Still, her old mind tells her that the bees have been fed and that there is nothing to fear. If she remains still, they will not hurt her: "The bees have their stomachs full, her mind told her, they will not sting. Stand still, stand still. It was her old mind that told her this." (129) Janet imagines the swarm of bees telling her that she is their bride and, remembering that she has her period, figures out that it is the blood that has attracted the bees. In contrast to Lachlan, who becomes a man learning how to submit and control nature and his surroundings, Janet enters maturity, womanhood – hence the references to her period and the belief that she is the bees' bride – in harmony with nature, which is what the scene with the bees symbolizes: "You are our bride, her new and separate mind told her as it drummed and swayed above the earth. Ah, so that is it! They have smelled the sticky blood-flow. They think it is honey. It is." (130) Suddenly, Mrs Hutchence smokes the cloud of bees out of Janet's body. She touches Janet with her hands to make sure that she has not been harmed, but she is disconsolate all the same, and Gemmy cannot stop moaning and producing sounds of distress. Janet reassures Mrs Hutchence: "The bees didn't hurt me, I knew they wouldn't. I remembered what you told me and it was true. They didn't sting." However, seeing the look on Mrs Hutchence's face, Janet realizes that the bees "might, if she had panicked, have stung her to death, martyred her on the spot," and clearly intuits that it was the power of belief that had saved her, the belief Mrs Hutchence had

inculcated in her that the bees were harmless: "So it had been *that* that had saved her, the power of her own belief, which could change mere circumstance and make miracles." (130-131)

This experience completely transforms Janet, from the inside and also from the outside. It is at this moment when she decides that she will devote her life to the study of bees, and everything she will do with the bees will bring her back to the intensity of this moment. In fact, she is surprised that Mrs Hutchence does not see that she has been changed, but when she looks at the swarms of bees in the little boxes under the tree and, then, at the incredulous look Gemmy returns to her, she knows it has happened:

> She was rather surprised really that she did not *appear* changed to Mrs Hutchence, since the body she was now standing in, as her mind saw it, was not at all the old one.
>
> She looked past Mrs Hutchence to where she had stood just a moment back, and what she saw was not herself, not a gawky child in pigtails and a faded frock, but a charred stump, all crusted black and bubbling; and she saw it – this, when she met his astonished look, was what convinced her – through Gemmy's eyes. (131)

Not long after this event, Janet starts gaining confidence as Lachlan loses his. Now that Janet has become a woman and the fact that his cousin is from Scotland is no longer a novelty, Lachlan feels displaced. He realises that a gap has been opened between him and his cousin. He is no longer the centre of attention of his cousin and his aunt's lives. Surprised, he sees that there is a new complicity between Janet and his aunt, so that he has been replaced as his aunt's favourite. Lachlan also realises that the distance between them might be insurmountable, and that he will never have access to some experiences that are reserved only to women. The gap between them is a gender gap. They have become adults. Surprisingly, Lachlan concludes that overall, the balance of power has been tipped to the other side, not in his favour.

As had happened in *An Imaginary Life,* even though men hold public power, the power of women turns out to be more important and, in the end, better off. As we will see, the reason is that men are the first victims of the sort of power they have.

This is how Lachlan lives this new shift of power between him and his cousin:

> And Janet?
>
> In these last months they had grown apart. He was already aware of a change in her, but it was now, in this company, then he saw how great it might be. He had taken for granted always that their lives were intertwined, by which he meant that her chief concern must be him. She did nothing to deny it, but was absorbed, he saw, in a world of her own that he had no part in. He caught looks between her and his aunt that had not been there before, and when he burst in upon them once, with his usual expectation of welcome, was surprised by the faces they turned to him, which were attentive but subtly closed.
>
> It had struck him then, and for the first time, that there might be areas of experience that he was not intended to enter. That closed look marked only the closest and most gently guarded of them. Beyond lay others that had never heard of him and never would hear.
>
> He was shaken. In the revelation that a power he had taken for granted in himself might have limitations, he felt much of it fall away. (149)

The cathartic experience of Janet with the bees seems to suggest a promising future. It has been a dangerous rite of passage, and she has turned out victorious. Janet will pursue the study of bees with all her heart, beyond what Mrs Hutchence could ever have imagined. "Years later she would become expert beyond anything Mrs Hutchence might have dreamed of at the bee business. She would know all the breeds and crossbreeds, and create one or two new ones…" (130)

In Chapter 2, we also get a glimpse of how gender difference is negotiated among Aborigines. Gemmy's liminal status – that of a creature in between two worlds, a spirit not fully

reborn, half sea-creature, half human – sets him apart from the Aboriginal society. As a result, the first thing we are told is that no woman would have anything to do with him. Then, Gemmy goes on to complain that the Aboriginal society is full of restrictions and prohibitions among people, but also among people and objects.

This is how the narrative voice puts it through Gemmy's point of view:

> No woman, for example, would have to do with him, and there were many objects in the camp that he was forbidden to touch. Their life was a cat's cradle of rights and restrictions; they all had objects, people too, that they must not look upon; but the restrictions on him were his alone, and the separation he felt, his questionable status, kept alive in him what he might otherwise have let go. (25)

When Gemmy joins the white settlement and goes to live with the McIvors, he teaches them what he has learnt from the Aborigines, respecting the distinctions they make about what is proper to each gender. Consequently, he teaches Lachlan to track, and the girls to collect wild fruits, unearth and prepare tubers for cooking, make baskets out of grass and the like:

> He taught the girls to plait grass and make dillybags, to hollow out gourds, dig up the fat yellow or white roots that, once you had thumbed the dirt off, could be baked in the ashes, and to gather berries that yielded a burst of welcome moisture to the tongue or an astringent sweetness.
>
> Making the distinctions between them which he had learned among the blacks, he taught Lachlan to track… (31)

Finally, there are the places Gemmy shows Mr Frazer in their outings together. When Mr Frazer asks Gemmy to show him the same things, he taught the McIvor girls, he feels uncomfortable because Mr Frazer is breaking well-established gender social roles in the Aboriginal culture. From the point of view of Aboriginal culture, it is Gemmy who is ashamed of the way Mr Frazer bears himself. Gemmy is particularly afraid of what other men might think if they saw Mr Frazer dealing in typical women's affairs, thus emphasising the homosocial character of gender

codes and norms that also pervade Aboriginal culture: "It disturbed him at first, it offended his sense of propriety, that what Mr Frazer wanted to see were the same things he showed the McIvor girls: women's business. What would the other men think if they knew of it? He felt ashamed for the man…" (59)

During Mr Frazer and Gemmy's botanical journeys, gender issues become increasingly central. They reveal that gender not only organises Aboriginal peoples' relationship among themselves and between themselves and objects, but also with the land and language. There is a repeated emphasis in the novel on the symbiotic relationship between these elements. Language and the land provide the existential coordinates that give meaning and purpose to a community: "There was no way of existing in this land, or of making your way through it, unless you took into yourself, discovered on your breath, the sounds that linked up all the various parts of it and made them one." (58) So, it should not come as a surprise that the gender order of the Aboriginal people is reflected in the language they speak and the land they inhabit. The impudence of the Aboriginal peoples walking around naked is balanced by a strict decorum regarding the kind of language and the places men and women might use and visit, respectively.

First, we are told about the relationship between language and gender. The narrative voice tells us that to pronounce the wrong word in the wrong place could be "blasphemous", and that a man should never pronounce some specific words. This gives rise to some hilarious situations. When Mr Frazer mispronounces a word and what comes out instead is a reference to an old man's testicle, Gemmy is embarrassed. Next, Gemmy is again embarrassed when Mr Frazer mispronounces a word and says the Aboriginal word for faeces, which are a taboo, like the protection of well-established gender norms. Finally, Mr Frazer pronounces a word that should never be pronounced by a man – we are not told which one, but Gemmy appears visibly troubled.

The word "man" in italics appears in the main text:

> To get a name wrong was comic but could also be blasphemous. In one case what emerged from Mr Frazer's mouth was an old man's testicle, in another,

> the tuber came out as a turd. Of course he understood immediately that he had botched the thing and after a good deal of trying amended it, but so scandalously on one occasion that Gemmy was shocked, and looked about fearfully, since the word Mr Frazer had hit upon was one the surrounding spirits should never have heard on a *man's* lips, and he worried a little that some of these things might get into the book. (60)

After that, the emphasis is put on the relationship between place and gender. Gemmy tells us that they were not allowed to touch some things because they belonged to a particular group of Aboriginal men. Other things they could not touch because only women could do it, and there were some places that were sacred in themselves, which defilement could put them in jeopardy. Regardless of to what extent Gemmy feels himself a member of the settler community, he seems to share the beliefs of his former Aboriginal culture:

> He was sensitive to this dealing between men and spirit. It was out of a kind of reverence, as well as concern for the danger he might put them in, that he concealed from Mr Frazer, who he knew would not notice, a good deal of what he himself could see. Things it was forbidden them to touch, since they were in the care of the men whose land they were crossing; others that only women could approach; others again that were a source of more power than he could control. They could have nothing to do with these things without creating a disturbance in the world that would do him, and Mr Frazer, and others too perhaps, irreparable injury. (60-61)

It is worth elaborating on the restrictions and prohibitions Gemmy refers to above. They give us a clue to the pervasiveness of the social configuration of gender and, contrary to what the first settlers in Australia believed, a critical look shows that there are more similarities than differences between Aboriginal culture and Western culture. An interesting source into the social organisation of gender in Aboriginal culture is the film *Ten Canoes*, directed by Rolph de Heer and

Peter Djigirr, where an elder tells a story to a young man, instructing him on the way of life of the Youlngu Matha people. (De Heer) Even though *Remembering Babylon* is set in the North of Queensland and we do not know who the people that take care of Gemmy are when he is cast ashore, and *Ten Canoes* is specifically about the Youlngu people in the north eastern part of the Northern Territory, what we learn about the Aboriginal peoples in the novel corresponds more or less to what we learn about the Youlngu in the movie. Therefore, what we are told about Aborigines in the novel is not merely the product of fantasy. However, it must be born in mind that Aboriginal culture was in no way homogenous before Western colonisation, as we pointed out in the introduction to this Chapter. Thus, as far as our argument goes, there are more similarities than differences between the Aboriginal culture portrayed in the novel and ours. The restrictions and prohibitions Gemmy refers to tell you whom you can marry: in the Aboriginal culture, you cannot marry within the clan, whereas in Western culture you cannot marry within the family. They delineate your responsibilities within society: in the Aboriginal society, women are collectors and gatherers whereas men track and hunt; in Western culture, women take care of the house whereas men work on the farm, in the fields or in the office. In some cases, the difference between the public and the domestic is so clear-cut in Western culture that Pauline Hunt records a village in England where women clean the inside of the house windows and men the outside. (Connell 74) Finally, both societies are clearly patriarchal, because it is men who go to war and dominate women. Likewise, Aboriginal cultures were patriarchal because they were polygamist.

We have already mentioned two characters that deserve a separate consideration in our analysis of masculinity: Mr Abbot, the schoolteacher, and Mr Frazer, the Minister. They embody contemplative, passive forms of masculinity and, like Lachlan Beattie, they are humbled in different ways in the story.

We are told George Abbot's story in Chapter 4. His father died when he was a child and being the "only boy in a family of five," (42) he grew up a sensitive, introverted and self-centred

character. When his father died, his mother applied to a distant and wealthy relative, Mr Robertson, who had been an admirer, on her son's behalf. Mr Robertson paid them a visit, showed none of the admiration he had displayed during their youth, but agreed to take care of the boy's education and sustain the family. A good looking, eager and clever fellow, George stayed with his Godfather for Easter and Michaelmas in his country place near Perth. He used to entertain his Godfather's visits with his charms. However, things changed when "at fifteen or so, life dealt him a first and fatal disappointment." His body dispatched his natural charms: "a terrible plainness began to declare itself." (43) People were not interested in him any more. Mr Robertson continued to pay for his schooling and keep, but he was not invited to stay with him any more. No longer physically attractive, his Godfather had no interest in keeping him close-by. What we have here is a particular instance of male homosociality: George is empowered by his Godfather's protection, and Mr Robertson's image is embellished by keeping George Abbot close. There is a male-female symbolic relationship between the two male characters, Mr Robertson representing the male part – autonomous, resourceful, provider, older – and George Abbot the feminine one – dependent, beautiful, submissive, and inexperienced. However, when the boy's Apollonian beauty evaporates, the mutual commerce ceases to function and Mr Robertson gets rid of him.

When George Abbot obtains his degree, he pays a visit to Mr Robertson to thank him, as is only proper, and to find out what job he has in mind for him. However, he is a bit unsettled when a young, good-looking footman opens the door. George cannot avoid observing the fineness of the silk stockings he is wearing, the strength of his calves, his swaggering gait. Things get worse when, as the footman steps aside to let him pass through the different rooms, George feels the youth measuring him up to resolve the comparison, satisfactorily, in his favour:

> The footman who let him in was a well-knit, snub-nosed fellow of his own age, very fancily got up. He was inclined, George thought, to swagger, and as they passed through various rooms and the young fellow stood aside to let him pass,

> George felt himself the subject of lazy scrutiny, which tempted him to fiddle in a foolish way with his collar.
>
> It was as if this big farm boy, who was, it was true, not a bad-looking fellow, had in conceit at the fine cut of his frock coat, the swelling of his calves in their pale silk stockings, together with God knows what other articles of smug self-confidence, set up a comparison between them, and settled the thing, with a good deal of satisfaction, in his own favour. George was put off his stride. (43)

We see another instance of male homosociality at work. The two youths, having a similar age, cannot avoid measuring themselves up. First, George notices his outfit and the confidence of his bearing. Then, he becomes an object of "lazy scrutiny," and notices that the youth is "not a bad looking fellow." The rivalry between them is accentuated by the fact that both are potential competitors for Mr Robertson's attention and enjoy the favours they might derive from it. In this love triangle, George already knows what defeat is, and is defeated again by his insecurity and the overconfidence of the male footman.

A bit disturbed, George tells himself not to fall back on any old familial sentimentality and talk man to man with his Godfather: "Let his benefactor take him seriously, just as he was." However, cousin Alisdair receives him so effusively and with such a warm embrace that George quickly feels his resentment melt. We are told: "He had been very fond of Cousin Alisdair at one time." (44) After they exchange the proper formalities, Mr Robertson asks George whether he has given any thought to what he would like to do with his life.

Spurred by the warm welcome, George pronounces a speech he had not originally intended and confides to his benefactor his deeper ambitions: in the deepest recesses of his being, his heart lies in Africa. Inspired by the explorer narratives and adventure novels of his time (he mentions Dr Livingstone), he knows that Africa will offer him the chance to meet his real worth as a man. He is ready for the hardships, sacrifice, and stoicism that such an adventure will require of him. However, he is also aware of his obligations, the responsibility he has towards his mother and

sisters, his debt towards Mr Robertson, and that he might have to postpone his dreams until he has had the time to save enough, etc. George's eloquence gains momentum until his cousin unexpectedly interrupts him, uttering a word he does not at first catch. "*Australia.* That was the word Mr Robertson had dropped into the room. The silence deepened around it, then spread." By George's reaction, Mr Robertson sees that he has hit the spot. He cannot hide his jollity. "Had he, by any chance, Mr Robertson sweetly demanded, his eyes dancing behind circles of thin gold, considered Australia?" George freezes in horror: "Well he had not. Never in his life. Not once. He grew breathless; he tried to keep the great smothering mass of it off." However, it is too late. Mr Robertson retaliates with an encomium about "the advantages of that other, rival graveyard," (45) and the whole interview turns into a pantomime of what George had expected. Mr Robertson rejoices, while George is contorted with the irony of it:

> The laughter that filled him, and threatened to break out and shatter every object in sight, echoed from the other side of the world, as Cousin Alisdair, as if eloquent effusion was a family trait, shared even by fifth cousins, began to elaborate, all watered silk but with a glint of steel in his eye, the advantage of that other and rival graveyard – the one George had *not* aspired to. Friends in Sydney… Opportunities out there of the highest order… Splendid seed-ground… Seven years. (45-46)

The subtext tells us about the role Australia played in the imaginary of the nineteenth century. It did not have the glamour, the danger and the mystery that Africa had. The weather is misty, the great expanses of land oppressive, its indigenous peoples guileless. It is the last retreat of the known world, it is never where the characters choose to be: Mr Abbot's dream was Africa; the McIvors had originally wanted to go to Canada (67); Mr Frazer has been increasingly removed from the centre of things, etc. It was a place of deportation, of opportunities for the lower classes and the second born.

As it turns out, things do not go as Mr Robertson planned: "The seed-ground, contrary to report, was rank and had been ruinous to him," so that he ends up as a teacher in the last post of newly occupied land, living in a room behind the blackboard of the classroom. Australia turns out to be as insidiously numbing and soul-depleting as he had feared, and Aborigines are a reminder that they will have to fight hard against apathy, against the misty weather and the harshness of the land, to keep their ways and not sink into some primitive stage from where they might not come back:

> It was on every side oppressive, in all its forms clammy and insidiously sweet – lushness and quick bloom followed by a dank putrescence, so that the soul was at one moment garishly excited, brittle, overwrought, and in the next slothfully laid low. Even the natives were of a dingy greyness. Thin-shanked, dusty, undignified, the life they lived was merely degenerate, so squalid and flea-ridden that it inspired nothing but a kind of horror at what human nature might in its beginnings spring from, and in such a place so easily sink back to. (46)

In Australia, the man he has inside will not come out to meet him. Having in mind Homi Bhabha's blending cultural critique, we could say that whether the Dark Continent excites "The horror! The horror!" (Conrad 86) of what human nature may spring forth in its early stages, Australia excites "a kind of horror" that deprives its victims of authentically living their suffering and the worst.

We are told Mr Frazer's story in Chapter 14. Like Mr Abbot, Mr Frazer is a sort of an outsider in the colony – his position as Minister confers him a certain status. He devotes himself to his parish and to botany, his long life passion. He is also of the spiritual and intellectual type, and a bit detached. As we have seen in many marriages in Malouf's fiction, his wife is smarter than him, but she does not show it off: "She is cleverer than he is but does not make him feel it. Cleverness, she knows, has nothing to do with what he is after; which is revelation." He loves his wife; he has a soft nature. He sometimes looks at her in search of a complicit look, and she is

happy to reassure him. During the thirty-three years they have been married, she has always followed him around the world, even to Australia, where she is furthest from what she cares for most, their children. We might doubt whether she has followed him in his progress or decline, but since we are told that it has taken them further and further from the centre of things, the latter seems to be the case. Again, the narrator's irony suggests that a social convention, that is, that women should follow their men is a cover up for a social injustice: "She has followed him in his progress – or decline – halfway across the world, and further each year from her real life, which is, he knows, in their children." She loves music and plays the piano, but this is the only place where he has been unable to provide her with one. So, she sits in an armchair and plays the music script in her head. She seeks refuge from him, his oddities and eccentricities in music. Frazer also puts some distance between himself and his wife, perhaps to avoid seeing what she thinks of him:

> She does not complain; though music, he knows, is her refuge from the frustration she sometimes feels. With *him,* with his passionate confusions. She saves herself by taking no part in his interests, perhaps out of a fear of finding them foolish, and he in turn keeps out of hers. (122-123)

Mr Frazer is the only person in the colony with whom Gemmy deals with as an equal, and with whom he feels valued for what he is – a source of interaction between cultures. We see another Gemmy when Mr Frazer is around.

As we mentioned earlier, Mr Frazer's passion is botany, and he takes Gemmy on his outings to botanise. Gemmy is more practical than Mr Frazer and, having been in a weak position all his life, less naïve. Mr Frazer respects his knowledge about the flora of the land and wants to learn from him, and Gemmy has always been surprised at the minister's "gift of understanding" since that first day, when he and Mr Abbot put words to his life story. He is also astonished at the minister's skills at drawing, the way he takes the essence of a plant or leaf and puts it on paper. They get on well with each other, and enjoy each other's company:

> But Gemmy, from that first day at the schoolhouse, had attributed to Mr Frazer a gift of understanding which somehow saw right through to what he wanted to express, and often enough, before he himself knew it. He trusted the minister, and was happy in his presence to open himself entirely to whatever might emerge from their silent communing when, in the cool early mornings, and sometimes again in the late afternoon, they went out together to *botanise,* as Mr Frazer called it, in the scrub country on the far side of the creek, or along the shady gallery of the creek itself where it climbed the escarpment to the west. (59)

We can emphasise two things at this point. On the one hand, in his article "Signs Taken for Wonders: Questions of Ambivalence and Authority under a Tree Outside Delhi, May 1817," Homi Bhabha states that the presence of the English book constitutes a sign of power and authority, and a model of imitation: "The discovery of the English book establishes both a measure of mimesis and a model of civil authority and order." (Bhabha 152) Gemmy knows that Mr Frazer has a special relationship with writing and drawing, which for him are forms of sorcery. As a result, the Minister has a special status for Gemmy. We have here a confluence of the discourses of knowledge and power. In their outings together, Mr Frazer transcribes the plants, roots, flowers, etc. that Gemmy shows him into the magic surface of his notebook: "… Mr Frazer was the agency for translating it out of that dimension, which was all effort, sweat and dirt, and grubbing with your nails, and thorns, and scratches, into these outlines on the page that were all pure spirit, the product of stillness and silent concentration." (60) What relates the drawings on the page and the things they refer to is a measure of mimesis, from a three-dimensional space to a two dimensional one. Writing does not work differently. In the first Chapter, when Mr Abbot hands Gemmy the seven written pages where they have written down his story, he understands that they contain, in some magical sense, the story of his life. But the experience is uncanny and Gemmy's first thought is how he might get the seven sheets back:

> He knew what writing was but had never himself learned the trick of it. As he handled the sheets and turned them this way and that, and caught the peculiar smell they gave off, his whole life was in his throat – tears, laughter too, a little – and he was filled with an immense gratitude. He had shown them what he was. He was known. Left alone with the sheets, to brood and sniff, the whole of what he was, Gemmy, might come back to him, and he began to plot, as he thought of his life out there in the minister's pocket, how to steal it back. (18)

The aim of the ritual scene in the schoolhouse where Mr Frazer and Mr Abbot write Gemmy's life down is to get to know Gemmy and, thus, to symbolically incorporate him into the settler colony – in contrast, the Aborigines acknowledge Gemmy into the Aboriginal culture when he enters his dreaming stories. The scene is a clear instance of what Homi Bhabha calls colonial mimicry: Gemmy mimics Mr Frazer as Mr Frazer mimics English bureaucracy. It does not escape Mr Abbot that the service is a parody:

> To George's vast amusement, Gemmy, as he received the sheets, put on a solemn expression very like Mr Frazer's own, shuffled the pages according to his own taste, and holding them, as Mr Frazer had, at arm's length, and making the same little humphing sounds of grave approval, ran his eyes down one page, then the next. When this ritual was completed he raised the sheets to his nose and sniffed them, and might have been preparing, till Mr Frazer intervened, to lick and maybe swallow them. He looked puzzled when Mr Frazer gently took them back. (17)

In the words of Ashis Nandy, we could say that Gemmy offers "a slightly comical imitativeness which indirectly reveals the ridiculousness of the powerful." (Nandy 84)

On the other hand, we have seen that Mr Frazer's passion is botany, a by-product of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century compulsion to conceptualisation and classification. This compulsion accentuated and recrudesced gender differences at home and racial differences abroad. As Pamela Scully argues: "Race and gender became linked to the extent that a description

of whiteness invoked associations with masculinity. White male scientists as well as European popular culture increasingly came to see femininity as well as blackness as forms of pathology." (Scully) Europe was practising its most impudent form of ethnocentrism.

We can conclude merging the two points. In his classic *Orientalism,* Edward Said explains how the Western world used modern science to dominate and control the West, especially regarding its linguistic – for example, he explains that German philosopher Friedrich Schlegel argued for the superiority of the Indo-European languages over the Semitic ones, hence the superiority of the English book – and classificatory developments:

> From the outset, then, Orientalism carried forward two traits: (1) a newly found scientific self-consciousness based on the linguistic importance of the Orient to Europe, and (2) a proclivity to divide, subdivide, and redivide its subject matter without ever changing its mind about the Orient as being always the same, unchanging, uniform, and radically peculiar object. (Said 98)

It is in the outings with Mr Frazer when they go to botanise when we most clearly see a humanised version of Gemmy that contrasts with the one of the settlers. On early mornings and late afternoons, Gemmy leads Mr Frazer through the scrub areas, creeks and escarpments on the West of the settlement, and shows him the vegetation of the country, instructing him on their names, which ones are edible, and how to treat them into a palatable mass. The two men together make quite an eccentric pair. Mr Frazer wears a wide hat, a portable inkstand on a strap over his shoulders, and a large bag with his notebooks. What Gemmy likes is the way in which Mr Frazer translates the earthly, rich flora of what he shows him into the neat and careful drawings on the page of his notebook. Small arrows link marks on the page with the drawings, the marks representing the names Gemmy teaches him. Gemmy believes Mr Frazer captures the essence of the thing in his drawings:

> Mr Frazer on these outings wore a wide-awake hat, much frayed at the edges, and bore on a strap over his shoulder a portable inkstand, and in another bag, of canvas,

> a set of fat little books. Here, to Gemmy's delight, he sketched the parts of the plants Gemmy showed him, roots, leaves, blossoms, with straight little arrows in flight towards them from one side or other from the page, where Mr Frazer, in his careful hand, after a good deal of trying this sound and that, wrote the names he provided. (59)

There is a light and comical atmosphere in these expeditions. We see Gemmy highly aware of the differences between the Aboriginal and settler culture, taking decisions on what he can show Mr Frazer without disturbing sacred Aboriginal sites, and mediating between the Aboriginals they come across and Mr Frazer on the latter's behalf. It is worth mentioning that Chapter 6, where we are told about these outings, opens with Gemmy trying to put off some of the settlers' plans to take advantage of the Aborigines. There is a sense of humour that balances the harshness of the situation here as well. On the one hand, there are those who think that Aborigines should be exterminated: "It was the quickest way; the kindest too maybe, in the long run. They had seen what happened to blacks in places where the locals were kind. It wasn't a pleasant sight." (56) On the other hand, there are others who see themselves as the most considerate and respectful towards the Aborigines, those who want to build bridges between the two cultures. They are the ones who get the most easily exasperated and who gave Gemmy the most trouble: "They were the peaceable ones, the ones who wanted to avoid bloodshed, couldn't he see that? Couldn't he tell the difference? Urgency made them desperate. They shouted at him, and then at one another." (58) But Gemmy can see that the kind of peaceful settlement they dream about only benefits the white settlers. The narrative voice leads us into Gemmy's thoughts in what is perhaps one of the most ironic scenes in the novel. It reveals the settlers' hypocrisy, so embedded in the culture, and the petty dreams they balance against their miserable lives:

> They had secretly, some of them, a vision of plantations with black figures moving in rows down a field, a compound with neat whitewashed huts, a hallway, all polished wood, with an old grey-haired black saying 'Yessir', and preparing to pull

> off their boots (all this off in the future of course, maybe far off; for the moment they would not mention the boots since none of them had any). (56)

Gemmy ignores the latter and carefully manipulates the former so as to protect his Aboriginal friends:

> So he hummed and harred and chewed his tobacco, and when he was forced to speak at last, put them off with answers which, by shifting a landmark and counting a few dead in with the living, set his people further north than they actually were and made them more numerous. He felt a heavy responsibility. (58)

We can see that Gemmy is not simply a keen social observer and analyst, but also someone who enacts a carefully balanced ethics between cultures, who ponders difficult situations and takes decisions on behalf of the weak, being almost absolutely powerless himself. Gemmy has the highest responsibility in his in-between status, and he measures up to our expectations. Also, in spite of his helpless and childish appearance, he protects the McIvor children in his own way, especially Lachlan. More specifically, we are told that he exerts "a fearful protectiveness", because Lachlan might resent it if he finds out. Ruefully, we see him surprised at the fatherly role he plays with Lachlan: "He was just a child! The realisation shocked Gemmy but settled him too. It was not often here that he could reclaim a sense of himself as a grown man." (55) It is this other Gemmy that must be revealed to the early settlers and who will become a powerful source of transformation.

Why can't the settlers see it? Why is it so difficult for the settlers to acknowledge Gemmy as he is? Why are social and culturally informed divisions such as age, gender, class, national and ethnic divisions so pervasive and difficult to overcome? The answer probably lies in the fact that our identity depends on the stability and endurance of these divisions. Moreover, they are more rigid than we think when considered under analysis because they are mutually supporting. Thus, a white middle-class British adult male derives a stronger sense of identity from his being adult, middle-class, English, white and male.

We have seen that Gemmy causes considerable anxiety in the colony, particularly among the men. Gemmy is a grown man, about thirty, but he is not seen as one by the adults in the colony. For example, Janet will play dolls with him, combing his hair and buttoning his loose shirt: "'No, no, Gemmy dear, let *me* do it,' she would say when he failed to button his shirt straight. Or laughing at the way his hair stuck out in quills and would not be disciplined, 'Sit still, now, there's a good fellow, and I'll brush it and make you neat…' (32) The fact that sexual desire is completely absent from the novel emphasises his childish outlook. He is white, but he does not look like one because of the influence of Aboriginal culture for sixteen years. Moreover, Gemmy reminds them that the Aborigines might reclaim what has so recently been turned into British national territory. Since land property was mainly a male thing, most pressure is put on men. Apart from the fear of a raid, there is something else difficult to define that makes men feel particularly anxious about Gemmy and women particularly afraid. Since the settler society is a patriarchal society, the fact that a white man can undergo such a transformation, losing his language and the semblance of a man causes particular anxiety. If Gemmy had been a woman, no one would have thought that the superiority of their race was in question – women were considered particularly vulnerable and easily influenced by external factors. Finally, Gemmy occupies the lowest rung of the social ladder.

There are few men in the settlement. We have already mentioned Mr Frazer, Mr Abbot, Jock McIvor, and Hector Gosper – the man with a harelip with whom Gemmy struggled for the hammer the first day he arrived in the colony. Then, there are Barney Mason, the Mason's roustabout Andy McKillop, Jim Sweetman and Ned Corcoran. Jock McIvor is easy-going and confident. Barney is his closest neighbour, a little bit dependent on Jock's sturdy temperament – they are best friends. Andy works for him. He is an insecure, cloying, resentful fellow nobody trusts. His wife left him for a Californian, got into trouble because of that, and when he left up north and was offered a job devoted himself body-and-soul to his employer. Jim Sweetman is an older, conventional man who enjoys dancing and playing the donkey with his granddaughter.

Finally, Ned Corcoran is an unscrupulous freeloader and a bully. He would use his son to borrow things and never return them:

> His idea of neighbourliness was to send one of his boys across (he had a whole mob of them), usually the soft-eyed eight-year-old, to borrow some implement or other that then found its way into his store. Months later, out of pure generosity, he would lend it out to some other fellow as if it was his own. He'd get it back, too. (35)

Ned Corcoran was the one who tried to bribe Gemmy into telling him where the Aborigines were so as to organise a raid against them.

Apart from Mr Frazer, who does not represent conventional manhood, the only adult male Gemmy deals with is Jock, who cannot bear having Gemmy close to him. He feels an irrational, physical revulsion towards Gemmy that he cannot explain; he is even ashamed of it: "the chief thing he had against the man was so unreasonable; he was ashamed of it." (63-64) In particular, he dreads Gemmy's bouts of affection and gratitude, especially when he touches him. Jock describes this feeling as a sort of moral aversion, which interestingly emphasises how mental, social and culturally ingrained divisions are physically embodied in the most corporal sense: "From the moment he saw the fellow he had felt a kind of revulsion, a moral one he thought, though it expressed itself physically." (64) What Jock's repulsion betrays is his homophobia: repulsion towards the fact that a man can be affectionate, which is a typical female trait, towards him. Gemmy literally gets on his nerves: "'There's nae ca' for that, man – enough! For God's sake, get off o' me!'" (64) Ellen is surprised to discover an "almost girlish modesty" behind her husband's "terror" (67) at Gemmy's signs of attention.

We are told how, on odd days after a long day of work, they would gather at the top of a hill where their properties met. Since Gemmy's arrival, Barney would frequently ask Jock for reassurance regarding the "white black man," who has become the catalyst of the fear that, one day, they might be raided by Aborigines: "a long-standing anxiety on Barney's part that was general

but had recently, to Jock's distress, found its focus in the white black man." (63) When Ned Corcoran joins them, he backs Barney's concerns: "'Yair well,' Ned Corcoran put in after a longish gap, 'I dunno about that. You'd be the best judge a' that, Jock, you an' Barney. How harmless the cove is. Seein' yer all so close. On'y I woudn' want 'im hangin' roun' *my* place.'" (65) This brief picture gives us an idea of what frontier masculinities was like at the time. Men had to work the land, provide for their families, and keep a constant eye on any possible aggression from the outside. In every possible respect, they heavily depended on one another: "Under the hard conditions of life up here neighbours were important," – Jock's thoughts wander – "and over the last years he and Barney had become more than that." (65) In the absence of any major events, they had to find a sense of self and of their own manhood among their small circle. Probably, that is the reason why in their dealings with one another they are very aware of slights. However, Jock finds it increasingly difficult to detach himself from Gemmy, and to reassure the others about him. He tells Gemmy not to cross to his neighbour's lands, but there were no fences separating one property from another, which Jock realises makes it more difficult to distinguish fact from paranoia: "…Barney, in his anxious way, was forever out there pacing the line and looking for signs of trespass; except that there was no line, and the trespass too might be no more than a shadow on Barney's thoughts, and how could you deal with *that*?" (65)

Jock is the first character in the novel who most visibly and most changes as a result of Gemmy's arrival in the colony. Just the fact of having Gemmy living with him and defending the poor fellow puts him in the spotlight, without having done anything wrong. It slowly changes the way his mates perceive him and the way he perceives them, which undermines his self-confidence and puts him ill at ease, as if he had done something wrong. Jock feels miserable. The first one to notice this is Hector, who has recently joined the group of grown-ups and is more observant than the others:

> He did not say much, he was still on trial here, but he was very observant. He had recently discovered in himself a streak of irony that he found scope for in

> the play that went on under the slow utterances of these fellows, but even more in the depth of their silences. It amused him, for instance, that they had begun to regard Jock McIvor, who was one of the little inner band, with a closer eye; as if he had developed a mark of difference, or some deformity had emerged in him that they had failed till now to observe.
>
> What intrigued Hector was that Jock McIvor, who had always been such an acceptable bloke, with all the easy confidence a man derives from it, had begun to lose that magic quality. Little defensive spikes and spurs appeared in him that surprised the others and increased a suspicion that they might somehow have been mistaken in him. (66-67)

What's more, no one argues against Gemmy's harmlessness. Different characters defend Gemmy in these terms. First, when the narrative voice tells us that the men in the colony are not scared of him, but of actual Aborigines: "Of course, it wasn't him you were scared of. He was harmless, or so they said, and you preferred to believe." (38) Then, there is Jock's neighbour Barney: "Gemmy's harmless enough." (90) Finally, the minister's wife, when she tells him: "It's true there's no harm in him, but he *is* a danger just the same." (125)

Gemmy is harmless, but he threatens to disintegrate the wellbeing of the settlement. This is the double bind Jock is caught in that distances him from his mates. The experience is excruciating:

> He did not like the experience, which was new, of seeing his friends from a distance, of finding them on one side and himself on the other, and the knowledge that if he was seeing them with new eyes, he too, since the distance must work both ways, had become an object of scrutiny. He was disturbed, most of all, by the view this gave of himself. As if there was something in him that justified scrutiny. That he might be less open than he appeared. (67)

The men in the colony that most despise and complain about Gemmy are Ned Corcoran and Andy McKillop, precisely the ones that are least well regarded by the men in the colony. Ned Corcoran, from the very beginning, assumes a superior tone criticising their credulousness regarding Gemmy: "'He's makin' mugs of yous,' Ned Corcoran asserted. 'You k'n say what you like about' im. He don't fool me." (35) And, then, he will continually nag Jock and the others about it, touching on sensitive issues such as that Jock does not have the safety of his wife and children at heart. "'Yair, well,' he said, 'it's the wife I'd be worried about. If it was me. You know what I mean? Gracie." (66)

These continuous suspicions and indirect attacks undermine Jock's morale.

About six months after his arrival, when things start going smoothly and people seem to forget about him, Gemmy receives a visit that precipitates the events in an unforeseeable manner. Gemmy is mending a fence in the afternoon. As fate has it, Andy is in the vicinity, and he spots two Aborigines, an old one and a younger one, crossing the McIvors land towards Gemmy. Andy is distressed. Halfway, they turn towards him, but quickly resume their way towards where Gemmy is working. Now he is dismayed: "The bloody effrontery of it! The cheek! The gall!" (86) The two Aborigines sit with Gemmy for a while. As Andy witnesses the scene, he starts to imagine how he will tell the story to Barney: "'Oh I kep' me eye on' them, you can bet on that!" (86) After a while, they stand up and leave from where they have come. Gemmy remains pensive for a couple of minutes and resumes his work. Overcome with indignity, Andy makes for where Gemmy is, and all the way a conversation goes on in his head. He had always suspected that Gemmy received visits from blacks, but Barney never listened to him because he always took Jock's side. Now, he would finally make things even with Barney. But when he reaches Gemmy and provokes him: "Ol' friends eh?" (88) he gets no answer. Gemmy ignores him, pretending he is not there: "His way with people he did not want to deal with was to pretend they were not there. He looked right through this fellow now, this Andy, and he was gone. He disappeared into the glare of the wall." (88-89) Incensed, Andy turns around and goes to find the others. Later on, we are told about the

incident from Gemmy's point of view. There, we see that Gemmy is afraid of Andy and fears the consequences that this visit may have for him. When he pretended Andy was not there, he was using a survival technique he had developed to deal with the bullies in the colony: "Slowly, over the months, he had learned how to handle such fellows. He stepped into their skin, looked about quickly, then dealt with them as they dealt with themselves." (109) The scene stages a moral evaluation because it described Gemmy's bullies as empty inside. That is the reason why they are bullies in the first place. When he pretends Andy is not there, what Gemmy sees instead is a "furious emptiness" that fails to find a human form:

> With an effort he pulled his eyes away, and the man, or the furious emptiness rather that wore a look and held a shotgun and was trying to find the *shape* of a man, went still and vanished.
>
> It was the kind he was, this Andy. If you refused him your attention he mumbled, dithered, boiled with his own hopeless impotence, and disappeared. (108)

However, he is aware that "the emptiness was real" and he is frightened. At this point, he makes a comment that is worthy of a cultural critic. He realises that the problem between him and Andy is that the rungs they stand on in the social class ladder are too close: "He was real enough; the emptiness was real. And they stood too close to one another on the lowest rung of things in the settlement for his ferocity to accept defeat." (109)

When Andy tells Barney, the latter does not know what to do with it, which incenses Andy. It seems to Barney that Andy has flown off the handle: "The news alarmed Barney, but he was even more alarmed by Andy, whose sense of outrage, it seemed to him, grew fiercer each time he went over it." (90) Then, Jim Sweetman arrives, and Andy tries to convey to him the urgency of the events he has witnessed. He is beside himself because his own credibility is at stake, against Gemmy! "He was determined not to be ignored. He had a savage need to convince people of things; but had first, he knew, and he withered at the old injustice of it, to convince them about

himself." When he repeats the story, without adding anything, Barney gives it credit now that Jim is also listening: "'You didn't say that the first time,'" he complains, to which Andy answers, dramatically: "'I tried to, an' you never bloody give me the chance!'" (91) However, Jim doubts. The farm is one of the most isolated in the area, close to Aboriginal hunting ground, and he has never had any trouble with them:

> He had no quarrel with them – so far as he knew and so far as any black, once your back was turned, could be trusted; there were a good many white fellers round here, this Andy for instance, that he trusted less. Even now he preferred not to look at the man. He got too much heady satisfaction from being the bearer of ill news. Still… (92)

Seeing that the men are not convinced, Andy spontaneously and cunningly adds something of his own accord to the story:

> 'I saw them give him something,' he said.
>
> That did it. 'Give'im what?' Jim Sweetman demanded.
>
> 'A stone,' Andy said softly, and was amazed himself at the size and smoothness of the thing as it landed slap in Gemmy's hand. 'It was wrapped up like. In bark and that – you know. But I seen it alright. Big as me fist.' And he thrust his closed fist towards them. (92)

Now that he has had his victory, Andy regrets the bit of fantasy that he has added to the story. He is afraid that now they will look for the stone, and when it fails to appear they will accuse him of making things up, discrediting his whole story: "'Been seein' things again have you, old son? Sufferin' from a touch of imaginitis, are we?'"(92) Andy will walk about the settlement brooding over the stone he made up, wishing it would materialize, "as proof of the nonexistence of that other, heavier and more fatal thing, an imagination." (93)

When Barney tells Jock the story, the distance between them increases. Jock does not credit Andy, and this time Barney stands his ground. "The sense of distance between them was new, and

it seemed to Jock to hold the possibility of a terrible desolation." (95) When Ned Corcoran joins them, John loses his temper and the break is absolute.

Jock's transformation is then complete. The paradox is that he has not changed, and neither have his mates. Jock is not an intellectual or philosophical type. However, he is aware that something has been revealed these days that had been there all along but hidden, out of sight. A dimension of existence that, until then, mateship, the easy camaraderie and companionship, the warmth and protectiveness of his small circle of friends up here had kept concealed. Utterly isolated, he realises he had been standing all along over an abyss. A sudden onset of vertigo overcomes him. This condition of existence recalls Heidegger's description of anxiety in *What Is Metaphysics?* Where Heidegger contends that a genuine relationship with the world is only possible when we are detached from our everyday concerns – not detached in an apathetic sense, but in the sense that we seem to lose hold of everything that is familiar and sustains us in our every day lives. We feel anxious because we feel ourselves hanging over the nothingness that otherwise our existence is if it were not for the company, the closeness of our acquaintances, friends, and the things we keep ourselves busy with. The experience Heidegger describes, and that overcomes Jock, appears when we fear losing everything that we hold dear to us and that verges on death, which literally means to let go. Nowadays, it is the sad experience of millions of Syrian refugees who have fled their homes and left their acquaintances and everything that is familiar and known to them in search of a life. It is interesting that Jock, who has travelled from England to the other side of the world, does not experience the fullness of what it means to *be* in Heidegger's terms until now. The situation is overpowering; he is suddenly aware of his limitations, the fragility of the ground where he stands.

It is in this sense that we said at the beginning that Gemmy is a source of transformation in the settler colony.

When Jock thinks about his new experience of estrangement, there is an implicit description of manhood, one in which the experience of solitude, of standing alone is not seen as

something negative, but as constitutive of the human condition. He admits that before he had feared standing alone, in the sense of not being accepted. Paradoxically, this is something he would not have accepted, because a man has to be independent. So first he accepts it, and then he acknowledges a past vulnerability: "an old wish to be accepted – and why not? – or a fear of standing alone." (4) He insists on this idea when the narrative voice tells us that he realises and regrets what lies "in the hearts of men", that is, in the innermost recesses of their beings. In the last paragraph, the world "alone" appears twice, again to emphasize the idea that there is a difference between standing alone when you feel part of a community and standing alone when you have no friends, no real support from the outside. This is how Jock lives this new experience of estrangement:

> *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.
>
> When had it begun?
>
> When they agreed to take Gemmy in. That was the simple answer, since it was from that moment that some area of difference, of suspicion, had opened between them. But the more he thought of it, the clearer it seemed that the difference must always have existed, since he too was as he had always been; only he had been blind to it, or had put it out of his mind from an old wish to be accepted – and why not? – or a fear of standing alone.
>
> He had never been a thinker, and he did not now become one, but he begun to have strange thoughts.
>
> Some of them were bitter. They had to do with what he saw, now that he looked, was in the hearts of men – quite ordinary fellows like himself; he wondered that he had not seen it before. What the other and stranger thoughts had to do with he did not know.

> 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; a sociable self, wrapped always in a communal warmth that protected it from dark matters and all the blinding light of things, but also from the knowledge that there was a place out there where the self might stand alone. (96-97)

In spite of his initial desolation, the change is for the better. Jock sees the world with new eyes – the same things, but now in their singular uniqueness. In other words, he is now aware of the transience of small and big things: "The things he had begun to be aware of, however fresh and innocent, lay outside what was common, or so he thought; certainly, since he could have found no form in which to communicate them, outside words." (98) This new vision of life brings him closer to a softer side of him he did not know existed before, to nature and to his wife, who has also been transformed. Nature: "Wading through waist-high grass, he was surprised to see all the tips waded with green, as if some new growth had come into the world that till now he had never seen or heard of." (97) And to his wife: "He had turned his full gaze upon her – that is what she felt." And his relationship with his wife:

> It was as if they were at the beginning of a courtship, very delicate, almost fearful on his part, and it struck her that in the early days of their knowing one another he had not been like this – he had been to sure then of winning her, or she had let him see too quickly that he had done so. It had prevented them from discovering something essential in one another. She was wiser now. She let him go on, and felt like a girl younger than she had been in those early days; more hopeful too. (99)

However, things soon start getting worse with the neighbours. Now, it is the McIvors who are bullied. First in the form of little random accidents: a fence to be mended, accidents, etc. Then, when they find three geese with their throats cut, Jock realises that the incidents were no mere

coincidence. The kids are disconsolate, and Jock feels outraged: "Who could have done such a thing? Little Meg, through her tears, gave him a look that went right through him. He had been powerless to protect Jemima, so why not her, or any one of them?" Jock knows it has not been the blacks, which means that it must be a neighbour, and the injustice of it, the gratuitous cruelty as well, dismays him. They have been defiled; he feels envenomed. The former confidence and self-assuredness he had felt among his mates become the measure of his despondency: "He was a stunned animal, all his strength, now that he was staggering, the weight that might bring him down." (103) Lachlan feels as outraged as he is, and demands revenge: he will do anything Jock tells him to do. But he is still a boy and Jock does not want to put on him such a heavy burden. "It's a'right for me, he thought, but he's too young for this." However, when Lachlan realises that he is at odds with his friends, and that they have been so easily and openly terrorised, he also keeps quiet. Regarding Gemmy, many people thought he would run away, but he simply vanishes "into his own skin," (104) where no one can find him. Three days after the incident with the geese, early in the morning, Jock comes across Gemmy, who is running away from the fence he had been mending the day he received the visit from the Aborigines. He tries to stop him, but Gemmy, terrified, dribbles past him. The narrative brings in scatological imaginary to explain to what extent Gemmy and, by extension, the McIvors have been defiled: "Jock went on, and the feeling of dread that came over him was like the faint, far-off smell of some new violation that was on its way towards them." (104) When he reaches the fence, the exact spot where Gemmy had added some new planks, there is a stain of shit all over it. The stink revolts him. He is even more revolted by the knowledge that someone he knows has done this, someone who might have come up with the idea while talking to him, face to face. He takes a handful of grass and tries to clean it, unsuccessfully. He has smashed some greenflies. Then, he realises that the stain draws a word, we are not told which one. He is glad Gemmy cannot read. Shattered, he goes to the river to clean his hands, "his breath racking him like a wounded animal's…" (105) Still, the worst is yet to come.

Gemmy sleeps on a lean-to shelter just the opposite to the wall where Jock and Ellen sleep. Ellen is sometimes awoken by Gemmy's cries in his nightmares, but she has got used to it. However, this time there is something more: a bump against the wall puts her on alert and she touches her husband, alarmed. He swiftly rises from the bed, takes his shotgun, and peeks from behind the windows. Janet has been woken up, and her mother tells her to go back to sleep and not to wake the others. Lachlan stirs in bed but continues sleeping. Jock sees a group of people running, very close together, but they are running away from the house. He hands Ellen the shotgun, puts his moleskins and boots on and, careful not to wake the children, opens the door and follows the small group. Ellen goes outside, in her bedclothes, and Janet follows her. When Jock reaches the bottom of the creek, he finds Gemmy in it, soaked in water, a bag in his head. He pulls it out and makes out a group of four or five men, running off into the bush. That is what he had dreaded the most: to have to come face to face with them, the men that were bullying them, men he knew. He is relieved and angry at the same time. "They had saved themselves, and him too, by making off. Cowards, he thought bitterly. But wasn't he one too in the relief he felt?" When Gemmy hangs on to him – another proof of how much he has been changed – now he does not recoil. "He was shaking, but comforted Gemmy as well as he could and for the first time did not draw away when the man clutched and held on." Jock takes Gemmy back home. When she sees them, Ellen turns around and notices Janet outside, with her. They stand together as they watch their father pass in front of them and take Gemmy to his shelter. Janet is thrilled. "Her father raised his head and the look he gave them she would never forget." (114) When they reach the lean-to shed, Jock sits with Gemmy, covers themselves with his moth-eaten blanket, and hugs him tightly:

> Laying aside his rifle, he crawled with him into that musty, dark-smelling place, and did a thing he could not for his life have done a week, perhaps even an hour ago: he sat huddled close to him in the dark, and when he shivered, drew him closer, pulled the old moth-eaten blanket round the two of them, and with the man against him,

> heard his juddering breadth, and smelt it, while outside moonlight fell on the cleared space round the hut where his wife and children waited. (115)

This episode of senseless bullying precipitates a series of events in Gemmy's head that brings together his present life at the colony with his life back in England, before he jumped on a ship and ended up in the antipodes of the world. The first premonitory event starts with the visit the Aborigines pay him. What they brought Gemmy was a reminder that he could choose to go back with them if he liked, to enjoy the gift of the land and its replenishing energy. "It belonged to him as he did to it; not by birth but by second-birth, by gift, and not just for his lifetime either but for the whole of time, since it was for the whole of time that it existed, as he did too so long as he was one with it." (108) Gemmy recognizes now that in these last months he has grown week – "the dry little cough that plagued him, and his stomach troubles" – and feels "the energy flow back into him" (107) with the evocation of his former life with the Aborigines. However, he chooses to stay in the colony. Then, Andy appears. But he is not really afraid of him or of any other men in the colony. They tease him, play him around, but when things go too far they pick him up and no one makes a fuss of it. The worst that happens to him takes place in his sleep, a reminiscence of the abuses he suffered back in his other life, especially at the hands of Mosey and the Irish in the ship that took him to Australia:

> His real tormentors were in his head, and they came after him more and more often now as their shapes rose clearer in his memory and grew faces and fists in the dark hours of his sleep. And as always, it was Mosey and The Irish who were the worst of them: Mosey with his high thin voice and fair wisp of a beard, soft as a girl, and The Irish with gunpowder pits in his cheeks and two fingers gone from his right hand. (109)

So, it is no coincidence that on the night that he is kidnapped, Gemmy is reliving his worst nightmares yet again, so that his worst times back in his previous life merge with a new nightmare

here on the other side of the world. It is a long quote, but it masterfully describes Gemmy's anguish and how the two worlds merge:

> 'What have we got here, now? A boy, is it? By Jimminy yes, I reckon it's a boy, a boyo. But what a scrawny, thin-necked, weasel of a boy', and with each new taunt they would begin to push him back and forth between them, 'what a snub-nosed – '
>
> 'Red-eared – '
>
> 'Big-mouthed – '
>
> 'Low-arsed – '
>
> 'Knock-kneed – '
>
> 'Imitation of a boy it is! More like a scrap of cheese – '
>
> 'Or the sole of me boot – '
>
> 'Or a bit of stale pie crust you can't hardly get your teeth into – '
>
> 'Than a boy, a boy, a boyo!'
>
> All the while leering and lunging as they sang the words back and forth and bowled him back and forth between them, till they began to thrust about under his clothes, and the cries that broke from him as their fingers pinched and poked and teased and twisted were the cries of a child, but the pain now was that of a grown man, outraged and powerless, who had to stand by and see it done, and for all the fierce howls that came out of him could neither drive the devils off nor prevent what, in a moment now, unless he wakes, will be past all remedy…
>
> He wakes from such a dream. A clammy hand is over his mouth, a mouth, close in the dark but not his own, is roughly panting. He struggles; half-waking, jerks his body to get free, but as so often, the dream hangs on, tough arms hurdle his ribs. It hangs on just that breath longer than sleep, but the breath, indrawn, is very deep and the fear comes to him that this time he may not be able to shake it

> off, that the tormentors he carries within him, who have been so long hidden and have begun, more and more often now, to come to the surface in him, will this time break clear, get out into the real world, where he will have no more control of them than he had in the days when they were real and he was one of them.
>
> And it is true. This time it is true. He is awake, and these others, all knuckled hands and shoulders and rough heads and breath, are cramped close under the lean-to with him, shoving, whispering instructions, at one point giggling.
>
> They have got him hooped about with their arms, they are pulling a bag over his head, and with the chocking chaffy roughness of it against his mouth, and in the dry breathlessness of nightmare, he is being hopped and dragged over stones, and when he stumbles, jerked upright by a crowd of bodiless whisperers who are trotting along on all sides of him, as if all his tormentors had found one another at last in the dream-space of his head, and discovering now what they have in common, have joined forces to gallop him to some corner of the dark where he is flat-handed this way and that, and when he throws up his hands to protect himself, falls, but at other times merely hovers on the brink, and is baited and played with; not brutally but with hands, neither fisted nor frenzied, coming at him from every direction, and without sound save for the grunted effort it takes to haul a man to his feet so that he can be knocked down again, and the breathing in the darkness, which is huge even inside the sack, of many mouths.
>
> Suddenly there is water round his ankles, and when he stumbles this time there is a splash that scatters moonlight through his skull. (110-111)

As a result of this episode of "senseless bullying" (115), which involves the men in the colony, Gemmy is removed to Mrs Hutchence's house. We have seen that it is the men who are mainly worried about Gemmy. However, women also partake of this concern. Women in the neighbourhood also gather from time to time, and when they join Ellen at her house, everything

revolves around Gemmy. Sick of this obsession, she wonders what they had talked about before Gemmy arrived. When they flush and recoil in horror at the thought that Gemmy would probably prefer to go about naked and eat like a savage – there are a couple of hints at cannibalism in the novel: "And eating grubs – imagine! – than potatoes and cold mutton. That is, if it wasn't something worse. Their own grandfathers, so they say" (70) –, Ellen reminds them that Gemmy is white – "They were forgetting, she told them frostily. Gemmy was white" (71) – to no avail. What upsets her the most is when they suggest she might not have the interests of her children at heart. Still, when the McIvors' house is raided and Gemmy is taken, it is the women who gather and find a solution to the problem, all on their own. It is the women who act.

We find out through the Minister's wife. One night, she tells him they need to talk. Briefly, she tells him about the two Aborigines' visit to Gemmy, the assault on Gemmy at the McIvors', how they had met to put into effect Millie Sweetman's suggestion to remove Gemmy to Mrs Hutchence's house, and how the plan had been carried out quickly and swiftly to everyone's benefit. Mr Frazer had heard about Gemmy's visit from the blacks but nothing else. He is hurt that no one had thought about consulting him, but there is little he can do now. The matter is settled.

Mrs Hutchence's place is a little removed from the settlement, and the Minister's wife is confident that no one will bully Gemmy at her place: "And you know what Mrs Hutchence is,' she adds lightly. 'They won't try their nonsense with her." (125) The minister's wife's comment seems to suggest that the men in the colony are unruly children who will not try their nonsense with an adult – Mrs Hutchence is probably in her fifties. But what seems to set Mrs Hutchence apart is her social status. We have seen that the female and male cultures have been in league to get rid of Gemmy, but they work by different means. On the one hand, the men are characterised by teasing, bullying, and aggression towards the weak. On the other hand, the women are also worried about Gemmy, the influence he might have on Ellen's children, his barbaric customs, etc. and they psychologically press Ellen.

We see Mr Frazer or the men in the colony would not have found a solution to the problem when, as a reaction to what his wife tells him, he decides to take the matter to the authorities. In his botanic journeys with Gemmy, he has been aware that the land is rich with edible fruits and plants they ignore, and that they can learn a lot from him. Once, at the end of a journey, he had come across Jim Sweetman, who was playing with the pony with his spoiled granddaughter and had given him a fruit to try and shown him the seeds where it came from. Mr Frazer bit into the fruit to show him it was edible but Sweetman refused it. On the contrary, he was a little impatient for being interrupted and having his granddaughter upset, and when his granddaughter began to cry to get his attention back, looked at the minister accusingly: "The child shot a glance at him, shrieked again, and Jim Sweetman, stricken, while the child sobbed into his breast, shook his head at him as if *he* was responsible." (122) It is after this episode when Mr Frazer realises that if there has to be a major change regarding how to adapt themselves to the new culture, it must come from above, from the high spheres of power. That is when he starts writing a report, and when he learns what has happened to Gemmy, he knows it is time to send it. Everything that follows is a parody of colonial institutions, quite in line with Homi Bhabha's criticism of colonial institutions in this regard. Mr Frazer is invited to Brisbane. He sees monuments behind scaffoldings, verandahed banks and weatherboard hotels and stores – a city built in the middle of the lush subtropical vegetation of the area. In his way towards the Governor's house, he is surprised to see him glamorously attired on a shiny chariot, as if evoking an unreachable metropolitan power, but when he rings his doorbell he is surprised to find him peeking out a window to see who it is and going to open the door himself:

> The Governor, he soon discovered, was a very visible figure. He dashed about the unpaved streets in a gleaming chariot, wearing epaulettes and a sword, and gave the impression, with his ramrod stance and lean profile, of being the embodiment of a distant, almost unapproachable power. But when Mr Frazer presented himself at

> Government House, it was Sir George himself who looked out of a window and called him in. (151)

Talking with the Governor, Mr Frazer feels ill at ease. He notices the Governor suspects him of being behind a plot to discredit him, but when he finally finds out that Mr Frazer is there on his own account relaxes and starts to parrot a monotonous encumbered discourse, all classic references. Humbly, he gives him a couple of books he has written, explains how he has baptised mountains and cities after some Mediterranean classical loci, etc. Mr Frazer has a bad feeling about his coming here, but when the Governor invites him for dinner at the Premier's House, he accepts. However, Mr Frazer finds himself among three diners who do not seem to get along and who do not have anything new to say to one another – the Premier, Mr Herbert; Lady Bowen, and Sir George, the Governor. He finds out that Mr Herbert lives with an associate, Mr Bramston, in a country house, which they jollily tell him bears their names: Herston. There, they indulge in growing vegetables and fruits they have imported from everywhere, and around which the conversation revolves. Mr Frazer believes they bring up the subject to give him an opportunity to talk about his report, but the Governor's tenseness tells him that something is not right and keeps quiet. Is he embarrassing him?

There is more than meets the eye going on between the men at the meeting. On the one hand, Mr Frazer fears that Sir George might feel betrayed because he and the Premier seem to be getting along well. But it is at this point that a whole series of erotic and sexual allusions begin to emerge that might not be readily perceptible to the actors, but it is clearly there for the reader. Mr Frazer notices that Mr Herbert is quite an attractive fellow, and is taken with his manliness and easy-going bearing, which contrasts with Sir George's pretentious nature. Likewise, Mr Herbert seems to like Mr Frazer, with whom he is attentive and solicitous. These are Mr Frazer's thoughts when he asks himself why he might have betrayed the Governor:

> Or he has been too responsive to Mr Herbert; whom he finds rather attractive on the whole, very manly and unassuming and, at one moment, when he took the

> opportunity, perhaps foolishly, to speak of Gemmy – whose name Mr Herbert already knew – very attentive and sympathetic. Sir George has seen it and sniffed out a defection, a choice of loyalties. (159)

On the other hand, there emerges in the jolly conversation going on between Lady Bowen and Mr Herbert a subtext of sexual allusions. First, there is the joint enterprise between Mr Herbert and Mr Bramson, and the fact that they have given their country house a name that, at least metaphorically, symbolizes their union: Herston. Secondly, Lady Bowen boldly tells Mr Frazer: "We are very gay when we go to Herston," where she might not only mean jolly but might refer to a homosexual relationship going on beween Mr Herbert and Mr Bramson. Finally, Mr Herbert goes red when talking about the magnificent asparagus they grow – it is unlikely that he goes red as a sign of modesty – and Lady Bowen, perhaps thinking that she is picking on Sir George's orthodox manners, talks about strawberries, whose form and colour suggest femininity, i.e. the lips, and passion, respectively:

> 'Our asparagus, this year,' Mr Herbert announces at another point, and the colour comes to his cheek, 'is quite special. People told us, you know, that it couldn't be done. Too damp. But there it is.'
>
> 'And the strawberries,' says Lady Bowen, darting a quick glance at Sir George who has put his knife and fork down, drawn himself up and is smouldering… (157)

As Mr Frazer fears from his first meeting with the Governor, his trip to Brisbane has been a waste of time. This is confirmed when, next day, he receives a note from the Premier, where he thanks him for being so considered and understanding – Mr Frazer cannot figure out what about – and offers Gemmy Fairly a post as a public servant, which means that he has given a completely wrong idea about Gemmy in his report. This incident brings into light the distance between official institutions and its representatives, and the people and territories they govern.

Since Mr Frazer had probably written down in his report that Gemmy was a "forerunner" and "a true child of the place" (121), as he had written in his diary, there is double irony in the act that Gemmy is offered a post as Customs Officer:

> '… I have pleasure in informing you that I have arranged for him to be offered the post of Customs Officer at the port of Bowen, at a salary of fifty pounds per annum, the official notification of which, etc, etc.'
>
> He was astonished. Had he made himself so unclear? Was it a return for his 'understanding' of a situation he had not understood? Was it a joke whose humour he was expected to recognise – at the expense, perhaps, of Sir George? Was it cynicism? Was it large-handed indifference? Anyway, it was what he took back with him. (159)

So, in the end, he probably was glad that the women had taken the matter up in their own hands regarding Gemmy.

However, the series of unfortunate evetns does not end when Gemmy is removed to Mrs Hutchence's house. Gemmy's nightmares will worsen there. In Chapter 16, Gemmy already is in his new room. It is a small room, with a bed and a waist high drawer, and a cot where Leona sits to feed him and tries to cheer him up. After the incident at the McIvors, Gemmy is terribly upset – now he suffered "…from bruised ribs and a broken mouth, but even more from a bruising of the spirit that threw him into moments of frantic terror…" (132). Mrs Hutchence and Leona treat him kindly, but Gemmy misses his small lean-to and the McIvor children, especially Lachlan. Even though he sees the girls regularly in their visits, together with Mr Abbot and Hector Gosper, he does not understand the games they play and further isolates himself. Gemmy is anxious in the otherwise cosy little room. He soon has a bad feeling about the small wooden drawer in the room, and thinks his malaise must come from something they keep there. Mrs Hutchence and Ms Leona are surprised when, soon after his arrival, they enter the room and see Gemmy in the midst of a snow of white pillowcases and bed sheets. They reprimand him lightly, because they do not want

to upset him anymore, and spent the day boiling the bedclothes in the copper, ironing, and when they finish they store them away. At night, when he is trying to fall asleep, Gemmy realises that what upsets him in the innermost recesses of his being is the smell of the wood the wardrobe is made of. When he falls asleep, it takes him back years ago, when he was a youngster working in a furniture factory. They were a group of kids whose job was to sweep the sawdust from in between the legs supporting the sawing teeth, the screaming of the machines a nightmare that would continue in their sleep, when they would warm each other sleeping close together and sustain themselves with the most primary forms of human contact. The smell of the wood revives in Gemmy his older self, shedding light on an area in his skull that had remained in the dark for a long time. Other memories from his other self start to emerge. After the factory, there was Willett, a coarse fellow that recalls the Artful Dodger in Charles Dickens' classic *Oliver Twist.* Willett is a rat catcher in Regents Park, and at weekends provides sewer and ditch rats for weekend matches. Gemmy is in charge of getting the rats out of their cages and throwing them into the ring. The rats sometimes climb all over his body, bite him and get entangled in his hair. Willett stands behind him and cajoles him not to stand back or look afraid, which he is – he is terrified:

> When he plunges his arm into the musky dark and hauls the sewer- and ditch-rats out of the hot, drain-smelling interior, they squeal and tumble over one another's backs, and fight, using their teeth something horrible, and he gets many wounds that turn to open sores. He has scars all over his hands – one thumb is bitten through – and on his ears as well, since the rats, if they get the chance, will run up his body like squirrels up a tree trunk and fix their claws in his hair, till Willet untangles and tears them off. They get up the legs of his trousers too if they are not laced at the knees with string. (137)

Gemmy is popular in the decadent world where he works: "He is a game little fellow – that is his reputation. He is proud of it, and has learned to swagger and win cheers." (137) When Willett arrives home, he is in charge of putting his boots to dry next to the fireplace; prepares

Willett's dinner, a fat sausage in a dirty pan which he is allowed to scrub with a piece of bread; gets ale for Willett's supper, etc. Willett abuses him quite often, especially when his moll is around. Once, he tells her to take Gemmy in her lap and give him the breast to suck. The narrow world where he lives gives him a measure of all good and bad things, since he knows nothing else. Being Willett's boy, Gemmy has a grip on the world, so he loves and fears him fiercely:

> Having known no better life than this, he cannot imagine one. Willett provides the only bit of closeness he has ever been offered, and since he has nothing else to love, he loves him with a fierce intensity, a fear too, which is the greatest he knows, that he may get lost, or that Willett one day may abandon him, taking with him the whole world as he conceives it: Ketch, the ferrets, the streets Willett is king of, the razor, the sweet garden smell of his hands, his curses, his kisses, the warm grease of the skillet, the boots with their trailing laces and tongues lit with flame, his name, Gemmy, his claim to existence as a boy, as Willett's boy. (135)

Until one night, "after a beating no worse than others he has received," (137) without purpose or reason, Gemmy sets the place on fire. "There, he thinks as he watches it catch. He could not say what he has in mind. Nothing, perhaps. He is eleven or twelve years old and some darker nature has begun to emerge in him. He has resentments." (137-138) His act of defiance and rebellion makes him feels elated. He even kicks Willett, who simply groans and does not move. However, when the ferrets start panicking, he comes back to himself and tries to stop the fire. But it is too late. He opens the windows, letting a rush of cold air come over his shoulders into the room, and runs from everything he is familiar with towards the unknown.

He runs until he is exhausted, then sits in a door-entrance and falls dead sleep until the bag man wakes him up and tries to put him inside a sack: "Once, in the night, a fierce-eyed little ragman comes, and takes him by the collar, and tries to push him into a sack." (138) At dead of night, he runs away, climbs a rope, and throws himself into a wooden box and falls sleep again. In

the morning, the sun caresses his face. Suddenly, a sailor pulls him like a rabbit from the box, and the sight terrifies him: a low grey cloud that suggests that his whole world has been turned into ashes.

We know where he ends up.

Therefore, we see how Gemmy's worst nightmares in Australia link with his worst nightmares in metropolitan London. There is a connection we have pointed out before, when Gemmy reflects that he and Andy "stood too close to one another on the lowest rung of things in the settlement for his ferocity to accept defeat," (109) between the abject, the wretched, the exploited and the working class in the metropolis and the natives, the marginalized and the abject in the colony. Civilisation and culture, even high culture sustain themselves exploiting the weak and then repressing this daily reality, in the same way that Empire justifies itself by projecting an area of darkness it has to enlighten. It might be no coincidence that Gemmy blames the seven sheets of paper where the minister and Mr. Abbot have written down his life for everything that is happening to him. If Homi Bhabha is right when claiming that it is the "immediate vision of the Book," that is, of writing, that is a mark of "'cultural' authority" (Bhabha 150) – now we understand why he puts the word 'cultural' in quotation marks – then Gemmy is justified in wanting to free himself from 'cultural' oppression by getting hold of the seven sheets of paper and burning them.

In the second to last Chapter, Gemmy goes to the school where George Abbot is marking papers. The narrative voice is humorous all along, when describing Gemmy's attitude towards Mr Abbot and writing. It may seem a paradox, but it is not. Teachers are representatives of culture, but they are at the lowest rung in this area.[99] And so it is that Gemmy believes that Mr Abbot has two identities, a social one when he is at Mrs Hutchence's and another, and darker one in his role as schoolteacher: "A man may have two natures. Here at his desk the schoolteacher was in the

[99] In Spanish, we have the expression "ganar menos que un maestro de escuela," literally "he earns less than a school teacher," whenever we want to say that someone has a low salary.

other darker and more powerful one, seated before a pile of papers, with at his elbow the bottle with the spirit that smelled of earth." (161) When Gemmy approaches him, at the beginning Mr Abbot does not know what he wants, but a name he pronounces takes him back to the day when he and Mr Frazer tried to figure out his story and wrote it down. He tells him that Mr Frazer has the papers, and takes a handful of his students' assignments to make his point. Mr Abbot has changed in the half month that Gemmy has been in the colony. "Since he had begun to love and also to forget himself a little, the world and everything around him appeared in a new light." (162) Now he respects Gemmy and regrets the contempt he had felt when Gemmy first joined the settlement. The word "endurance" comes up several times. What Mr Abbot claims now is that there is something commendable in enduring the blows of life and having the strength to carry on; that there is something more ennobling in suffering than noble sentiments or the high aspirations he had had as a teenager. This analysis extends to the whole of Australia, as the last outpost of the British Empire. First, we are told that Mr Abbot sees Gemmy differently through his own experience, which is the only way he can empathize with others: "He saw – it was still himself he was thinking of, it was the only way he could grasp what others felt – that there might be something after all in mere endurance." (163) And then, the narrative voice links those qualities with manhood, as if endurance was not a quality woman could possess. Still, he does prove our point when distinguishing a nobility that does not depend on high culture: "They were in a place, a continent, where it was mere naked endurance perhaps that best revealed the qualities of men. And that might be true of every place, when the fabric of pageant and the illusion of noble sentiments had been ripped away." (164-165)

Edward W. Said, in his book *Culture and Imperialism* has highlighted the correlation between the higher and the lower classes in the metropolis and between the metropolis and its colonies. In this book, Said argues that during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries the English novel served the purposes of Imperialism. Firstly, because it interiorised the idea that England had a legitimate right to dominate its colonies on the basis of its higher cultural and political

institutions. Secondly, because the novel was a subtle way of spreading and establishing the Imperial designs in the colonies. We have seen how *Remembering Babylon* evokes the world of Charles Dickens when talking about Gemmy at work in a British factory and his degraded life in London. In the following excerpt from *Culture and Imperialism,* notice that Said elaborates on how the novel *Mansfield Park,* by Jane Austen, reflects and, therefore, reinforces the cultural idea that the aim of the colonies is to provide the means to maintain a bourgeois way of life at home, in the same way that household servants serve in a house. The last part of the excerpt testifies to the analogy we pointed out before between the abject at home, which Eric Wolf called 'people without history,' and the native people 'without History.' However congratulatory these labels may be, they concisely represent in their wording the worldview we are trying to deconstruct.

> As a reference, as a point of definition, as an easily assumed place of travel, wealth, and service, the empire functions for much of the European nineteenth century as a codified, if only marginally visible, presence in fiction, very much like the servants in grand households and in novels, whose work is taken for granted but scarcely ever more than named, rarely studied (though Bruce Robbins has recently written on them), or given density. To cite another intriguing analogue, imperial possessions are as usefully *there,* anonymous and collective, as the outcast populations (analysed by Gareth Stedman Jones) of transient workers, part-time employees, seasonal artisans; their existence always counts, though their names and identities do not, they are profitable without being fully there. This is a literary equivalent, in Eric Wolf's somewhat self-congratulatory words, of 'people without History,' people on whom the economy and polity sustained by empire depend, but whose reality has not historically or culturally required attention. (Said 75)

The house where Mrs Hutchence and Miss Leona live evokes the Bertram's manor in Jane Austen's novel *Mansfield Park,* which also stands in isolation in the country in Northamptonshire. *Mansfield Park* tells the story of Fanny Price, who comes from a poor background and moves in

with her wealthy relatives, Sir Thomas and Lady Bertram. After many incidents, involving adulteries, licentiousness and debauchery, we see Fanny's honesty compensated at the end of the novel when she marries Edmund, her first love at the beginning of the novel and the only good man in the family, the message being therefore that virtue is more important than social class and that at the end it is always paid back. (Austen) Also, and this is what Edward W. Said emphasises, the novel portrays "a structure of attitude and reference" (Said 73) by means of which Sir Thomas's plantation in Antigua provides the capital for the Bertram family to be able to carry on a wealthy life: "According to Austen we are to conclude no matter how isolated or insulated the English place (e.g. Mansfield Park), it requires overseas sustenance." (Said 107) In any event, Said also points out to fact that one might too quickly infer that Jane Austen's work is in agreement with slavery. This is wrong. The novel implicitly critiques the cruelty of slavery, but the problem was that its reality was so ingrained in the culture that it was not easy to see though it. But there are some subversive, anti-slavery and post-colonial elements in Jane Austen's novels to suggest that she did not positively, and unthinkingly endorse slavery. This is the point Said wants to make when he writes, quoting *Mansfield Park:* "Fanny Price reminds her cousin that after asking Sir Thomas about the slave trade, 'There was such a dead silence' as to suggest that one world could not be connected with the other since there simply is no common language for both." (Said 115)

This worldview draws a political map that reflects social class divisions at home, where England plays the role of the upper class and its colonies the role of servants. Said also emphasises this point: "we should now proceed to regard the geographical division of the world – after all significant to *Mansfield Park* – as not neutral (any more than class and gender are neutral) but as politically charged." (Said 111) In *Remembering Babylon,* Mrs Hutchence's house plays an analogous role to Mansfield Park in the novel that bears the same name. It stands on its own on Bowen road, and it is ostentatious: "She lived three miles out on the Bowen road, not in a hut but in a real house." (75) But there are more similarities. No one knows what the exact relationship between Mrs Hutchence and Miss Leona is, which suggests that Leona might be the result of an illegitimate

relationship and that the two women come from a world similar to the one Jane Austen portrays in her novels. This is emphasised by the fact that Miss Leona likes to recreate the European salons and that is the reason why she plays hostess to Hector Gosper, Mr Abbot, the McIvor girls, and Gemmy. Miss Leona is introducing the McIvor girls into the world of courtship, which is a European import. For example, we are told that "Janet knew only too well what was going on, and was fascinated, because Hector, she knew, was not much more than seventeen, whereas Leona, as far as she could work out, was- well, twenty-five at least." (79) We will recall that when he meets the Hutchence's, George Abbot was looking for a shady spot to read his book, and delight in the reading in French, which was the language of refinement and etiquette. At the table, Mr Abbot is aware of how careless he has become in the colony, and realises that Hector, a farm boy, takes better care of himself:

> If he was let down by anything it was the state of his shirt-cuffs, which were very grubby. He pulled the sleeves of his jacket down to hide them, and noticed, as he did, the dirt that was ingrained in the knuckles of his big hands – even Hector's, he saw, were cleaner. How careless he had allowed himself to become! His hair, for example. He ran his hand through it. It was a bird's nest; whereas Hector was altogether, for all his overgrown limbs and the harelip, very neat, and was not barefooted but wore flash new boots. (80-81)

Of course, we can see this as another instance of colonial parody of metropolitan customs. But we can also see it as a first step towards the establishment of genuine Australian customs, inherited but different from Europe's. This is emphasised by the fact that the house does not look like anything the settlers', all of them European immigrants, had seen before. As we pointed out in the introduction, the Australian landscape was not like anything the first colonizers had seen before. So, it should not come as a surprise that all that they import acquires features of their own there.

When the settlers go to see the house, to see if they can figure out where the two women come from, they are disappointed:

> The house might have flown through the air and landed, plump down, from some seaport up north that they barely had heard of, it was so unlike anything you would see here. If it had information to give away, they couldn't fathom it. It was in a language they could not read. (76)

And then, in the next paragraph, we are given a hint that the house might not look like any other house, but be something genuine, when they consider that maybe that is what houses will look like in the future in Australia: "Was it the past or the future they were looking at? If the past, it was not their past. If the future – well, on the whole they did not care for it." (76)

Finally, Mrs Hutchence's house is autonomous. The source of her fortune is a mystery – "no one knew where she came from… or how she could afford to buy a real house" – and there is the rumour that they might have come from Malacca or Macao, but no one knows for sure: "They had come, it was said, from the Islands, from Macao, or maybe it was Malacca…" (75) Like Manfield Park, the fortune that sustains them comes from somewhere else.

Our point is that in the same way that Jane Austen's novel hints at social mobility, in *Remembering Babylon* Mrs Hutchence's advocates that the colonies, in this case Australia, can also become the centre of things.

We have seen in our analysis of previous novels that change is a recurrent motive, but in *Remembering Babylon* this motive appears both as a clear fact and with an intensity that no other novel has. In the six months Gemmy stays in the colony, most of the characters experience deep changes, in some cases liberating and in others painful. Sometimes, these changes are the result of Gemmy's influence in the colony, but not always. For example, Lachlan and Janet mature into adulthood in different ways, and the experience of Janet with the bees will awaken a life-lasting passion in her. Mr Abbot changes for the better when he joins Leona's parties at Mrs Hutchence's, abandoning his façade of superiority and relaxing a bit. But we have seen how Gemmy deeply

changes Ellen and Jock McIvor, especially Jock. What is important is that change is an important leitmotiv in the novel. This is emphasised at the end of the previous to last Chapter, when Gemmy runs away from the schoolhouse with the seven sheets of paper. For the first time perhaps in his life, Gemmy realizes that he is free: "he could go any way he pleased," a glowing light behind a single large and low cloud of ash. It is a bushfire, a current phenomenon in Australia by means of which Aborigines cleared the land of undergrowth and stimulated the forests' regeneration. As a result of the strong heat waves produced by the El Niño-Southern Oscillation,[100] which is not linked to the seasons and may comprise time-spans of years, these fires can reach considerable proportions and burn great expanses of land. Metaphorically, the great fire suggests purification and the biblical Babylon that bears the book title. Change, destruction and resurrection from the ashes is the image with which Gemmy's story ends. The narrative voice emphasises how the undergrowth and the forest burns, but it puts equal emphasis on how the fire is the agent that cracks the seeds open of the new plants and tress that will inhabit the place. Contrary to *An Imaginary Life,* where the narrative voice suggests several times the idea of progress when talking about transformation and change (especially in 22-23, but also on 58 and 133-134), in *Remembering Babylon* we are told that the burning and change have "no finality", that there is no reason for it: "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." (164) This worldview puts *Remembering Babylon* in line with the postmodern critique of the idea of reason and progress and makes it a classical postcolonial novel.

[100] According to the Wikipedia: "El Niño-Southern Oscillation is an irregularly periodical variation in winds and sear surface temperatures over the tropical eastern Pacific Ocean, affecting much of the tropics and subtropics. The warming phase is known as El Niño and the cooling phase as La Niña." (*Wikipedia "El Niño-Southern Oscillation"*)

As Gemmy walks towards the fire, he anxiously looks for the Aboriginal language that will allow him to reunite with the land and its Aboriginal inhabitants. More specifically, he looks for "the word" that will open the door back to it: "If he did not find the word soon that would let him enter here, there would be nothing left of him but a ghost of heat, a whiff as he passed of fallen ash." Suddenly, it slowly starts to rain and the word comes to him: "*Water*." (164) And with the word, the Aboriginal world illuminates in front of him. The cleansing effect of the water dissolves the words in the sheets of paper that he is still holding, trembling, in his hand. The papers break, and slip from his hands:

> Rain had begun to wash the writing from them, the names, the events; their black magic now a watery sky-colour, the sooty grains sluicing away even as he watched; the paper turning pulpy, beginning to break up in his hands, dropping like soggy crumbs from his fingers into puddles where he left them, bits all disconnected … *and my fiens Billy an … pretty little black patch over … thunder Then … of every colour of …* (165)

Now, he is free.

However, the last Chapter contrasts with the one we have just described.

The last Chapter, where we see Lachlan and Janet in their old age, sets the action about 40 years later. We quickly perceive that things have not been easy for either of them. If we read between the lines, we can blame patriarchy. The narrative voice makes some explicit comments in this regard. The critique contains some irony, but the general tone is tragic. In this last Chapter, we learn that Janet has become sister Monica, and that Lachlan occupies some important official post. Lachlan and Janet have been out of touch for the most part of their lives, until the outbreak of World War I, when Janet asks Lachlan for help when the authorities cut her correspondence with a German apiculturist. Lachlan intervenes in her favour and, when things get ugly, he is accused of being in league with the Germans through her cousin – the language of the bees being

a secret code to pass information between the two parties. After all this, Lachlan decides to pay a visit to his cousin. That is how the Chapter opens. He is visiting her in an official car with a driver.

The first impression we get as readers is that Lachlan has done well, and that Janet has become a nun in order to be able to pursue her study of bees and to maintain her independence of mind and spirit. At first sight, Lachlan has done better than Janet. The nuns are excited and the visit is a break from their daily routine. The man in the car represents that other world they have set themselves apart from, a world that is described as "impressive but dangerous." It is the world of public affairs, a world of men. The car symbolises this world. However, the narrative voice describes the car – its metallic shape, the smooth running of its engine – in such everyday and natural terms, that the reader is left with the impression that modernity has nothing to do with the crisis of values the novel critiques. The adjectives used to describe the car suggest a cat; the engine purrs, and it pokes its nose through the convent gate:

> Almost beautiful in its way, it nosed its metal form, all purring, into the quiet of their walled retreat (the walls were ten feet high, spiked at the top with shards of glass from ginger beer and lemonade bottles), an impressive but dangerous reminder of a world they had set themselves apart from, though not entirely, and which had lately become very noisy and tragically interesting. (166)

Another hint at the fact that it is not modernity – science and technology – that the novel is critiquing is that later on, Janet compares the hive of bees to a machine. Years back, she had thought of it as an angel. Has she learnt something about the bees that makes her qualify them as machines now, instead of as angels? It does not seem that this is the implicit message in the novel: "She would have thought of it once, the many minded, one-minded swarm, as an angel. She thought of it these days as a machine, which was a change but not a difference." (175)

The problem of their contemporary world, the narrative voice seems to suggest, is not modernity and everything that stems from it, but patriarchy. A social organisation that is based on hierarchy and where this hierarchy is sustained by violence and aggression: between men and

between men and women. This social organisation has a long history: it is as old as the world. For example, the Aboriginal peoples the first Europeans came across in Australia were polygamous. The issue is complex, because we have seen in Chapters 4 and 5 on *Fly Away Peter* and *The Great World,* respectively, the uses modernity can be put to in patriarchal societies, for example at war: mass mobilisations, trench warfare, prisoner of war camps, etc. What about the liberal economy and the new bourgeois morality? Generally speaking, sexism seems to be an older and more pervasive malady than political systems or progress. This at least seems to be the point of view that the narrative voice in *Remembering Babylon* endorses. As long as personal relationships are hierarchically structured as power relations, for example in the division between public and private spheres, political and economic ideologies as well as the development and use of science and technology are going to degenerate in one way or another. As Connell and Pearse put it in *Gender,* even if the sociological study of gender specifically concerns the bodies of individuals, their sexual orientations, and how these are organised into meaningful lives, gender is at the base of and it affects society at large: "gender concerns the way human societies deal with human bodies and their continuity, and the many consequences of that 'dealing' in our personal lives and our collective fate." (Connell and Pearse 11)

When Lachlan steps out of the car, the nuns at the convent are not so much concerned about the man himself and the reason for his visit as for what he represents – the world of their fathers and brothers, the public world of institutions and the actors of history in their own country: "The world *he* belonged to was familiar. It was that of their fathers and brothers, the bushman in three-piece suit down for The Show." (166) It is a world they do not trust, a morally disreputable world. The narrative voice emphasises that what the nuns specifically distrust is its maleness: "It confirmed them in their distrust of the world, especially the active, overbearing male part of it." (167) There is a stir about Lachlan because he is suspect of being a traitor to the country. Some of them are even happy that sister Monica has been involved in this scandal, thus rejoicing in their moral superiority: "… some of the sisters had looked at her for a time with new eyes – the

suspicion, after all, the mere possibility, was something – and one or two of them had been pleased to see her momentarily brought down." (167) In this, they partake of the values of the world of men. However, their distrust works both ways. They also feel that Lachlan is going to judge them. We know the pressure there was on women to get married at that time. If they did not get married before a certain age, they became spinsters, which was a sign of failure as a woman, because a woman was supposed to get married, give her husband a heir, and run the house. So there is a note of irony when we are told that the nuns make sure that the inside of the church is clean and well-polished before Lachlan comes in, as if it was proof that they were there because of their true devotion, and not because of their failure as women. The reader should notice that the masculine pronoun *he*, the generic noun *man*, and the adjective *domestic* qualifying the noun virtues, which refers to female qualities, have been written in italics in the main text on pages 166 and 167. This indicates that there is a conscious emphasis on gender issues in this Chapter.

This is what the nuns know about Minister Lachlan, and how they experience his visit:

> The *man* had not been cleared, or not in the public eye; and they rather enjoyed the hint, beyond his obvious plain looking and plain speaking, of something not quite trustworthy in him. It confirmed them in their distrust of the world, especially the active, overbearing male part of it. Some of them rushed about to see that the bannisters were without dust, rubbed their elbows on window-glass, peered at the tiles in the entry hall for heel-marks and scratches, as if he were here as an inspector of their devotion to the *domestic* virtues, to expose them as housewives largely failed. (167)

For further irony, the *raison d'être* of the convent is also corrupted. The building had belonged to a slaver, whose wife had donated the building to the congregation in order to clear her husband's name. In this way, money turns an "old ruffian" into a "grandfatherly figure." The convent is under the auspices of a patriarch, whose portrait oversees the main staircases of the building. It is interesting that the narrative voice says that he has a look of regret in the picture –

regret at not having had any descendants who now filled the house. Sometimes, the look seems to look down on the sisters hurrying around the convent, which interestingly links racism and sexism in the same paragraph: in a patriarchal culture, women belong to men; they are their property, like slaves. Racism and sexism mutually reinforce each other.

This is the story of the convent:

> It had been built, with ballroom, billiard room and separate kitchen and servants' quarters, for a local shipping magnate, whose fortune, before Federation put an end to that sort of thing, had been based on blackbirding for the sugar interests up north. His widow, an organiser, these days, of charity balls for the War effort, had deeded it to the sisters, as part of a bid for respectability in which the family name, in keeping with the new mood of expeditionary fervour and heroic self-sacrifice, would be relieved of the stain of Early Days in the South Seas, and the old ruffian who had been the scourge of all the nearby islands could become, with his white waistcoat and whiskers, a benign, grandfatherly figure, the very embodiment of the last great, if rather rough age of hobnailed visionaries. In this form his portrait dominated the staircase with its cedar newel posts and spindles, glaring down in regret, perhaps, of the children and grandchildren he had expected to fill the house when he first conceived it in the loneliness of nights up in the tropics, or in disapproval of the women in sensible boots who crossed and recrossed the stained-glass entry hall with their hands in their pockets, or, with skirts hauled up in the freedom of seclusion, swabbed its tiles with lye. (168)

The first time Lachlan visits Janet at the convent, he recognises the man in the portrait, Duncan McGregor – "the old cut-throat" – whom he had come across before in what Lachlan defines as an "unedifying experience." (168) However, this antipathy characterises most of Lachlan's male acquaintances. In a patriarchal society, homosociality is mediated by fierce competitiveness, where the ones on the top of the social hierarchy look over their shoulders to the

ones below. In only three pages, there are several other references to the essentially hostile nature of the world of men. When War breaks out, the house of a man called Walter Goetz, a German, is vandalised. His protests provoke his detention and he and his family are subsequently deported, even though his wife is Australian. However, as it turns out, one of Goetz' representatives happens to be Lachlan Beattie. Someone from his own office leaks documents to the press, his house is broken into, and Janet is surprised to find the letter he had once written to Lachlan asking for help published on the first page of *The Courier*, together with several of her studies on the flight patterns of bees, as part of an international conspiracy. (172) This signals the end of Lachlan's career as a politician. The affair has been detrimental to Lachlan's party, and now they want to get rid of him: "They want my head, that's all." He has come to visit his cousin to tell her that they are going to get rid of him before she finds out through the papers. Lachlan has come to reassure Janet: "'When it happens,' he looked amused, 'you mustn't think that you were to blame.'" (173) When Janet asks him if there is anything she can do, Lachlan tells her that he will give them hell. It is the only language men understand. The ones who will get rid of him are the ones of his own party: "I'll give as good as I get. I'm no Saint myself when it comes to that sort of thing. But I won't win. I've embarrassed the Government, that's the real issue. It's my colleagues who will get rid of me…" (173-174) On top of it all, when Janet asks him whether Walter Goetz and him were friends, he answers negatively and disqualifies him and his wife in the crudest terms: "No. He's rather an unattractive fellow really, I don't quite trust him. The wife is all nerves. Sick, I mean. They are helpless, hopeless people." (174) Lachlan does not trust anyone, he seems to have no friends. Lachlan is fighting a war on his own and against everyone. They all are vulnerable to a similar fate, but now that he is in the spotlight, it is his turn. To make things worse, he has recently lost his wife. In his first letter, when he had reopened contact with her German apiculturist, he had told her about "the death of his wife, which had occurred just seven months before" (171) and, after the war breaks out and Australia is mobilized, he loses his grandson in France. He will tell Janet about it during his first visit.

Lachlan's world is falling apart, and he is seeking refuge in Janet.

The brief reference to Walter Goetz strikes a familiar note in Malouf's private life. Even if Lachlan does not empathise with him, it is a tragic story, and not an uncommon one at the time, which Malouf's family knew quite well. He tells about it in his memoirs, *12 edmonstone street,* in the last Chapter, entitled "The Kyogle Line." In this Chapter, Malouf recalls a family trip to Sydney in 1944, where he talks about his father, someone whom he would have liked to know better: "I liked my father. I wished he would talk to me and tell me things. I didn't know him." (149) Midway, close to midnight, the train stops at Coffs Harbour to let passengers stretch their legs, get a drink or simply have a break. Malouf and his father go for a walk. Malouf is enjoying their being together like that, when suddenly they come across a crowd. They are observing three Japanese POWs. The experience is a vivid one: "But looking in at them was like looking in from our own minds, our own lives, on another species. The vision imposed silence on the crowd." (Malouf 150) When father and son move away, silence is broken and people start cursing. However, as Don Randall points out, Malouf does not recount this memory from the point of view of the first person singular – he recounts it from the point of view of an omniscient narrator. We see him and his father detach themselves from the crowd, and observe the multitude referring to the Japanese in derogatory terms. Randall defines it as an "estranging" experience (Randall 77), which puts an end to the sense of togetherness of father and son. What seems to have triggered the shift to the third person singular, to the uncanny moment and the existential void is the memory of a painful episode in their family history, when David's grandfather was imprisoned as an "enemy alien" three years before:

> The experience was an isolating one. The moment you stepped out of the crowd and the shared sense of being part of it, you were alone.
>
> My father felt it. As we walked away he was deeply silent. Our moment together was over. What was it that touched him? Was he thinking of a night, three

> years before, when the Commonwealth Police had arrested his father as an enemy alien? (Malouf 151)

At the time, Malouf's grandfather was more than eighty. Malouf tells that his grandfather was not much concerned by any of this, but that his father looked deeply troubled. His grandfather was taken to prison, the authorities realised the situation was absurd, and sent him back home again "on personal grounds." However, Malouf explicitly asks himself how his father might have felt and how the experience might have affected him: "My father never told us how he had managed it, or what happened, what he *felt,* when he went to fetch his father home. If it changed anything for him, the colour of his own history for example, he did not reveal it." Malouf dismisses what accounts for one's citizenship, that is, what authorities decree. He refers to it as a "purely notional view," as official discourse. As regards his father, Malouf says: my father was legally Australian, but "the rest" – what is not part of the official discourse and defines your being Australian – he had to prove it himself, mostly through violence: "The rest he had to establish for himself; most often with his fists." (Malouf 152) Second or third migrant generations tend to feel rootless. The sense of not belonging creates a bitterness that often translates into violence to reaffirm one's identity.

In this way, Malouf's father's passion for boxing was not only a claim to his manhood, but also a racial and ethnic one. The figure of the boxer recurs frequently in Malouf's novels, as we have seen, and most often linked to issues of national legitimation and chrematistic ambition. We will recall when Digger joins the troop of half-cast boxers, where he mixes with the crowd and spurs his own to a fight, re-enacting on stage the test of racial superiority between colonizers and colonized.

As a result, even though the episode with the bees seems to point to the possibility of a bright future for Janet, Australian society is not ready for it. It is not only that gender difference is accentuated in frontier settlements, where the possibility of aggression is more likely. Australian involvement in foreign events such as the Boer Wars and World War I also increased the distance

between the worlds of men and women, particularly to the detriment of men, as we have just seen in the case of Lachlan, who can only trust his cousin.

Troopers and bushrangers in *The Conversations at Curlow Creek.*

Three years after the huge success of *Remembering Babylon,* which would definitely place David Malouf as a classic Australian author in the international scene and turn him into a must-read author in postcolonial literary studies, *The Conversations at Curlow Creek* was published in 1996. The novel was well received by critics and the general public alike, but unlike its predecessors, it did not obtain any major literary award. In spite of this, it subtly and magnificently continues to delve into Australia's past and identity in a resonating and captivating prose.

The Conversations at Curlow Creek weaves a literary plot with a historical one. On the one hand, it tells the story of Adair, Virgilia and Fergus as they grow up in Ireland. The relationship between the three youths starts to complicate when Adair finds out that Virgilia, whom he has fallen in love with, is in love with his best friend, Fergus. As a consequence, Adair joins the military, and Fergus travels to Australia to join the convicts' plight for freedom. Prompted by Virgilia, Adair goes to Australia to find the whereabouts of his friend. There, Adair suspects that Fergus is in fact the legendary bushranger Jack Dolan. In an ambush, a group of troopers capture one of Dolan's men, Daniel Carney. The novel is the conversation between Michael Adair and Daniel Carney inside a hut in the eve of the latter's hanging, where Adair tries to find out about his friend as they reminiscence their lives and what has taken them to the other side of the world.

In a phone interview with Irish writer Colm Toibin in 2007 – Colm Toibin was calling from Barcelona, where he was residing back then –, the interviewer, rather jokingly, but at the same time pertinently, tells Malouf that in the abovementioned books, he seemed to have written an "Old Testament", whereas in his previous novels he had written "a new Testament for Australia." (Malouf and Tóibín) When Malouf asks him to elaborate, Tóibín tells him that in *Remembering Babylon* and *The Conversations at Curlow Creek,* Malouf deals with the dark origins of Australian

colonisation, mentioning the clash between the first settlers and the Aboriginal peoples and the fact that the settler culture did not have the tools for an easy settlement in such an exotic habitat as Australia. Tactfully, Tóibín does not mention the main theme of the novel they are discussing, *The Conversations at Curlow Creek,* which is transportation and the convict system, even though he uses the expression "the fatal shore" in the interview, referring to Hughes' classic on the topic.

In other words, an Irishman avoids reminding a second generation Australian of Lebanese and British origin about the dismissive stereotype that Australia was made up mainly of refugees, criminals, thieves and Irish felons.

The irony behind the "good manners" between Malouf and Tóibín bespeaks the situation of denial of their potential listeners. As long as some topics about Australia's past continue to be taboo, the country cannot aspire to a respectable future. This is the reason why Malouf's novel deals with Australia's dark past: because it must. The contradiction between a tainted past and an immaculate present is there from the very beginning, and it has not lost any of its original force as the dialectics between colonizer and colonised. As Robert Hughes points out:

> This sublimation has a long history; the desire to forget about our felon origins began with the origins themselves. To call a convict a convict in early colonial Australia was an insult certain to raise colonial hackles. The approved euphemism was "Government man." What the convict system bequeathed to later Australian generations was not the sturdy, sceptical independence on which, with gradually warning justification, we pride ourselves, but an intense concern with social and political respectability. (Hughes xi)

Needless to say, this distinction between good and bad citizens – i.e. people – reflected the tensions and moral shortcomings at the heart of British society. We are all familiar with Charles Chaplin's *Hard Times* and Dickens' world, which portray the disastrous impact of the Industrial Revolution and capitalism on British society and culture. The Industrial Revolution made the wealthy few richer at the expense of the mechanisation of unskilled labour, thus increasing the

number of the poor, who were forced to starve or steal.[101] The reader will recall our analysis of this context in the previous Chapter on *Remembering Babylon à propos* Gemmy Fairley, whose past memories working as a child in a wood factory come to haunt him in his dreams at Ms. Hutchense's house, sparked by the smell of her drawer's timber. The British government, instead of trying to find a solution to the problem, passed stricter laws and enforced harsher penalties for minor crimes, most of which had to do with forgery or the usurpation of property, such as stealing some food or a garment. The sentence for forgery was the death penalty, and for stealing private property transportation. To make matters worse, biological determinism and Georgian values at the time led to speculation on the existence of a "criminal class."

So far in our thesis, we have seen that Malouf has been covering Australian history in his novels. Until *Remembering Babylon,* that history had been directly lived by him or explained to him by somebody who had lived it: his growing up in mid-twentieth century Brisbane in *Johnno*, where he experienced first-hand the impact of World War II as a child; his revision of the World War I myth of ANZAC in *Fly Away Peter;* his rendering of the myth of the digger in *The Great World*; etc. In his revision and re-writing of Australian history, there is always some irony that helps Malouf render this history with a clinical eye. In this regard, *The Conversations at Curlow Creek* is no exception. Anthony J. Hassall quotes an interview with David Malouf by Barbara Williams to emphasise this point. "He has said", says Hassall, "that *The Great World* and its "teasing" title were "deliberately set up to undermine categories like epic or saga": in a similar manner *The Conversations at Curlow Creek* is a contemporary deconstruction and refictionalizing of the bushranger myth." (Hassan 146)

The bushrangers were the "government men" who had escaped into the bush and menaced the colonial order by providing an alternative discourse on justice, where they defended the poor against the landowners and the representatives of the British Empire in office. Unable to bear the

101 One can't avoid feeling that we are starting to live a similar situation with the apparition of 3D printing machines and widespread robotization.

harsh conditions of working for the government, for example constructing roads, or because they had been assigned to heartless masters who treated them like slaves, they would escape into the bush. Those who were lucky could gain their freedom once they had served their sentence. Some masters would employ them as free men. The most famous bushrangers were Irish, and folklore liked to compare them to Robin Hood in England, who would steal from the rich to provide for the poor. (Brooke) The bushrangers were men and their history and folklore was a male one. There is no record and no notion of a female bushranger in Australian history. No doubt, this was due to the imbalance between the number of men and women that were transported, four to one up until after 1820, according to Stuart Macintyre (Macintyre 39), and seven to one up until 1852, according to Robert Hughes (Hughes 244), but it was equally a result of British patriarchal and misogynist Georgian values.

During transportation, women would seek a partner in the ship so as to avoid being abused and gain squalid privileges during the trip. That is the reason why some of them would arrive pregnant in Australia. On arrival, they would be betrayed by their ship partners and left to their own devices in the new colony. The others would be exposed on parade first for officials and men of influence to choose, then for single free men in the colony. A good partner was the only way out for them. As Robert Hughes puts it: "The officers, being officers, got first pick of the women; and a female convict soon learned that her best chance of survival in New South Wales was to give herself over to the "protection" of some dominant male." (Hughes 246) Then, he adds: "Military officers got the first pick, then non-commissioned officers, then privates, and lastly such ex-convict settlers as seemed "respectable" enough to obtain the governor's permission to keep a female servant." (Hughes 253) However, not all of them would be so lucky. Some would be sent to work as housemaids to landowners or officers who were abusive, and sometimes brutally so, or

even openly took them as concubines or prostitutes (Hughes 253).[102] Those who had been discarded because of their character, age or condition, would be sent to the Female Factory in Parramatta. (Hughes, 254)

In Britain, transported women would simply be cast as "whores" and "prostitutes," because society would not distinguish between someone who had committed a criminal offence out of starvation or in a sporadic act of rebellion and moral licentiousness. This translated into a widely spread licentiousness in Australia, that derived from middle-class double morality and took advantage of the situation of exploitation of convict women. When a convict woman lived with a man without any legal bond, which was most often the case, and the man got tired of her, he could simply get rid of her without consequence: "Since the liaisons were free of legal ties, a settler could simply throw a convict woman out when he was tired of her." Some of these women would then go to the Rocks in Sydney, which would remain one of the most licentious and depraved places in the history of Australia until well into the twentieth century: "This caused a troublesome floating population of whores and unattached "disorderly women" to accumulate around Sydney Cove, whose westerly arm, "The Rocks," soon acquired a well-deserved name as the rowdiest and most dangerous thieves' kitchen in the colony." (Hughes 253)[103] Robert Hughes explains the case of Lieutenant Clark, who in 1787 sailed to Australia leaving behind his baby son and his wife Betsy Alicia Trevan. He sent her emotionally charged letters regretting his decision to go to Australia to further his career and wrote dismissively and derogatorily about the women in the ship. Everything amiss during the voyage was the female convicts' fault, affirming in his diary that they "are ten

---

[102] The shocking scene in the movie *Rabbit Proof Fence* (Noyce), where we see a master go into the black servant's room on the sly at night to have sexual intercourse, was not only something that was stealthily justified by government policy to whiten Aboriginal blood and assimilate the Aborigines. It happens everywhere where there is an abusive relationship of power between master and servant /slave.

[103] We will recall that in *The Great World,* Vic comes across his derelict son in The Rocks, and the pantomime of an act his son performs there.

thousand times worse than men Convicts." Eventually, his wife died in childbirth, and his son in the war against France. However, he had a daughter with a convict woman who was born in Norfolk Island, whom he never mentioned, not even in his diaries, but whom he convinced her mother to christen Alicia (Hughes 248-250).

Similar to the fatal consequences that the exportation of patriarchal values had on Indian society, British patriarchal society and its middle-class morality put women in a terrible position in Australia. Hence Robert Hughes' conclusion in his exposition of the fate of women convicts in Australia: "The sexism of English society was brought to Australia and then amplified by penal conditions" (Hughes 258), to which he later on adds that "women continued to be treated as a doubly colonised class throughout the life of the penal system." (Hughes 261) In the worst cases, women convicts would be the victims of the rage that comes from impotence and dejection, both at home or in the street. The situation would last until the end of transportation. As Robert Hughes puts it: "The brutalization of women in the colony had gone on for so long that it was virtually a social reflex by the end of the 1830s." (Hughes 259)

We can see that convict women suffered worse than men in Australia. Why then the lack of social and folklore acknowledgment, which, nevertheless, has been afforded to their male counterparts, the bushrangers? Whence the lack of a Moll Flanders in the Australian literary tradition, when works by such prestigious novelists as David Malouf and Peter Carey were celebrating the life of convicts such as Jack Dolan and Ned Kelly? Why does this void still persist today? In spite of there being no record or notion of a female bushranger, there is an increasing record of the hardships that female convicts had to endure at the time, and the key role they played making the colonisation and the birth of the nation of Australia possible, other than their subservient role as suffering wives and mothers in the folklore tradition.

Stuart Macintyre argues that the Australian context was complex enough to provide every school of thought and historian with what it is looking for. Consequently, we would be led to conclude that what we read and know about the convict period tells us more about ourselves and

our times than about its object of study. Among these disciplines, he mentions feminist historians of the 1970s and onwards, who defended the important role of women as mothers in the construction of Australia:

> Those sympathetic to the convicts draw heavily on popular ballads and broadsides as well as the protests of contemporary humanitarians to present them as victims of a harsh penal code and brutal regimen; in his vast panoramic evocation of *The Fatal Shore* (1987) Robert Hughes portrays early Australia as a place of banishment, exile, privation and death – as a gulag. Those cliometricians who seek to establish the character of the convicts from penal records find them to be criminals. Those economic historians who are more interested in the convicts as a workforce reconfigure the same records and find the same people to possess skills that they put to good use. Feminist historians of the 1970s took the masculine preoccupation with the immorality of the female convicts as indicative of an oppressive patriarchy, yet subsequent champions of female achievement reconstructed their life stories to show them as exemplary mothers. Each of those schools of interpretation seeks to release the convicts from the shackles of prejudice, yet every attempt is caught inextricably in the tangle of language and imagery used to describe them. (Macintyre 43)

A good example of a feminist historical work of research that puts a woman under the limelight as raw material for a feminist, that is, more inclusive, more just, and truer to the facts revisioning of Australia's history is the research book *A Spanish Convict in Colonial Australia (1808-1877). Who was Adelaide de la Thoreza?* (Ballyn and Frost), which analyses a historical text written by Revd James Cameron that tells the story of a Spanish woman who, while living in England, was sentenced to transportation to Australia. Distinguishing between Cameron's romanticised vision of his parishioner and what probably was Adelaide's real life journey, Ballyn and Frost's document depicts the hardships that women had to endure in Australia, the importance of the social class

factor at the time, which was seen as a mark of personal worth more than as the result of personal circumstances, it proves the multicultural origins of Australia and, most importantly, the extreme hardships and penuries women had to put up with at the time.

Adelaide de la Thoreza had three children, one of them of full Spanish blood from an abusive landlord, even though she managed to escape into a more decent household as maid and to give his child an English name so as to guarantee him a fair start in the colony. In a speech entitled "My Multicultural Life" delivered in 1984, David Malouf implies that the first settlers were a homogenous Anglo-Saxon group, even if his description of the rich multicultural background of his contemporary Australia is quite broad. Malouf talks about Australian identity in hyphenated terms: "…Australian and Welsh, or Irish, or – *these days* – Greek, or Chinese, or Chilean, or Vietnamese, or an urban black, or a ghettoised gay male, lesbian separatist, Pentecostal Christian, Moslem, or any other of the newly visible and vocal minorities." (Malouf 19, my emphasis) Likewise, Robert Hughes and Stuart Macintyre mainly talk about British and Irish immigrants to Australia. However, as we can see in the case of Adelaide de la Thoreza, the first settlers were already a quite heterogenous group. Adelaide de la Thoreza died an accomplished woman in the company of her three children, and grandmother of 26 grandchildren. Could she provide the raw material for the first female folk hero of the convict period?

In a review of the book published in *The New York Times,* American critic and writer Brooke Allen praises David Malouf's style in *The Conversations at Curlow Creek*, quite pointedly arguing that he is a visual writer – we have seen that Malouf thinks in images or idea-images, as Ivor Indyk extensively argues in his book *David Malouf* (Indyk) – who offers a remarkable impressionistic portrayal of life in Australia at the turn of the Eighteenth century. However, he also says that the main theme and characters in the novel are impressionistically portrayed dramatic stereotypes: "Unfortunately, his visual sense is more impressive than his feeling for character. The main players here are, for the most part, little more than stock figures of romance." (Brooke) Malouf's "impressionistic" style is unmatchable, but Brooke has a point when he says that the characters

and the plot in *The Conversations at Curlow Creek* lack depth and the touch of destiny – i.e. the feeling that something inevitable has taken place. Perhaps Malouf forgot, or maybe after the huge success of *Remembering Babylon* he was so overconfident that he did not feel the need to find a particular voice for his new novel.

We have repeatedly seen that Malouf first needs to find the right voice before he starts a novel. A distinctive voice is what gives consistency and depth to his narrative, it sort of puts all the pieces together. We have seen Malouf find this voice in his poems. Some of them, he might have written a long time before, but when he goes back to them, he discovers that the voice of that poem is what the novel he set about to write was calling for. Since poetry is always something very personal, this has helped Malouf find the right voice in novels set during his lifetime, or whose events he had heard people and family talk about; also, in allegorical, but very personal, novels, such as *An Imaginary Life* and *Ransom*, which are both based on deeply private experiences – in the case of an *Imaginary Life,* love, and in the case of *Ransom,* the experience of war as a kindergarten kid in Brisbane. However, there are two exceptions to this general rule: *Remembering Babylon* and *The Conversations at Curlow Creek.* We have seen that in *Remembering Babylon,* it was the real story of "Gemmy Morril or Morrell" that inspired the novel, and felicitous words "Do not shoot, I am a British object!" he shouted when he came across an English settlement, after having lived for a long spell among Aborigines (*Remembering Babylon,* 183). It is worth mentioning here that this expression was not a stroke of genius, but had its roots in the convict period: convicts and ex-convicts sardonically called free immigrant settlers to Australia "free objects." (Hughes 237) We have also seen that the characters of the novel stick to stereotypes. To that extend, the narrative voice in *Remembering Babylon* is "realistic," mixed at the same time with Malouf's vivid prose and images, but we might argue that it is not poetic. There is a distance between the author's experience and the events he portrays. The story is also told in the third person singular. We could say that *Remembering Babylon* is Malouf's most fictional work, because it does not have a properly poetic voice and is not based on personal experience. What about *The Conversations at Curlow Creek?*

Malouf answers this question in his interview with Hellen Daniel. At the very end of the interview, the interviewer calls Malouf's attention to the fact that, at the time when the novel was published in 1996, many Australian writers were interested in writing about the colonisation of Australia, creating a sort of counter-version to official and historical discourse. *Remembering Babylon* had been published in 1993, and Peter Carey published *True History of the Kelly Gang* in 2000 (Carey), which was a huge success, winning both the Booker Prize and the Commonwealth Writers Prize in 2001. Whereas Malouf's *The Conversations at Curlow Creek* was about a folk legend bushranger deeply ingrained in Australian and Irish culture, Jack Donahue (Irish spelling) or Jack Dolan (Australian spelling), Carey's *True History of the Kelly Gang* was about the similarly legendary bushranger Ned Kelly, also of Irish descent, but whose legend was posterior and who has a fame that is more international than local. This momentum of Australian history and culture might have been inspired by the celebration of the Summer Olympics in Sydney in 2000, which put Sydney on the map and in the mind of half the world, like the Summer Olympics of 1992 did for Barcelona.

In the same interview, Helen Daniel asks Malouf why he chose to write about the Irish in *The Conversations at Curlow Creek*, and whether he was inspired by the Castle Hill Rebellion in 1798. Malouf's answer is that he wanted to take account of an important part of Australian identity that was not English, but marginal to it. This impulse was the result of his continuous interest in marginal figures, like the Scots – the McIvors – and Gemmy in *Remembering Babylon.* Malouf explains that what is marginal in the English experience becomes central in Australia, which stands at the periphery of the known world, hence his interest also in the Irish contribution to the building of Australian identity. Malouf reminds her interlocutor that the perception of the English as representatives of law and order is an extended prejudice, the same that makes the Irish stand for disorderliness and chaos. Nevertheless, Malouf builds his novel on these prejudices and takes the "disorderly" Irish experience as a powerful source of life and creative energy. He adds that part of the terror towards the Irish was a terror of Catholicism. (Daniel and Malouf)

Malouf does not comment on whether the events at Castle Hill Rebellion had some influence on the genesis of the novel, but bearing in mind that Malouf is quite straightforward in acknowledging his sources and influences, we might surmise that since he does not mention it, they probably didn't, despite the fact that these events being in his Australian readers' minds certainly came in handy for him as a context for the novel, where we only find an implicit reference to these events: "The rumour was that those fellers, out there, had been raising up the blacks to help in some sort of rebellion. Among the Irish – it was always that, the Irish." (27)

The Irish were a continuous source of concern for British law, and women played no minor role in the vandalising of property and the mocking and taunting of authority. Macintyre explains that the Irish "engaged in collective protests by withdrawing their labour, damaging property and making shows of dumb insolence or theatrical protest, as with the group of female convicts who turned about to pull up skirts and smack their buttocks before a governor." (Macintyre 44-45) In 1798, inspired by the French and American Revolutions, the Irish unsuccessfully tried to overthrow British rule in Ireland. (Bartlett) The instigators were deported to Australia, where they soon mutinied. According to Stuart Macintyre, the Castle Hill Rebellion was the most important insurgency in Australia to topple British law. As in England, the Irish were seen as the main instigators of conflict in the first colonies, and a menace, however illusory, to British law:

> There was some safety in numbers, but in 1804 the most numerous and overt challenge to penal rule brought savage retribution. Irish convicts sentenced for their part in the rebellion there in 1798 rose up on a government farm at Castle Hill and let 300 men first to Parramatta and then to seek support from the farmers of the Hawkesbury. The rebels were overtaken by troops and their uprising put down. A score or so were butchered on the spot, eight hanged and more flogged in an effort to obtain information. (Macintyre 45)

Finally, Malouf also tells Helen Daniel that he had two separate plots in mind before he considered putting them together in a single novel. On the one hand, a conversation about

absolutes – Malouf mentions life, death and the law – between two men and, on the other, the story of a man who loves a woman who, in turn, is in love with another man. We might surmise that due to the fact that he did not want to place the story in a contemporary context, he came up with the idea of mixing the two plots into a single story line: "I suddenly saw a way of matching the two and I wanted none of the contingencies of contemporary life to be involved in it." (Daniel and Malouf) What better context than an Irish bushranger waiting for execution to have two men talking about absolutes? What can you do if the man that stands between you and your loved one is the very Jack Dolan, the much-admired legendary Irish bushranger?

The Conversations at Curlow Creek tells two stories where the narrator, Michael Adair, stands as the main witness of events. We have seen that Broke Allen has pointed out the "impressionistic" style of the novel, arguing that Malouf "seems to observe his characters' world in a series of discreet, almost palpable images" to the detriment of his characters' development, whom he labels "stock figures of romance." (Brooke) As we argued, we believe that this is so. However, the skill of an author to portray in writing a series of visual images that linger in the mind of the reader in the way Malouf does cannot be overemphasised. After reading the novel a couple of times, one is left with the impression of having seen the movie too. Could that be the reason why none of Malouf's novels have been made into a movie!

Regarding the tone and atmosphere of the novel, the main story in *The Conversations at Curlow Creek* has some Gothic elements: moonlight, Carney waiting on the death row, gory and uncanny experiences, etc. They stand as a point of contrast to its luminous end. In the very first Chapter of the novel, we are told about Jed Snelling's spectacular and horrific death, which symbolizes colonial violence.

The novel opens late one evening in the early nineteenth century in the New South Wales outback, in an imaginary place called Curlow Creek in Australia, where a band of troopers keep the bushranger Daniel Carney prisoner in a small hut. The scene has a dreamlike quality. There is moonlight outside, but not strong enough to illuminate the interior of the dark and reeking shack.

When Michael Adair, who has to officialise the hanging of the escaped convict, enters the hut, his first thought is that "the bird is flown," (1) until his sight adapts to the dark, distinguishes the bulk of a man crouched in the corner under a pile of rugs, and hears his laboured breathing. Adair asks the trooper Kersey, who has accompanied him to the hut, to go and fetch a light. Kersey answers in a condescending manner and takes his time, and Adair urges him to hurry up and do as he is told. We see that Adair, despite being Irish, expects Kersey to stick to formality and authority, which produces the first brush between them. All the action of the novel will take place in or around this small cabin, and in the reminiscences and dreams that Adair and Carney have there.

Officially, Adair is there to oversee the execution and, supposedly, to find out whatever he can of what the bushrangers are up to, despite the fact that he already suspects that they are no real menace to the system.

As Robert Hughes explains:

> There was nothing romantic about them. A few were pathetic harmless men who ran away from chain gang or master because, like a Bathurst absconder named Charles Jubey, they were "so harassed and torn about" by cruel discipline that they became "weary of life." Many were mere thugs: muggers, chicken-stealers and occasional rapists. Small farmers were their victims, not the "rich," and their crimes were brutal when not petty. (Hughes 235)

The two men are exhausted, Adair from the long ride and hunger – we are told that he hasn't eaten anything since breakfast – and Carney because of having been confined within the hut, the beating he had received that very same morning, and the injuries he got when he was captured. Even though they share an Irish background, they are two strangers whom circumstances bring together. Their feebleness justifies the long pauses that give the narrative voice time to go into their thoughts and memories, which make up most of the conversation between them. It also justifies the dreamlike quality of their encounter. They do not always know what the other one is

referring to exactly, and sometimes they do not know how some information has gotten into the other's head.

We are in the world of folklore and superstition. For example, after they have barely exchanged more than a handful of words, Adair sits down in a corner in the hut and realizes how tired he is. Recalling Washington Irving's short story "Rip Van Winkle" to the reader, considered the first American tale about a man who falls asleep in the woods and does not wake up for twenty years, missing the American Revolution, ("Libros de Cíbola"; "Rip Van Winkle") Adair believes he is about to fall asleep, when some stories about men who have fallen asleep in similar whereabouts and have not woken up for centuries come to his mind. (6-7) The feeling we get is that the narrative voice takes us back to the dawn of Australian culture, which has its origins in folktales and popular ballads.

When Kersey goes to fetch the light, we see the secondary characters of this story that provide the general background of the novel: Kersey, Langhurst, Garrety and the Aborigine Jonas, although the latter does not count, because he is black: "the black who was with them, Jonas, did not count." (9) As we have argued at length, sexism and racism go hand in hand. At the beginning, they were a group of five troopers, but two weeks before, one of them, Jed Snelling, had been killed in an altercation with a group of Aborigines. The encounter had nothing remarkable about it when, suddenly, they all became louder than usual, started shouting, and "Jed Snelling had with no warning become something unimaginable, a man with a spear in his neck who was on his knees on the rough ground, gurgling." (15) The image, like Gemmy's standing on the fence post in *Remembering Babylon,* is a powerful one. A man on his knees, arms open, head back, with a spear on his neck "gurgling" symbolizes the lack of a common language between colonisers and colonized. Snelling tries to speak but blood chokes and kills him:

> …gurgling – praying maybe, or shouting for his wife or his mother, only you couldn't tell because the words were indistinguishable from the blood that was

> gushing out of him in an arc like a fountain, all sparkling in the sunlight but turning dark where it was sucked into the droughty earth. (15)

The noise Jed Snelling makes resembles the unfamiliar sound of a language one is not familiar with, a situation common enough in first contact contexts, as the one we are describing in the novel. The situation gets out of hand because everyone starts shouting and panicking, thus thwarting communication. It also symbolizes the coarseness of the English language for everyday use in colonial Australia at the time. Malouf has stressed often enough the symbiotic relationship between language and geography, even if due to our everyday familiarity with things we are not aware of this bond and, mistakenly, we take it for granted. In one of his earliest essays, from which we quoted above, *My Multicultural Life,* written in 1984, Malouf explains that Australian writers have had to fight harder than European writers to write about what was actual and authentic about their experience: "For one thing, they had to throw off the purely English stereotype – the job of early Australian writing, and living too, was to disentangle what was local from what was transported English." (Malouf 20)

Jed Snelling gurgles and cannot communicate because the sounds he is trying to make are drowned in blood before they can even be articulated. Violence impedes communication between settlers and natives before they give each other the opportunity of speech. Jed Snelling's death is the epitome of colonial violence. Blood plays an important symbolic role in the novel, capturing the violence of first contact and transportation.

We have just pointed out the first one. First contact was bloody, and the shed blood stands as a metonymy for first contact. Later on, the cruelty of first contact appears in the form of a hyperbole. During a break in the conversation between Adair and Carney in the hut, Adair leaves the hut to stretch his legs and take some fresh air. Garrety is telling the other troopers about some uncanny experiences he has had. The first story Adair hears is the most Gothic and gory account we find in the book. It is a Gothic formula we repeatedly find in current television series and films,

such as Stephen King's *The Shining.* Garrety was in a paddock in Candem when, suddenly, he is transported into another dimension, where he sees himself submerged in a pool of blood:

> I was standin' in blood. It was all around me, filling the whole paddock like a lake, I was up to me ankles in it! I smelt it then, and felt its wetness, the air was so thick I could hardly breathe. An' all of a sudden there were these voices, cryin' out something terrible, I never heard nothin' to touch it, all that cryin' and wailing.
>
> 'I knew what it was then. I'd stepped into a place where something terrible had happened, or was goin' t' happen, either one, I don't know which, I couldn' tell which. An' it didn't matter. I was there, that's all. (141)

The second story he tells, brings some humour and lightens the narrative. It suggests that there are many false accusations and a lot of confusion regarding the penal system in the colony. The spirit of a man visits Garrety, thinking that he had killed him. To everybody's surprise, Garrety has to clarify that he hadn't kill him. You would think that once you were dead, you somehow would know those things:

> '…I told him: it wasn't me, mate, I never done it, you've got this all arse up. He put a smirk on 'is face at that and just looked at me as if he knew better. I was surprised. I always thought – you know, that once you were passed over you'd know everything at last, all the answers, that's what I would of expected.'
>
> 'Yes,' Langhurst said dreamily, 'me too. That's what I would of thought too.'
>
> 'Well, he didn't. That must've been why he was hangin' about. To find out. Anyway, after a bit the weight sort of come back to me, I could move. Then 'e was gone.' (136)

Secondly, Jed Snelling's blood soaking the earth also has a powerful symbolic meaning. In most of his novels, Malouf makes explicit the settlers' deep awareness that, before you really inhabit a place, you need to establish a relationship with it through the death of your loved ones. You belong where your ancestors rest, and the longest your line of ancestry buried in that place,

the deeper your roots. More generally, this also includes your children, as we have seen in *The Great World* and *Remembering Babylon,* your parents, your siblings, your acquaintances, your friends, your tribe, etc. Jed Snelling's unsettling death roots the small group of troopers to the land, as will the hanging of Daniel Carney the next day.

Blood and death are both a literal and symbolic way of inhabiting the land. Blood provides the land with a substance that the individual *is*, as representative of his people, whereas death provides the land with some coordinates that mean something to you in terms of your own experience. They both make the land home, and they both are a reminder that what makes us all equal in the face of one another, regardless of our ethnic background, is that we all suffer. Whether they be convicts or simply the poor coming for a shot at a better life, the pain and suffering of the colonizers resonates with the pain and suffering of the colonized.

In this regard, there is a contrast between the force and energy of Jed Snelling's bleeding – "like a fountain" – and the bright and fecund fluid that irrigates the earth, darkening and enriching the land: "all sparkling in the sunlight but turning dark where it was sucked into the droughty earth." (14) The blood of those who have lost their lives in the clash of first contact irrigates the land and binds the destiny of its original inhabitants with that of the colonizers. When Jed Snelling is speared, the troopers quickly retaliate, wounding a man and an old woman, and finishing off the man with the butts of their muskets. At the end of the novel, we will see that popular wisdom and folklore always places the Aborigines in league with the Irish.

Malouf emphasises this idea again later on in the book, deftly intermingling Aboriginal imaginary with that of the European settlers. Garrety, the only one of the troopers born in Australia – native to the land, we would say – holds a special connection to the land, which makes him "as good a tracker as any black." (28) His special power allows him to forecast the weather and read the footprints of different kinds of animals, what type, size and how old their prints are, to know what kind of country lies ahead days beforehand, and it also makes him have a special relationship with the horses.

The Aboriginal boy who accompanies them is spooked by his powers, which come from the same source as his own. As always, what is familiar, in the hands of a stranger, turns uncanny, and Jonas does not recognise this uncanniness:

> Jonas observed all this and was spooked. It wasn't that he felt intimidated by a rival – rivalry was a thing he could barely have conceived of – but Garrety's knowledge came from a source he did not care to recognise. He would let nothing that Garrety had prepared pass his lips and touch nothing he had laid a hand on. (29)

Thirdly, blood refers to the violence of the penal system that was the reason for colonisation and that, consequently, was imported to Australia. Whether a convict, a bushranger, an Aboriginal, a trooper or a farmer, violence was a constant possibility, and you never knew where it would come from. In the early thirties, the Bushranging Act allowed the government forces "to use violence when dealing with small Emancipist settlers whom they routinely suspected of harbouring bushrangers out of criminal sympathy," and since rewards were given to any who produced information that would help catch a criminal, "the colony was a morass of denunciation and spying." (Hughes 236) A heterogeneous amalgam of force of law, banditry, mistrust, and gratuitous violence held together a brittle social fabric on the brim of anarchy.

Robert Hughes conjectures that the first forger of the bushranger myth was Michael Howe, a seaman from Yorkshire who had deserted both the navy and the army and was sent to Van Diemen's land on the charge of highway robbery. He soon escaped into the bush, bringing together a gang of about thirty bushrangers. In his late twenties, he was well organised, energetic and a born leader. In an environment which was constantly out for blood, he developed an obsessive neurosis: he wrote down all his bad dreams in blood on a Kangaroo-skin diary and would write and sign his letters to the governor negotiating his unconditional pardon also in blood. Surviving in the bush required resilience. In order to survive in the bush, even for someone with Howe's skills, you needed to be in league with convicts, ex-convicts and free settlers out for profit.

Howe had married an Aboriginal woman whose knowledge of the bush was indispensable to survive. Howe's downfall began with an ambush where his pregnant wife could not keep up with him on the run. Once she had given birth, she helped the soldiers to track him down, unsuccessfully. He turned himself in on condition that if he testified, he would be pardoned of all his crimes except murder. The authorities were astonished at the large number of respectable men who had been doing business with Howe, which included Reverend Robert Knopwood. Eventually, Howe became wary and escaped again into the bush. Again, they brought an Aboriginal tracker from Sydney to hunt him down, unsuccessfully, until two white men found his whereabouts. They shot him, beheaded him and brought the head to the governor in Hobart Town, where it was staked in public view as was customary. (228-230)

Let us recall that the novel is a conversation between a trooper and a bushranger who is kept in custody before his hanging. The rest of the novel is reminiscences while they toss and turn all night. We get a first glimpse of penal violence – we will see more of it – when we are told about an incident that happened the same day Adair arrived, early in the morning. Langhurst had allowed Carney to leave the hut for a bit of exercise, and while the convict was relieving himself and Langhurst had given him his back out of prudery, the former attacked the later off guard. Langhurst manages to escape from his grip and starts hitting and kicking him, until Garrety arrives and holds him back. Blood pours from one of his eyes: "The man staggered to his feet. Blood was pouring from his eye. He stood bull-like, the shoulders bunched, head lowered." (22) Garrety gives him a punch and the man is defeated. In this case, the blood refers to the brutality of the penal system.

We get another glimpse of this cruelty when we are told about how Daniel Carney was captured. Garrety had led the small group of troopers to the rebels' whereabouts, in the rocky bottom of an embankment. There were five of them: Daniel Carney, whom they keep in custody; the supposedly legendary Dolan, who is mentioned quite casually at this point: "Dolan, the tall one, almost a giant, who was the leader…" (26); Luke Cassidy, a freckled and loud kid; and

McBride and Lonegan, of whom we are not given any details. They sent Jonas for back up and, the next day, early in the morning, they went in, killing three of them on the spot. Luke Cassidy ran away and Carney's thick skull saved him: "… the bullet he got had bounced off his thick Irish skull and done no more than stun him." (27) Luke Cassidy was killed three days later.

They did not stake his head as was customary but laid him out on a board held by two chairs in order to satiate the settlers' curiosity and dissuade them from absconding. Again, the brutality of the sight exposes the rebel's violence, which could only be matched by the government's superior legal violence:

> All day, in drizzling rain, people had come in from the surrounding farms and brought their children, some of them two-years-olds in their fathers' arms, to stare at a real bushranger, his jaw tied up with a strip of torn shirt, where it had been shot away taking with it most of its teeth: a sight fearsome enough to satisfy the imagination of the most pious shopkeeper or industrious freeholder as to the malignity of outlaws and the wisdom of the authorities in having them hunted down and exterminated. (33)

Finally, blood is present in the novel in the form of Langhurt's nosebleeds, boils and genes. They are a somatisation of anxiety and stress, and they also indicate the worst form of violence in the colonial context: gender violence. Let us recall that when Jed Snelling killed and the troopers retaliate, they feel ashamed when accidentally injuring an old woman. They do not even bother to finish her off.

Everything that has to do with women is undervalued, discredited or, on the contrary, idealized and, therefore, dehumanized. We will see the former among the troopers, and the latter in Adair's relation with Virgilia towards the end of our analysis.

Relying on a conventional and stereotypical definition of gender roles, Malouf constructs his characters as opposite and compensatory gendered pairs, including secondary characters. After the narrative voice tells us that the relationship among the troopers had been wearied down by the

"store of watchful suspicions, resentments, sources of silent scorn and mockery, of little jockeying's for position, and alliances and betrayals" that everyday coexistence brings about, Kersey jokingly and derogatively refers to the band of troopers as having become like "married men." Thus, Jed Snelling and Kersey had made a pair, and Langhurst and Garrety another one, with the consequence that Jed Snelling's death brought an imbalance to the group: Kersey, afraid now of being on his own, now tried to pair up with Garrety:

> After Jed Snelling was gone things had changed. Kersey had been fond of Jed. They had made a team, a loose one, and he and Garrety, for all the scratchiness between them, another.
>
> 'We're a couple of old married men, ain't we, Jed?' Kersey had insisted. (9)

On the one hand, we are told little about Kersey, and less even about Jed Snelling, as if the latter's death had taken with him part of Kersey and now Kersey was only a shadow of himself. All we know about Jed is that he "had been married four months", (10) was often "constipated", and when he dies, they collect his meagre belongings, "a penknife, letters, and engraved ring and such, and wrapped them in a big spotted handkerchief and sent them to his wife." (16) Kersey is the older of the troopers, "near forty", and had been in the force for a few months longer than the rest, to no advantage, because no hierarchy had been established by the authorities among the group, and its anarchy gave way to a natural hierarchy, with Garrety on top, because of his skills and individualism, but with Kersey assuming formal authority. Thus, it is Kersey who welcomes Adair and takes him to the hut, where the prisoner is kept captive. Since his partner's death, Kersey "had got panicky, afraid of being left out on his own," (10) and tries to befriend Garrety, who is nineteen, like Langhurst and Jed was, but Jed's disappearance has clearly brought an imbalance to the group. Kersey is the one who cooks, and he is usually eager to please the rest of the group. When the time comes to hang Daniel Carney, Michael Adair gives him the precise instructions about the proceedings, and we see him eager to please his superior.

On the other hand, Langhurst is a reflective and introverted man. He had been very affected by Jed Snelling's death, which had led him to ponder existential questions about the nature of the soul. As Garrety will point out to him, it is useless to speculate on the existence of the soul, not because there is none, as Garrety contends, but because what allows Langhurst to question everything cannot help him solve its own mystery:

> This was impressive, but Langhurst found he could not so easily turn his back on a question that seemed to him to be vital, and which, when he considered his own case, guaranteed in him the thing that set him apart but at the same time linked him up to all the rest; the part of him, uncomfortable as it might be on occasion, that was alert and attentive, observing itself and worrying away at its own unlikely motives and desires; and was the agency through which he could, as he put it, think things out, turn them over as he was doing now. (12-13)

In contrast to Langhurst, Garrety's special bond with the land and nature makes him a practical man, a man of action. Even though we could say that his special bond with nature puts a romantic aura about him, he is not romantic:

> Of women he had no opinion at all except that it was a grand thing, any chance you got, to fuck them. Perdition he had never heard of, except as a weak oath he would have scorned to use. And once, on the subject of the soul, when Langhurst had rather gingerly brought it up, he had claimed he didn't believe that he or any other fellow had one, and thought it useless to speculate. (12-13)

After Jed Snelling's death, Langhurst finds Garrety's matter-of-fact agnosticism difficult to accept, especially when he had played such an important role in the event, liberating Jed from the spear that kept him caught in limbo between life and death. Langhurst could not stop thinking about the event, because he had held Snelling's eye at the precise instant of trespassing. What he had seen was the tremendous effort that it required the soul, which was just breath, to leave the body, and the body's fierce fight not to let it go. The sole thought of it makes Langhurst quiver.

Langhurst's description is very accurate in exposing a religion of the body, with a life of its own that only responds to its insides – blood, guts, muscle, skeleton –, and its urges and instincts. In particular, Landhurst is completely fascinated by the force and the amount of blood that Jed Snelling's body expels at the moment of his death.

> But Jed Snelling's most intimate possession, Langhurst felt, though neither of them could have intended it, had been passed on to him. It was what he had seen when he had looked into Jed's eyes and right through to where his whole life was gathered up into a single knot, which, with the most tremendous effort, while Garrety applied all his force on one side and Jed Snelling himself on the other, was wrenched right out of him in an agonising release of which the sucking sound, Langhurst felt, was only the most distant echo.
>
> That is what, on more than one occasion since, he had tried to talk about.
>
> He had seen Jed Snelling's soul go out of his body. Seen it. That was fact. And it wasn't just a breath that came out on a last releasing sight. It was a knot, a thing the size of a fist, that had to be torn out of the flesh with a violence that was terrific, an effort so all-consuming that it seemed superhuman, and which, when you tried to translate it to your own body, was unimaginable. The mere thought of it and Langhurst broke into a sweat.
>
> That was one thing. But there was something else as well.
>
> He had seen a pig killed often enough. Seen the hot little ball of flesh and muscle, its throat cut, rolling from side to side on its short, powerful legs, go thundering down then length of a paddock till the blood was drained and it toppled. But what struck him now, in Jed Snelling's case, but also his own, was the terrible pressure it must exert all over the surface of the body to come out with such a rush. In your wrists, your throat, your belly. And the terrible energy with which, as he had seen even in so quiet a fellow as Jed Snelling, the heart, like a live

> thing you could hold in your hands, wet and fat and kicking, had so forcefully jerked it out. (16-17)

As we have seen in Malouf's previous novels, his characters are at its most authentic when they surrender to their bodily impulses. This is specially so in *The Conversations at Curlow Creek,* and it is perhaps where this philosophy is better articulated. We see it first regarding Langhurst and Garrety at the beginning of the story, but we will see it again concerning Fergus and Adair, and, finally, Carney, in a crescendo that will close the book, and whose final message tells us something about Australia and Australia's national identity.

Landhurst wonders at the ease with which Garrety inhabits the world through his body, and how this easiness reflects on all the other areas of his being:

> He was very easy with himself. Had the nature, Langhurst decided, of a clean, quick animal, darting in and out of situations, attacking with a swift ferocity, then, agile and unscathed, slipping away, with no indication that it had cost him anything either in thought or sweat. (11)

In contrast, Landhurst is ill-all-ease in the world, and his body reflects his uneasiness at different levels:

> This was a source of continual wonder to Langhurst, who felt he sweated over everything, either before or - which seemed even more shameful - after, and was at every moment self-consciously aware of the heaviness of his bones, the blood in his neck, in his puffy hands, in his cock. He also felt the pressure in him of words, of the need to get out into the open the feelings he was perplexed by or the thoughts he had been going over and needed to find words for if he was to get them clear. (11)

All this translates into the way the men relate to each other and into their manhood. Langhurst feels intimidated by Garrety's masculine exuberance and knows that his friend looks down on him: "Garrety thought him soft, he knew that, with the milk still on his lip." (13) This is

something that the other troopers feel as well, even though he is not aware of that. The narrative voice tells us: "it would have surprised him to hear that there was a quality in him (even Garrety felt it) that appealed to rougher natures and made them softly protective of him, and that he made use of this without knowing it was there." (30) Whereas Garrety had had to fend for himself since he was nine, Langhurst had been raised in a farm and slept in a bed before he became a trooper. However hard life at the farm was, their experiences could not compare.

If Garrety and Ladhurst were indeed an old married couple as in a traditional gender novel, Garrety would play the role of husband and Langhurst the role of wife. Not only is Langhurst "soft"; he is also sentimental. At night, he dreams about his female dog Nellie, whom he has brought up since it was a puppy. He misses his dog, the warmth and affection he received from her, and whom he treated like a soul mate; he dreams about her all night. Garrety might have mistaken her for Langhurst's lover, hadn't he also been fond of animals, particularly horses.

Langhurst reflects that…

> he might act better, have a firmer grip on his own nature, if he had his dog Nellie with him, who he had brought up from a puppy and owned since he was nine years old, and talked to, and slept with, a companionable warmth against his side, and whose spirit, he believed, was somehow continuous with his own – though he had seen this only when he was riding away and felt for the first time the lack of her close and loyal presence.
>
> 'Who's Nellie?' Garrety had asked him once.
>
> 'Nellie's my dog. Why?'
>
> ''Cos you spent half the night talkin' to 'er. Talk, talk, talk.'
>
> 'What did I say?'
>
> He was worried what he might have given away, but the news made him happier than he had felt for a whole month.

> ‘I don’t know,’ Garrety told him. ‘I reckoned it was private. I didn’t listen.’ (23-24)

Being soft and sentimental are traditional feminine traits. Malouf could have left it here, as he has done in previous novels. However, in a novel about the convict period and the legendary bushranger Jack Donohan, gender difference had to go deeper, and the violence of the period comes up in a repressed form in *The Conversations at Curlow Creek*. Since the mind cannot be aware of it, it comes up in a psychosomatic form: nosebleeds and boils.

The nosebleeds Langhurst suffers from in Australia, however sporadic, are a spectacle; similar to the spectacle the government would make of exposing the bushrangers’ mutilated bodies to make the population fear them. A privileged spectator, Garrety jokes that he was well aware of the danger he put himself into when he decided to become a trooper (Jed Snelling’s death and Daniel Carney’s hanging are in the reader’s mind), but nothing could compare to Langhurst’s nosebleeds. In the text, the reference to blood, its richness, and the image of a passing angel gratuitously delivering Langhurst a punch symbolically – and comically – emphasise the repressed violence latent in the colonial context. The image of Langhurst bleeding, “a real gusher”, (17) with his head back on the ground, recalls the scene of Jed Snelling and “the blood that was gushing out of him in an arc like a fountain” (14) when he was speared at the throat, which reminds us that the driving narrative in Malouf’s work, whether they be characters or images, always work in dynamic pairs of opposites or similarities.

> When he was younger he had had a tendency to boils, which came one after the other in crops and which, so his mother said, were an indication of the richness of his blood. Which may have accounted as well for his nosebleeds.
>
> He had grown out of the latter – or almost. Once, when they were just riding along, he had produced one that was prodigious, a real gusher – he might suddenly have been punched in the face by a passing angel. He had had to lie down on the stony ground while the others, still on horseback, looked on. ‘Jesus! They told me

> I was likely to see blood in this game,' Garrety remarked humorously, 'they did warn me of it.' This was before the Jed Snelling business. (17-18)

The boils, which are infections of hair follicles, are another source of deep embarrassment for Langhurst. They appear in his crotch. He always cleans and treats them at night, when he believes no one can see him. But they do – at least Garrety does. Garrety thinks he is masturbating, and since the noise bothers him, urges Langhurst to get it over with soon. Langhurst turns red as a beetroot and blames his blood.

> The boils were another matter, the plague was not past. The rubbing of the saddle, the sweatiness of his groin, were a constant worry to him. Anxious about every itch or swelling, he spent a good deal of time in private investigation of parts of his body where he knew he was vulnerable, to the point where Garrety, once or twice, had told him if he couldn't stop playing with himself to just take it out, give it a good bashing and be done with it.
>
> 'I'm not playin' with myself,' he had insisted hotly, but his blush – once again his blood betrayed him – suggested the opposite. (18)

As Don Randall puts it: "masculine gender identity, its uncertainty and instability, becomes a more pressing concern than ever previously in Malouf." (Randall 147-148). He specifically mentions in this regard Langhurst's continuous preoccupation with body as a signal of femininity. Langhurst constantly bleeds through nosebleeds and boils, and he easily blushes. Randall refers to him as a "bleeder" (Randall 148). Especially when Langhurst is inspecting and cleaning his crotch, we can't avoid thinking about menstruation. The fact that he easily blushes also feminizes him, since the situation feeds on the stereotype – however unfounded – that women are demure and timid.

To sum it up, his forefathers also betrayed Langhurst. The genes in his blood had produced a mirror female version of him, a twin sister. Garrety cannot get over it: "But Garrety was not just surprised, he was awed." In fact, Garrety is obsessed with the idea: "I can't imagine it,' he kept

saying over and over." (20) The issue was that whereas Langhurst's features were average and he still had a boyish face, Garrety's had been hardened by experience – it was difficult to imagine a female version of him. "It was hard to get your mind around another Garrety, some female version, or even another male one, of his long-boned leatheriness and dark, almost gypsy features, whereas his own broad-faced, crack-lipped blondness was common and repeatable." (20) All in all, Langhurst's softness, timidity, his propensity to blushing and the existence of another female version of him excited Garrety:

> In their early days together he had made the mistake of confessing to Garrety that he had a twin sister. He was surprised by the effect it had had on the other youth. He was so used to it himself, it had for so long been a settled condition of his existence, that it meant nothing to him. Garrety had stared as if he was some sort of phenomenon – a calf with five feet at a country fair. He had coloured up and said mildly, 'It's nothing. Honest. There's nothing remarkable in it.'
>
> But Garrety was not to be put off.
>
> 'You mean she looks like you?'
>
> 'Sort of. Well, not exactly- she's a female.' This was meant to be a joke but Garrety for once was too intent to see it. 'She's an old married lady of nineteen.' (19)

We get a glimpse of how pervasive sexism was by the degree of Langhurst's deep concern about his nosebleeds and his wary secrecy with the boils in his crotch, and it is easy to see Garrety's unbound sexual instinct behind his obsessed curiosity and quirk humour. Likewise, the metaphor that they act like married men would not be cheek-and-tongue if there actually was any queerness between them. The aversion to sodomy in the colony can only be compared to the degree of sexism at the time, since the two of them are connected.

We have mentioned that there was an average of six or seven male convicts to one female convict sent to Australia. As a land to be colonised, men guarded the frontier and explorers would

be the ones who would go to map new uncharted territory. Everywhere you looked, you saw groups of men at their business. It was also a misogynist society. Adair explains that during the time he serves in the army, the wives of his fellow officers "were the authorities on everyone and everything." (43) Male convict force would be seen at work on the "Great West Road" across the Blue Mountains and on the "Great North Road" (Hughes 235), hard work that reminds us of the horrors of the war prisoners working on the Burma Railway we have seen in *The Great World.* Men would prefer to undergo any kind of risk and escape to the mountains rather than continue working on the roads. They guaranteed a stable supply of bushrangers, which were also made up of men, like troopers. Everywhere you looked, except in farmhouses, the big cities, and the Female Factories, you would see groups of men at work. Men and women were also shipped separately, in travels that would last up to nine months. As a consequence, sodomy was seen as a real evil to eradicate in Australia. It was punished with death and, perhaps not surprisingly, but indicative of the prejudices of middle-class morality, it did not leave many records behind. (Hughes 264) It was a way not to compromise the convicts' manhood, and it was in the interest of the first free settlers not to bring to light the downturns of the convict system so as to continue to rely on a free workforce. Robert Hughes puts it rather sarcastically: "Buggery, it has been said, is to prisons what money is to middle-class society." (Hughes 265) This situation would change in the 1830s, when abolitionists championed by Jeremy Bentham argued that the penal system degraded men and women to the status of mere beasts, and to committing horrendous crimes comparable only to cannibalism – that is, sodomy. In spite of this, Hughes contends that it will never be possible to tell how widespread homosexuality was at the time. (Hughes 265-266)

There is a hint at homosexuality among convicts in the novel, but the issue is mentioned very discreetly, as if it was just a possibility impossible to verify – like the historical facts that should back it up. The night at the hut is coming to an end, and Carney feels the need to clean his conscience before his imminent death. It is the worst crime he has committed, and the last one he will confess to: the killing of a man.

The story involves a threesome that mirrors, in the way Malouf's novels are internally organized, the threesome involving Virgilia, Fergus and Adair. It is a short story, it is only about three pages long, but the degree of emotional intensity mirrors the main story of the novel.

Carney was working in a road gang, and there was a man called Shafto who could not stand being in the sight of him. He hated him to death, it was visceral. Carney would try to avoid him, but Shafto would seek him anyway, as if he needed Carney's presence to feel fully alive, as only emotions such as hate can do: "It meant more to 'im, that – what 'e had against me – than getting' the food into his mouth." (167) In the gang there was another fellow who was conspicuously queer, and Shafto would taunt him. Seeing that it infuriated Carney, he would rejoice in it, and would start taunting Carney about it. Blinded by rage, Carney would get at him, kill him in cold blood, and feel liberated. This is how Carney tells the story:

> 'Well, there was another feller in the gang. A kid, really. Girlish sort o' lad, a bit light in the head if you know what I mean, but no harm in 'im. This other feller, this Shafto, took to tauntin' 'im. Not bullying like – more taunting, which can be worse sometimes. It made the rest of us uncomfortable. What 'e was suggestin', like. These things do go on, you know, sir – men are animals, there are fellers that do such things, it's best not to speak of 'em. I never had nothin' to do with that sort o' thing meself, nor the lad neither – or if 'e did, I never knew it. It was just that 'e was delicate like, soft. It made some men kinder to 'im, others the opposite. It's strange that, how one man'll go one way, another just the opposite. Anyway, it upset me, his tauntin' the lad like that, an' when he saw it he was pleased. Sort of – satisfied. I saw the little smile on 'is face. He'd found a way of getting' at me. So I thought, it'll do me no good to say anything, it'll on'y make matters worse. So from then on there was two of 'em I had to keep out of the way of.'
>
> He paused, wet his lower lip, frowning. Chewed a moment at the hangnail of his thumb.

'You know, sir, there's some things seem like fate. Whatever step you take, in any direction, there it is right in front of you, it can't be avoided. He didn't give up, that feller. He just went on and on, and one day I just said, "Leave it alone," I said, "why don't you?" Not loud.

'"What was that?" he says back, gleeful like but tryin' to keep it hid. He was that happy. It had come at last.

'"We all know," he says, in a voice he was tryin' like to keep steady, he was that worked up, "we all know why you're speakin' up for the cunt." Then he said somethin' I wouldn't want to repeat.

'I didn't think. I just threw myself right at 'im. He was smaller than me. He must of known if we fought I could beat the daylight out of 'im. I meant to kill him, I can admit that. I wanted to stamp 'im right into the ground. Like you would a spider. I hit him, he went down. I didn't need to 'ave hit 'im again. I've got a temper, like. It comes on quick but it goes off quick as well, an' it 'ad gone off, so I didn't need to 'ave hit him again. But I did, an' I put the whole weight of me body into it. I wanted to knock 'im out of the light.' He sat shaking his head. 'I said I meant to kill 'im and I did mean it, then I didn't. An' it was when I didn't, an' didn' need to, that I went in an' finished 'im off. Deliberate. Some part of me just hit out and did it, an' I stood back with the sweat flyin' off me, and to tell God's truth, sir, I never felt better in all me life.' (167-9)

The relationship between Carney, Shafto and the "soft man" is the negative of the relationship between Adair, Fergus and Virgilia. Virgilia and the soft man function as catalysts for love and hate, respectively. Shafto is obsessed with Carney, and Adair is obsessed with Virgilia. Fergus, like Carney, wants to be left alone. Like Adair when he fails to find Fergus and supposes he has died at the end of the novel, when Carney kills Shafto, he feels liberated from a vicious relationship.

Whereas the action of the first Chapter of *The Conversations at Curlow Creek* takes place exclusively in Australia and opens up a story-threat, the action of the second one is fully set in Ireland and opens up another one. In both stories, that conflate in Australia, Adair is the main witness of events. The first Chapter is a little more than forty pages long, and the second one a bit over twenty and, from then on, the events of the subplot, Adair's life in Ireland, will intermingle with the present story in Australia in the form of free association of ideas that recall the different episodes of the main characters' lives, Daniel Carney and Michael Adair. As we mentioned, Malouf wanted to have in the main storyline of the book two men in conversation about absolutes, such as life and death. Carney's sentence – death by hanging: "But this man's death was announced. It was certain. (…) What was in operation here was the law." (5) – provides the context and the duration for the main plot, and the urgency and the finality of what they talk about. As is customary in Malouf's novels, everyone at Curlow Creek will end up transformed by Carney's death.

Adair's parents were opera singers, not the kind of dependable profession you would imagine today, but a more libertine and distraught one: "From what he could gather of his parents, they had lived very much like gypsies, carefree and, except in the exercise of their art, entirely without discipline." (44) As a response to the chaos at home, Adair was quite the opposite. He led an orderly, decorous life he would stick to with stern discipline. His parents died in a shipwreck when he was three years old, and the Connellans at Ellersley Manor adopted him because they had no children of their own. Aimée Connellan had been a close friend of his mother's at school. A situation that repeatedly appears in Malouf's novels, the Connellans had had many children, but none of them had survived. We have already mentioned the important symbolic role that dying in a place plays in the process of making a piece of land home:

> … in the fourteen years of their marriage barely a year had passed when she was not expecting a child. Unhappily, none of them had survived. Ellersley, a small manor house in a hundred and fifty acres, was a house of ghosts, of little names unspoken but recorded in stone behind an iron grille at the end of a Walk. (51)

We are also told that Aimée Connellan was "the finest horsewoman," and that she loved her dissolute husband dearly, but eventually grew tired of his dissoluteness and ended up hysterical.

Adair's life story resembles Vic's story in *The Great World*. Like Vic, a rich family adopts him, but unlike Vic, the connection to the family is not through the father but through the mother. Like Vic's mother, Aimée Connellan is unhappily married and relieves herself with her adopted son, in scenes that are ambiguously motherly and sexual: "There was also a special smell to these occasions, which he came to associate with her tears and his own pleasurable discomfort. It was a long time before he understood what it was." (57) Sensitive topics such as homosexuality and paedophilia are present in abeyance in the novel. Like Vic, his unstable childhood imposes on him a stern discipline, but Adair does not redeem himself by means of material and worldly success, but by means of love. In this respect, Adair will not inherit the family fortune; Mr Connellan will spend most of it, and what is left is Fergus' by right of birth.

Indeed, soon after adopting Adair, the Connellans have a son that survives, Fergus. Aimée is thirty-eight. At the beginning, no one in the house gives the child much thought, not even his mother, believing that if she ignores him, maybe he will survive. In the mother and the household's attitude towards Fergus, we see how superstitious the Irish are, something they will bring over to Australia and indicates their flair for the fabulous and mysterious that make up the salt of legend.[104]

---

[104] A typical Irish legend the Irish brought to Australia and that gives us an idea of what Irish superstitions were like is the legend of the banshee, which is a female spirit that warns of death in a house. It is a recurrent figure in Peter Carey's novel *True History of the Kelly Gang*, where the young narrator, Ned Kelly, tells the reader how the Banshee came to Australia:

> When our brave parents was ripped from Ireland like teeth from the mouth of their own history and every dear familiar thing had been abandoned on the docks of Cork or Galway or Dublin then the Banshee come on board the cursed convict ships the ROLLA and the TELICHERRY and the RODNEY and the

The circumstances of Fergus' birth and survival are so unusual that everyone believes that he is a special child, a sort of fairy boy from the woods.

> From the beginning Mama Aimée's attitude to him was fearful and softly guarded. Her fear was that if she showed too much interest he would, like the others, be taken; if she looked too hard at his blue eyes and little perfect fingernails and ears, he would vanish.
>
> She was not a believer but she was powerfully superstitious. There were watchers, spirits born out of the peat bog, creatures with wolf-fangs and withered dugs and thin grey hair who were observing her every movement or look. If they saw how full of need she was, they would work their spell and the boy would sicken. They had to be deceived. She must harden her heart, never look at him except sideways, till he was safe.
>
> And it was true, there was something about the child that was uncanny. He wasn't like a human child – that was the whispered talk among the servant girls, who lived in the same world of folktales and superstitions as their mistress, who had heard this secret lore thirty years ago from peasant girls just like them in her aunts' kitchen.
>
> He never cried. (59-60)

The fact that Fergus never cries is a sign of his divinity. Also, a precocious sign of masculinity in a child, since boys don't cry, even if it will turn out to be a deception, probably a sign of what

---

> PHOEBE DUNBAR and there were not an English eye could see her no more than an English eye can picture the fire that will descend upon that race in time to come. The Banshee sat herself at the bow and combed her hair all the way from Cork to Botany Bay she took passage amongst our parents beneath that foreign flag 3 crosses nailed one atop the other. (Carey 108)

the household wanted to see more than reality. As a teenager, Fergus will "burst into tears" when Adair tells him that one day he will leave, because his life circumstances are different from his and Virgilia's. On these occasions, Fergus turns out to be quite a sensitive fellow:

> Our circumstances ' - he went back to the word because he found a kind of pleasure in its cruel objectivity - 'are different. It doesn't mean we are not close, and fond of one another. We are, you know it. But I have to think about such things. Or it's my nature - I suppose it is.'
>
> Suddenly Fergus burst into tears.
>
> 'I don't know why you are saying these things,' he said fiercely. Adair was shocked. He hadn't expected this.
>
> Fergus got up and crossed quickly to where his horse stood and put his arms around the big bay's neck. (119)

Since Fergus' mother, Aimée Connellan, avoids taking care of her child so as to mislead the bad spirits, and the housemaids are sceptical about him, Adair takes the role of surrogate mother: "Only Adair felt free to give the child his unguarded affection." (60) First, this leads Adair to believe that children have a special power against bad spirits. That is the reason why Adair's affection actually saved Fergus: "Because the watchers, his young mind having no fear of them, had no power over him. So long as he had charge of the child they dared not touch him." (61) This will create a special bond between them. However, as we pointed out before, Adair will redeem himself of his life circumstances through love. On second thoughts, he becomes aware that the magic he operates has no mystery, or is the mystery of innocent love that we unfortunately grow out of when we become adults: "But it was no special power he had. Simply that he too was a child and had for the first time opened his heart and found a language of affection which, so long as that affection was unquestioned, could not be misunderstood." (61)

Soon after Fergus is born, Mama Aimée sent Adair to study his letters to Eamon Fitzgibbon's place, called the Park. He has a daughter, Virgilia, who is the same age as Adair, and

they will study together. As other characters in Malouf's novels, such as Johnno, she is blue-eyed and red-haired. Her father had three sons from a previous marriage, and he made no difference to her upbringing. That is the reason why Virgilia looks athletic, energetic, confident and speaks for herself, but she is not a tomboy – "not a tomboy, not at all" (80). Unlike Adair, who is "always aware of limits," Virgilia accepts "no limits." (81) She has ambitions, and she is set on circumventing the limits imposed upon her by society. When she asks Adair what he wants to be in the future, she is taken aback when he says that, maybe, a soldier, maybe because she is aware that that was an area that was completely out of her reach, and says: "you might at least have said a general" (81) out of spite. In contrast, Adair is aware that his position in the household where he is living depends entirely on the charity of the Connellans, and that he has not a secure foothold on the world. Whereas Virgilia is proud of herself, Adair is aware of his humble origins: "He was dependent on the kindness, the charity, of others, and on what he could do in the way of service, or command in the way of affection, to keep it. This was humiliating." (81)

Because of their different positions in society, Virgilia assumes some gender roles that are masculine and Adair others that are feminine. She is the bold one, lies, and is adventurous. Adair follows her lead; he is shy and morally faultless. When Adair takes Fergus with him to the Park, their typical roles are also inverted. Virgilia likes to pet pamper, sing nursery songs and teach games to Fergus, but when Fergus soils himself she recoils in disgust. Seeing Adair enjoy his motherly role, she cannot avoid teasing him: "What a good little mother he is,' she would sing. 'Isn't it a good little mother she is?" (94) Far from maddening him, Adair enjoys his role and is proud of the special relationship he has with Fergus. He knows that if Virgilia is scornful, it is because she is envious:

> Fergus during these ministrations lay very still and trusting under his hands, and from the corner of his eye Adair observed, not without a kind of humorous satisfaction, the look of mild disgust with which Virgilia followed his movements. But there was curiosity there and envy too. She must see, he thought, how these

> movements of intimacy pleased him. How completely, while he worked, Fergus was his. (94)

In spite of their inherent contradictions, all characters in *The Conversations at Curlow Creek* are flat. We see them growing from kids to adults, but they do not change at all. If anything, they become disappointed in life, with only the exception of Adair, who perhaps will find happiness in Australia.

Since Adair and Fergus live together, and they go to school at Virgilia's house and they get along, they soon become very close, developing a lifelong "intimacy of three," in which they will discover and develop their characters. The narrative voice emphasises that "more and more they made up a company of their own," (97) isolating themselves from any exterior influence. They only care about what they think about each other. Adair is conservative and traditional, Virgilia is stubborn and Fergus is a free soul.

There is an episode in Eamon Fitzgibbon's house, when they are still kids, that summarizes their relationship throughout the book. On the one hand, Virgilia is described as "the prime mover," but she is already unable to contain Fergus. In the face of defeat, she becomes powerless, lowering herself to Adair's status, who sees in her defeat and powerlessness a common ground between them. Adair loves her the most on these occasions when Fergus leaves her blood-drained and lifeless, staying beyond her control and reach. In other words, when she comes face to face with her limits. Adair also feels closest to her "in these moments when all her attention was on Fergus", thus enacting their own and new version of the love triangle: Adair cannot directly love Fergus without questioning his manhood, but he can do it safely through Virgilia. On the other hand, Fergus will not be contained because it is not in his nature. As they grow up, Fergus will do his own thing, leaving for the outback or to fairs where he might find horses he might be interested in. Fergus reminds us of Johnno. Boys were afraid of his boldness and his wilderness, and girls did not interest him: "The boys his own age were scared by his wildness, and the girls, who were attracted by it, even some of the older ones, who had heard of it from their brothers, did not

interest him." (111) Probably because of that, girls found him "the most delightful boy in all Ireland," (179) including, to Adair's dismay, Virgilia, whose constancy would match his own in her love of Fergus.

All in all, as in a Greek tragedy, their destinies are contained in the faults of their respective characters, which are visible in their childhoods:

> Virgilia remained the prime mover. Adair had, long ago, and quite willingly, yielded authority to her. But Fergus, young as he was, could not so easily be controlled. He did not mean to deny her. It was simply that he had no idea what she wanted of him, it was not in his nature to be contained. When he fell into one of his freaks as she called it, she took it personally and protested, mildly at first. 'Fergus,' she would warn him, 'you're wool-gathering.' But he had no control over his moods. Almost unconscious of the extent to which he had moved away into a dimension of himself where he was absent in all but the flesh, he would, in a dreamy fashion, push her hand away. 'Leave me,' he would tell her. But she could not. When urgings and tugs failed to work she would begin to deliver little punches to his upper arm that became increasingly vehement, till he either came out of himself or ran away crying and calling her names learned from the stableboys that left her white-faced with affront.
>
> Adair never felt closer to her than in these moments when all her attention was on Fergus and the whole of her intense being was set on breaking the boy, on winning him back. What touched him was the loss of all restraint in her, and when she was defeated, as she mostly was, the stricken look that drained her cheeks so completely of colour that you could see even the palest freckle on her skin, and under its fineness, a thing that never failed to astonish him, the blue more intense than any sky-colour, of her veins. In being powerless she became transparent. What he loved in her, and all the more because she so rarely revealed it, was her

> vulnerability. It was here, he believed, that his advantage lay. She would see at last, she must, that her only peace, her only safety, was in him. (98-99)

We see the three of them growing up, and how their relationship changes as they mature. First, it is Virgilia who does not want to fight and imposes some distance between her and Adair, leaving Adair to play with Fergus. Then, it is Adair who notices that the new distance between them means that they have grown into adulthood, leaving Fergus on his own. None of them seems to know exactly what the change is about, but they seem happy in the midst of its mystery and danger:

> 'Don't', she had told him when he tried to draw her into an old game of rough-and-tumble that would once have had her struggling fiercely beside them. He was hurt that if he touched her now she pulled away, offended that when he tried to force her she called him silly and stalked off.
>
> 'Oh leave her,' Fergus told him, 'if she doesn't want to play. We don't need her.' But it was no consolation to be paired in her eyes with a nine-year-old.
>
> He stood and watched her go, no longer happy in the world Fergus offered but unable to follow. He could not grasp what had happened. Then the time came when he could and it was Fergus who was left. Almost from one day to the next they were in accord again, he and Virgilia, but in a way that was new and afforded him the keenest satisfaction, though there was a sense of mystery in it too that left him light-headed and even, at times, fearful; but it was a pleasurable fear. (100)

At the peak of puberty, Adair has to come to terms with his own body, and as far as the body mediates between the self and the outside world, he also discovers a whole new world of experience. First of all, he discovers a "new capacity for hurt" both in himself and in those around him. "Most of all, Virgilia. Did she know how much she was at risk? He trembled when he thought of it." We are not told whether Virgilia might be the victim or the perpetrator, because Adair speaks beyond the duality of subject and object. The real issue is that whatever the hurt, a

proportionate capacity for suffering will have to keep the scales even, and these are unmeasurable things. Thanks to Freud and Nietzsche, (Freud *Totem and Taboo*; Nietzsche *Beyond Good and Evil*) we now know that the repression of one's instincts and sexual desire leads to civilized behavior, but also towards sickness and despair. Adair realizes "that there had opened up around him, even as he began to feel his power, an immensity of the unknown, of what might never be known, that was a kind of terror to him," (100) and which both appeases and civilizes him. Neither Adair nor Virgilia can give free rein to their impulses.

There is an exception. It recalls the episode in *Remembering Babylon* when Janet McIvor enters puberty and experiences some kind of symbiosis with nature when the bees surround her and leave her unscathed. Now, it is Adair who feels estranged and decides to go for a walk. There is a splendid day, but there is some kind of electricity in the atmosphere. When the wind changes and clouds appear on the horizon, instead of going back home safely, he decides to stay outside. He feels reckless and needs to balance the recklessness with the turmoil outside, feel the inclement weather on his skin. However, Adair is not Janet McIvor. Men are meant to dominate nature, not to find an ally in it. Like Lear, his brief moment of boldness will lead him to misery. When it starts to rain Adair hears a voice. It is Virgilia, who is calling for him. When she reaches him, it is pouring down, and under cover of water they surrender to their bodily impulses and tenderly embrace each other. Virgilia has fallen for Adair's act of impulsive freedom, but in time she will notice that it has been only that, a happy exception.

> One day when he had abandoned the others to be on his own, he found himself in the new oak-grove Eamon Fitzgibbon had planted at the edge of the farm.
>
> It was early spring. The young trees, which were as yet only twenty feet tall, were misted with green, but it was a greenness, as the pale sum caught it, that was more like a trick of the light than fleshly foliage.

What had carried him here, or so he had thought, was a mood, the need to catch up for a moment with his own tumultuous feelings. But when he stepped in among them he realized that the trees too were in a state of disturbance. Midges swarmed in their shade. The heat that had begun to gather, and which he felt as a dampness at the base of his spine, had set off an electric quivering in the air. It was, he saw now, the beginnings of a storm. How odd, he thought, when he looked up at the sky. There was no sign of a cloud there, only the spasms of a distant restlessness. Yet his body had felt the change, and in a moment he had confirmation of it from a different source.

In the crooked little avenues of an oak-trunk ants were swarming. They too had scented it. Some message had run from one to another of them, and now, in hundreds, which would soon be thousands, they were leaving their holes before the flood and excitedly climbing.

Looking in on their tiny lives, on bodies that in such a minute space could contain so much knowledge, will, all the co-ordination and discipline of an army, he had an apprehension of how crowded and complex his own body was, which did not seem at all lumpish or out of scale but on the contrary very finely adjusted, subtly attuned to everything that was happening here. The air crackled. All his senses were alert.

He should get out in the open, that is what he thought. No point in being struck. He plunged through bracken towards the open field, which was newly ploughed, the raw clods shining from the share, and there it was far off on the skyline, a cloud no bigger than his fist, but black as smoke and spreading, and above it lightning tremors, flash on flash.

He might have gone in then. There was still time to run for shelter. But he did not. He stood with his hands raised, rejoicing, when they came, in the first big

splashes that wet his cheeks and darkened his shirt. Then, almost immediately, there was such a down rush of water that he might have beaten flat into the earth. He was drenched - hair, clothes, skin - and staggering. The field turned to mud, then to liquid mud, he could barely keep upright in it. He heard his name called, and when he turned towards the source of it, saw emerging out of the thunderous light, as if it had somehow come to light from cold marble, what he took to be one of the statues in Eamon Fitzgibbon's gallery, a nereid that for a good while now he had guiltily stopped to contemplate and had gathered at last into the store of images he kept at the back of his head, her garments so liquefied and transparent that you saw through them the shape of her limbs and the small risen breasts, though the face was blunted and featureless like the face in a dream.

It was Virgilia, who had come out looking for him. She too was soaked, her garments liquefied, revealing the small risen breasts. She came up to him, laughing, reached for his hand, and clasped it as if she might otherwise have slipped and drowned. 'What are you doing?' She shouted.

He shook his head. For explanation he raised her hand and set it on his breast, as if it was there she would find her answer: in the flesh under his clinging shirt, in the clamouring of his heart. He felt freed by this new element they were in. To be drenched like this was a kind of nakedness. He lifted her hand to his mouth, as he never could have done if they had been in the presence of furniture. She did not object. When he lowered it, he let his head tilt forward and his lips found the softness of her neck. He was entirely without experience. Each of these actions was for itself. He did not think of them as leading anywhere.

The rain continued to hold them. As long as it lasted it was as if they had at least stepped outside the permitted and ordinary. But after a little her hand came

> up to his chest and pushed him off. He saw then that the rain was ceasing. They were in clear outline again and facing one another. But she was smiling.
>
> They walked away hand in hand, slipping and sinking in the muddy furrows, hauling one another out. But what pleased her, he discovered after a time, was the belief that he had changed, had broken through into some part of himself where he was reckless. But it wasn't that. He had from beginning to end been following his body - that was all; doing what it wanted, what it told him to do. When he wandered away from them and sought the solitude of the oak-grove. When he stood waiting in the field for the rain to fall. When he called her to him and she had revealed herself and allowed him to touch her. She did not know it yet but he could do these things. This was just the beginning. He was patient. He would last. (100-104)

Meanwhile, Fergus has also grown, and he has grown up fast. Virgilia will find in him what she cannot find in Adair: freedom from convention, order and discipline. Whereas Johnno found or lost himself subverting the existing social order, unable to find a place for himself in society, Fergus simply has renounced society altogether and found the meaning of life in his freedom.

> Fergus meanwhile, at sixteen, was a man. Already over six feet three and no longer amenable to discipline, he was allowed to go about pretty much as he pleased, had his own horses, his own pack of harriers; barelegged, dishevelled, he came and went according to his own wishes and ignored even his mother's easy regimen. (177)

Adair describes him as an eccentric, behaving like a folk hero. He compares him to the Romantic poet Lord Byron, well-known for defending his ideals and sexual exploits, and for having fought for the Greek War of Independence. However, Fergus did not care so much about clothing and first impressions:

> It was all very well for him, Adair thought. He never tried to make an impression, good or bad, cared for no one's opinion, but the McMahon girls just the same were besotted with him. They found his scowls Byronic, hung on his moody silences. When he broke into smiles, because his natural charm and good humour could not long contain itself, they thought him the most delightful boy in all Ireland. It wasn't true what people said of him. That he was half savage and unfit for society.
>
> It made no difference that he had not washed or changed his shirt. Some grace had been afforded him that belonged so completely to his nature that he had never considered it, may even have thought it so general as to be beyond consideration. Adair, who had spent every day of his life with him, and would have known immediately if there was any element of calculation or self-consciousness in him, had no more resistance to it than the latest appearing and most unreflective stranger. (179)

Unlike Johnno, Fergus has a father, but all he has ever cared about is drinking and meeting his cronies. Since Fergus was born, his father's relationship with his mother got increasingly worse and he is rarely at home. When he is, all he wants is to have food and alcohol on the table and to be left alone. Like Johnno, in the absence of a fatherly figure at home, Fergus grows wild. Obviously, he can do what he does because he is a man, but he ends up living a paroxysm of liberty. The collateral victims will be the women closest to him: his mother and Virgilia. Regarding his mother, Fergus simply thinks she is mad, and confides this to Adair without the slightest emotion. "'My mother's mad, don't you know that?'", he tells Adair. "'It's a shame and I'm sorry, but I don't mind it so much. I don't like to see her, that's all. I'm sorry for her, but I don't want to see her. You should keep away from her too, Michael.'" Indeed, his mother goes mad when she would like to see him holding on to mummy all day and, instead, Fergus does as he pleases and completely ignores her. "He is a demon," she tells Adair. "He isn't my child, I've always known

that. He was sent to torment me." (109) Mama Aimée asks Adair to mediate between them, but Adair knows that there is nothing he can do about it. She accuses him of taking sides, so Adair ends up hiding from her. Instead of socializing with his own people, he spends most of his time in the country.

Within the sphere of possibilities that patriarchy opens up for him, Fergus is his own master, self-sufficient and sure of himself. He is an amalgam of different male figures of the Western literary and folk tradition. Like Prince Hal in *Henry IV*, he plays the role of errant son. Like Lear – it is always Lear -, despite his arrogance, he is a good man.

This is how Adair describes Fergus at this stage:

> Wild-eyed, tongue-tied fellows would appear at Ellersley and stand, cap in hand, till he came out and spoke to them; fellows with straw in their hair, who travelled to country fairs and brought him news, or so they claimed, of horses he might be interested in, in villages forty miles off in another country. He would ride off with them and be gone whole nights and days, looking, when he got back, as if he had slept in ditches or been in a brawl. Mama Aimée raged. James Connellan, preoccupied as always with his own affairs, shrugged his shoulders; the boy was his own master. (186)

And like Robin Hood, he likes to help the poor. On one of their outings together, when they had hunted a few hares, Fergus had taken Adair and Virgilia, quite unexpectedly, to meet the O'Riordans, a destitute family living in a battered hut in the woods. There live Mrs O'Riordan and her daughter Marnie, who will eventually end up working as a servant girl for Virgilia. There also live a bunch of children. They all are happy to see Fergus, even if at the beginning they are distrustful of Adair and Virgilia.

Once everyone is at ease, Adair and Virgilia discover the hardships the O'Riordans have to endure. Mr O'Riordan has been sentenced to Australia, and the family is led to fend for themselves. It is the first time Adair will hear of New South Wales. Fergus is helping them out:

Fergus shook his head. But the affection they all had for him, and the pleasure he took in it, was too plain to be hidden. 'O'Riordan,' he told them quietly, 'was transported.'

'Seven years,' the woman announced. 'Do you know, sir,' she asked Adair, 'where New South Wales is?'

It was the first he had heard of it. Now, sitting in the dead of night in the very heart of it, he cast his mind back to that afternoon and the woman's question. Somewhere out here, Fergus, all six feet six of him, if it was him, lay a bare three feet under the surface, at a spot unnamed and strange, having run to the ends of the earth not to become what blood at least had intended, the last in that sequence of green mounds at the end of the Walk. How could they have known then, either of them, any of them - for there was also Virgilia - the part it would play in their lives?

New South Wales... (194)

Soon after their encounter under the rain, Adair discovers that Virgilia desires Fergus. Being in love with Virgilia, he had idolized her. He had thought that she was an asexual being, freed from mundane passions. To his dismay, he discovers, stealthily, that she desires Fergus, who, for his part, remains quite unaware and unresponsive to her cravings. When Adair confronts Fergus about it, we discover that what Fergus feels for Adair is more important to him than what he feels for Virgilia. The love triangle has got more complicated. The three involved figures might describe a vicious circle, more than a triangle. Is Fergus trying to tell Adair that he loves him? Does he do it for mateship's sake? Adair complains that Fergus' indifference makes her suffer.

The dialogue between Adair and Fergus is charged with feeling and regrets. Adair is in love with Virgilia, who is in love with Fergus; Virgilia is in love with Fergus, who is in love with Adair; Fergus is in love with Adair, who is in love with Virgilia. It is not simply that Adair is

in love with Virgilia, who is in love with a third uninvolved party. In this threesome, desire circulates endlessly, contaminating an emotionally charged childhood friendship.

This is the scene from which we can gather that Adair has idolized Virgilia, and a love triangle in which every member is, at the same time, a subject and object of desire:

> It was at this time that Adair began to see that Virgilia's feeling for Fergus was no longer one of those shifting inconsequential alliances, based on a word or a whim or the many little dissatisfactions and bursts of sympathy that till now had characterized the movement of emotion between them.
>
> One afternoon, he and Fergus had been playing shuttlecock while Virgilia, book in hand, looked on. They had taken their shirts off in the heat, and when the game was over, used them to dry off. Stretched out beside her in the grass, which was cooling off on the skin, they slept.
>
> Waking, he looked up from where he had thrown his forearm across his eyes to keep off the sun.
>
> Virgilia, her knees drawn up under her skirt, had laid her book aside and was staring with a dreamlike fixity at the muscles of Fergus' throat, which tensed, went lax, then tensed again, as with his limbs flung out and his bare chest lightly heaving, he slept. Her lips were parted. Her teeth glistened. She looked, Adair thought, as if she were drugged.
>
> Desire, that is what he saw. But also that desire was a part of her nature. He had consoled himself till now with the belief that it was not, or that she had not yet discovered it; and for no other reason than that he desired her and she had shown no response.
>
> As for Fergus, he seemed entirely unaware. He watched him, watched them both - he had discovered a new talent in himself, though he took no pride in it, that of the spy; but was convinced after a time that his first impression was a right

one. Fergus knew nothing of the change in Virgilia's feelings. Adair was angry with him now on new grounds. For the innocence, the indifference it might be, that allowed him to hurt her and remain blithely unconscious of it.

He kept all this to himself, and it was typical of Fergus, he thought, when the boy at last challenged him, that he should be so sensitive to his feelings when he was so oblivious to hers.

'What is it, Mickey?' He demanded in his forthright way. 'You're angry with me, I know you are. But why? What have I done?'

'I'm not angry,' Adair told him.

Fergus turned away.

'Now,' Adair said, 'you are angry with me.'

'Yes I am, of course. Because you feel something and deny it. Why should you lie? Is it Virgilia?'

'Perhaps.'

'You don't have to fear that, Mickey. I know what you feel for her. Do you think I would do anything to hurt you?'

'No, I know you wouldn't. But you hurt her.'

'Virgilia? What do you mean? How do I hurt her? I'm the same as ever was.'

'But she is not.'

Fergus looked away and shook his head.

They were making their way to the Park across country, through a patch of dank wood thick with sycamore and whitethorn that freighted the air with its suffocating sweetness, and foxgloves in purple clumps. In spring you could find Irish orchids here, if you knew where to look, and in autumn mushrooms. But now it was June. The air was hot and close. They sweated, their shirts sticking to their backs and the flies swarming.

> They came out into waist-high meadowsweet and Fergus strode ahead, slashing at the flower-heads left and right with a hazel-switch. There was nothing more he would say. He would, as he always did, take this into himself, but they would not speak of it again. (112-115)

Adair reproaches Fergus that he makes Virgilia suffer. However, who is suffering the most? Is it Fergus because of Adair's indifference towards his true feelings? Fergus can't question Adair's friendship, but is Fergus trying to say something else? Is it Virgilia, who sees that Fergus remains oblivious to her desire? Or is it Adair, who sees that the woman he loves, Virgilia, is in love with Fergus? It seems now that we also have a man who is in love with a man who is in love with a woman.

As was the case in *Johnno*, the question of what it is exactly that Fergus feels for Adair might not be pertinent. Concepts might help us understand reality, but regarding gender issues, they might do more harm than good. What difference does it make whether Fergus feels a homoerotic or homosexual desire for Adair? Isn't it more accurate to say that he appreciates, is fond of or loves his friend? Since Adair has raised Fergus and mothered Adair, his feelings must be quite intense, and things might be quite complicated for him.

In any case, what does the novel tell us? We do not know what his feelings are regarding Virgilia, but we know that the three friends are very close and fond of one another. We know that the Connellan's – Fergus' parents – have adopted Adair, and he is always aware of that. It puts him at a disadvantage, even if Fergus and Virgilia will never make him feel that way. However, as Adair is about to enter adulthood, he is set to leave Ellersley and join the army. When Adair tells Fergus about his plans, he is shattered. He refuses to let Adair go and tries to persuade him into staying, to no avail. Fergus appears hurt, distressed and offers to share or give all his inheritance to Adair if he would stay, but even if Adair does not doubt the authenticity of his offer for a second, he won't change his mind. Deeply upset, Fergus bursts into tears, reproaches him his indifference towards his offer and feelings and leaves.

The following passage may contain the keyword, password or even magical word to the meaning of the novel. First of all, regarding Fergus, it allows us to see to what extent he is fond of Adair. Like the letter that is left visible to everyone so as to keep it hidden in Poe's *The Purloined Letter*, we should read Fergus' words in their literal sense. It is difficult not to feel touched by them. In these lines, we see that we had been given an idolized image of Fergus, and that it was false currency, one falsified by patriarchal values – the same values that made Adair idolize Virgilia as an asexual being. Let us recall that the Connellans had given up having a child of their own when Fergus was born and that, once he was born, they believed he wouldn't survive long, like the others. However, against all odds, years passed, and he lived on. This imbued Fergus with an aura of mystery since his early years. We are told that "he never cried," (60) which was of course only a perception they had of him in the house and, as we pointed out before, a sign of manhood in a child. Being the only child to have survived also burdened him with a huge responsibility. He was the heir, the man of the house. As Adair put it: "To be so singled out for survival, for life! To have put into your hands, and so firmly, the gift those others had let fall." (105) The following passage is important because it humanizes Fergus. In the same way that since the 1980s feminism began by talking about the experiences of real women of flesh and blood, men studies must begin but talking about the real experiences of men of flesh and blood.

Secondly, there appears in this passage a word that functions as a password that will link, at the end of the book, the two stories that make up the joint argument of the novel. It will also link, symbolically, two countries, Ireland and Australia; two destinies, that of Adair and Fergus; and, perhaps most importantly, two parallel levels of reality, fact and folklore. The word is "kismet." It has an ambiguous status. It is Adair who pronounces it. This is the sentence in which it appears: "'You would, I know you would, but my life is - Every man's life is his own, that's what I believe - Kismet. I have to make what I can of it. And you know, it isn't as easy as that, you can't just give things away.'"

We could say that the word functions as a common name, that is, that Adair is summarizing in one word what he is trying to say: we all have to live our own lives, the lives we have been predestined to live. This is the definition of "kismet" according to the OED: "the idea that everything that happens to you in your life is already decided and that you cannot do anything to change or control it." The word might appear capitalized in the same way that we capitalize Truth, Destiny, Fate, etc.

Another possibility is that the word functions as a proper name, a nickname Adair may use to call Fergus whose origins are to be found when he used to nurse him as a child.

It could be both.

Whatever it is, the word passes quite unnoticed by the average reader, even when it comes back, later on, at the end of the book. However, like the purloined letter that disappears when it is blatantly exposed, the word contains a well of emotions between Adair and Fergus.

Surprisingly, the passage ends with Fergus transformed, as if having come to a resolution all on his own, as was his custom:

> Adair was surprised. Didn't he know all this? In the close sharing of so much that was secret but silent between them hadn't the boy understood that what made life so hard for him, his uneasy place in the world, could not be changed by affection, even his affection, or the avowal that he would never be anything less than a dear older brother and the one person in the world he could not do without?
>
> He saw how distressed Fergus was and was sorry. He hated to see him hurt. Most of all, he thought, it was a kind of shame; at having failed to see what ought to have been obvious, and for the doubt it might cast on the depth of his nature or his love.
>
> 'But it is not right,' he said simply.
>
> 'It's the way it is,' Adair told him. 'It's no fault of yours - or mine either. It's the way the world is.'

'I'd have made the world very different, if I'd had the making of it. I'll give you half of whatever it is - all if you'll take it. Then you can stay.'

'You would, I know you would, but my life is - Every man's life is his own, that's what I believe - Kismet. I have to make what I can of it. And you know, it isn't as easy as that, you can't just give things away.'

'Why can't I?'

'Because that's the life *you've* been given.'

'I'm not free - is that what you mean? We're not free.' He shook his head. 'That's not what Eamon Fitzgibbon tells us.'

'No, it's not. But I'm not sure I believe him. Anyway, you couldn't because it's not the way things are done.'

'Then we should change them. Shouldn't we?'

'You would,' he said affectionately, and it was true. He would. That was his style.

'What you really mean is you wouldn't accept.'

'That too, I couldn't. Not because I think you wouldn't do it gladly, I know you would, but because it's already settled in my mind. I mean to hire myself out as a soldier. That's the honourable Irish thing to do.'

'Then I'll go with you.'

He must have caught, Adair thought, the little movement with which he looked away.

'Do you really think,' he flashed out, 'that I mean to stay here and sit playing whist all night, and starve my tenants, and be a fat do-nothing like my father -'

'You shouldn't speak like that of – '

'Shouldn't? Why is it always should and shouldn't with you, Mickey? I don't think that way. Neither does Virgilia.'

The barb shot home. Adair winced but would not let it pass.

'Because you do not have to, you and Virgilia. I do. It's what I've been trying to make you see. Our circumstances' – he went back to the word because he found a kind of pleasure in its cruel objectivity - 'are different. It doesn't mean we are not close, and fond of one another. We are, you know it. But I have to think about such things. Or it's my nature - I suppose it is.'

Suddenly Fergus burst into tears.

'I don't know why you are saying these things,' he said fiercely. Adair was shocked. He hadn't expected this.

Fergus got up and crossed quickly to where his horse stood and put his arms around the big bay's neck.

It was a moment Adair would return to again and again, looking up through the waves of heat from the fire to the quivering image that haunted him still of Fergus, his arms round the horse's neck, leaning his brow for comfort against the huge shadowy creature that turned its head in sympathy and tried to muzzle his cheek.

But his own fear for the moment was hardened. Let him accept the conditions of his life, he thought. I have accepted mine.

There was an element of deliberate cruelty in it, that was the reflection, he saw, of a bitterness in him that he had failed, for all his philosophy, to suppress. But it was not Fergus he had meant to punish.

The image burned in him still, and clearer now for having been sharpened in memory by the times he had gone back to conjure it; no longer with the heat of the fire to make it shift and waver in the light, so that boy and horse, all airy illusion, might have been suspended a foot above the earth, but grounded at last in a real weight of bone, and in a sorrow he felt with all the heaviness of his regret that the

> moment should stand so clearly as the end of something. Do not turn, he found himself saying, as if he could arrest the moment and stop time from moving on.
>
> But the boy had turned, calm again, and walked slowly to the fire, and sat, and something new had begun between them. (116-120)

Fergus seems to have taken an important decision as a response to Adair's words. He will follow Adair's path to fight for justice and freedom where these ideals were more compromised. Adair finds out where that is about four or five years later, while he is serving in Galicia. He receives a nervous and anguished letter from Virgilia, who urges him to find Fergus for Mama Aimées sake and also, one might gather, for her own sake. This is the event that will take him to the other side of the world:

> It was with the same matter-of-factness that she reported – how long ago – a year, was it only a year? – he was still in Galicia, and could not have guessed what the simple statement would mean, how far it would take him out of his life, though he knew the emotion she must have forced down in herself to write so casually: 'Fergus is gone, no one know where. Mama Aimée is frantic, as you will no doubt hear. Do you know anything of this?' (49)

The situation is complex. Adair joins the army, thus endorsing British foreign policy and somehow defending the *status quo* that placed him at a social disadvantage, living off the charity and good-heart of the Connellans, while Fergus will join the Irish cause against the British and, extensively, the status quo that placed him at a socially advantageous position from the moment of his birth. At one point in the novel, Adair worries that he might have "stolen Fergus's birthright," thus taking his place as first born and legitimate child. However, we know that this is not so. Adair might have taken Fergus' place in their mother's heart as confidante, but even this is questionable. We have seen that whereas Adair accepted his fate and condition, Fergus complained against a state of affairs that would take his best friend away from him. Fergus appears as a social revolutionary, who sees in their lack of freedom and social injustice the roots of his personal and

the likes of the O'Riordans' misery. Adair has always looked forward to "the preservation of all that was settled, with what you could hope to find tomorrow where you had left it yesterday," (173) lest he should lose his family again. We could say that Fergus takes a progressive stand whereas Adair takes a conservative one. The two friends hold two competing views about the world in this regard.

Adair's views deserve some qualification. He is not a conservative because he thinks that durability and stability are natural or logical principles we must abide by, but because, after having lost his biological family, he is terrified of what the world can do to you. At one point in the novel, Adair worries that he might have "stolen Fergus's birthright," thus taking his place as first born and legitimate child. However, we know that this is not so. Adair might have taken Fergus' place in their mother's heart as confidant, but even this is questionable. Adair knows his belief does not make much sense, but he does not believe the world makes much sense either: "Unreasonable, unnatural? It might seem so, but he had long since given up the belief that the forces that move us have anything to do either with nature or reason, or that the heart moves in anything but the most crooked way." (211) Throughout the novel, Adair shows himself as quite wary about the way the world works. Earlier in the novel, Adair describes himself as a deeply ingrained sceptic: "He had a high regard for the incomprehensible. Perplexity, he thought, was the most natural consequence of one's being in the world - which did not mean that one should yield to it, or to the disorder which, unless one took a firm hand, was its unhappy consequence." (44) If he is a conservative, it is because he needs to balance the fragility and the impermanence of things, but he does not have a blind faith in reason, like Virgilia's father, Eamon Fitzgibbon, whom Fergus' evokes in his defense.

Eamon Fitzgibbon had been educated in France and had been there "at the time of the Revolution." (93) We have seen that he had decided to offer her daughter, Virgilia, the best possible education. Perhaps it is worth mentioning at this point that, even though women would not be allowed to vote until 1945 in France, women won the right to vote in 1902 in Australia.

The cultural, scientific and technological advances in Europe had given Eamon Fitzgibbon a glimpse of what the future would be like, and he could only understand that future in terms of progress:

> "'A hundred years from now men will live very different lives from anything we know, Michael.' That is what Eamon Fitzgibbon had told him. 'The world will be transformed. *We* will be transformed. The process has already begun – I saw it myself, the beginning – August the fourth, 1789. Your children and grandchildren, in 1910, 1915, will be in the glorious midst of it….'" (161-162)

The narrative voice might be using dramatic irony, since we as readers know that the French Revolution was followed by a time of terror, and the 1910s the outbreak of the Great War. However, so as to emphasize how wrong he is, the narrative voice also embarks on situational irony. Eamon Fitzgibbon's words have the opposite effect than the one we would expect on Adair. As Eamon speaks, Adair cannot free himself of the image of their servant girl on the way upstairs that has aroused him. What drives mankind, we see, is not reason and progress, but the sexual drive, a view Freud would fully endorse:

> He was just fourteen. He sat listening in the dim light of the Library, seated in a body that was all turmoil, all disorder, blind lust, so that for all the time Eamon Fitzgibbon was urging him to a vision of truth and justice in a time to come, his own backward nature, which knew and cared nothing for reason, drew him back to the dirty footsoles of the servant girl he had seen on the stairs on the way up as she knelt at her scrubbing: the light of her thighs, where she had hoicked up her skirt and it rode higher each time she lunged forward and swung her arm in a half-circle leaving a swathe of suds; her raised rump, and when he turned back, the way her eyes had lifted to his, moist with the headcold that made her sniff and draw the back of her hand across her nose. (162)

Fergus moving to Australia brings the story into a whole different dimension. Particularly, when Malouf has set himself out to write about the bushrangers.

Fictionalising the bushranger period recorded in ballads and folklore is no easy task. How do you find the right voice? Malouf is a fiction writer who started out as a poet, and there is in Malouf's fiction the imprint of the poet. We have seen that he has found the voice for most of his novels in some of his poems. The narrative voice in Malouf's poems is that of ordinary men and women and their everyday lives. Now it cannot be different.

If we compare *The Conversations at Curlow Creek* with a novel written about the same period and on the same topic, that is, Peter Carey's *True History of the Kelly Gang,* we will notice that Carey solves the problem of the credibility of his account pretending the narrative voice is simply transcribing Ned Kelly's memoirs. So as to make the pretence more credible, he starts every Chapter noting down the parcel number, number of sheets, typography, and describing the state the papers were in at the moment of transcription, followed by a summary of the Chapter. The narrative voice pretends to be so faithful to the original text that it includes half blanked out swear words so as not to offend the reader. (Carey) How does Malouf bridge the gap between folklore and fiction?

As we have seen, Malouf opts for what he does best. He chooses some quite ordinary situations, such as a conversation and an unrequited love experience, and shows that they are at the heart of people regardless of their background or the time period they lived. Then, he links these situations with the essential human need of story-telling and the spinning of yarns. The story is woven in between the folds of existing folklore, dreams, the commonality of language, misunderstandings, wishful thinking, and… *voilà*!

We find Adair, the day before he will depart on the *Hyperion* back to Ireland, having a meal with ex-army surgeon James Saunders, who has invited him

In his popular 2006 TED Talk "Do schools kill creativity?", Ken Robinson explains that when children do not understand something, they simply fill in the missing information. We lose

this spontaneous and creative ability as we grow up. (Robinson) In *The Conversations at Curlow Creek,* this kind of misunderstandings and void fillings tell a parallel story in between the lines. When Adair tells Kersey to go and fetch a light for him, Kersey is crossed, because he does not like to be bossed around. Reaching the campfire, the troopers ask him about the two men in the hut. We find out that he has clearly misunderstood "Adair" for "O'Dare," a common enough name for a typically Irish one:

> 'Who's that? Who are you referrin' to? Him or mister bloody O'Dare?'
>
> 'Is that 'is name? O'Dare?'
>
> 'That's it.' (30)

In this game of misplaced identities, Adair suspects that Dolan is, in fact, Fergus. The real motive of his being there to question Carney is not to find out about the gangs' plans, but to find Fergus' whereabouts.

Adair believes he might be on track when Carney tells him that, like Fergus, Dolan is two meters tall and has a special gift with horses:

> 'I never knew any men like him, sir, not here, not in Ireland. He stood six feet six in his socks. There was no horse wouldn't come to him, walk right up to where he held his hand out and put its nose in his palm as if he was sweet-talkin' them every step in some language only horses know, and him all the while just standin' there, not sayin' a word – '
>
> 'Go on,' Adair found himself saying, and broke the spell.
>
> Go on seeing him, he had meant, and he will be here. He will step right in out of the moonlight and we will both see him. Could there be two such? He did not believe it. Fergus. It must be. To have got so close and missed him, and for this fellow Carney to be the only source of proof!' (38-39)

Adair feels that he is closest to Fergus when Carney talks about their fight for freedom and justice. When Carney resignedly tells him: "'You know, sir, there's a lot of injustice in the world,'"

Adair feels the strong presence of his friend in the hut and cannot hide his excitement: "'He felt strongly another, a third presence in the closeness of the hut, and with his heart sounding above the rasping of Daniel Garrety's breathing, he asked: 'Did you hear that from him? From Dolan?'" Seeing Adair's interest, Carney is cautious. He will not provide straightforward answers, lest he said something that might compromise his friend.

> 'You say you were fighting – what did you say? – for justice? What sort of justice was that?'
>
> 'I don't know, sir. We wanted to be free.'
>
> 'Did *he* tell you that?'
>
> 'Maybe.' (37)

This fight is placed in the wider context of Australian colonisation, and the reasons for Australian colonisation. To Adair's surprise, Carney articulates what he perceives as the shortcomings of society much better than he would ever do, reflecting that Carney's questions "went straight to the centre of his own thoughts, his own confusions, as if this illiterate fellow had somehow dipped into the dark of his head and drawn up the very questions he had chosen not to find words for." (35) Carney has the insight that living at the very bottom of the social ladder and having been forced to migrate to the antipodes of the known world can provide, which echoes what we nowadays know as Southern epistemologies and subaltern forms of knowledge. [105]

[105] My references are Sousa de Santos' *Epistemologías del sur* and Raewyn Connell's *Southern Theory* (Sousa Santos and Meneses; Raewyn W. Connell). In "Can the Subaltern Speak?", Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak contends that discourses produced in the West have always tried to erase the location of their enunciation, as if they strictly produced objective knowledge:

> Although the history of Europe as Subject is narrativized by the law, political economy and ideology of the West, this concealed Subject pretends it has 'no geo-political determinations.' The much-publicized critique of the sovereign subject thus actually inaugurates as Subject. (Spivak 271)

Carney's thoughts have not lost their pertinence today. On the one hand, he highlights the fact that being Irish, as opposed to countries where "legitimate" knowledge is produced, such as England, France, Germany or Italy, affords you a particular understanding of things. The new field of Southern epistemologies contends that this is an epistemological form of oppression, since it extends the false view that intellectual work and experience coming from first world countries is more rigorous and qualified than work produced in other parts of the world. However, as we see in the novel, the opposite seems to be the case when Carney can put into words what Adair, who has been educated, cannot. This is what Carney tells Adair: "'A man will start askin' questions sooner or later, if he's a man at all. Even an ignorant one. Maybe an Irishman asks 'em sooner than most. You'd understand that, sir, bein' Irish yourself.'" (36) Since Australia stands further from England than Ireland, Carney describes Australia as a worse place than Ireland. In Australia, Carney feels "like as if they'd taken Ireland and turned it into a place that made things as hard as they ever could be in this world," (62) as if Australia was "an Ireland that has gone bad." (63)

On the other hand, Carney asks Adair about destiny and free will, about the reasons why men are born in a particular time and place that will make them take certain paths in life. In the way he puts the question, Carney asks Adair what it is that makes one man stand on one side of the law and the other on the other side, whether there is a reason "'for them fellers out there bein' troopers' - his fingers came to the puffy flesh to one side of his eye - 'and Luke Cassidy not. For what happens.'" (36) This distinction, the distinction between troopers and bushrangers, between those who abide by the law and those who do not, will lead Adair to ruminate on the meaning of the law in a letter to Virgilia, and that will have an influence on the manner of the novel's resolution, where he distinguishes between a higher law and a lesser, "the insufficient law." (250) The latter is the law of men, which, in an oppressive society, turns into a mechanism of control and exploitation:

> For I confess, privately, to you only my darling, that this lesser law I do not and cannot accept. What is it worth, if all it achieves is the breaking of a man in

> good health who might, if the world were kinder and more just, be of some use to it, and whose dignity, I do believe, is the equal of those who have judged and will deprive him, in an hour from now, of his one unconditional right in the world, breath, and the full span of what his rude health must decree as 'natural'? (227)

The story itself will provide its own answer to Carney's question, namely, that the difference between one man being a trooper and another being a bushranger is quite porous. They all will end up empathizing with Carney. We are told that Garrety will change sides and get killed, like Carney: "Tom Garrety, after a spell of running in the Ranges with a gang very like the one they had just hunted down, had been shot and killed." (238) When his time comes, the troopers wish he would escape and be saved at the last minute. We have seen Adair telling Virgilia in one of his imaginary letters that he would forgive Carney if it was up to him, and the narrative voice tells us that Langhurst felt "there was a part of him that hoped he would [escape]." (244)

During the conversation, Adair cunningly tries to plant suspicion in order to find out more about Dolan. He asks Carney whether Dolan might have held something back from them, whether there might have been a plan of rebellion only he was on the know and that he did not want to share in case they were caught. Carney emphatically denies it, and Adair sees that his loyalty is absolute and that it was reciprocal. As we have pointed out before, life at the frontiers required blind faith in your peers if you wanted to survive.

The bushrangers were no exception. Carney tells Adair that Dolan "'…knew what I was, what it would be in my case, a feller like me. But he knew another thing too. That I was loyal. That I'd stick to him to the death. I don't reckon he expected any more of me, or of any of us.'" When Adair asks what he did expect of Dolan, he replies: "'That if there was a way out of all that, he'd find it,' he said softly, 'if any man could.'" (38) This blind faith in your peers at the frontier is one of the reasons why mateship became a sign of national identity in Australia.

We will recall that in the epilogue of *Johnno,* the narrator Dante ends up reflecting on the personal things he inherits from his father: an accounts book with a leather cover where he

registered acquisitions and that was proof of his worldly success, and a book called *A Young Man with an Oil-Can,* about a young Scot who, starting off with just an oil-can, had built the biggest chocolate factory in the Commonwealth. It was the Australian version of the American dream. In *The Conversations at Curlow Creek,* we can trace the humble origins of such a dream of material success:

> Many of those families down there were ones whose men folk, back home on the other side of the world, poor tenant farmers or day-labourers, would have had no prospect in all eternity of owning even an acre of land, and here they were offered hundreds if they had the strength to tear it out of the wilderness and plough and work it. That surely was something. (67)

However, in *The Conversations at Curlow Creek* Australia is mainly presented as a place of redemption and rebirth. When Adair first enters the hut, Carney mistakes him for a priest. Adair is surprised at his naivety: "There would be no priest - had he really expected it? Where did he think he was? There were only two priests in the whole god-forsaken colony." (5) In spite of that, in the closeness and intimacy of the hut, prompted by Adair's friendly questioning and driven by the nearness of his certain death, Carney confesses to Adair.

First, he confesses having surrendered to the pleasures of idleness, sex and theft, but in such terms that it is Adair who is ashamed of being asked for forgiveness about that. So much so, that Adair's response takes Carney by surprise:

> 'Oh,' the man said, concerned that Adair might have taken him amiss, 'I didn't just mean – you know, women. Other pleasures. Like just bein' idle like, with nothin' to do but get drunk in the sun. But women too, I can't deny that. Even if it is a sin as they say, it's a man's nature. An' God knows, it wasn't that many, and I can't say even now that I am sorry for it.'
>
> 'Why should you?' Adair said, almost brutally. 'Why should you?' (160)

Adair feels pity for Carney, that he should resent any miserable pleasures or comfort he might have enjoyed in his otherwise arduous existence, and he feels pity for himself, too, since Carney's confession makes him see the malaise of a society that turns everything good and pleasurable into something one should feel ashamed of.

How have we come to distrust such basic needs? This is how Adair puts his thoughts:

> He felt a kind of anger at the world of denial he had glimpsed in the misery of the man's poor confession. Such common delights - why the denial? Why should ordinary fellows crawling about under the sun begrudge themselves these innocent comforts in a world that was so full of injustice and every sort of misery? Why was he - for it was himself he was thinking of - so ashamed of these disorderly surges of a desire that was, after all, what kept the world itself in existence, or all the part of it, at least, that was human; kept humanity, in all its irrepressible millions, breathing and pushing for place, for a little light and air, a little dignity too, before it was crushed back into the dust; kept it hanging on, like this fellow here, to a few more hours of warmth in the flesh. (161)

Seeing Adair's reaction, Carney asks him whether there are no crimes. Adair answers that men commit crimes when they break the law, which gives Carney further ammunition against the unfairness of the system, embarking on a soliloquy that disarms Adair yet again.

Carney admits to theft because of his ignorance, and because he didn't have anything to put into his mouth:

> 'I don't know,' Carney muttered. 'Half the time, when I broke it, I didn' even know what it was. How could I? They never even learned me what it was. I had to live. I *had* to break it. I wonder I didn' do worse than I did, considerin'. I was an animal half the time, no better, no worse. But how could I of been otherwise? There's such a thing in the world as hunger. But was we any better when we was brought here, an' hung up in the triangles and whipped? Not a bit of

it. Worse if anything, worse I'd say. The fact is, sir' – he was becoming more and more agitated – 'I killed a man. That's what I wanted to tell you.' (165)

We have already explained that Carney killed Shafto. After that, he escaped into the bush, so he was never sentenced. Carney had never told anyone about it, not even Dolan. Now that his final hour is coming close, it is time to tell his most unspeakable crimes. When Adair asks him why he never told anyone, not even Dolan, whether he was ashamed, Carney bursts: "'No, sir. [I never told anyone] Because I *wasn't*.'" Insistently, Carney asks Adair what he thinks about his crime, "man to man," (170) and Adair finally decides to absolve him, but before doing so, he embarks on a meditation about the restraining morality of the West:

> Adair drew a deep breath. When he spoke it was for himself as much as for the other.
>
> 'If I were God,' he began - It is an illusion, he thought, this faith we have in reason, this conviction that we can keep disorder at bay by making rules and twisting our nature out of the way it would lead us; into the most horrible crimes perhaps, but they would be our crimes, the ones our nature demands. Instead of which, we live in the shadow of the crime not committed, though we still bear the guilt of it. In obedience to the rules. And our cowardice festers in us, turns our whole nature awry in a parody of what it means to be guiltless. There is no answer to this, but everything we think of as human and civilized depends upon it. 'If I were God,' he said again, 'I would choose to forgive because I could not find it in my heart to do otherwise.' (170-171)

Adair's meditation deserves some careful analysis. Here, the narrative voice picks up again the distinction between the insufficient law or penal law and natural law. Clearly, human law is unjust because reason always falls short of justice, and our faith in the rules and regulations of the penal system is "an illusion." However, "everything we think of as human and civilized depends upon it," we do not have anything better, we have to make do with what we have.

Therefore, the conclusion seems to be that if one decides to live according to his nature, he will have to accept the consequences. That is not the path Adair chooses. Speaking through the character of Adair, the narrative voice clearly defends listening and following our natures within the limits of the human law.

The opening paragraph of the novel has Adair ask himself: "What is it in us, what is it in me, he thought, that we should be so divided against ourselves, wanting our life and at the same time afraid of it?" (1) Like Carney, he is afraid of being happy: he believes he does not deserve it, or he thinks that if he risks too much, he will get punished for it. We have also seen Adair's abnegation and self-deprecatory attitude when Fergus offers Adair everything he owns if only he would stay. Nietzsche interprets it as a form of calculation. When he does not accept Fergus' offer, we see Adair acknowledging that "There was an element of deliberate cruelty in it, that was the reflection, he saw, of a bitterness in him that he had failed, for all his philosophy, to suppress." (119) Since Adair was not born with the same privileges as Fergus and Virgilia, he will have a harder life. That makes him morally superior. The situation reflects what Nietzsche calls the bitterness and jealousy of the morality of the slave. In Australia, when Adair realizes that he will not work out whether Fergus is dead or alive, and that he was relying on Fergus' death so that, finally, nothing would stand between him and Virgilia, he falls prey to a similar feeling of despondency and dejection. In a tone that evokes Nietzsche again, Adair feels alienated from what he calls "the powers," recalling Nietzsche's notion of will to power: "Despondency – that is what his feeling was called. Darker than dejection. A sense of impotence from the powers." The humility he has been stoically enduring for years has been a waste of time. Virgilia will never love him: "She would grow old in the fanaticism of her first love." (221) Everything seems lost to Adair.

The Conversations at Curlow Creek might have been written for the likes of Fergus, Virgilia, Garrety, and Carney. Being a book about the bushrangers, it cannot be contained within the boundaries of human law, the insufficient law. We have seen that there is a trend in all of Malouf's novels, in which they all call for a transformation of a state of affairs that is unfair, a

change of vision that will make us more human. In the case of *The Conversations at Curlow Creek,* the humanization of the bushrangers. We could say that the main characters of the novel we have just mentioned, the ones who show Adair and the readers the path to follow, remind us of Nietzsche's notion of the *übermensch,* the man who breaks with the morality of his time and creates his own code of conduct. This man silences his mind and listens carefully to his deepest emotional and bodily needs. He will select those values that favor and enhance life, reining in his will to power in his determination to improve himself and society. When talking about the first settlers in "A Spirit of Play", Malouf emphasizes the idea that independently of what side of the law you stood, all those traits that have gone into the making of modern individualism, resourcefulness and entrepreneurship were there from the very beginning to decide who would succeed and fail in the colony:

> Eighteenth-century playwrights and novelists often made their hero a criminal, a highwayman or confidence trickster or thief. Gay's *Beggar's Opera,* Defoe's *Colonel Jack* and *Captain Singleton*, Fielding's *Mr Jonathan Wild,* all play with the interesting and subversive notion that the qualities that go to the making of a successful criminal – entrepreneurial, egotism, and eye for the main chance and for the weakness of others – may be the same qualities than in other circumstances make a politician or businessman. Botany Bay in some ways puts this cheeky proposition to the proof. (Malouf 131-132)

The Conversations at Curlow Creek is a Nietzschean novel. In her recently published biography on the German philosopher, Sue Prideaux summarizes the main ideas we have referred to above. I would say that, like Adair, the narrative voice in *The Conversations at Curlow Creek* subscribes all of it, always within the boundaries of the insufficient law, and always with a view to improve it. We might hypothesize that Malouf would also endorse it:

> Conscience, then, is the price of social structure and it is the toll taken on the soul when the Judeo-Christian ascetic tradition with its "thou shalt not" buries

our most natural instincts beneath the deadly burden of guilt. Instincts that are not discharged outwardly become internalized. Burdened with bad conscience, we turn against ourselves in misery and self-loathing that is stoked by legend of original sin and by the asceticism imposed by priests. The concept of existential neurosis would come later, but this is undoubtedly what Nietzsche was describing as he drew a picture of modern man who has "no external enemies or obstacles but rips himself apart, persecutes himself, gnaws at himself, gives himself no peace, he is like an animal who batters himself raw on the bars of his cage." How can we be liberated from our imprisoning bars of bad conscience and self-disgust in the cage constructed by the ascetic priest? The antidote to the slave morality is the morality of the *Übermensch*; the free, affirmative, independent spirit. The moral quality of this higher man is driven by his life force, his will to power. Though Nietzsche saw evolutionary theory as describing a merely moral-free means of preserving life, his "will to power" obviously owes a great deal to Darwin's survival of the fittest, but Nietzsche takes it further. Nietzsche's will to power is both a symbol of man's potential and a parable of the importance of self-overcoming. (Prideaux, 276-277)

We should not confuse self-achievement and progress, the modern idea that there is a linear development of society towards higher levels of development. Colonialism and Nazism have justified their genocides appealing to this idea of progress, which we should always question unremittingly.[106]

[106] Reading Prideaux's life of Nietzsche, one of the things that calls our attention is that he was a frontline critical thinker. In spite of admiring and being very close to Richard and Cosima Wagner (he would never be as close to anyone, except perhaps Lou Salomé), he fell out with them because of their nationalism and antisemitism. Likewise, he fell out with his sister, Elsiabeth, who married a champion of antisemitism, for the same reason. Nietzsche and Elsiabeth's characters and political views could not be further from one another. Unfortunately, when Nietzsche lost

Like Freud, Nietzsche always paid special attention to dreams, which he thought gave us privileged access to our true selves and provided the raw material of the world of folklore and myth. In *The Conversations at Curlow Creek,* dreaming becomes an integral part of the story, intertwining Adair and Carney's experiences with the experience of the land.

After having stayed up most of the night, exhausted, Adair nods. He dreams he is on the shore of a lake under a clear sun, looking at the vast blue of the water but unable to see the other shore when, suddenly, he feels a presence behind himself, a shadow, that is visiting him. He feels empathy towards this "endangered self," whom he uncannily recognizes as himself. However, this other behind him is also Carney.

In the telling of Adair's dream, we see the narrative voice describing an experience that feeds on the two etymologies of the word religion, placing them in the wider context of Aboriginal dreaming. On the one hand, religion comes from the Latin word "*religare*", which means binding together. Thus, religion is what binds a group of people into a community. This is what happens when Adair recognizes himself in the shadow, who is also Carney. On the other hand, religion also refers to the "unscathed", to what one feels when he is aware that he has survived a great danger. (Anidjar) That is when Adair notices that Carney's experience, who has been sentenced to death, is also his experience, it will become part of his history and who he is. Finally, the land is a defining element in this dream: Adair is standing at the shore of a lake, trying to make out the contours of an Island sea that is a paradise for the wretched of the earth.

This is how Adair describes the uncanny experience of having a double self, his own and Carney's:

> He was standing in clear sunlight at the edge of a vast sheet of water, so dazzling with salt and reflected light that he could not see the farther shore and had for a

---

his mind, Elisabeth would carefully edit her brother's unpublished papers, manipulating them for the cause of the Nazis. She was given several honorary doctorates and nominated to the Nobel prize for her work.

> moment to shield his eyes against its blinding throb. He was aware of another presence, close at his side but slightly behind. He felt its heaviness there, but knew he must not turn his head to look or it would vanish, and with it the lake or inland sea and its wash of light, and he too, since he understood that the figure there at his side was himself, a more obscure, endangered self with a history that was his but had somehow been kept secret from him. The tenderness and concern he felt was for both of them. (217)

Seeing that the vision holds, he starts to walk towards the water, followed by the shadow behind him. Then, he notices that he is having an escape dream: "It is real, he breathed. It is a door in the darkness, a way out." (218) Not fully awake, he realizes that he has been partaking of a colonial vision, a dream of an inland island of plenty where convicts and refugees live a life of freedom and self-realization.

When he opens his eyes, he sees Carney staring intently at him.

Falling back onto his ordinary self, Adair fears that Carney might have been seeing into his dreams. He must repress his dream of rebellion and keep Carney at bay. Then, it comes to him that maybe it is not Carney who has seen into his dreams, but he who has partaken of Carney's deepest dreams:

> News of rescue, was it? Could he know that? Of a rescue that at the last moment had failed? He felt a kind of warning that he should control his thoughts if he did not want them known; that the space they shared was no longer a contained one with fixed walls and a roof, but was open, and in such a way that the normal rules of separation, of one thing being distinct to itself and closed against another, no longer applied.
>
> I am not properly awake, he thought. I was right the first time. I have wakened into another dream. (220)

The hut seems to have turned into a sorcerer's refuge. In the middle of a moonlit night and in a foreign country, Adair and Carney have been bringing to life the ghosts of the past. They have been dreaming the land, building an inland secret refuge that would bring strength and hope to the desperate and hopeless.

Adair falls back asleep again. It is his deepest and loving self who speaks, so the stream of consciousness that we read is Adair's voice imagining that he is writing to Virgilia. It is an important moment of transformation and revelation in the novel, so Adair recovers in his thoughts the terms of a conversation he had had as a child with Virgilia.

It is a conversation about two opposing worldviews: the masculine principle of activity, as opposed to the feminine one. Virgilia reproaches Adair that, for him, everything leads to extinction: "And because you believe the only end of everything is extinction you can't wait to prove it so, and since it can't be avoided, you grow more and more impatient for it, you can't wait for it to be consummated. There's the whole principle of masculine activity!" (183). Contrary to Adair, Virgilia believes that everything evolves towards refinement, towards the true essence of things: "The real movement, I think, is towards refinement, towards the essence, something so fine that we think it is gone but all it has done, in fact, is become more absolutely itself. There's no question of extinction!" (184) As was the case in *An Imaginary Life,* where the narrative voice distinguished between men and women's power and at the end the latter's prevails, *The Conversations at Curlow Creek* closes in a way that makes it clear that it is Virgilia's view that prevails.

Why is the principle of extinction understood in its literal sense labelled as the masculine principle, and the principle of extinction as a means to finer and higher forms of being as the feminine principle? As we have seen, women were second class citizens both in Europe and in the colonies: they could not vote, hold public office, study at university, etc. Virgilia is aware of that because she knows she will never be able to join the military, unlike Adair. We have also seen that the world of troopers and bushrangers was an exclusively male one. The judiciary were also the exclusive sphere of men. As we have seen in our analyses of the novels *Fly Away Peter* and *The*

Great World, the world of men we are describing here was heading towards an apotheosis of violence and destruction in the First and Second World Wars. That might be the reason, then, why Virgilia might subsume the world of violence and destruction of men within a larger movement of ontological growth and development.

In spite of the brief time they have spent together, Adair and Carney have become very close. They have also come to terms with their respective destinies, they have changed to accept their fate. Adair has realized that he will never marry Virgilia: "The sons and daughters he dreamed of, who were her children too, would turn their faces from him, step back into the dark. The seed in his loins would sizzle and dry up." (222) Carney has accepted the fact of his death. In one of his cat naps in between their conversation, Carney wakes up troubled, unable to let the physical anxiety in his sleep go. Adair asks himself whether Carney has finally come to terms with the physical certainty of his close death: "Could it be, Adair thought, the physical certainty at last of what was to occur? Which had come to him out of that deep body-knowledge that in sleep we have no guard against?" (147) In the time they have spent together, and in spite of the different lives they have had, Adair has empathized with Carney: they are both Irish, they have started out with nothing in life, and circumstances have brought them to the other side of the world against their will.

Being close to death by proxy, that is, to the male principle of extinction, Adair will replace Fergus for Carney in his mental map, or subsume the former within the latter, so as to move on. This also means he will leave Virgilia behind:

> My dear, my dearest, I say this now because I feel very close tonight to the fact of extinction - not my own, not yet - that will have its hour and I will have to face that too - but the fact of extinction itself, as real and palpable, as much a part of things, as a drop of moisture on a damp wall, a button, a bowl of porridge. I feel very close to the cold edge of it, because I am close to *him*. No, not Fergus after all, whom I had hoped in one form or another to find here, but this stranger whose animal presence comes near to stifling me, I can smell so strongly the

fearsome stink of his body, have in my ear his groans, the wet snuffling of the mucus in his nose, and in a bucket just feet away the foul voiding of his bowels.- There is nothing shameful in this, and little, after so long, that I find offensive. 228

It is Carney who, self-possessed, reminds Adair that his time is come: "'I reckon, sir, it must be about time,'" (229) and the two men leave the hut into the coldness and brightness of dawn.

The scents and the light of the new day are invigorating. They feel like they have stepped into a new beginning. Everything about them is alive: the horses dance, the birds sing, nature overflows. Kersey brings them some tea to warm them up, and the two men stand together, "like two men about to set out on a mission, and so eager to begin they had no time to sit." (242). Unexpectedly, Carney asks Adair for a final wish: whether he could bath in the river crossing the creek and refresh himself. When Adair assents, Kersey is mesmerized. Before he can react, Carney and Adair are already walking towards the river, where the horses stand in the shadow of she-oaks and scrub-pines.

Perhaps thankful with Adair for having conceded him this final wish, Carney makes him a gift in return, and Adair discovers that he was on the right path in his quest for Fergus:

> "'You're all right, darlin'. Dannell's here. You know me. There's a pretty.' He whispered a name as if it was secret between them.
>
> 'Is that what he called her?' Adair asked. 'Kismet'?
>
> Daniel Carney smiled. 'That was the name 'e give 'er. Cut 'er out of a mob an' trained 'er himself. It was like watchin' two dancers. I thought sometimes – you know, that he might have been one himself in another life. He had that look to 'im. He was six foot six in his socks – '
>
> 'I know,' Adair said. (244-245)

Next, Carney enters the water. When Kersey reaches the other troopers and tells them what Carney is doing, they all panic. Langhurst is the first one to go and see what they are doing. Observing them with the horses, he doubts what he would do if Adair let Carney go: "There was

a part of him that hoped he would." (244) The other troopers join him as they see Carney entering the water, with Adair just watching calmly. One can distinguish three channels in the river with the naked eye, depending on the depth. Carney walks into the first one, then the second one.

They are all hypnotized watching Carney clean himself in the water. We have said *The Conversations at Curlow Creek* is Malouf's most Nietzschean novel. In this sense, one cannot stop thinking about the Christian ritual of baptism, as if Carney was clearing himself of all the sins he had committed during his lifetime. The philosopher that proclaimed the death of God was more against the church than against the figure of Christ and Christian imaginary.

> The man reached down, scooped up a double handful and splashed it over his head, shivering at the icy coldness of it, though there was sunlight on his shoulders and hair. Slowly, with what appeared a loving care for the heaviness of his own flesh, he began to wash from his body the grime, the caked mud, the dried blood of his wounds, which the water as he laved bore away, a brief stain on its surface, to wherever the lie of the land was taking it; into some larger stream that would spread wide at first, then slowing, die out as so many of the streams did in this country, into marshes, or hundreds of miles on, via one stream then another, find its way to the sea. (246)

As they look on, the troopers are transformed. Surprisingly, Garrety looks at the scene with his head lowered, as if he was being blinded by the scene: "He looked up with lowered head as if there were something here he could not directly fix his gaze on." Langhurst, for his part, wishes he could do the same, and summons himself to take a bath later on: "When all this is over I will go down and do what he is doing. I'll strip right off and wash. He felt already the clean touch of water laving over him, cold but clean, taking the dirt off, and had an intense desire to begin all over again with the freshness and sanctity of things." (248) The scene brings Adair "…a quietness he had been reaching for, he felt, for the whole of his life…" (249). They all feel as if Carney was a prophet showing them not the way, but their way.

Like Fergus, and maybe like Virgilia in spirit and, later on, like Garrety, Carney is a good sample of what Nietzsche calls the superman, a free spirit. Sue Pridaux defines Nietzsche's superman as follows:

> What is man? A hybrid between plant and ghost. What is the superman? He is the meaning of the earth who remains faithful to the earth. He does not believe those who offer extra-terrestrial hopes: they are despisers of life, who die self-poisoned.
>
> The superman knows that whatever seems cruel, random or disastrous is not a punishment sent from the eternal reason-spider above to punish the sinner. There is no eternal reason-spider and no eternal reason-spiderweb. Rather, life is a dance floor for divine accidents. Meaning must be found through saying "yes" to the divine accidents on the dance floor. (Prideaux, 231)

The scene closes with Carney walking towards the bank of the river. Clean and self-possessed, walking out of the river as if he had just been reborn, we see a man who accepts his life as it has been and is ready to pay the price for it. We glimpse here Nietzsche's theory of the eternal return, or *amor fati*: you have to love your life as if you wanted to live it as it has been infinite times, with all its pain and suffering. Sentenced by the insufficient law, he has also lived freer than his fellow countryman.

If we return to our question, to whether it is the masculine or feminine principle that prevails, we see that Virgilia was right. The movement of things is towards a finer version of themselves, towards their essence. The troopers would all like to exonerate Carney from his crimes and let him walk away. They will end up incorporating Carney's experience into their own experience, bathing in the river so as to clean themselves from the grime and dust of their everyday lives and be more themselves. The distinction between troopers and bushrangers, between us and them, has become thinner through Carney's experience and death. Like other Malouf novels, as we have seen, *The*

Conversations at Curlow Creek confirms that the general movement of things is towards self-improvement and realization, and death stands at the climax of this process.

So far, we have told the facts of the story.

In the Epilogue, we find ex-army surgeon James Saunders having dinner with Adair, who is departing next day back to Ireland on the *Hyperion.* A girl is serving them, and Adair guesses from the uneasiness between them that they are having an affair. Saunders has given him a bunch of letters he needs delivered to his family and friends back home.

The ex-army surgeon, speaking with an arrogant and disdainful tone, is ranting about the needs of the colonizers for the folklore and gossip that fill their otherwise ordinary lives: "They need this place to be outlandish, to deliver up marvels. To approximate, I would say, to the literary taste of the age – that is, to the mysterious, the nightmarish, the Gothic." (253) They need stories to lighten their lives with hope and news to have something to talk about. News from abroad take too long to arrive, and when they do, they are no longer news. Therefore, they need to supplant them with local material.

James Saunders is talking about the legend that has been built around the characters of Dolan and O'Dare for the last fourteen years. He is quite aware of the role Adair has played in this story, even though his friend refuses to acknowledge having taken any part in it: "'Not me, Adair protests,'" but Saunders insists: "He bears the *real* version of your name. O'Dare!" (254) The truth is that Adair has heard the story told several times, and he is quite tired of it. People did not even notice, by the ring of his name, that he knew the events they were talking about first hand.

What surprises Adair is how much only he knew, which had its origin in the intensity of the world of dreams and secret longings of a mind on the fringe of death, had come out into the light and become common currency. In a state where, again, the mind is freer to capture the most humane side of the facts around it and its historical context:

> …How had so many details of a thing only he knew, and had communicated to no one, got out of his head and become general currency, begun

> to make the rounds of barber-shops and shipping offices and barracks and the dinner-tables of the better class of merchants and gentleman farmers? – an event merely dreamed, when his moral faculties were for a moment in abeyance in the other world of sleep, an act, to him impermissible, out of a freer and different life… (257)

And what is the story that will be told? As always, its moral outcome would depend on what side you were on, but the plot would remain essentially the same, with a small variation or a bold one depending on the art of the storyteller and how gullible his audience was. It recalls the plot of a Hollywood movie with the hero of the hour:

> At the last moment Daniel Carney had been saved – that was the nub of it. The Irish officer who had been sent out to oversee the hanging had all along been in on the thing, but had played so skillfully his part of lawman and public official that even the prisoner had been deceived. Some sort of unmasking had taken place during the night they had spent locked up together. At dawn the prisoner, still hacked, had hobbled down to the shores of a large lake, or inland sea. His chains were removed and he was allowed to wash. While the other troopers watched from a distance, a boat paddled by natives appeared, who were involved it seemed in the ordinary business of spearing fish. But suddenly the native produced muskets, and under their covering fire, the officer and the convict both had clambered into the boat and been whisked away into the mist, the natives being in reality members of a settlement of disaffected ticket-of-leave men and runaway convicts who, over the nearly forty-years of the colony's existence, had created, on the shores of a freshwater sea teaming with every sort of wildlife, a rival colony, a shadow Sydney as large almost as the original. Anyway, the officer, whose name was O'Dare, had become the hero of the hour, a true embodiment of the spirit of Irish resourcefulness and derring-do, and Daniel Carney a martyr miracously

> resurrected; or O'Dare was a hateful renegade and confounder of the rule of law and Carney a dangerous rebel, once more on the loose. (278-258)

A privileged but discreet witness, we wonder what story James Saunders' handmaid would have told.

Chapter 5: *Ransom*, or male heroism in old age.

David Malouf's latest novel, *Ransom* was published in 2009, thirteen years after the publication of *The Conversations at Curlow Creek*. The other novels he had published within a span of three or four years, except *The Great World,* his longest and most ambitious novel, published six years after *Harland's Half Acre.* One gets the impression that after more or less twenty years of intense and successful production, Malouf felt his need for fiction writing exhausted or fulfilled. Compared to his immediate predecessors – *The Conversatiosn at Curlow Creek, Remembering Babylon, The Great World, Fly Away Peter* – *Ransom* is stylistically less charged and more prosaic than the former novels. In this regard, it is similar to *Johnno* and *Harland's Half Acre*, Malouf's first and more autobiographical novels.

We also get the impression that *Ransom* could be Malouf's last piece of fiction from what he hints at in several interviews that followed its publication. First, the idea that what a fiction writer produces has to be consistent with his body of work, which suggests the idea of closure. In an interview with Shannon Burns in December 2009, the same year *Ransom* was published, Malouf explains how the creative process works for him. When he comes across something that interests him, he starts writing bits and pieces that belong to that story. Sometimes it translates into a short story, other times it leads to a novel. But oftentimes he will abandon them in *medias res*. There are several reasons, and Malouf emphasises twice the fact that there is a theme, a connection that links his fiction books:

> Sometimes it means your interest has run out, but often, for me, I look at it and think it's quite a good idea for a book and I could certainly write it but it's really not one of my books. And that's the point at which I would very happily abandon it. And I wouldn't go back to it because I'm really not interested – there's something about what's going on there that doesn't belong in my body of work. (Burns and Malouf, 30)

The fact that Malouf is willing to forsake a novel – even a good one! – because he believes it does not fit in with his body of work suggests that he has a clear idea of what he has achieved and is happy with it. It even excludes *a priori* any effort at expanding the boundaries of his body of work. Secondly, in an interview with Brigid Rooney earlier that same year, in September, interviewer and interviewee embark on an exegesis in the similarities and differences between Malouf's recently published novel, *Ransom,* and *An Imaginary Life.* Rooney quotes an interview with Sally Blakeney, where Malouf stated our previous point, that every piece of fiction *organically* adds to the body of a novelist's work, in the same way that the addition of a new room changes the spatial relationships within a house. Answering the question, Malouf reflects that, unlike *An Imaginary Life,* his first novel *Johnno* was very autobiographical. At this point, he says: "…I'd begun to think of myself as having written, by accident as I said, my first and my last book, so what I've been doing since is filling the space between." (Rooney 82) The spontaneous reference to a first and a last book in reference to *An Imaginary Life* while discussing *Ransom,* which are the only two books by Malouf not set in Australia, but that imaginatively recreate classical themes and authors, suggest that Malouf might have decided, consciously or unconsciously, that *Ransom* would be his last book.

Ransom mainly retells Chapter XXIV of Homer's *The Iliad*, entitled "A grace given in sorrow" in the Fitzgerald translation. *The Iliad* tells about a few days of the story of the Trojan War between the Trojans and the Greeks. All the court aristocrats of Sparta had wooed Helen, promising to the one who married her help in case the need arose. Having married Menealus, Helen is abducted by the handsome Paris, son of Priam, King of Troy. Faithful to their promise, the Greeks gather their armies and sail for Troy under the leadership of Agammemnon, the King of the Micenae. (Kirk viii) The Greek army includes Achilles among its ranks, leader of the fearful Myrmidons. The *Iliad* starts when, after nine years of stalemate, the Gods decide to intervene. This is the state of affairs at the opening of David Malouf's book.

Like *The Iliad*, *Ransom* is a story about war, and this is something Malouf himself emphasises in his Afterword, entitled "A note on sources." On this occasion, Malouf spares us the task of finding out where the first idea to write this story came from, as well as where he found the right voice for it. Malouf traces the genesis of the story back to 1943 at his primary school in Brisbane, when he was nine years old and Brisbane was the centre of operations of the Allied forces in the Pacific, under the leadership of General MacArthur. The kids could not go out during their break because of the weather, and their primary schoolteacher read them the story of Troy. Unfortunately, even though the kids were completely caught up in the story, when the bell rung they all went back to class and they could not hear the end of it. Young David was devastated, but also intrigued about the similarities between Homer's great war and the one they were living back then, World War II: "I had immediately connected Miss Finlay's ancient and fictional war with our own. We too were left hanging in the midst of an unfinished war. Who could know, in 1943, how our war too might end?" Consequently, *The Iliad* was already well rooted in Malouf's personal experience of war at an early age. Malouf himself goes on to emphasise the deep impression that the mingling of the Trojan War and World War II made on him during his childhood when he tells us that, thirty years later, he wrote a poem about it called 'Episode from an Early War,' where he tried to "bring the two parts of my experience together." (222) In the excerpt he quotes, the narrative voice is a nine-year-old who observes with astonishment the cruelty of Achilles' dragging the lifeless body of Hector round the mould of Patroclus, under the impassive gaze of the gods. The poetic voice contrasts the reality of his present war against the artificial character of *The Iliad* – moulded on the formal and national needs of story-telling that change over generations –, revealing his scepticism:

> …the war, our war,
> was real: highways of ash
> where ghostly millions rise out of their shoes and go barefoot
> nowhere… (223)

Malouf concludes his note on sources saying that he wanted to tell the story of Priam, Achilles, Patroclus and Hector from *The Iliad,* that he has extensively elaborated on Priam's journey to the Greek camp and on how Patroclus became Achilles' closest confidant, that he took Priam's story of how he was taken prisoner and then ransomed as a child from Pseudo-Apollodorus' *The Library*, and that the character Somax is the product of his imagination.

We may ask ourselves why Malouf explicitly links his personal experience as a child during World War II with *The Iliad.* We have seen that Malouf's work is closely linked with Astralian history and the building of Australia as a nation. We saw how critics symbolically perceived *An Imaginary Life,* which was his only novel not set in Australia so far, as very Australian because it tells the story of Ovid exiled at the margins of Empire, in the same way that Australians felt exiled in regard to England, which was at the centre of things. Therefore, it might seem that Malouf needed a reason to bind *The Iliad* with Australia in some way, and his childhood experience at primary school provided him with exactly that. But there is another possibility, which Malouf perhaps overlooked, perhaps wanted to avoid because of the possible patriotic or political readings it might have led to, or perhaps simply did not consider worth his time. The title *The Iliad* means Troy, Ilium being another nme for the city. The city of Ilium stood at the entrance of the Strait of the Dardanelles on the southern side, overseeing the Gallipoli Peninsula where the Battle of Gallipoli took place during World War I. Therefore, we can launch the hypothesis that by elaborating on a passage of a myth which has a historical recorded basis in European history, (Crespo xx) Australia had legitimately won its claim as a nation in its own right in the Battle of Gallipoli, fought on mythic territory.

Ransom is divided into five Chapters, which in their turn are divided into sections, which are separated by a double space. In chapter one, the action centres on Achilles. It is the chapter with more divisions or sections – the narrative voice does not flow, suggesting the discord and chaos that pervades the Greek camp. In particular, the dispute between Achilles and Agamemnon; the casualties and the weakening of the Greek army because of Achilles' refusal to fight; Patroclus'

death, and Achilles' defiance of the gods when he refuses to allow the Trojans to take Hector's body and offer him a proper burial. When Patroclus dies, the short sections may suggest Achilles' dismembering rage.

The novel opens with Achilles on the shores of the Aegean Sea, looking at the Greek fleet, and his double nature is revealed to the reader. On the one hand, he is a farmer and a fighter, an earthy man. We see him recalling his former life as a farmer, ten years ago, and his son, Neoptolemus, whom he will not see again and who now lives in his father's house. On the other, he is the son of the goddess Thetis. Facing the sea, he is in touch with his other, airy and godly nature, which is essentially liquid and changing: "He is a child of earth. But for the whole of his life he has been drawn, in his other nature, to his mother's element. To what, in all its many forms, as ocean, pool, stream, is shifting and insubstantial." (4) After that, we are told how he met Patroclus. His father, Peleus, was attending Monoetius, King of Opus, when Achilles noisily interrupted them, eager to show his father the hare he had just hunted. Peleus reprimands him and Achilles stands still, spellbound by the solemnity of the occasion and the story he hears. Patroclus had killed the son of a royal court high official, Amphidamas as a result of a fight over a knuckelbones game. Monoetius was asking Peleus to adopt Patroclus. The instant of indecision while Peleus makes up his mind and so much is at stake binds the two boys with the force of destiny, since Monoetius and Patroclus' fate could have been Peleus and Achilles' own in the reverse circumstances. It is understood that from that moment on, Achilles and Patroclus' lives are inseparable:

> The boy whose fate is suspended here stands with parted lips, though no breath passes between them; lost, as they all are, in a story he might be hearing for the first time and which has not yet found its end.
>
> Achilles, too, stands spellbound. Like a sleeper who has stumbled in on another's dream, he sees what is about to happen but can neither move nor cry out

> to prevent it. His right arm is so heavy (he has forgotten the hare) that he may never lift it again. The blow is about to come.
>
> The boy Patroclus tilts his chin, thin brows drawn in expectation, a little moisture lightning the down on his upper lip, and for the first time Achilles meets his gaze. Patroclus looks at him. The blow connects, bone on bone. And the boy, his clear eyes still fixed on Achilles, takes it. With just a slight jerk of the shoulders, an almost imperceptible intake of breath.
>
> Achilles is as stunned as if the blow was to himself. He turns quickly to his father, on whose word so much depends. (12-13)

The narrative voice further emphasises how their meeting changes both their lives, pointing at the transformative effect of our dealings with others. When Patroclus' father tells the story, Achilles imagines the knock of bone on bone that kills Amphidamas' son, which is the same sound that translates the sound of their souls colliding as they notice each other's presence: "the knock of bone on bone as two lives collided and were irrevocably changed." The same event, the same noise, Achilles realises, as if time were a function of space and not the other way around, changed not two lives, but three. Achilles feels he has taken the place of that other boy:

> No, Achilles told himself, not two lives, three. Because when Patroclus relived the moment now, he too was there. Breath held, too dazed, too spirit-bound to move, he looked on dreamlike as that other – the small son of Amphidamas, whose face he had never seen – was casually struck aside to make way for him. (14-15)

Bearing in mind that the boys were ten years old when they met and Achilles' position at court, we can gather that first they were like brothers, then gradually Patroclus became Achilles intimate friend, lover and personal attendant until his death at the hands of Hector. It is interesting to note how the death of Amphidamas' son irremediably brings together Achilles and Patroclus' lives, and the death of Patroclus the lives of Achilles and Hector in a single story that unites their

destinies. When Achilles says that by killing Amphidamas' son, Patroclus had made way for him, what he is saying is that the ego does not stand separate, apart from others. The story we tell is never the story of a single individual, and who that person is or becomes is never separate from them. This is why Malouf emphasises in his note on sources that in *Ransom,* he revisits "the world of *The Iliad* to recount the story of Achilles, Patroclus and Hector." (223) The three names are mutually interdependent, part of a single story and destiny.

It must also be noted that death is a positive source of transformation in Malouf's fiction, not a negative one. To the contrary, it transforms and frees the living.

After this brief episode from childhood, we are told about Achilles' brawl with Agammemon; how the Trojans found out about it, and taken the opportunity to fight the Greeks to their own ships until Achilles yielded to Patroclus' demands and let him wear his armour to lead the Mirmidons against the Trojans, who had to retreat to the very walls of Troy. Let us recall that Achilles had refused to fight because Chryseis, Agamemnon's war prize had been ransomed and sent back to Troy, and Agamemnon had claimed Briseis, Achilles' war prize, as her substitute. Observing the ruthless fight from the distance, Achilles sees how Hector kills Patroclus as if he was observing his own death, since Patroclus is wearing his armour. Patroclus being irreplaceable for Achilles, he is beside himself with grief and flows into a rage.

The next section starts when all the proper ceremonies have been carried out to burn Patroclus' body. We see a pensive Achilles holding Patroclus' bones in an urn. In *The Iliad,* all characters know their destinies. As G.S. Kirk says, the important thing is how the Greek and Trojan heroes will meet them:

> …they saw each encounter as a move in the complex operations of divine destiny, in which a man's success or failure depended on the gods as much as, or more than, on himself, and the important thing was to win or lose with honour, with pride, defiant or boastful as a true aristocrat should be. (Kirk xvii)

So at the end of this very short section, which is roughly one page long, Achilles tells Patroclus to wait for him, implying that now that he is gone his own death must be close – it is his destiny – and that they will soon meet in the afterlife:

> 'Just a little longer, Patroclus,' he whispers. 'Can you hear me? Soon, now. Soon.'
>
> But first he had Patroclus' killer to deal with, in a last encounter out there under the walls of Troy. (21)

In the next section, when after a long day of battle Achilles finally confronts Hector, who is wearing his armour, he feels like he is fighting his own shadow and witnessing his own death for a second time: "And Hector's death when it came, in *his* armour, like watching for a second time the dreamlike enactment of his own." (22) Achilles had referred to Patroclus as a "man who was half himself," (18) so that when Patroclus dies in his armour, Achilles must be unable not to let part of his self go with him. Before Hector dies, he takes hold of Achilles' arm. They look at each other in the eye, and Achilles notices that there is no rancour in Hector's eyes. To the contraty, Hector speaks to Achilles "with an almost brotherly concern," because before they were mortal enemies they were men: "Man to man, but impersonally." However, Hector expires before he can say anything. Suddenly, Achilles hears the voice of a God speaking through Hector: "'You will not long outlive me, Achilles,' the voice whispered. Then, 'The days are few now that you have to walk on the earth.'" (24) According to the intersubjective nature of character we described above, as his name is bound with the names of Patroclus and Hector, as they die Achilles dies a little bit as well, and he gets closer to fulfilling his destiny. However, one thing is to know one's destiny – we all know we are going to die – and a different one is to walk the talk. Achilles is young and the fullness of his manly vigour runs through his veins. Why not defy the gods and the cruel destiny they have in store for him? He is a just and honourable man and he has done nothing wrong. In spite of knowing his fate, Hector's eyes are "wide with disbelief" when Achilles' sword traverses him. Likewise, when Achilles finally lets Hector's body fall on the ground, his rage is not appeased.

Hector's words have further unsettled him; the gods provoke him. Patroclus and Hector having passed away, Achilles does not recognise himself. The narrative voice emphasises this moment of detachment from who he was, which only intensifies his fury and distress: "He felt his soul change colour." There is a moment when Achilles seems to lose consciousness, but he quickly recovers. "It was another, more obdurate self that found its way back…" (24) As his Myrmidons surround him and Hectors' body, recover his armour, and one by one stab Hector's lifeless body, Achilles watches, impassive and unfeeling. "Achilles watched. Himself like a dead man. Feeling nothing." (25) He is about to turn against everything he stood for. Once again, when the narrative voice tells us that Achilles felt "like a dead man," it emphasises death as a positive repository of transformation.

As an aside, we can ask ourselves why Malouf points out, in his note on sources, that he wanted to retell the story of Patroclus, Achilles and Hector. Particularly, as we will see, if we consider that whereas *The Iliad* tells the story of Achilles, *Ransom* tells the story of Priam, King of Troy. Our guess is that Malouf is emphasising a particularly Australian character trait, which we have already dealt with at length in previous chapters: mateship. However, as we have also seen, Malouf keeps his feet on the ground when talking about mateship. Achilles is the hero of *The Iliad*, and they all want to be like him, including Hector, who proudly wears Achilles armour at the moment of his death. We have also seen extensively how emulation leads to mimetic rivalry, which means that Achilles' friendship with Patroclus was tainted by rivalry. That is, everyone in *The Iliad* admires and fears Achilles: the bond between them is haunted by René Girard's logic of mimetic desire. Achilles feels uncanny when Hector kills Patroclus wearing his armour, looking exactly like him. Also, when he kills Hector wearing his armour. Achilles feels haunted by these deaths, which are also his death. Who is the doppelgänger here?

Needless to say, classical society – like Western society – is patriarchal. Malouf could not tell that he was going to write about Achilles' wife or mother without writing an explicitly feminist novel in this context, which is something he wouldn't do because it wouldn't fit his main concern

as a writer: the construction of men and masculinities as key in the construction of Australian identity throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Chapter one ends by describing Achilles' infamous heresy, his defiance of the gods and ancient custom when he refuses to allow the Trojans to take Hector's body so that they can offer him a decent burial, as he deserves. Instead, Achilles ties the inert body of Hector to the crossbar of his chariot every morning, and brutally rides in front of the walls of Troy until the body of Hector is completely disfigured. Then, he goes back to the Greek camp, where the remains of Hector's body are given to the dogs. The gods, fond of Hector, recompose his body during the night, so that every morning Achilles has to perform the same ritual so as not to see the body of his enemy and killer of his soul mate Patroclus immaculate again.

However, as previously mentioned, Achilles is estranged. It is not only the Trojans and the gods who find Achilles' attitude distressing and monstrous. His own men, who had always admired and loved him, do not recognise him. They believe he has gone mad, or is under the influence of an evil spirit:

> They have the minds of hawks, these men, of foxes and of the wolves that come at night to the snowy folds and are tracked and hunted. They love him. He has long since won their love. It is unconditional.
>
> But when they look at him these days, what they see confounds them. They no longer know what authority they are under. He is their leader, but he breaks daily every rule they have been taught to live by. Their only explanation is that he is mad. That some rough-haired god has darkened his mind and moves now like an opposing stranger in him, occupying the place where reason and rule should be, and sleep, and honour of other men and the gods. (29)

Achilles is caught in a vicious circle. He tells himself that he is doing this for his friend Patroclus: "All this, he tells himself, is for you, Patroclus." But his abominable act does not alleviate his pain. Twice in the same page the narrative voice tells us that it is not enough: "And still it was

not enough. Still his grief is not consumed." And, then: "But it is never enough. That is what he feels. That is what torments him." (33)

Chapter one tells the story of Achilles and Hector, which is at the heart of *The Iliad*. Chapter two tells the story of Priam and imaginatively elaborates on how Priam comes up with a plan to rescue, to ransom the body of his son Hector with the help of the gods. From now on, the story will revolve around Priam.

As we said, chapter one was made of brief sections, ten in total, most of them one or two pages long. Chapter one is thirty-three pages long. In contrast, Chapter two has half the sections, five in total, and doubles the length of the first chapter: it is sixty-eight pages long. In this second chapter, the narrative voice starts out in an intimate tone – the court silently and helplessly suffers Achilles' wrath and impiety as he mercilessly drags the body of Hector every morning for all of them to see. As events unfold, the narrative voice gains in confidence.

In the first section of chapter two, the narrative voice describes Priam alone in his cell, deeply troubled by what is going on. He suffers not only for Hector but also for his wife, Hecuba, his other sons and daughters and grandchildren, and everything he stands for. All that he has known is irremediably menaced, but the ignominy, the insult Achilles is inflicting on them menaces to doom everything he represents for all eternity. Can Priam, in his old age, redeem his legacy and turn around Achilles' humiliation of them? What story will people tell about Priam and Hector and everything he stands for in the future? This is the crux of *Ransom*. At the centre of it, there is not a woman, as was the case in *The Iliad*, but a man – Patroclus. If at the centre of *The Iliad* Paris, son of Priam and Hector's brother, steals Helen from Menelaus, bringing about war, at the centre of *Ransom* there is Hector, who kills Achilles' intimate friend, lover and personal assistant Patroclus.

In the twilight between sleep and vigil, Priam receives a visit from the goddess Iris. Some iridescence in the room turns jelly-like, and Priam is offered a vision of himself sitting in a cart next to the driver and two mules. Under a coverlet in the cart there is part of his treasure. The first vision is followed by another image. He sees the same cart in the opposite direction, but under the

coverlet this time there is Hector's body. This vision is not given straight away to Priam; he has to look for it in his mind after he has noticed the presence of the deity in his room.

Just before the vision takes form, an image from his childhood, an image of himself as a slave, a frightful life of deprivation and abuse assails Priam. His life as king, he believes, is a mockery. It is as a reaction to this thought that the goddess Iris suddenly speaks: "'Not a mockery, my friend, but the way things are. Not the way they must be, but the way they have turned out. In a world that is also subject to chance.'" Priam is astounded, because in his role as king he is the guarantee that custom and piety are followed to the letter in his world, whereas the goddess has admitted that chance plays an important role in the course of events. That is the reason why he repeats to himself, as if to process the implications of what the goddess has just said: "'Chance?'" (46)

Several important issues have come up in the first few pages of the first section of chapter two: Priam's old age, his symbolic status, and the importance of chance and accident even in the life of kings and the dealings between god and men. The revelation of this latter fact by a goddess comes as a surprise to Priam and will particularly shock his wife and the court. The first point, Priam's old age, will be at the centre of our analysis in this chapter, because our aim now is to analyse masculinities in the context of old age. We hope our analysis will break some new ground in this regard, since there is an acknowledged gap in literary studies focusing on masculinity in old age. (Falcus 58) The second point will allow us to shed some light on class issues regarding masculinities and old age, and the last one will help us glimpse a fairer worldview for future generations.

In his interview with Shannon Burns, Malouf makes it clear that even though he is using classical characters and motives, he is writing for a modern audience and that, therefore, the characters and motives in *Ransom* are essentially modern. (Burns 30) What is interesting is that Malouf answers this when he is asked about the "humanising" character of his fiction. Malouf says that this is something very difficult for a writer to set to do on purpose because he does not believe,

unlike Patrick White, that there are good and bad characters. Things are a bit more complicated for Malouf: "I don't have that strong moral stance that can separate the sheep from the goats. I actually like goats." (Willbanks 16)

In the first section of chapter two, the narrative voice emphasises Priam's old age repeatedly. Priam and Hecuba are always very still, suggesting the stiffness one feels, as one gets older. Also, the bodily rigidity reflects a character trait, reinforced by their role as kings. Priam and Hecuba are very traditional and closely follow custom and convention. "Priam groans" early in the morning in his chamber, and "weakly" tells his chamber servant that he has not called him, that he does not need anything. Moreover, when the goddess Iris visits Priam, his body language shows him tired of the weight of ceremony that has been put upon his shoulders in his role as king, or unable to put up with it anymore. That is the reason why, when Iris appears to Priam, even though "he sits very still, his shoulders in the spare frame [are] a little sunken." (47) When Priam goes to tell Hecuba about his vision, he finds her already raised in her daily chamber, "sitting, very erect."(49) Priam admits that he is "more rigid than others," and insists: "A little too punctilious, I know, in all that is due to ceremony. A stickler, as they say. For form, for the rules." (77) But this could mistake us into a common prejudice nowadays: that as people get older, they turn more conservative and reactionary. When Priam tells her about his plan, Hecuba is astonished to hear it coming from him, "he who has always been so observant of what is established and lawful," (61) because it is unprecedented. But it also indicates that embracing the new has nothing to do with age.

In the case of Hecuba, the repeated references to her straight back emphasise her aggressiveness and firmness of character. When Priam enters her room and prepares her for what he has to say, she can't bear it when Priam mentions Achilles, and starts cursing him. We are told: "Priam quails before this small, fierce, straight-backed woman." (51) When they gather Priam's council for him to reveal his plan, we see her power. The narrative voice tells us that in spite of the war, there are factions in his court: "Only part of this has to do with court politics. The rest

arises from the rivalry of their wives." (80) As we have seen repeatedly in our analysis of the novels, power lies with the women. In Troy, they all fear Hecuba:

> The wives are afraid of her, and it amuses the princes, who know their mother and her ways, that women who at home can be demanding, even intractable, go to water when this small, straight-backed woman puts her disconcerting questions, giving no indication in her smile of what she might think of the reply. (81)

In the case of Priam, the descriptions of his old body are more often linked to his symbolical role as king – "to stand still at the centre" (44) – mutually emphasising the ceremonial nature of his high status and how old he is. This is how Priam sees himself:

> My role was to hold myself apart in ceremonial stillness and let others be my arm, my fist – my breath too when talk was needed, because outside my life here in the court and with you, my dear, where I do like to speak a little, I have always had a herald at my side, our good Idaeus, to find words for me. To be seen as a man like other men – human as we are, all of us – would have suggested that I was impermanent and weak. Better to stand still and keep silent, so that when old age came upon me, as it has at last, the world would not see how shaky my grip has become, and how cracked and thin my voice. Only that I am still here. Fixed and permanent. Unchangeable, therefore unchanged. (53-54)

The narrative voice also describes other physical attributes of old age. In my analysis of *Harland's Half Acre*, we highlighted the tender and loving descriptions of the way Phil's mother attended her father-in-law, the complicit look between them, even when describing the tasks of cleaning and changing him. We will recall that Phil and his parents move to Southport because Phil's grandfather on his father's side gets sick. Phil's mother takes care of him, and Phil happily becomes her assistant. While his mother takes a nap, Phil stays with his grandfather, putting his pillow in the right position every now and then as his mother does. His grandfather thanks him,

and then he kisses him on the forehead. This is how Philip experiences his grandfather's skin and bodily presence, in a tone that is realistic and doting at the same time: "The skin was paper thin. You were aware of bone. But there was nothing frightening in it, and I wasn't in any way disgusted by the odour of decay." (70) Later on, we are told about the special relationship Phil's mother and grandfather develop in time. They might have been mistaken by "lovers":

> In their quiet times together all they had endured in extreme and barely tolerable passages of mere nerve, made an electricity between them that was like the flow of energy between lovers. I might have been jealous if Grandpa and I had not had our own relationship, and if my mother had not made me her only assistant. (100)

We have just seen that Malouf does not believe that an author can set out to moralise, as it were. He suggests that this may happen, as it actually happens in the narrative voice of *Harland's Half Acre,* which echoes here, in *Ransom,* where we find a "gerontological" description of old age, in the sense that the narrative voice makes the reader familiar with what it is like to be old in poetic terms, that is, in positive terms. Can you imagine a demeaning or disgusting poetic description of old age? We can't. We use "gerontological" in quotation marks because we must distinguish between literary criticism on ageing and gerontology, which is a scientific, not an aesthetic discipline. As Sarah Falcus argues: "Stories of age do not provide answers to questions about ageing. They do not illustrate gerontological concepts. They can offer comfort, inspiration and possibility." (Falcus 53)

When Priam is about to tell Hecuba about his plan, he takes her hand and notices how old she is. He takes her hand lovingly, imbued by an affection that encompasses all the years they have spent and the many experiences they have shared together, the family they have built, what they know is their common destiny:

> He watches, says nothing. Moved again by the tenderness they have so long shared, he seats himself beside her and takes her hand. It is no longer white now

> but veined and mottled like his own with liver-coloured spots, the flesh between the fine bones, which his fingertips gently feel for, puckered and slack. He raises it to his lips, and she casts a piteous look upon him. Her eyelids are swollen with tears. (50)

It seems redundant to emphasise the importance of descriptions like this, where experience is a value and we see a positive, loving and uplifting vision of old age in the context of time shared.

We live in a youth-obsessed society. Adverts exclusively display with ideal teenage bodies that, beautified by stylists, professional make-up artists and hairdressers, photographers and Photoshop, do not exist. We are on the brim of social psychosis, because actors and models make us lose touch with our real bodies.

In her Ted Talk "Looks aren't everything. Believe me, I'm a model", model Cameron Russell explains how she worked for the most prestigious fashion adult magazines, often posing with a supposedly ideal partner when she had never even had her period yet. She displays her pictures in the magazines and she looks like an adult woman. Next to these pictures, she shows pictures taken with her parents on the very same day those pictures in the magazines were taken, where she looks like what she was, a girl. She explains that because of her looks she would sometimes be given some items at clothes shops for free, or she and her friend would be given just a warning when pulled over by policemen. The point of her speech is that we judge people by the way they look, instead of judging them by their character, as it should be. Social activist Ashton Applewhite puts it the other way around when she proposes "to include age in our criteria for diversity, and to mobilize against discrimination on the basis of any aspect of ourselves other than our characters." (Applewhite 12) However, in the introduction to her talk, Cameron Russell quite unconsciously shows her age bias. She explains that she became a model because her profile meets the requirements of the social construction of Western beauty – she is tall, has a slender figure, and is feminine. Next, she adds that she is also lucky to possess what we are genetically programmed to consider attractive: health, symmetry and… youth! (Russell)

Why is it so important to fight age bias? Because it is pervasive, it goes unchecked and is particularly cruel in Western societies, noticeably worsening other forms of social discrimination such as gender and race. Applewhite contends that, since World War II, there has been a boom in consumer culture, which fosters values associated with youth and an ideal of beauty embodied by Cameron Russell. We try to postpone the signs of old age in us, and recoil in disgust when we see them in others: "older people are Other, not US." (Applewhite 18) This sharp division is at the root of all evils. Soon, we come to hate old age so as detach ourselves from it:

> Propelled by postwar leisure and prosperity, the explosion of consumer culture, and research into a stage of life newly dubbed "adolescence," youth culture emerged as a distinct twentieth-century phenomenon. As this "cult of youth" grew, gerontophobia – fear of aging and dislike, even hatred, of old people – gained traction. (Applewhite 15)

The side effect of this cult of youth is an aversion, even a demonization of old age. Applewhite quotes Barbara MacDonald and Cynthia Rich's *Look Me in The Eye, Old Woman* to make her point:

> Rich held that physical revulsion is no less than a tool for oppression. "The principal source of the distaste for old women's bodies should be perfectly familiar," she wrote. "It is very similar to the distaste anti-Semites feel toward Jews, homophobes feel toward lesbian and gays, racist towards blacks – the drawing back of the oppressor from the physical being of the oppressed." Unreasoned and fear-based, physical revulsion operates as "an instant check whenever reason or simple fairness starts to lead us into more liberal paths." (Applewhite 123)

We call discrimination on the basis of age "ageism." Applewhite also offers her own, brief definition of ageism: "discrimination and stereotyping on the basis of a person's age." (Applewhite 8) The term was coined by geriatrician Robert Butler in 1969, the same year the term "sexism" went into circulation. According to Applewhite, "he defined it as a combination of prejudicial

attitudes toward older people, old age and aging itself; discriminatory practices against olders; and institutional practices and policies that perpetuate stereotypes about them." (Applewhite 14)

Our aim in this chapter is to show how *Ransom* can help change people's reactions and values towards old age.

One of the cultural critics that has had more impact on the development and establishment of age studies is Margaret Morganroth Gullette. She views "ageing as a learned set of beliefs and practices that prevent us from functioning in an optimal way in relation to aging, our own bodies, and people more than ten years older than we are." (Gullette, *Agewise* 34) Gullette warns us against pervasive and ordinary comments such as "we need new blood in this business," which go unnoticed and predispose our society to ageist attitudes. She proposes to replace "aging" for "ageism" every time we talk dismissively about age so as to start to get rid of our biases. (Gullette, *Agewise* 35)

It is important to note that ageism affects people at increasingly younger ages. Gullette has focused her research on middle-ageism, and places the onset of the causes of middle and old age ageism in the United States earlier than Applewhite, back to 1900, due to industrialisation and technological change, urbanisation, the cult of youth and "the invention of a male midlife sexual decline." (Gullette, *Agewise* 13) She also links the increasing appearance of ageist attitudes from the 1900 to the fall in infant mortality throughout the twentieth century. However, high mortality among children was common until the end of World War II in Australia. In *Remembering Babylon,* set in the second half of the nineteenth century, Jock and Ellen McIvor lose two children of the four they will have, (101) and in *The Great World,* set in the interwar period, Marge and Billy Keen, Digger's parents, have seven children, with only Jennie and Digger surviving. (11-12) Back then, Gullette contends that children were "heavy" with death, because infant mortality was very high. Nowadays, infant mortality rates have dramatically fallen in Western countries, and we associate death with old age. We even keep children away from wakes and funerals, further increasing the perception of a neat divide between childhood and old age:

> Death tightened around sick old age in America only with the lowering of the infant mortality rate toward 1900 as a result of public health and obstetric advances. Before that, the old seemed healthiest because they had survived so much. Death occurred so frequently to newborns and children under five that *they* seemed heavy with it, heavier perhaps than all the other categories but the enfeebled. In our modern life course and contemporary metaphoric system, children have become nearly weightless. New practices – by which children are kept from funerals and often apart from the elderly – seem normal because it is right to keep them light. (Gullette, *Aged by Culture* 108)

In her analyses of midlife and old age ageism in Western society, Gullette sees a proliferation of decline narratives. Basically, they delineate a declining of one's skills, capabilities, and health and life course aspirations, as one gets older. These decline narratives are fed by political, economic, cultural and medical discourses, affecting the lives of thousands, including their self-confidence, health and job chances. In our analyses of *Johnno, Harland's Half Acre* and *The Great World* we have seen how hard it was in times of recession to keep afloat and stay within the system, poverty being a constant threat. Gullette juxtaposes to these decline narratives a progress narrative based on the American dream, which promises jobs for everyone and a rising wage trend based on seniority that leads to a fulfilling life. James Truslow Adams first coined the expression "American dream" in 1931 in *The Epic of America*, and as Adams intended it, it did not mean simply material success, but a fulfilment of the person taken as a whole. (Hackett 42-43) This does not mean that the popular interpretation is a wrong one, but Gullette aims to make this ideal available to everyone in an anti-ageist ideal world:

> Both of my parents' stories, and my own, showed me how central our *economic* possibilities are to age auto/biography. The so-called American Dream narrative, the drive for "progress," and its violent twin, the fact and fear of midlife decline, cannot absolutely determine but certainly interactively affect any

meaningful life story we tell during our working years and beyond about selfhood and development, the fate of the family life course, friendship, community, avocations. (Gullette, *Aged by Culture* 146)

Fighting ageism in the workforce and in our institutions is important to avoid poverty in midlife and in old age, which inevitably leads to a miserable life and premature death. Gullette reminds us that any form of discrimination is soul killing, because it is always beyond the victim's control: "Nothing defeats the soul more than the sense of being forsaken or about to be forsaken on the basis of an ascribed category (age, race, sexuality, gender, ableness) that I cannot – that no one can – control." (Gullette, *Agewise* 222) Quoting political scientist Victor Wallis, Gullette explains that discrimination and poverty lead to "biologically distinct communities," (Gullette, *Agewise* 75) where the wealthy will lead long, healthy lives whereas the poor will sink to ever new depths of misery:

> Poverty constructs anxiety, helplessness, ignorance, greater exposure to toxicity, job strain at work, poor diets. As the PBS series *Unnatural Causes* demonstrated, poverty comes with attendant illnesses like asthma, obesity, hypertension, high blood pressure, and heart disease. Life-threatening illnesses may go undiagnosed and untreated because of lack of health insurance, lack of access to medical and psychiatric care, or other ways treatment is rationed by class. Racism and sexism, which worsen poverty, also worsen health outcomes. (Gullette, *Agewise* 75-76)

Needless to say, Priam has reached old age because he is King. Does he suffer discrimination? In the classical world, when Alzheimer and dementia were unheard of, not least because people did not live long, but also because such manifestations where usually attributed to a person's daemon or the influence of spirits, if you enjoyed a certain social status and had money you normally did not, even if cases of sons trying to usurp their parents patrimony have been a constant throughout history. As Gullette puts it: "For a man now, looking older is not by itself

"distinguished." Perhaps it never was, except for the rich." (Gullette, *Agewise* 119) There is a moment, after Priam has told Hecuba his plans, and he talks to her about chance, that she wonders whether Priam's "wits are not unstrung." (61) However, when in the second section of chapter two Priam puts his plan forward to his council, they are all stunned by it not because they think it is crazy, but because it is unheard of. Deiphobus and Polydamas try to dissuade him on these grounds with arguments, and Priam also reasons to counteract their arguments. It is precisely when answering Polydamas that we notice that Priam is alive and well for his age, meaning that he uses his long experience to respond to a terrible situation and to continue to add new layers of meaning to his life course-story.

After Polydamas makes his speech to dissuade Priam from his plan, this is what he answers:

> The image I mean to leave is a living one. Of something so new and unheard of that when men speak my name it will stand forever as proof of what I was. An act, in these terrible days, that even an old man can perform, that only an old man *dare* perform, of whom nothing now can be expected of noise and youthful swagger. Who can go humbly, as a father and as a man, to his son's killer, and ask in the god's name, and in their sight, to be given back the body of his dead son. Lest the honour of all men be trampled in the dust. (90)

Because of his role as king, there have always been stories about Priam and his kingdom. And in the face of Achilles' infamy and provocation now, he needs to turn the events around and carry out a heroic act to turn the story in his favour, or to re-enter history in a heroic and memorable way. We will see that not only kings and aristocrats tell stories. In fact, the best stories are to be found elsewhere, as Priam will soon find out.

Meaningful life-stories that encompass the whole lifespan are the best antidote against ageism. In this regard, literature and the arts can provide inspiring models, and Priam is an inspiring model for several reasons. Firstly, he is really an old man. Secondly, putting his story into the spotlight and giving it substance is a way of rewriting the cultural heritage we as Westeners most

identify with, and last but not least, because he and Hecuba are facing the highest ordeal: the loss of a son. It is precisely this latter point that makes *Ransom* such an interesting story from the point of view of cultural studies about aging.

Gullette states that ageist bias and decline narratives are so powerful that these are "psychosocial not private problems." The individual cannot fight these forces alone. For example, when the individual feels the irrational drive to undergo cosmetic surgery, he is responding to social pressures he cannot control and that he is powerless to avoid. Gullette speaks of an "age-related dysmorphia":

> Dominant decline culture manages to produce, in great numbers of not very-old-people, what we could call age-related dysmorphia: a belief that some features of one's body, or the whole body, once located within the huge range of normal, has become substandard or even deformed. (Gullette, *Agewise* 106)

Gullette further argues that this social pressure is culturally displaced by a proliferation of novels that revolve around the death of children. This is how she frames her argument, and how she handily links it to ageism:

> When authors kill children, they construct the question, "Can I survive the worst that life can shove at me?" When a plot acutely poses this question as "Is time on my side or against me?" in our culture the reader demands an answer to another question very closely allied but not exactly the same, "Should I damn aging or value it?" (Gullette, *Aged by Culture* 70)

In this regard, *Ransom* has all the ingredients of what Gullette calls "a recovery novel" (Gullette, *Aged by Culture* 71) in old age, when we barely have any time left to mourn and overcome a loss such as this. *Ransom* can help us fight ageism in our culture at its root. As Gullette puts it: "How do we choose our metaphors or myths? If being ruled by them limits us, does learning how they work free us?" (Gullette, *Aged by Culture* 157) She emphasises this last point: "Very great artists **form** their times rather than bear witness to them." (Gullette, *Aged by Culture* 162) Sarah Falcus

also highlights the extent to which literature might be a powerful ally of gerontology in its fight against bias towards old age: "Literature does not – as most literary critics working on ageing are at pains to stress – simply mirror or reflect a social world, but, instead, is part of and complicit in shaping that social world." (Falcus 53-54)

In their speeches to dissuade Priam, his sons and councillors all praise the love and affection they had for Hector, and his noble and valiant character. They all acknowledge him as the defender of Troy, and that is the reason why his death is also so painful. The gods also hold him in high regard: that is the reason why they would not allow his body to be corrupted. During the night, his body is recomposed, so that every morning, before he ties his feet to the axle bar of his chariot, this is how Achilles finds Hector's body: "Hector lies as if sleeping. His features are those of a young bridegroom newly refreshed, his locks glossy-black as in life, the brow like marble, all the welts and gashes where yesterday bone showed through smoothly sealed and the torn flesh made whole again." (32-33) Priam and Hecuba are torn with grief and self-reproaches for not having been able to prevent Hector's death and Achilles' abuse. Priam witnesses Hector's death from a bastion on the walls of Troy, and when he sees Achilles dragging Hector's body through the dust, his first impulse is to go running to save his son. Restrained, he lets himself fall to the ground, and "with howls that in their pain and desolation must have seemed bearlike fouled his head with excrement." (45) Hecuba, for her part, is consumed by anger – "Oh, if I could get my hands on that butcher I'd tear his heart out and eat it raw!" (51) –, and she reproaches Priam his negligence in raising up his children:

> 'Troilus was very late in walking – do you recall that, Priam? You used to tempt him with a little dagger you had, with a dog's head on the handle – do you recall that?' – and she searches his face for a response. 'I was in labour for eighteen hours with Hector. That is what I recall when I think of his body being tumbled over the stones and left out there for dogs to tear at and maul.' (52)

More importantly, Hecuba makes it clear that part of her is also being desecrated by Achilles' profanation: "'It is *my* flesh that is being tumbled on the stones out there.'" (52) However, Achiles' profanation and Hector's death is also an opportunity – albeit an infelicitous one –to grow.

> No recovery novel recommends oblivion; on the contrary, they all value memory. But they trust time, or rather aging. They count on it to bring relief from the most hurtful parts of loss: the self-blame and the ingenious self-punishments, the irrational anger at a spouse; the sense that nothing of one's self is left (that one's identity is solely constituted by being a parent), the inability to enjoy, the shock of the rediscovery of loss over and over. Novels that describe recovery admire the human spirit and often its multiple selves. They show that we have big shoulders. Novels with older characters who have aged and suffered and yet have resilience in the face of the worst vicissitudes of adult life, carry considerable conviction. Even in our culture, these subversive texts whisper, when the going gets tough, it helps to have aged a little. (Gullette, *Aged by Culture* 71)

The stakes are always high in the fight against ageism, but if the loss of a child is always an ordeal, the loss of an exemplary one in whom so much is at stake is even worse. That is the reason why the story in *Ransom* inspires us in our fight against ageism and the diverse forms in which decline narratives menace our growing up and growing old into meaningful lives.

In our modern societies, Gullette gives us some advice as to how to combat the diverse open fronts we must face. The fight must be carried out on political, legal and artistic grounds:

> Decline can be fought legally and politically, on such grounds as economic rights for workers, antidiscrimination, the value of seniority, and patient rights. It can be combated ethically, on the grounds of respect for our parents, equal rights for elders, and civic responsibility for the whole life course. And it can be fought

> imaginatively, through the illuminations of our best and longest-lasting stories. (Gullette, *Agewise* 223)

Ashton Applewhite also makes a call to the "political" fight against discrimination because of age: "The task is to become aware of the political context of personal experience." (Applewhite 233) Whether young or old, teenage or middle age, there should be no age-related prejudices. We should avoid stereotyping. That is, we should use ""people first" language." (Applewhite 57)

A progress story and an upward vital trajectory implies change and transformation. The quid of the question is that growth requires both continuity and discontinuity, the death of an old self so that a new, more experienced and accomplished older self can appear. Notice we did not say better; every age has its own good and bad things and accomplishments, which the self must strive for. The philosophy that a life worth living consists in an evolution into higher orders of being, in the sense of more complex and rich was already present in *An Imaginary Life*:

> What 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, except in dreams that blow in from out there bearing the fragrance of islands we have not yet sighed in our waking hours, as in voyaging sometimes the first blossoming branches of our next landfall come bumping against the keel, even in the dark, whole days before the real land rises to meet us. (134)

However, everyone is afraid of change and of growing old. It means that we will no longer be who we are and that we are going to become someone different, not us. Most of all, we fear growing old. Simone de Beauvoir puts it quite succinctly in her seminal book *The Coming of Age*:

> Thinking of myself as an old person when I am twenty or forty means thinking of myself as someone else, as *another* than myself. Every metamorphosis has something frightening about it. When I was a little girl I was amazed and indeed

deeply distressed when I realized that one day I should turn into a grown-up. (Beauvoir 5)

We fear changing into that old person across the street who walks bent over with a cane or that other one that suffers from incontinence and Alzheimer in a residential home. There is no change we fear more than growing old. But as in the case of Phil's grandfather in *Harland's Half Acre*, who also suffers from dementia – "Grandpa did not always live in the present. Or rather, his present was a layer of several decades that could replace one another with startling rapidity and in no sort of chronological order." (65) –, Malouf can offer fun and pleasing, sometimes even uplifting accounts of commonly distressing experiences. We need positive, uplifting, familiar narratives of old age so as to accept it as something normal, part of our destiny as humans, that is, as part of our humanity: "If we do not know what we are going to be, we cannot know what we are: let us recognise ourselves in this old man or in that old woman. It must be done if we are to take upon ourselves the entirety of our human state." (Beauvoir 5)

We have many identities. The ones that are most dear and defining to us are our family bonds, our identities as father, mother, son, grandfather, granddaughter, etc. Moreover, we feel these identities as future oriented. The loss of a grandparent or a father carries with it heavy existential consequences. For example, a father is normally regarded as a protective figure and a mother as a nurturing one, and we feel a deep existential void when they pass away. These are life-changing experiences. But when a son dies or a grandson, we feel that this goes against some natural order of things. We have repeatedly heard the phrase that 'parents should never outlive their children.' So that Priam and Hecuba might feel Hector's death and the daily defilement of his body as a particularly excruciating experience.

In order to overcome these traumatic experiences, the individual has to find a way to confer them some private meaning. Priam and Hecuba know that they are going to lose the war against the Greeks. When Priam tells Hecuba his plan, she begs him: "And if you too are lost? Who will stand by me in what we know is to come? Because we know, both of us, what that is…" (60) We

have also seen a god reminding Achilles that his death is closer. The question is how they are going to face their destiny:

> But by reimposing our own meanings on these "disgraced" identities, we can privately experience them as real, positive, necessary, even cherished possessions. (…) Aging can give us proofs that we have some narrative agency, some way of squeezing out from under subjections. (Gullette, *Aged by Culture* 125)

We all continuously age, but sometimes we feel we age more in an instant than in years. That is what happens to Achilles when he sees Patroclus die, and to Priam when he sees Hector die. However, because they have a choice and they can still decide how they are going to respond to this traumatic event, this process of transformation is good in itself. It is an opportunity and an instance of freedom, the highest good. In *An Imaginary Life*, Ovid asks: "What else is death but the refusal any longer to grow and suffer change?" (134)

The novel in this regard shares a fundamental characteristic of age studies: narrativity. "Aging involves a narrative. Aging *is* a set of narratives." (Gullette, *Aged by Culture* 129) Gullette justifies this assertion quoting Paul Ricoeur's *Time and Narrativity*, where he underlies the intrinsic temporal quality of the novel, its minimal structure:

> Paul Ricoeur has said, "Narrativity [is] the language structure that has temporality as its ultimate referent." Put in terms of age studies, "temporality" in fiction is the sense of the movement of time produced by the author's ways of representing the characters' lives in time, especially that of the protagonist. (…) In short, novels report on age as well as aging. In this context, aging means into-the-midlife, sometimes only early midlife. Novels in a given era build upon and contribute to, affirm or modify or deny, their culture's life course imaginaries. (Gullette, *Aged by Culture* 64)

That is the reason why the story of the novel itself tells us about society's representations of the aging process. Its plots and stories enable as well as delimit a range of possible

representations of age available to a society. According to Gullette, when the form of the novel reaches its maturity around the year 1900, most novels are novels of formation or *Bildungsroman*, telling stories about female characters until they marry or travel voyages in the case of men. This was the peak of a life. Increasingly, novels about life after marriage started to appear. They were mainly about adultery or the possibility of adultery, or about the death of children, displacing in a symbolic form, as we have seen, a fear of aging. (Gullette, *Aged by Culture* 65-66) We saw how *Johnno* was about growing up and finding a place in society. Johnno fails in his attempt whereas Dante finally succeeds when he writes his first novel about his friend, thus redeeming both of them. *Johnno* is, properly speaking, a *Küntslerroman*. Now, in *Ransom,* the novel form exemplary stretches to later life. Priam heroically refers to his experience, and the strength and knowledge he has accumulated over the years, to try to put time on his side: "Ultimately, though I didn't discover this for a long time, progress narrative promises children not a charmed life but a resilient self. The story helps produce that self." (Gullette, *Agewise* 151) A self that is confident is worthy of love and loving.

Besides time-consciousness, a powerful ally in the face of loss and adversity is the ability to recur to our multiple past selves: "When you start using the strengths of your multiple identities in your favour, the healing process is under way." (Gullette, *Aged by Culture* 75) This is precisely where Priam finds the strength in him to carry his vision to fruition.

When Priam tells Hecuba about his plan, she obviously uses different ruses to try to dissuade him. First, sarcasm: "'You expect that… jackal, that noble bully, to be moved by this touching pantomime?'" (57) After that, common sense mixed with irony: "'And you expect this wolf, this violator of every law of gods and men, to take the gift you hold out to him and act like a *man*?'" (58) Then, when she reminds him of the dangers he will encounter on the way to the Greek camp, parody, garnishing her account with some ageist prejudices: "'Some swaggering lout among the Greeks would strike you down before you got even halfway to the camp. Think of it.

Two old men in a cart laden with gold? Do you suppose your grey hairs would save you?'" (59) Nevertheless, Priam has set up his mind to it and will not be convinced otherwise.

It is at this point that Priam retells Hecuba his story, a story she and everybody has heard a thousand times. Not from him, but it is part of the legends that inform their culture. This story takes them back to a similar story of loss. When Priam was a child, five or six years old, Troy was conquered, his father killed, his people slaughtered. The maidservants tried to save him and other children from the court dressing them in slave's clothes, dirtying them and mixing them with other children their age who were slaves. Having lost his father, his family, everything that was familiar, and headed for an unknown and surely cruel future, Priam experienced a first death back then:

> To be at one moment Podarces, son of Laomedon, King of Troy, and in the next just one of a rabble of slave children, with a smell on me that I had taken till then to be the smell of another order of beings. A foul-slave smell that I clung to now in the hope that it would cling to me, since it was the only thing that could save me from drowning like my brothers, up there in the citadel, in my own blood. (68)

In the same way that the goddess Iris shows Priam the way to ransom Hector's body, it was his sister back then that ransomed Priam from his damned fate. In spite of Hecuba, who has a lot of the matriarch about her, it is feminine intuition that saves Priam. When he believes everything is lost and prays that none of the other children who know who he is will give him away, he hears his name. Terrified, he sees his sister Hesione calling at him:

> '"Podarces!"'
>
> 'Is she mad? Doesn't she realise?
>
> 'Because *he* is at her side, hulking and dark. Bareheaded but still fully armed. His leather cuirass stained with sweat, his body pouring forth the stink of his terrible exertions. Heracles, our father's enemy. The others know him too, and draw back. I am left alone under his gaze.

> 'It will happen now, I tell myself. Doesn't she realise? I close my eyes, hold my breath. (71)

However, he does not die. By the exchange between Heracles and his sister, he learns that she will be offered as a war prize to Telamon and, so as to spoil her, he has told her he will let her have anything she wishes for. Being a child, Heracles expected she would choose a whim, but she chooses to save her brother's life.

Heracles doubts, and believes she is trying to trick him with a substitute. '"He leans closer. "Well," he says playfully, "my little substitute, aren't you the lucky one?"' (73) But he finally consents on one condition: that he will change his name to "Priam, the price paid," which means ransom. Why?

> 'So that each time he hears himself named, this is what he will recall. That till I allowed you to choose him out of this filthy rabble, he was a slave like any other, a nameless thing, with no other life before him but the dirt and sweat of the slave's life. And in the secrecy of his own heart, *that*, for all the high titles the gods may heap upon him, is the life he will go on living day after day till his last breath. (74)

Priam had his first growing experience at age five. As Gullette puts it in *Aged by Culture:* "Could we tentatively agree, as a gesture toward life-course solidarity, that age autobiography can potentially be written by any subject old enough to have seen a prior self fade and a new one emerge and to know why?" (Gullette, *Aged by Culture* 149) Priam's experience interrupts the normal development of the child, who healthily remains only mildly present-oriented during his teenage years until adulthood. (Gullette, *Aged by Culture* 14) In this case, we can say that Priam is a precocious child regarding age and aging.

A discourse on aging is an autobiographical discourse, and this is what Priam's early childhood experience makes possible. He puts behind an older self, becoming someone else. Old at five! Don't we say somebody old remains young at heart as well? Why at heart? Is it a good thing or a bad thing? When Priam surprises Hecuba early in the morning, eager to tell her about his plan,

before they speak, Priam embraces her out of affection. The narrative voice tells us that "she allows herself, almost girlishly, to be held and comforted." Then, they sit holding hands "like children" (50) before Priam can summon the courage to speak. Can you feel like and look like an old man at five? Can you feel like and look like a child in your seventies?

The side-effect of growing older is the appearance of one's uncanny doubles as we age. It is a ghostly experience. As Gullette puts it: "The most puzzling quality of the much-memoried 'I' may be its constitutive habit of *othering* past selves as strangers while holding tight onto its right to say what they felt and how they relate." (Gullette, *Aged by Culture* 151) Priam is not only aware of the presence of that older self as he was. It has grown up like him in body and mind and has always stood by his side.

Before Hesione saves him, Priam looks at the path that would have taken him, that has taken him to his other life, a path of misery and oblivion – one of the things he regrets the most is that in his other life he has become one of those about whom "no story will ever be told." (75) It is a reminder that we are never one, but a conglomerate of identities:

> 'I look up now and I can still see it. It's the road my other self went down. To a life where you and I, my dear, have never met, have never found one another. To a life I have lived entirely without you. In the same body perhaps,' he holds up his arm, 'with the same loose skin, the same ache in the knee-joints and thumbs. But one that for sixty years has known only drudgery and daily humiliation and blows. And that life too, I have lived, if only in a ghostly way. As a foul-smelling mockery of this one, that at any moment can rise to my nostrils and pluck at my robe and whisper, So there you are, old man Podarces. (68-69)

The metaphor of a parallel reality is something that Malouf had already used in *The Great World,* concerning Vic and also the projected flow of the river in the POW camps of Malaysia. The difference is that here Priam envisions his other self as having actually led a life parallel to his own. The sense that we have lived the countless possibilities we have encountered in life as paths not

taken in our imagination provides us, in retrospect, with deeper layers of experience. We might venture that this is true as well of our dreams and projected future selves: they define us more than who we truly are.

In her book *Aged by Culture,* Gullette also elaborates on this fictional recourse. It signals recovery. She calls them "valuable illusions," and they serve to initiate a process of mourning to the extent that what is lost is assimilated into the present-time flow, that is to say, as presence. (Gullette, *Aged by Culture* 76) To make her point, Gullette quotes Ann Tyler's *The Accidental Tourist,* where the main character, Macon Leary, tries to overcome the loss of his son Ethan: "The real adventure, he thought, is the flow of time; it's as much adventure as anyone could wish. And if he pictured Ethan still part of that flow – in some other place, however unreachable – he believed he might be able to bear it after all." (Tyler 354)

In accordance with this line of argument, bearing in mind the scene we have just described in *Ransom,* Malouf explains in his interview with Bridget Rooney that he has always associated "second chances and second breaths" with the idea of redemption:

> DM: One of the things I notice and I can't explain why it seems important to me, is second chances and second breaths, a reading of your life in which you get a second go. It happens to Vic, in *The Great World.* It happens to him quite early, when his father dies and he gets another family. But there is a moment later, I remember, when it happens again. He has some image of himself as having jumped…
>
> BR: The leap.
>
> DM: Yes, and of having come down in the wrong place. And there's a sense there of your life being redeemed, of your being given a second chance, but you can't quite connect it with the first chance. (Rooney 86)

In section five of chapter two, we see the preparations for Priam's journey to the Greek camp. There is a lighter and comic atmosphere in this section, especially if we compare it to the emotionally charged events we have been recounting, which will help transition to chapter three.

Let us recall that Priam's vision is one of simplicity and austerity:

> A plain wooden cart, of the kind that workmen use for carrying firewood or hay, and drawn by two coal-black mules.
>
> He himself is dressed in a plain white robe without ornament. No jewelled amulet at this breast. No golden armbands or any other form of royal insignia.
>
> On the bench beside him the driver of the cart is a man, not so old as himself but not young either. A bull-shouldered fellow he has never seen before, in an ungirdled robe of homespun. A bearded, shaggy-headed fellow, rough but not fearsome. (47)

As Priam retells his vision, first to Hecuba and, then, to his councillors, its contours and purpose become clearer to him. In the retelling, two elements stand out. The first one is an emphasis on family ties. The second one is an emphasis on his condition as man over his status as king. Most often, the two elements appear together. When talking about Hector, Priam refers to him as "such a son and a brother," (50) and he emphasises that his mission is to go to Achilles' camp "not as a king but as an ordinary man, a father" and ransom "the body of my son." (56) The first thing we hear Hecuba say is complaining that "I am a woman and can do nothing but sit here and rage and weep," and emphasising her motherhood: "'It is *my* flesh that is being tumbled on the stones out there… I was in labour for eighteen hours with Hector.'" (52) Even though Hecuba behaves like any mother would, she mocks Priam when he tells her that he wants to go to Achilles' camp "'like a *man*.'" (58) More sober, she insists: "'But you are not *any* man.'" Priam's anti-aristocratic and anti-classist vision is not simply a stratagem. This is really a tremendous thought. He longs for a more spontaneous and freer way living. That is what he feels is called for – let us recall that Malouf is aware that Ransom's characters are essentially modern and that the book is

aimed at a modern audience – and he suggests that perhaps this is precisely what Achilles needs as well:

> 'But you are not *any* man.'
>
> 'That's true. In one way I'm not. But in another, deeper way, I am. I feel a kind of freedom in that. It's a feeling I like, it appeals to me. And perhaps, because it is unexpected, it may appeal to him too: the chance to break free of the obligation of being always the hero, as I am expected to be the king. To take on the lighter bond of being simply a man. Perhaps that is the real gift I have to bring him. Perhaps that is the ransom.' (59-60)

In the end, Priam talks dismissively about the life he has led, and shows himself resentful. "'I've played my part, and tried to let nothing peep out of the real man inside so much empty shining.'" (78) Again, he manifests that the purpose of his vision might be also to redeem himself and Achilles from the lives they have been obliged to live, so that when Priam ransoms Hector's body, he might be saving Achilles at the same time. "'… I have now to be ransomed a second time – to ransom myself, as well as my son. By going to Achilles, not in a ceremonial way, as my symbolic self, but stripped of all the glittering distractions and disguises, as I *am*.'" (79)

According to this reading, we could say that *Ransom* tells the story of the confrontation between Priam and Achilles, where Priam will use the ruses of peaceful disobedience, because he refuses arms and convention, to fight and transform Achilles. Priam's strategy also rests on core Australian values, such as a respectful disregard for authority and formality, which translates into a kind of interaction free of fuss and formality.

However benign Priam's intention might seem at first sight, it shocks everyone because his plan is unprecedented. When the god Iris reveals Priam his vision, he remembers the life he escaped from as a child, and believes his current life, as king, is a fake. He believes that the gods mock him. At this point, Iris corrects him. The world, she tells him, is also subject to chance: "'Not a mockery, my friend, but the way things *are*. Not the way they must be, but the way they have

turned out. In a world that is also subject to chance.'" (46) Priam repeats in disbelief the word "chance" to himself, a word that makes up a single paragraph. The pauses that a paragraph implies, a word on its own followed by a question mark, emphasise the effect it causes on the characters and that it means to cause on the reader. In the next page, the same word, in italics this time, also followed by a question mark and standing as a paragraph again on its own: "*Chance?*" (47) It is a transgressive idea, but slowly it makes sense to Priam. It is the fact that everything is not determined beforehand that opens the door to what he is about to do: "'I believe,' he tells Hecuba, 'that the thing that is needed to cut this knot we are all tied in is something that has never before been done or thought of. Something impossible. Something *new*.'" (58) This view of things sheds a new light on his life. The goddess Iris' words turn Priam's decline story into a progress story.

As Applewhite tells us: "we need more rich, complex stories that shrug off the mantle of decline and show there's no "right" or "wrong" side to forty – or any other age." (Applewhite 21)

We get a glimpse of the enormity of what this new way of thinking implies by the way Hecuba reacts to her husband's words:

> 'If I do not succeed in this, and am lost, then all is lost. We must leave that to the gods. Or to chance.'
>
> There! – and a little shiver goes through him – he has said it.
>
> Chance?
>
> She looks up quickly. Surely she has misheard. (61)
>
> And a bit later on:
>
> 'As for this other matter –' she cannot bring herself to use *his* word – 'this idea you're so taken up with, of how and why things happen as they do, that is not to be spoken of. Imagine what it would lead to, what would be permitted. The randomness, the violence. Imagine the panic it would spread. You must, I beg you, keep that strictly to yourself. Now, I will go and give orders to have a fire set under

> the cauldron and water heated for your bath,' and she steps swiftly to the door and calls a servant. (62)

In the fourth section of the second chapter, we see Priam attired in a plain white robe. When Priam is presented with two magnificent horses and a brand-new ostentatious chariot, followed by Idaeus, he reprimands his men and rejoices in his role as architect of his new worldview. "I asked for a cart," he scolds them, "an ordinary mule cart, not this… carnival wagon! You have done this because you are still thinking in the old way. I told you, I *tried* to tell you, that my vision was of something new." (92) Dumbfounded, the princes go to the market looking for a carter with two mules and a cart, where they come across Somax, a bulky man in his fifties waiting to be hired. We learn that he is a scatter-brained fellow who likes a laugh and a drink or two every now and then in the tavern, and that he has five children who have all passed away. When they take him to the palace, at first, he does not recognise Priam. When he does, he does not see the imposing and aristocratic figure he is familiar with. "He is surprised how old he looks. How sunken his cheeks, and deeply set in their sockets and milky pale the eyes under the straggle of white brows." (95) When Priam comes close to inspect him, he shows himself satisfied. "The carter resembles so completely the figure in his dream." (96) The princes enter the mules, Beauty and Shock. Somax feels more like himself in their presence, and we can see that he is particularly fond of Beauty. Priam makes sure that he knows what is expected of him, and then decides to change his name on the spur of the moment. "'I am accustomed,'" says Priam, "on all occasions when I leave my palace, to have a herald with me. He is called Idaeus. Since you will be my only companion on this journey, that is how I will think of you, and how you, my man, should think of yourself." (97) Somax is not very happy about this but resigns himself. They charge his cart with Priam's treasure carefully selected by Priam's son, the priest Helenus.

Somax is quite out of his depth all the time he is in the palace. He finds the neatness of the place, and the height and clean and white skin of the Trojans impressive. He does not know very well what and how to answer when he is prompted to speak. The class differences between the

court and Somax give way to some ironic situations and mocking remarks. When Priam says he likes the look of him, his men applaud his choice: "…all the members of the court take a second look and clap their hands – but in a restrained and formal way, with a sound so pit-a-pat small that the pigeons are barely disturbed in their dipping and promenading." (96) But Somax, on his part, also reacts mockingly: "Likes the look of me, does he? Well there's something!" (96) When Hecuba asks her servants for some spring water and wine to offer the gods and she performs the necessary ritual, there seems to be no signal that the gods favour the mission, until someone notices something high in the sky:

> Mmm, the carter thinks, a chickenhawk. Riding the updraught and hanging there, on the lookout for a fieldmouse in the furrows below, or a venturesome hamster or vole.
>
> But prompted by his mother, the priest Helenus proclaims it an eagle. The carter is surprised at this, though no one else appears to be. The whole assembly raises its eyes, and the murmur that fills the court is one of wonder and relief. (101-102)

In the last section the narrative voice tells what daily life is like in Troy. In the morning, the people of Troy go to watch the impressive army as they leave Troy and head to fight the Greek army in what is an interminable war. In the evening, they resume their posts again to see who makes it back and who does not. In the meantime, construction works and reparairs continue, and complaints and legal disputes are solved within the city walls. War has not interrupted their everyday and unexceptional lives. Since Hector's death that war seems to be at a standstill and they can have a brief rest. However, today something unexpected happens. Workers on scaffoldings announce that a small party is leaving the court. People soon gather to see what is going on, leaving everything they do. What they see confounds them. Priam is riding in a cart next to Somax, a person they know well from the village. The royal princes and councillors escort them. They accompany them outside the walls of Troy and, at regular intervals, in groups or by themselves,

they turn around and walk back to the palace. The cart fades away in the distance. What is going on? Is Priam abandoning them? What are his princes and councillors thinking? Will he succeed?

In part, if *Ransom* has a strong appeal to a modern audience, it is because it challenges our cultural and build-in assumptions, that is, our ageist attitudes towards old people. What can Priam do against Achilles? We know how the story ends, and we are curious to find out how this old man, stripped of his role as king, will manage to soften Achilles and ransom the body of his son.

So as to give ourselves a measure of our ageist attitudes towards old men, we could have a look at how these transpire in the seminal book on aging and ageist studies: *The Coming of Age*, by Simone de Beauvoir. The book is a thorough and intelligent investigation into aging and ageism in different cultures, which breaks new ground in a largely disregarded and sensitive area, sensitive because it is difficult to clearly disentangle normal aging from ageist prejudices. Even today, ageist studies are largely absent from the university curriculum. It is precisely talking about *The Iliad,* when she analyses what it was like being an old man in classical Greece, that Beauvoir repeats and, by repeating it, enforces the classic reading of *The Iliad*:

> Only a man in the prime of life could discover a ruse more efficient than all the traditional tactics. Ulysses far outweighs both Nestor and his own father, Laertes, who resigns the crown for him. In the same way Hector eclipses Priam. We may infer that so long as Greece was feudal, the old men had more honour than real power. (Beauvoir 99)

If this was not enough, Beauvoir also dismisses the possibility that an old man, whatever the circumstances, can make a good hero for a novel:

> It is true that if an old man is dealt with in his subjective aspect he is not a good hero for a novel; he is finished, set, with no hope, no development to be looked for; as far as he is concerned it is all over and death already dwells within, so nothing that can happen to him is of any importance. (Beauvoir 210)

Ransom not only specifically contradicts Beauvoir's statement about *The Iliad*, it also disqualifies her assertion that an old man, even a very old man, can make for a good hero in a novel. This is not so rare today as it was when Beauvoir was writing in the second half of the twentieth century, as the success of the novel *Hundred Year Old Man Who Climbed Out Of The Window* reminds us of, but it is still rare.

Chapter three is a poetic and lively chapter, consisting of only one long section of about fifty pages and a short one, that closes the chapter, of a page and a half. It gives the impression that Malouf wrote this chapter in one stroke, uninterruptedly, feeling at ease with the subject matter and simply letting his poetic prose flow. Here, we will witness Priam's actual transformation, contradicting Beauvoir's statement that an old man cannot make an interesting subject matter, an appealing subject of experience for a book.

In the following pages, we see Priam learning about the world anew, a world and a form of life he completely ignores. The narrative voice repeatedly resorts to the image of the child to describe how Priam acts and feels. We are told that he wonders at everything, and because of his old age and ignorance of life outside court, cannot fend for himself. Somax, a village carter, will be his psychopomp in the new world and adventure he is venturing into. In their journey to the Greek camp they have to cross the river Scamander, made up of two channels running parallel to each other, leaving a mount of riverbed in the middle. One of them runs deeper than the other, but at this time of year they are easy to cross. Still, they carry a heavy load. When they reach the river, the carter suggests they make a stop and encourages Priam to get down from the cart and rest a little. First, Priam politely declines, but then accepts. Not having any experience of how to address royalty, Somax relies "on native wit, and such bits of experience as are common to all, whether the gods in their wisdom have set us high or low," (115) which translates as baby talk, emphasising again the idea that Priam is like a child learning all anew: "'That's it, my lord,' the carter told him, 'you'll see. We'll have a nice rest here, and maybe even a bit to eat.'" (114) Priam does not feel affronted by the carter's inexperience or condescendence. To the contrary, he sees

"so much modesty and goodwill in the man, and so much tact," that Priam is quite happy with his new Idaeus: "It was not reverence he lacked, only a knowledge of the forms." (117)

The first thing the carter does when they get down is pull up his robe and walk into the river – "sandals and all" (114) – to let the coolness of the water refresh him. A group of curious fingerlings approach and tickle at his feet, but when they see they are not interested they disappear again. Somax is enlivened by it. When he turns around to see what Priam is doing, he realizes the king feels quite out of place here: "He's like a child, he thought, a bit on the slow side. Or a man who's gone wandering in his sleep and doesn't know where he is or how he got there." (115) If Priam was not an old man, he would not feel like that. He would be so full of himself and of his own presence that he would not see anything else. Moreover, Priam is on the way to change. He has no other option, but it is also an opportunity to continue growing. There is the widespread belief that as people get older, they become stuck in old habits and routines and refuse to change, particularly men. But Ashton Applewhite argues that, as people get older, they also choose to take the road less travelled and to continue growing spiritually and intellectually: "Hallmarks of this process include less fear of death and disease, deeper relationships with fewer people, coupled with an increased desire for solitude, and diminished commitment to old habits, routines, and principles." (Applewhite 60) Somax suggests that Priam should also get his feet into the river, so as to relax and refresh himself a little. He helps him take off his sandals, and urges him to walk into the water:

> Like an obedient toddler, Priam lifted one foot then the other till the sandals were off and sitting side by side on the lip of the sand; then, with a glance towards the driver, who nodded to urge him on, took three uncertain steps into the stream. When, as the driver had promised, he felt the cooling effect, he smiled, looked back to where the driver was still crouched on the bank above, and nodded. Then stood staring down at his naked feet, which were bony and white, as the same little slivers of light came flashing in, and nudged and tickled. He observed with

> amusement that they found the royal feet every bit as disappointing and without interest as the driver's. (117)

The river has several associated meanings in our culture. Having his feet washed in water with Somax could symbolize Priam's humbling attitude to get his son back. Like the biblical image of the lord washing his disciples' feet, Priam simply behaves like an ordinary man. It could also symbolize Priam's baptism into his new self, or, more according to the period the novel recreates, Heraclitus' river, when he says that life is a continuous process of change and that no one can say that he will swim twice in the same river. In this latter meaning, however apprehensively, Priam has jumped on the bandwagon of change as described by Heraclitus.

Next, Somax produces a leather satchel with some food: pumpkin seeds, cheese, black olives and a stack of griddlecakes. He suggests that they eat something, and again Priam refuses and then, encouraged by the carter, accepts. Slowly, Priam notices that Somax is a chatterer. He starts telling him about how his daughter in law cooks the cakes, how she only uses the best buttermilk and flips them with a quick move of her wrist in the oven so as to turn them a golden brown. There is a lightness in the small cakes that comes from the way she handily flips them over in the oven, sometimes burning her fingers a little, which makes her put them in her mouth really quick. The carter also explains that his son made a small improvement in their fireplace to make it easier for his wife to cook the griddlecakes. When Priam finally agrees to take one, he is surprised. "It was very good. What the driver had said of its lightness was true, and of its effect on the spirit." (121) Somax's talk adds to the pleasure of the taste of the cakes. Priam rejoices in his new experiences. In this ordinary and unpretentious enjoyment, Priam again notices that Somax does not stop talking, just for the sake of it. "What he had to say, if you regarded it strictly, was unnecessary. It had no point or use. The wonder, given this, was that it did so little harm – none at all in fact – to the fellow's dignity." (125-126) When Somax makes a pause to eat Priam suddenly notices that even when they are not talking, "everything prattles" around them. It tells you how much is going on around you, enlivening everything it touches. "Except that it wasn't silence at

all, it was a low, continuous rustling and buzzing and humming, as if each thing's presence was as much the sound it made as its shape, or the way it had, which was all its own, of moving or being still." (127) In contrast, Priam recalls that life at court is full of silence. It is silence that is the mark of authority, and words are only used when strictly necessary – you describe or do something with language, you do not use it for the mere chitchat pleasure it provides, as if it were song, which is what Priam is learning from Somax. That is the reason why Priam can taste the lightness of the daughter in law's wrist in the griddlecake.

> In his own world a man spoke only to give a shape to a decision he had come to, or to lay out an argument for or against. To offer thanks to one who had done well, or a reproof, either in anger or gentle regret, to one who had not. To pay a compliment whose decorative phrases and appeals to vanity or family pride, were fixed and of ancient and approved form. Silence, not speech, was what was expressive. Power lay in containment. In keeping hidden, and therefore mysterious, one's true intent. A child might prattle, till it learned better. Or women in the seclusion of their own apartments. (126)

However anachronistic, Priam's enjoyment in the fact that everything rattles, everything speaks for itself and has a voice is a defence of democracy, in contrast to the silence and composure and the formalities of life at court. Moreover, Priam notices that Somax's talk is full of lively interest: "What he had to say, his pleasant way of filling the time, was of no importance. It was full of something else. Interest." (127) As a consequence, a new feeling takes hold of Priam, a thirst that only Somax's talk can appease: "The wish to put to the man one or two questions that were in no way necessary, served no purpose at all in fact, save the scratching of an itch he had discovered to know more about these unnecessary things, and to satisfy in himself a new sort of emptiness. Curiosity." (129) When Priam asks him about his children, he becomes aware of the similarities and contrasts between the aristocratic life of a king at court and that of a layman.

Priam learns that Somax's wife and his three sons and two daughters have all passed away. His only remaining family are a daughter-in-law and her daughter, with whom he lives. Only two of the boys get to be grown up. One had just died the previous spring on the same river they were about to cross, a little way down. The mule Beauty had lost its grip on the riverbed, he went down to put her straight, the mule must have kicked him and they found him drown down the river. The mule was pacing on the other side of the bank, as if nothing had happened. The carter didn't know whether to punch her, finally falling on his knees and embracing her between his arms: "But whether it was for grief at my loss, or joy that she was safe, I can't tell you, sir. We're such contrary creatures. Maybe both. Anyway, since then I've been that fond of her, you wouldn't credit." (141) The other died when he went under a carriage loaded with wood on a rainy day to help a neighbour. He wanted to show off, but while he was pulling and overexerting himself in the mud, something broke in his innards. "Like nothing I've ever heard, sir, before or since. I break into a sweat myself, even now, just at the memory of it." (133) Pride got the best of him. Somax recalls that once he had refused to do something, he had told him to do, punching him hard on the face for his insolence. He regretted it ever since, because he would have grown out of it. If only the gods had known, maybe they would have spared him also. Priam is touched by his story, and asks himself whether his losses can be compared to Somax's: "all that was so personal, and the man's memory of it so present and raw, even now in the telling of it, that Priam wondered if the phrase he had taken up so easily, that he knew what it was like to lose a son, really did mean the same for him as it did for the driver." (136) Priam starts to regret is what Hecuba reproached him. Early in the morning, he was uncomprehending. We were told: "This kind of women's talk unnerves him." (52) He had blessed his children and welcomed them under his protection in the same way that he had performed the long-established burial ceremonies as custom and law demanded. But he could barely remember any intimation or personal experience with them. "Their relationship to him was formal and symbolic, part of that dreamlike play before the gods and in the world's eye that is both

the splendour and the ordeal of kingship. He could not even be sure of their actual number. Fifty, they said." (136) To which Priam wonders whether he has had a better life than his carter:

> Did he regret these human occasions, and the memory of them that might have twined his sons more deeply into his affections and made his relationship with them more warm and particular?
>
> Perhaps. (138)

We might think that the distance between parents and sons among the aristocracy and the closeness between them in the lower classes is something that belongs to the past, and that in this sense the novel is quite removed from ordinary experience. However, this is far from being so. The new aristocracy are the very rich today, people like Donald Trump, and this reality is criticised everywhere today by authors such as English writer Howard Jacobson and English writer Jonathan Coe. In a recent book entitled *Pussy,* Jacobson portrays the rise of prince Fracassus after the figure of the president of the United States Donald Trump, in a sad and poignantly humorous social satire that portrays his sexism and egotism. There is no mistaking that Fracassus stands for Donald Trump, because an illustration by Chris Riddell in the front cover of the book represents Donald Trump as a baby in a nappy running after, supposedly, pussy. In the novel, the parents delegate the raising and education of his son to nannies and tutors. They all abhor him. (Jacobson) Likewise, in Jonathan Coe's *What a Carve Up!* and its sequel *Number 11*, Coe portrays multimillionaire families who only care about money, regardless of the wars and poverty their investments might cause around the world, or the consequences that their policies might have on the education system and NHS of Britain. In *Number 11,* Gilbert Gunnery offers the best that money can afford to his children, and no more. (Coe, *Number 11*) As *What a Carve Up!* concludes: "there comes a point when greed and madness can no longer be told apart." (Coe, *What a Carve Up!* 493)

However, Priam is a moral man. His ransom as a child did more than save his life. Priam imagines what he might have felt if he had had a similar relationship with his sons, what those experiences might have been like and what he might have felt when burying them, and the mere

thought of it makes him shiver. After all, as Malouf states, The stories we have read and been told also conform our experience. Their memory can be so vivid and personal that we might sometimes doubt at their origin, like when we tell ourselves:

> This isn't something that *happened* to us, it's something we read in a book! But didn't that also happen? How else explain the certainty we felt of having been there in our actual body, at an occasion, imaginary as it might be, that had all the immediacy of sensory impact and presence with which real events come to us? (Malouf 15)

Priam has more experience of the world now that he has heard Somax's story first hand, and he has become wiser. Reflecting on this, he harvests his own knowledge in an act of syncretism:

> Royal custom – the habit of averting his gaze, always, from the unnecessary and particular – had saved him from all that. And yet it was just such unnecessary things in the old man's talk, occasions in which pain and pleasure were inextricably mixed, that so engaged and moved him. (139)

That is also the reason why the king does not look surprised when he hears his market carter state something, he feels word for word: "But the truth is, we don't just lie down and die, do we, sir? We go on. For all our losses." (131)

In his interview with Shannon Burns, when answering to the question of the humanising quality of his novels, Malouf seems to imply that part of his responsibility as a writer consists in giving voice to the low class, to those who stand outside history: "You know, it's absolutely anachronistic to allow, in amongst characters who belong to the epic world, a character like Somax. Because he has no place in the epic world." He certainly achieves that when he brings Priam and Somax together, spinning the story of their lives in a single tale:

> A lot of what my writing has been about – particularly the books that are set in Australia – is taking characters who don't seem to be very interesting, don't

> seem to have much going on, and writing in a way that gets inside them and presents their take on the world, but also simply assumes that just because people are not articulate they're not necessarily unthinking or unfeeling. Since the writer is very articulate, it's a matter of finding words for feelings or thoughts and apprehensions and understandings that person themselves might not be able to find words for. So I think getting inside the character and trying to see the character from inside rather than outside is a way of making a character what we think of as human, which really means 'like us.' (Burns 30)

After this exchange between Priam and Somax, dusk falls rapidly. Priam is upset. "He was sorry they had to move on. He had got used to the place and the small pleasures it provided, not least of all the opportunity to sit and listen to the other's talk. He would remember all this." (142) The two old men have grown fond of one another, but they have to move on.

Again, Somax helps Priam put his sandals on, talking to him like he would to his granddaughter:

> 'That's the way, sir,' he coddled, as Priam, like a child, very placid and biddable, raised first his left, then his right foot to be dried, and when the driver indicated that he should resume his sandals, repeated the action so that the man could fit them and fasten the cords. (143)

However, when they reach the cart, someone is waiting for them. It is a youngster with long golden and bronze glossy hair in ringlets, wearing a bonnet, leaning against the cart in a leisurely, relaxed way, lazily looking at his fingernails. Even though he says he comes in peace and that Achilles has sent him to escort them to his camp, Priam and Somax distrust him. The youngster, who swaggers and is exceedingly sure of himself, introduces himself as Orchilus. Somax tries to shake him off, but Priam has enough experience to know that sometimes things are not what they appear to be, and they accept his protection.

Not without some difficulty, they cross the two streams of the river. Priam feels elated. When Orchilus looks at Priam and notices the tension in his body and limbs while crossing the river, which flows with a fast current and almost overturns the cart, he teases him: "'An adventure, eh, father?'" (153) Actually, Priam might very well be living the adventure of his life… at 70!

> It was true, he had not [expected this]. But there he was in the midst of it, and now that the first of his fear was past, he felt almost childishly pleased with himself. He was enjoying it. He hung on hard to the crossbench and looked happily out over the expanse of sounding water with its eddies and haphazard cross-currents of light, already telling himself, in his head, the story of their crossing and feeling steadfast, even bold. (153)

When they reach the bank of the river, they hear an owl hooting in the distance. In Greek mythology, the owl symbolizes Athena the goddess of knowledge, power and wisdom. It is a signal that the mission is overseen by supernatural forces, and of divine intervention.

It is when they have crossed the river that Orchilus starts chattering, this time more boldly than before, exhibiting a knowledge he should not posses, thus overawing Somax and Priam. "'And that pretty daughter-in-law of yours? How is she? Still troubled, poor girl, by her limp?'" (156) Somax is surprised that he knows about his daughter-in-law, and mad that he has mentioned that she has a limp. He looks at Priam to see his reaction, and Priam indeed looks surprised at the revelation that she has a limp. He will have to reimagine the story including this new detail: "He would have to begin all over again," Priam tells himself, "though he was glad to hear that she was pretty." (156) After that, Orchilus further provokes Somax, explaining that he has a "temper," is sly, and "a bit of a tippler, and a storyteller and spinner of tales," further maddening him. But like Priam now, Somax also refuses to antagonise the boy: "Some inkling that all here was not quite as it seemed." (157) When Somax whispers to Priam that he suspects that their escort is not Greek, not even human, Orchilus changes his voice and spurs them to guess who he is. Astonished, Priam recognises the god Hermes.

Bearing in mind the suggestive character of Priam's vision at the beginning of the novel, which occurs early in the morning, between sleep and wakefulness, we might ask ourselves where the need arises to have the actual presence of a god helping Priam and Somax in the mission. Hermes tells them that he is invisible – only they can see him. He clarifies that he is here to help them. Suddenly, Priam feels exhausted. Even though Somax's presence next to him raises his spirits, it is not until Hermes takes him by the wrist and infuses him with a jolt of adrenaline that he feels ready to confront what lies ahead of him. Is it too difficult to believe that two old men would make it to the Greek camp on their own?

As we grow older, we lose our reflexes, flexibility, strength, and we cannot overexert ourselves over long periods of time, at least without the proper training. Increasingly, though, athletes supplant these qualities by skill and experience. We only need to think of Roger Federer, who just won his 19th Grand Slam and his 8th Wimbledon titles at 36, and he is still going strong. Moreover, from an intellectual point of view, it has been proven that there is nothing an older healthy person cannot do that a young one can. "The brain of a healthy older person can do almost everything that a much younger brain is capable of. Sometimes it just takes a little longer. Other cognitive domains remain stable or improve." (Applewhite 74) To the contrary, because of their experience, old men are usually more cunning and have more resources at hand to overcome obstacles and difficult situations. In this case, Priam's old age and vulnerability plays to his advantage, and he could have made as dramatic an entrance to the Greek camp as the one that actually occurs in the novel.

So, are writers responsible for these fictional choices? Sarah Falcus believes that fictional accounts of age are invaluable to gauge the attitudes towards age and aging in a given culture, thus acknowledging their cultural power:

> If we appreciate the power of literary narratives of ageing to influence our cultural understanding of what ageing means, then it becomes clear that content-

> based studies, as well as spirited defences of the need to consider representations of ageing in literature, are still very valuable to the field. (Falcus 56)

In this regard, Cullette calls on the responsibility of writers to make critically informed choices when it comes to aging in their novels:

> One intermediate effect of age studies might be that responsible writers poised over narrative decisions would think more critically about their own age-related contexts and motives and internalisations, and finally, about the consequences of their narrative choices in an intertextual world where discourse shapes the consciousness of others. If "blackness" has been changing in the white imagination (and the black), if "woman" is now changing in the male imagination (and the female), then "midlife aging," and indeed "aging" altogether, can begin to change in the imaginations of all of us. (Gullette, *Aged by Culture* 78)

How does chapter three end? When they reach the camp, eluding the night wards, someone knocks at the gate of the Greek camp. The men doing the night guard are surprised to hear this knock at the door. Three of them stand up and walk towards the gate to see what is amiss, while the others continue talking and playing dice-games. But before the three men reach the gate, the huge pole, which only Achilles can manage by himself, is removed to one side all on its own, and the gates open by themselves. In the middle of the path, a cart pulled by two mules and driven by two old men slowly makes its way into the camp. Once inside, the gates close and the pole moves back to its crutch with a thud.

Chapter four starts with Achilles and his men eating in their hut. Achilles is sitting in a corner in the dark, while his men are eating at a large trestle table in the middle. They are loud and vociferous and eat and drink voraciously. They are afraid of silence, and when it sets in once, one of them starts talking about home until someone rebukes him and more wine is served. Achiles does not seem to notice any of this. With a movement of the head, he invites his two personal attendants, Automedon and Alcimus, to join him. "He sits with a full cup before him, eating only

so that his attendants will be free to eat." (168) Automedon makes Achilles feel uneasy. He is loyal and attentive but is not attracted to Achilles as Patroclus was. Worse still, Achilles regrets that when Patroclus died, it was Automedon who stood next to him and took him in his arms. He is jealous of him:

> When the helmet was struck from Patroclus's head and he went reeling, hot blood gushing from his mouth, it was this man, Automedon, who ran to lift him up, and holding him close in his arms, watched the light that moved cloudlike across his gaze as the bright world dimmed, and crying out and leaning closer, caught the last breath at his lips. It was Automedon who stood astride the body and, blinded by tears, fought the Trojan jackals off.
>
> Him, Achilles tells himself bitterly, not me. In his arms, not mine. (169)

There is something about Achilles' sad mood that goes beyond Patroclus' death. The war has been going on for almost ten years, and Achilles has grown old in the meantime. Patroclus' death is simply the realisation of this fact. When Achilles looks at his myrmidons, what he notices is the difference in age that separates them: "They are young, these men, and have hearty appetites." (170) Then, Achilles pushes himself to eat, so that Automedon and Alcimus can eat, again emphasising the age difference between them:

> Automedon tries not to make it obvious that they have been holding back. But Alcimus, who is just a boy, does not. When Achilles has served himself, his big hands go quickly to the platter of roast meat, the bread in its woven basket, and his jaws work horribly over the gobbets of fat. (170)

Suddenly aware of the noise he is making, Alcimus restrains himself and dissimulates, sucking his fingers in a "maidenly way that is almost comic." (171) The presence of Alcimus confirms that Achilles has grown old recently, it is a proof of change: "He likes to have Alcimus by him. For his own sake, but as a reminder too of what he himself was just a season ago." (171)

There is a nostalgic flair menacing the atmosphere – as when there is a silence in the hut that makes one of the men reminisce about their lives back at home, or when Achilles realizes that he is no longer young. This feeling of nostalgia is dangerous, especially in a warlike setting where men need to feel in the prime of their manly vigour and strength, and there is no room for feeble morale. As Cullette contends, nostalgia is one of the most powerful instruments of aging decline narratives. As she says: "Nostalgia propels the genre." (Gullette, *Aged by Culture* 153) That is the reason why men soon interfere when someone starts talking about home, or why Achilles not only feels depressed because he misses Patroclus, but also because his death is a signal that the clock is ticking. Nowadays, we would say that Achilles is going through his midlife crisis, and needs some help.

At the beginning of chapter two, when Priam has just woken up and is still under the influence of the iridescence in his room, which he knows indicates the presence of a god, we are told that this kind of interaction is nothing out of the ordinary for him, as they are for his daughter Cassandra, Apollo's bride, and his son, the priest Hellenus: "What exists quite naturally in Priam as an aspect of daily being, and in Cassandra as self-induced hysteria, has in Helenus taken a sleek professional form." (43) Why Priam's advantage over a pythoness and a priest? In the section "The ethnological data" in her book *The Coming of Age*, Beauvoir explains that most primitive societies that have reached a level of comfort, by which she means that basic daily needs such as safety and food have been secured, old men acquire a quasi-divine status because of their knowledge/magic powers. In fact, the two are inextricable:

> Among primitive peoples knowledge and magic are inseparable: a science of the nature of things allows objects to be made use of both according to the rational laws of cause and effect and according to their magical affinities; then again, techniques are indissolubly bound to the magic rites without which they would be useless. The 'greying men's' knowledge coincides with the possession of magic powers: both the one and the other increase with age. These men reach their

highest point when they become *yenkon*[107], on the verge of decrepitude. They are able to inflict disease upon whole vast groups of individuals, and they are dreaded. (Beauvoir 62)

In these societies, the old are believed to have magical powers because they are close to the afterlife, in a sort of in-between stage. Like Achilles, who is a demigod, Priam is also a border figure, inhabiting that blurry region that divides the human and the godly.

Therefore, it is not surprising that as Priam enters Achilles' hut, his presence unleashes an alteration of the atmosphere between the two men, as if another dimension had suddenly been opened between them. The story suggests that it is Orpheus playing his lyre that does the trick: "A god moves invisible among them, and in the wake of his passing the full-throated shouting of the Myrmidons is cut off. The silvery notes of the lyre touch and change the air." (171-172) Achilles, who is a demigod, quickly recognises that some divine intervention is taking place. In a poetic tone, the narrative voice describes the world in a way that is reminiscent of Heraclitus' philosophy again. The philosopher from Ephesus explains it by means of the metaphor of the river: you will not swim twice in the same river, because everything flows, nothing stays the same. In other words, we are constantly aging:

> He knows what this sudden suspension of his hard, manly qualities denotes. This melting in him of will, of self. Under its aspect things continue to be just themselves, but what is apprehensible to him now is a fluidity in them that on other occasions is obscured. The particles of which they are composed, within the solid forms, tumble and swarm. As if flow, not fixity, were their nature. The world swims, and for as long as the mood lasts he too is afloat.

[107] Beauvoir refers to the Aranda: "The Aranda are hunters and gatherers of food who live almost naked in the Australian forest." (Beauvoir 61)

> He has moved into his mother's element and is open again to her shimmering influence. In such moods he *sees things* – a thickening of the half-light beyond Automedon's shoulder that strikes him first as a startling of his blood. (172)

With the wealth of knowledge of an old man, Priam seeks to convince Achilles by recourse to age, family bonds, and mortality. Also, by means of surprise: he answers Achilles unprecedented heretical act with another act, equally unprecedented.

In what follows, there is a cascade of emotions swarming over Achilles that make the aging process and its consequences visible, involving love, mateship, loyalty, and intimate affection, and what the narrative voice calls "the sacred bond" between father and son.

Under the influence of his mood, the first-person Achilles sees is Patroclus walking towards him. The death of his best friend and lover, which he witnessed as his own death has made a deep impression on Achilles. Also, the god's words through Hector's mouth when he killed him are a reminder that he is bound to die soon. But he realises he has made a mistake. The person walking towards him is an old man: "The loose flesh under the chin hangs in wrinkled folds, the eyes deep-set under knotty brows." (173) He now believes it is his father he is seeing. Nostalgia, a corrosive ageist feeling, takes hold of him. The vision of his father as an old man first makes Achilles aware of how much he himself has changed since he last saw him. Then, he longs for the man he had looked up to and his first model of manhood.

> It is nine years since Achilles last saw his father. When he sailed from Phthia he was little more than a boy, already fully grown and well-made but with few signs upon him of the man he has become – a warrior, deep-chested, thick in the shoulders and neck, his features roughened by long months of bivouacking on the open plain. It is what time has done to him. And it strikes him now, in a great wave of sadness, how much his father too is changed.

> The Peleus he left, who had clasped him so strongly to his breast, reluctant to the point of tears to let him go, had been in the prime of life, strong-thewed and warrior-like, a man to be feared. The figure who comes to him now is still noble-looking and tall, but all his muscles are slack. The hair, once thick and iron-grey, is thin and of a fleecy whiteness.
>
> 'Father,' he says again, aloud this time, overcome with tenderness for this old man and his trembling frailty. 'Peleus! Father!' (172-173)

Achilles cries and falls on one knee, but when Automedon and Alcimus call out to him and he looks again, he recognises Priam. When he introduces himself, Priam mentions that he has come to speak to Achilles "man to man, as a father," but what he means by that is still obscure to Achilles: "'I am Priam, King of Troy,' he says simply. 'I have come to you, Achilles, just as you see me, just as I am, to ask you, man to man, as a father, for the body of my son. To ransom and bring him home.'" (175)

What Achilles sees is difficult to believe, and when he sees who Priam's new Ideaeus is, utterly unbelievable. How can two such old men have been able to get to his tent on their own in a cart pulled by two mules, unnoticed and unassailed? Priam simply answers that they have been guided. Achilles feels a kind of elation at the situation, an easy-going atmosphere he has long forgotten what it feels like after so many years being at war and so many quarrels and offended dignity and all.

> 'You are Ideaeus, the king's herald?' Achilles asks the man. He is puzzled. Not simply by the claim that this rough-looking fellow should be Priam's herald but by a situation that has already passed beyond anything he has a precedent for. What surprises him is how easy he feels, despite Automedon's warning. (178)

Needless to say, Ideaeus does not know how to address Achilles nor how to explain how he came to be Priam's herald. "The words to cover it are there in his head but would get turned about and jumbled if he tried to get them out." (179) Somax's reaction, his humility, shyness and

uneasiness amuses Achilles. It further amuses him to see the closeness and affection existing between two old men. When Somax, stammering, tells Achilles that he is "'the king's…helper, today,'" the narrative voice tells us: "he had almost forgotten himself and said 'companion.'" (180) Priam comes to his rescue and explains that he intends to speak for himself on this occasion and excuses Somax, thanking him for his service and telling him that he will see that he is properly paid if they make it back

Achilles is delighted again:

> Achilles is intrigued by this by-play between the two old men, who belong to such different worlds – the humility of the one, the awkward shyness of the other – and all the more because it has proceeded as if it were a matter strictly between the two of them and he had no place here. He might have taken offence at this, but for some reason does not. The unfamiliarity of it, the unlikeness, take him out of himself. It amuses him. (181)

What Malouf brings to the world of *The Iliad* in *Ransom* is a certain lightness to the strict world of convention. The narrative voice turns things comic so as to make a certain detachment possible and bring about a catharsis, a transformation. Touched, Achilles tells his men to attend to Somax and his mules.

In his interview with Brigid Rooney while talking about *Ransom*, Malouf makes of the drama of ageing an opportunity for redeeming oneself from fatalistic discourses – that is to say, decline narratives – through comedy, or at least a certain spirit of comicality:

> One of our most extraordinary capacities as humans is the capacity for play, and I've always wanted to say, of a certain kind of comedy, that it's the highest of all our achievements in the literary field. We all know what the truth is, and that is that everything ends badly, everybody dies. The end of everything is death. So tragedy is the only kind of writing which is actually true to the facts. But we have created this other form, in which we exercise our imagination and freedom to make

things otherwise. We've created out of that the world of comedy, and especially those comedies, like Shakespeare's last plays, where what happens, through some miracle, is that people repent and when they repent they are forgiven. There is reconciliation, there is resurrection. What is lost is recovered, the dead come back. (Rooney 83)

The newness of what Priam is doing and its comic effect is essential to the plot of the story, as it is essential to shatter ageist bias.

When Priam finally makes his speech, he catches Achilles by surprise, touching on a cord that, for a second time and masterfully, makes the aging process in the novel visible. He appeals to the memory of his son, Neoptolemus and to his own youth and old age. He also reminds Achilles of his mortality: stripped of their titles and differences, they are only men, and they all have a common fate. On this basis and appealing to the "sacred bond," he asks him to let him have the body of his son back, so that he can have a proper burial.

… But what Priam says now catches him entirely off guard.

'You are, I know, the father of a son you have not seen for more than half his lifetime. A boy growing up in his grandfather's house in far-off Scyros. Think what it would mean to you, Achilles, if it was his body that was lying out there, unconsecrated after eleven days and nights in the dust. The body of a son for whom you have a father's soft affections, to whom you owe sacred duties that nothing, nothing in the world, can cancel. Do you think I ever imagined, when I was a young man as you are now, in the pride and vigour of my youth, that I would in old age come to this? To stand, as I do now, undefended before you, and with no sign about me of my royal dignity, begging you, Achilles – as a father, and as one poor mortal to another – to accept the ransom I bring and give me back the body of my son. Not because these cups and other trifles are a proper equivalent – how could they be? – or for any value you may set upon them. But because it

> does high honour to both of us to act as our fathers and forefathers have done through all the ages and show that we are men, children of the gods, not ravening beasts. (182-183)

Priam stops a minute to catch his breath, during which time Achiles remembers that his son was seven years old when he left Phthia. He knows he is a grown up now, eager to leave his grandfather's house and join him at War.

In the meantime, Priam resumes his speech:

> 'Achilles,' he says, his voice steady now, 'you know, as I do, what we men are. We are mortals, not gods. We die. Death is in our nature. Without that fee paid in advance, the world does not come to us. That is the hard bargain life makes with us – with all of us, every one – and the condition we share. And for that reason, if for no other, we should have pity for one another's losses. For the sorrows that must come sooner or later to each one of us, in a world we enter only on mortal terms. Think, Achilles. Think of your son, Neoptolemus. Would you not do for him what I am doing here for Hector? Would your father, Peleus, not do the same for you? Strip himself of all the ornaments of power, and with no concern any longer for pride or distinction, do what is most human – come as I do, a plain man white-haired and old, and entreat the killer of his son, with whatever small dignity is left him, to remember his own death, and the death of his father, and do as these things are honourably done among us, to take the ransom I bring and give me back my son.' (184-185)

Influenced by Priam's words, Achilles recalls that early in the morning he had gone to the beach as usual and had had an uncanny experience: "he had stood staring out across the gulf and felt that it was not space his mind was being drawn into, but the vast expanse of time, at once immediate in the instant and boundless, without end." (185) Achilles had forgotten himself, put aside his pride and his ego and had a first experience of transcendence, an insight into eternity.

What does the trick is the intuition that his son's life is a continuation of his own, in the same way that his life is a continuation of his father's life: "Now, in the aftermath of Priam's words, he sees beyond Priam another man, both closer and further off: his father Peleus, and beyond him another, himself, the old man he will never be." (185) In this latter vision, Achilles sort of deceives his destiny and writes his own recovery story before he actually dies.

We come across in this way a topic dear to Malouf: male succession, not in terms of spiritual succession, as we have seen in Malouf's previous novels, but bloodline succession between fathers and sons.

Influenced by Priam's words and recent events, Achilles' mind does the trick and he grows older. As eighty-year-old folk artist Marcia Muth told Ashton Applewhite: "Your life does change as you get older," she told me. "You get into what's important and what's not." (Applewhite 3) Achilles finally yields to Priam's demands and accepts the barter.

We might ask ourselves at this point whether Achilles is too young for seeing the world like Priam, since he is in his mid-twenties. However, as critical age scholars argue after gender and queer critics, we should not see the young-old dichotomy in binary terms, but as a continuum. "There is no old/young divide. We're always older than some people and younger than others. Since no one on the planet is getting any "younger", let's stop using "aging" as a pejorative." (Applewhite 11) Since Achilles knows that his death is now closer, it is no wonder that he starts acting and feeling like an old man.

The second section of chapter four is a short one. It is barely four pages long. It deepens the positive account of age and the ageing process. Achilles goes to find Hector's body, as he has been doing for the last ten days now, but this time it is different. Alone, Achiles sits on a stool by himself and contemplates Hector's naked body. He marvels at the beauty of it, "composed and still in the early perfection of its early manhood." (189) Nowadays, death is something that is strictly contained with which we deal in an expedite and almost concealed fashion. The dead body is an object of taboo. In Spain, where the dead are buried two or at maximum three days after

decease, sometimes the very next day, the wake is held the day before burial. There is a room where the deceased's body is kept, properly attired and recomposed for the occasion, and another room next to it with chairs where family and friends can go to give their condolences to the family. Few people enter the room where the dead is, and if they do it they do it silently and apprehensively. Needless to say, no one touches it. In England, where the body is usually buried later, probably because it is colder, the wake is done afterwards, which means that any dealings with the deceased's body are still rarer. The dead body is taboo. Since the old are close to death, we regard them with certain apprehension and distance. That is, we dehumanize them. In *Ransom*, we see another kind of relationship with the dead body, in accordance with the positive view of old age that the novel offers. The revision of a distant myth provides the right context for a revision of our dealings with death and the old in our modern society. "Achilles sits and contemplates it: shining brow, lean jaw, the cheeks sunken a little. On the upper lip and chin just the shadow of a beard." (189) Moreover, the stillness, the quietness of death provides Achilles with a profound comfort and peace of mind. Priam has given him the opportunity to shake free of the burden on his shoulders. He can resume his life now and fulfil his destiny, which he now accepts. The presence of death embodied in Hector, the beauty and contentment of it, reconciles Achilles with his destiny. The narrative voice tells us that "They are in perfect amity," (191) and talks of the "true Achilles":

> What he feels in himself as a perfect order of body, heart, occasion, is the enactment, under the stars, in the very breath of the gods, of the true Achilles, the one he has come all this way to find.
>
> He sits quietly in the contemplation of this. (190)

In the third section, Hector's body is taken to the laundry hut where women will anoint it and leave it ready for Priam. Hypnotized, Achilles follows it. Death has cast a spell upon him, a positive and calming influence he is eager for: "Drawn once again by the deep abstraction of its calm, which his own still feeds on, Achilles is unwilling to break away." (193) As we saw in *An*

Imaginary Life, Achilles wonders at the fact that women bring us and welcome us into the world and are the ones who last see to us before we leave it. He grows curious to see what the last transactions of the body on earth are like. However, the women will not let Achilles witness how they deal with the body in its last stages, and he has to vacate the hut.

The next section is also brief, about four pages long also. Achilles wakes up Priam, who is fast asleep. Before he wakes him up, prompted by his contemplative mood, he watches Priam and remembers his father Peleus: "Achilles, watching, is touched by the old man's dignity, even in sleep, and his thoughts fly once again to Phthia and his father Peleus." (194) Priam is first startled to see Achilles, but soon remembers where he was before he went to sleep. In the remainder of the section, we get a glimpse that Priam is the one who is more alert to his surroundings. Two servants are standing apart from the two mythic figures. One of them yawns and the other one throws him a reproving look, but Priam is not upset but amused. After splashing some water onto his face, Priam looks at Achilles again, and marvels at his physical presence. However, instead of feeling intimidated, he tries to figure out what his vulnerable spot might be.

Of the two of them, it is Priam who is more proactive, and the cannier of the two:

> But this is no dream. The cramp in his old bones tells him that, and the bulking presence that watches from just feet away: the animal eyes in the broad-browed skull; the big knuckles of the hand, which even in rest, lightly clasped now on the haft of his sword, retains a terrible potential.
>
> What puzzles him is the desire he feels – curiosity again, the new impulse in him – to know more of what is hidden and contrary in this boldest, most ferocious, most unpedictable of the Greeks. Mightn't that be useful to him later? As a means to saving them – Hecuba, himself, his people – from what otherwise must surely come?
>
> It is in the light of this *otherwise* that he stands with his brown dripping, while Achilles, who is also puzzled, looks on. (196)

In the fifth section, Achilles and Priam eat together, Achilles hungrily, and they agree on the terms of a truce of ten days, during which the Trojans will mourn and deal with Hector's body according to custom. In the last and sixth section, we see Achilles accompanying Achilles and Somax to the camp's gate. When they depart from each other, they "joke darkly," which confirms that they have transcended their circumstances. They have put aside war and age difference. The teasing is a form of male bonding.

In a high-handed attitude, Achilles tells Priam that if he calls for him when they destroy Troy, he will help him. Priam responds with equal arrogance:

> 'And if, when I call, you are already among the shades?'
>
> Achilles feels a chill pass through him. It is cold out here.
>
> 'Then alas for you, Priam, I will not come.' (201)

Following Swedish sociologist Lars Tornstam, Ashton Applewhite calls this form of transcendence "gerotranscendence," because it requires an awareness of one's aging process as well as an acceptance of change and a willingness to continue growing psychologically and spiritually until we die. Lars Tornstam sees it as a synthetic ability to feel all the ages one has been at once, (Applewhite 49) but Applewhite believes that this growing process may be experienced in different ways – "some inhabiting an increasingly distilled sense of self and others exploring a multiplicity of identities." (Applewhite 50) On the one hand, we might think of Achilles reminiscing his son Ptolomeus, his father Peleus, himself as a teenager before leaving Phthia; being his own self and projecting the old self he will never be sequentially as an experience of transcendence of this kind, his mind projecting all those different ages like a prism within the skull of his head. On the other hand, we might view Achilles' new sense of self in the morning at the beach and Priam's newfound curiosity for the rustic and ordinary, and their wariness of convention, ostentatiousness and the relief it provides to put pride and ego aside and focus on what is really important, as indexes that they have reached a more distilled sense of self.

The last chapter wraps the story up, closing Priam's story of Hector's ransom and portraying a few events that further provide the novel with a sense of closure and transcendence in the context of *The Iliad* as a whole. It also reemphasises the importance of story telling in the construction of any meaningful life. We subscribe to Cullette's conclusion about the essential link between aging, identity and literature: "In my redefinition, age identity is an achievement of storytelling about whatever has come to us through aging." (Gullette, *Aged by Culture* 124) The sense of closure is further emphasised by the fact that it is the shortest chapter, about fifteen pages long, divided into three sections that give the reader the impression of strokes on canvas or brief insights into a story he is already familiar with.

On their quick and smooth journey back, Priam asks Somax to stop for a moment on a quiet moor. Without help, he steps down from the bench of the cart and goes to see the body of his son Hector. Somax is too moved to turn around, and hears the king sob in anguish. However provisional and humble the victory, Priam reservedly tells himself "This is triumph." (208) Why? Not simply or not mainly because he has recovered the body of his son, but because of the story that people will tell afterwards. He has turned a clamorous defeat into a victory, and now his name and his lineage, the story of his people, will be remembered in a tale about overcoming the worse of adversities, the death of a child, and about growth. He has cleansed his name.

What Priam needed was a story to balance the scales of myth a bit in his favour. To counteract the story of the fearless Achilles and Troy, the story of his abominable defiance of the gods and what was custom and convention and sacred, by defiling the body of his son Hector, with another story, a beautiful story of courage and resolution, the story of Priam, an old man, who against the odds would felicitously ransom the body of his beloved son from Achiles' wrath. But he also had to be brave, because he could only counteract Achilles' unprecedented act with another equally unprecedented and bold one, without clearly dismissing who he was, or getting lost in the way, like Achilles seemed to be, wrecked by anger and pain, but bringing about a

suspension of things that deepened into his own sense of self. As Cullette puts it, it is in life and death situations that we make the most important decisions regarding aging and identity – "Verbal choices representing the meaning of "aging" get made under pressure, in particular historical, geographical, economic, discursive, and chronological contexts" (Gullette, *Aged by Culture* 124) – or, in a more peremptory way : "When the risks are high, our discursive decisions will be attempts to hold on to our worth." (Gullette, *Aged by Culture* 123)

The narrative voice verbalizes Priam's thoughts on his way home:

> It is only a provisional triumph, of course; the gods are not to be trusted when they tilt the balance momentarily in your favour. And what sort of triumph is it to be bringing home the body of a son? But he has done something for which he will be remembered for as long as such stories are told. He has stepped into a space that till now was uninhabited and found a way to fill it. Not as he filled his old role as king, since all he had to do in that case was follow convention, slip his arms into the sleeves of an empty garment and stand still, but as one for whom every gesture had to be hit upon, every word discovered anew, to say nothing of the conviction needed to carry all to its conclusion. He has done that and is coming home, even in these last days of his life, as a man remade.
>
> Look, he wants to shout, I am still here, but the *I* is different. I come as a man of sorrow bringing the body of my son for burial, but I come also as a hero of the deed that till now was never attempted. (208-209)

Priam also recalls the glimpse he has had into Somax's life with tenderness and pleasure.

We have seen that a meaningful life needs an autobiographical story. That in spite of the drawbacks, the hardships, the suffering and the pain we are able to sew our own story into a meaningful plot is proof of our humanity and capacity for transcendence, and that we can overcome the worst that life can throw at us. The truth is that life is neither easy inside nor outside fiction, but we can use the latter to enlighten the former and make it more endurable. By providing

us with a story of self-improvement in which the individual has to face unbearably difficult situations in his old age, even the worst of all, that is, the death of a son, Malouf enriches and stretches our life-course imaginaries, helping us fight our ageist bias.

A powerful story stretches life's meaning until the last breath. In the next section, we see Achilles in his hut, ready again for action. There is an oblique reference to the cause of his death: "His heels glow." (211) At this point, the narrative voice makes a swift transition between Achiles' enlivened mood and his destiny, suggesting that Achilles faces his death contented, even happily: "In the instant warmth and energy that fills him, the end, which is so close now, seems to have been miraculously suspended." (211) What matters is how we confront our destiny, not our destiny. The next words, that start a new paragraph, confirm Achilles' destiny: "It has not." (212)

Achilles' life stories have finally brought them face to face with the bare fact of existence. As American philosopher John Richardson puts it in his book *Heidegger:* "Beneath our pragmatic directedness we pursue a more essential project, for each of us the same. We are tasked with the need to realize and achieve our particular "mineness," to become our own self, no longer submerged in the collective *das Man."* (Richardson 173) This is what Heidegger calls "authenticity," because Achiles has always known what his destiny is and, in spite of that, he faces it head-on and bravely. Richardson summarises Heidegger's notion of "authenticity" quite succinctly, where "guilt" stands for the circumstances everybody always already finds oneself in in life:

> It lies in anticipation (properly facing death) plus resoluteness (properly facing guilt) – though really these are not independent but require one another. In anticipating death I recognize it as a possibility, and this changes my relation to my aims or goals – I pursue them as possibilities too, rather than awaiting them as future actualities. And in resoluteness over guilt I choose my heritage while recognizing its contingency – the impossibility of making or justifying myself "from the ground up." (Richardson 174)

Immediately, in the same section, we witness Priam's death. We see Neoptolemus sailing for Troy, and next we see him chasing Priam in his palace. Like Achilles, Priam lives an authentic life until the very end, fighting for his life until the last breath, even though he knows that his story ends tragically. As Malouf reminded us, how could it end otherwise? Priam's end, which involves Neoptolemus, who "knows already that the last days of this story belongs to him," (212) symbolizes the final victory of the Greeks and the end of Troy. It is also supposed to "heroically" stage Neoptolemus revenge of his father's death, but as we said, Malouf is interested in another kind of heroism this time.

Neoptolemus' revenge turns into a butcher's job:

> All scrag and bones, the old man he has fallen upon, like a dog that has to be put down and refuses to go quietly, half-rises and wrestles in his grip. He wrenches sideways, resisting the blade, and the boy, for all his ready strength and sinew, and the hardness and agility of youth, grunts with the effort and grows breathless. His heart is racing. His palms are slippery with sweat.
>
> Awkwardly aspraddle, he cries out like a child in his frustration – this is ridiculous! – and tugs the head back hard in his locked forearm, his right hand hacking at cartilage. He repeats the cry and hacks and hacks. Warm blood jerks over his fist. (213)

Priam defecates on himself. When Neoptolemus finally meets his destiny, he feels more miserable than ever. So much so, that he apologizes to his father: "Nothing here has gone cleanly or as he wished. All botched! All scramble and boyish hot confusion. His chin sunk on his breast, 'Pardon me, father,' he whispers." (214) Most unsettling of all, just before giving the final blow as he called his father's name, Priam had turned "a ghastly far-off smile." (213) As in the case of Achilles, only an authentic life embedded in a truly meaningful life story could make Priam meet his death with a smile.

Contrary to Achilles and Priam, Neptolemus meets his heroic destiny miserably. While singer-poets will tell his story in glorious terms, there is nothing in his story he feels he can be proud of: "And for him the misery of this moment will last forever; that is the hard fact he must live with. However the story is told and elaborated, the raw shame of it will be with him now till his last breath." (214) On the other hand, and despite the shameful conditions of his death, Priam dies a heroic death and he dies at peace. However, *Ransom* does not end with some poet-singer telling the story of Achilles or Priam or Neoptolemus, but with Somax. We know he had a reputation for being a storyteller and a spinner of tales, and that is how he is portrayed at the end of the book, telling about the incredible adventure we have just read. Of course, people distrust him. How could a mule driver take the place of Priam's herald, Idaeus? The message, however, is that story telling and myth is not the exclusive reserve of gods, kings and heroes, but that it goes from the bottom up. Their origin is usually the folk tale.

Malouf is a storyteller, and he likes to see himself as one. While commenting on *Ransom*, he said he was interested in finding out what form of redemption, what kind of story was available to an old man in the epic world to redeem himself and be remembered. Interestingly, Malouf admits that he came up with this story because he was an old man, which makes us wonder whether representations of old age by old artists offer us a glimpse into how they perceive old age or themselves as aged. Perhaps, Malouf wants to postulate with *Ransom* his place as an old man in society, in the same way that the narrator Dante finds his place in society as a writer by writing *Johnno*, a novel Malouf has repeatedly stated is highly autobiographical. Was he thinking of himself when, in the last paragraph of the novel, he says about Somax: "This old fellow, like most storytellers, is a stealer of other men's tales, of other men's lives" (218)? When writing *Ransom*, was Malouf aware that he was writing his last novel? Is it meant to stand as a testament, like Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, to his fiction writing? In this case, there would be a slight displacement of Malouf's real motives in the novel. Unlike Priam, he would not be so much concerned about the stories people will tell about him, or not mainly so, to the extent that Malouf has been a public

literary figure for some time in Australia, but about whether his stories will be read and reread and remembered in the future.

After all, what will define Malouf's posthumous life is his stature as writer:

> Because it really is concerned with what is possible to a man who is too old to take part any longer in an active warrior culture. And because he can't do that, he has to discover some other form of heroic action. Because what he's concerned with – like everybody on that world – is the only form of immortality it allows; that is, the story that will be told of him when he is dead. He has to replace what he knows is inevitable – his own ignominious death – with some other more striking story, so that his name is spoken that is what will define him. Maybe you have to be an old man yourself to conceive of that, and to write it. (83)

It is Malouf's high regard for storytelling and the example of what kind of heroism is possible in old age that makes *Ransom* such a valuable gift to critical cultural age studies. Perhaps someday people will read *Ransom* as people read *King Lear*, as a book that offers interesting insights into cultural and gerontology studies on old age. Sara Falcus stresses the importance of the alliance between literary cultural studies on aging and scientific work on gerontology, on the basis of their common interest in storytelling and narrative:

> Traditionally the preserve of the literary, narrative has now entered gerontology and become established within both theoretical and therapeutic environments. With its insistence on the temporal, narrative is of obvious interest to those exploring age, often based on the idea that we live storied lives. (Falcus 50)

What's more, because of the limits inherent in scientific discourse, fiction and narrative can reach where scientific gerontology cannot. Falcus quotes Hannah Zeilig on this point: "Narrative, literary and critical gerontology all share an ability to confront (rather than shirk) the

ambiguities and complexities of age, ageing and later life and an interest in quizzing the cultural norms of ageing via non-scientific forms of knowing." (Falcus 57)

Conclusion

David Malouf's fiction writings span from the publication of *Johnno* in 1975 to the publication of *Ransom* in 2009, and he reached his peak as a fiction writer in the 1990s with the publication of *The Great World* and *Remembering Babylon,* which won several prestigious national and international awards. Malouf is both a beloved local and national writer in Australia, and a well-known author in postcolonial studies. Though only anecdotical, the only Australian writer to have won the Nobel Prize for literature, Patrick White (1912-1990), who had a reputation for his elitism and unsociability, befriended Malouf and openly admired his novels. (Willbanks 16)

On the one hand, Malouf's first novel, *Johnno,* which is set in his local town, is still a spiritual guide for Brisbane youths and a much beloved novel for Brisbanites, and his autobiography *12 Edmonstone Street* stands as a reference for anyone interested in life in Brisbane in the first half of the twentieth century. Even though Brisbane has changed a lot in almost a century, you can still recognize the most emblematic places that Johnno and Dante go through in the novel, and Malouf's poetic descriptions of the city's unique subtropical weather and vegetation have no parallel. Only five years ago, in the summer of 2014, when I visited the University of Queensland to access the Malouf archive as part of my research, the Museum of Brisbane was offering a retrospective of Malouf's work through the work of five Brisbane artists. The curators of the exhibition presented Malouf as having been the first to articulate Brisbane's identity, and in the catalogue of the exhibition, the Museum's director acknowledged that "as a city we are fortunate to have someone like David Malouf to describe and give definition to what it means to live and be from here." (Museum of Brisbane, 5) On the other hand, Malouf's fiction books *An Imaginary Life* and *Fly Away Peter* have been compulsory readings in the Australian school curriculum and in the High School Certificates exams, the equivalent to the A-levels in England or the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) in the USA.

Now that global studies and postcolonial literature are gaining presence in the Departments of Humanities of the most prestigious Universities, *Remembering Babylon* is likely to remain in their curricula for years to come. In connection to *Remembering Babylon, An Imaginary Life* still receives much word-of-mouth praise. When mentioning my interest in David Malouf, I still remember my colleagues asking me whether I had read *An Imaginary Life* yet. I have to say that it surpassed my expectations, and those whom I recommended it, loved it as well. The fact that in international congresses and conferences on Global Studies and Literature everyone has read these novels provides an icebreaker and a common ground, similar to the English language that we all share and allows us to communicate regardless of where you come from. As a PhD candidate from a small town in the Mediterranean coast, I have to admit that writing about David Malouf and his novels has posed a challenge.

In light of the research carried out in this thesis, it is now time to weigh David Malouf's contribution to the field of gender studies. The hypothesis with which I began my research, that is, whether men play a key role in his writings, has been confirmed in a way that has surpassed my expectations. Now, it is time to recapitulate our most relevant findings.

- Firstly, our analysis has clearly revealed that definitions of manhood and masculinities are closely tied to national identity. Malouf knows the Australian legend well. Emulating Kipling's voice in his popular poem "If" and the American literature about the far West, Australia's first writers found a similar masculine, manly voice in the literature about the bush. (Murrie 73) Frontier masculinity idolized the figure of the child, because it was closer to nature and wildness, like the Child in *An Imaginary Life.* We have seen how Edward Dyson's popular short story "The Conquering Bush" echoes in *The Great World,* or the legendary bushranger Jack Dolan in *The Conversations at Curlow Creek.* The Australian legend, as it is recollected in the bush stories, mythology and folklore, represents an exclusively male atmosphere in isolated settlements and fronts. The legend would inform war masculinities during the World Wars, in a way that would definitively define the Australian character: sceptical of authority, easy-going, egalitarian, larrikin,

resourceful, etc. David Malouf can take pride in having been recognized as an author who has contributed to the actualization and definition of this tradition in his fiction, which is no mean feat.[108]

The legend had a disastrous impact on women and the feminine. Needless to say, they are completely absent from the legend. Digger's life story in *The Great World* reflects this tradition. Digger's mother cannot understand why her husband, who had fought in the First World War lying about his age as a young lad of fifteen, is so insensitive: "…she looked at him now and wondered what it was that had bruised all feeling out of him. Or had he never had any?" (19) Moreover, the destinies of the female characters symbolically reflect their position in society. Digger's older sister is slow, and his mother goes crazy, setting her house on fire and willing herself to die. Digger realizes that men had brought the war home in a literal sense: "He had faced this sort of thing before but had not expected to see it again in his lifetime, and not here. She was willing herself out of the world, and she would do it too." (246) Mother and daughter stand for the oblivion and insignificance of women in a profoundly misogynist society. In this sense, Malouf's writing is very faithful to the legend, but it fails in giving a rightful voice to the women at the time of the narrative.

We have also seen how class, culture and ethnic background inform the legend. Thus, we have seen that, when Malouf says that he is interested in writing from the margins, he writes about the Irish or Scottish experience in Australia, as in *The Conversations at Curlow Creek* and *Remembering Babylon,* respectively. Likewise, he claims that he is interested in giving voice to characters who

---

[108] In a joint talk with Australian poets Les Murrary (1938-2019) and David Rowbotham (1924-2010), David Malouf affirms: "I tend to take Australian identity – my own and Australia's, for granted. I would only say that I am always writing from here." (Malouf, Murray, & Rowbotham, 323)

might not be articulate, like Carney and Gemmy in the abovementioned novels, but which does not mean that they are unthinking or unfeeling.

A colonial society is an outpost that has to constantly re-evaluate the power and economic relations and the cultural assumptions upon which it is based. It is a society that has to negotiate the systems of representation brought from home to meet the challenges and demands of the colonial context, as we have seen above concerning the way in which the Australian legend reconfigured gender relations. It is another feat of Malouf's novels that, by means of the suffering that comes with experience, his main characters realize that the dispossessed stand in the same relation to the well-off as they stand in relation to Empire. This realization is a form of empowerment of dissident voices; it is an empowerment of difference. At a symbolical level, this transformation can be read in terms of kinship. Malouf's main characters start out as children, who do not partake yet of the misogynistic world of adults. We can think of the relationship between Ovid and the Child in *An Imaginary Life* or Lachlan and Janet as children in *Rememembering Babylon.* As they grow up, these characters emulate the patriarchal world of adults and the patriarchal values they inherit from overseas, but they soon find out that they cannot identify with them. Ovid gives up teaching the Child, preferring instead to follow the Child into the unknown. Likewise, Lachlan and Janet grow to love Gemmy and everything he stands for.

Surprisingly, there are no examples in Malouf's fiction of a story between a male and a female character involving this type of transformation. The real actors of transformation in the novels are always male: Dante and Johnno in *Johnno;* the Child and Ovid in *An Imaginary Life;* Jim and Ashley in *Fly Away Peter;* Frank and Phil in *Harland's Half Acre;* Digger and Vic in *The Great World;* Gemmy in *Remembering Babylon;* Adair and Fergus in *The Conversations at Curlow Creek,* and Priam and Achilles in *Ransom.* There is no doubt that these transformations affect the way the male and female characters relate to each other, because they always imply the deconstruction of patriarchy. For example, in *Remembering Babylon*, Lachlan and Janet meet years later. Lachlan has lost a son in the Great War, and they both recollect the lesson Gemmy taught them years ago, that

is, that we would all be happier if the world were kinder: "What a thing Love is, she thought. And that was the word on her lips, though she did not speak it. Love. What she said was 'Lachlan' and took his large paw in her own equally scabbed and freckled one." (176)

- Secondly, Malouf intervenes in the patriarchal tradition by questioning masculine succession by right of the first-born male child, symbolically rendered in the fact that surname inheritance only passes on to the male members of the family, whereas the female members lose it. We can appreciate this intervention in the recurrence of the following themes in his novels. First, the realization that one's identity as a child depends on the place one occupies within the family, as only child, younger or older brother, twin brother, adopted child or foster child, and that this identity is not fixed. Moreover, in all of Malouf's fictional novels, there is an older brother who dies. *An Imaginary Life* provides the most illustrative case. We are told that Ovid had an older brother, and that their birthdays fell on the same day. He describes his brother as pious and devout, and he tells us that his mind was one with the farm. In contrast, Ovid's world begins where the walls surrounding the farm end. (81-82) He does not feel at home within the patriarchal scheme that his father symbolizes. One day, Ovid's older brother falls sick, and cannot attend the local celebration of the Parilia, in which he is supposed to perform a special role as heir. Next in line, Ovid takes his brother's place in the celebration. He is terrified and fears he might actually kill his brother if he believes in the celebration he is about to perform. Unfortunately, his older brother dies and Ovid believes it has been his fault: "I know it has happened – I have let some grain of belief in all this sprout in my mind, and killed him." (83) Eventually, Ovid does not assume his role as heir and escapes to the city where he starts a new life. His father remarries and starts a new family. (78) Ovid emphasizes that he is given a second life, a second opportunity. (78, 90-91)

Second, the recurrence of adopted or foster children in all of his novels, except *Johnno* and *Fly Away Peter*. The most illustrative cases are Gerard's in *Harland's Half Acre,* and Vic's in *The Great World.* The storyline of the former novel is that Frank Harland wants to recover the state that his forebears lost due to their indulgence and laziness, which he sees reflected in his father. However,

his family's only offspring is Gerard, the son of his deceased brother, who died in the First World War. Gerard's mother goes through serious economical and personal difficulties and Frank believes she does not take proper care of the child. At a turning point in the novel, she accepts money in return for letting Frank become her son's legal guardian. Gerard moves in with his uncles Frank and Tam, but the exclusively male atmosphere of the house and Frank's high expectations suffocate him. Moreover, the fact that he has been turned into a merchandise, an object of exchange, has depleted him of all subjectivity and volition. In a patriarchal society where men are expected to be the agents of desire, Gerard has been emasculated to fulfill somebody else's dreams. Tragically, he commits suicide, frustrating Frank's dream of lineage.

In *The Great World,* when his parents die, Vic moves in with the Warrenders. Vic's father, Dan Curran had been Captain Warrender's batman for three years during the Great War, and they had agreed that the Captain would take care of any of Dan's offspring in the event of his death. Back from the war, Dan turns into a wretch who beats his wife and is bullied by his drinking mates, until one day he gets killed in a brawl. Aware of his origins, deep inside, Vic always doubts his manhood. During the Second World War, as a POW in Thailand, his comrades do not like him, because he is always trying to prove himself: "Forever looking about to see what you might be thinking of him, Vic was all little burrs and catches, always uneasy with himself yet at the same time cocky, and anxious at every opportunity to put himself forward or to get the better of you. Digger couldn't stand him." (113) The Warrenders have no male offspring, and Vic takes charge of the family business multiplying its worth a thousand-fold. Money being a surrogate for the bravado of military life, Vic compensates his insecurities as a man with the endless accumulation of capital. In their regular get togethers, his former war mates cannot hide their surprise at how well Vic is doing: "Don't you read the papers?" Douggy asks Digger, "Needham's – that's him. He's practically a millionaire. Makin' money hand over fist." (249-250) Unfortunately, like Frank, Vic wants to put his son under the pressure of his martial discipline. Like Frank, Vic also sees his own father's vices and weaknesses in his son Greg:

> He looked at the boy, saw his contemptuous smile and the likeness between them, and on the other side saw his father; and there was likeness there, too. This was what Ellie and the others could not know. He felt powerless, and at a time when power was just what came to him so easily, and publicly, elsewhere. (263)

Vic and Greg fall out, and Greg leaves his parents' house. Seven years later, Vic comes across his derelict and drug addicted son living in the Rocks, the rowdiest and most debauched place in Sydney. (306-309)

Summarizing, we can see that by narrating and, thus, privileging Ovid's life and his refusal of the patriarchal system, Malouf turns the system upside down, thus privileging a freer, more egalitarian and spontaneous self. Symbolically, the recurrence of these themes in Malouf's novels and other Australian authors, for example Patrick White's *The Vivisector,* may stand for the anxiety and ambiguity that characterizes the relationship between England and Australia. Whereas India has historically been perceived as the jewel in the Crown, Australia has often been perceived as dispensable for the British. Hence the obsession with themes of succession, foster and adopted children. All in all, the complexities of patriarchal succession, that is, bloodline and male succession, call for a different type of succession in Malouf's novels, a continuation of another sort. Which one?

In his 1998 Boyer Lecture "A Spirit of Play," Malouf talks about the origins of the colonization of Australia. He contrasts a Western system based on patriarchy and the possession of land, which is a symbol of status and power, to an Aboriginal type of possession of a spiritual sort. The former one is based on hierarchical relations and exploitation, the latter on sustainability. In the Aboriginal worldview, you do not own the land, you belong to it. According to Malouf, the Aboriginal peoples are absolutely right in this, and we have to learn from them. At the time of Western colonization, the land was distributed taking into account the family unit, reflecting the

patriarchal system Malouf questions. Since the head of the family unit was the man, passing from nothing to owning a piece of land made him, automatically, a man in the full sense of the word:

> It was the promise of land, fifty acres for a man, thirty more for his wife, and thirty for each child, that was the new element in this experiment and a defining one in our history, not least because of the conflict it involved with the original owners. That is another story, another and darker history interwoven with our more triumphal one, and the conflict over land that is at the centre of it is not just about occupation and ownership; it is also about what land means. For Aboriginal people land is the foundation of spiritual being. For Europeans it represents security and status, or it is a source of wealth.
>
> The desire of ordinary men and women to become property owners was the making of this country. To own a piece of Australia, even if it was only a quarter-acre block, became the Australian dream. The desperation that lay behind it, the determination of poor men and women to grasp what was offered and raise themselves out of landless poverty into a new class, was the source of a materialism that is still one of our most obvious characteristics.
>
> It has taken us 200 years to see that there might be another and more inward way of possessing a place, and that in this, as in so much else, the people we dispossessed had been there before us. (*A First Place,* 132-133)

Malouf privileges in his novels a spiritual sort of possession over one based on patriarchy, that is, male and bloodline succession based on relations of hierarchy and ownership. We can see it in the way the novels we were discussing above unfold. In *Harland's Half Acre,* when his nephew commits suicide, Frank realizes the absurdity of his dreams of grandeur. After a short crisis, he moves to one of the Islands in the Pacific in the Easternmost part of the country. There is a new turn to his art, where the world of man is placed within the larger world of nature: "When he admitted the human to this world it was on nature's terms." (187) In *The Great World,* Digger

suffers from a strange condition called hyperthymesia. He remembers everything. When he is captured by the Japanese, he is the one in charge to keep track of the deceased and survivors among the POWs who have been captured. When his life and Vic's take different paths, he asks himself why Vic still sticks to him. Then, he realizes that Vic needs a witness to his life, not in terms of material and worldly success, but of what his life had been like as a man:

> It was a moment Digger would remember; when he saw clearly, and for the first time, what Vic wanted of him. He was to be one of the witnesses to his life. Not to his achievements, anyone could see those, which is why he hadn't bothered to draw Digger's attention to them; but to those qualities in him that would tip the balance on the other, the invisible side.
>
> It had taken Digger so long to grasp this because the idea that a man might need *witnesses* to his life was so foreign to him. But once he had seen it, though the role did not please him, he stuck. It was one more of the responsibilities that had been laid upon him. (251)

Finally, it is worth mentioning as an example of spiritual succession with Aboriginal roots *The Conversations at Curlow Creek,* where dreaming is a major narrative force. Carney, an Irish runaway, is held prisoner by local troopers and interrogated by a local officer on the eve of his hanging, also from Ireland, Michael Adair. Adair has been riding for two days without rest and is exhausted, and Carney has been badly beaten. Their conversation is haunted by memories of the past and catnaps, during which they have and share dreams of escape. Later, Adair will find out that Carney and him, and everything they dreamt about in the hut, have become part of the folklore and history of the land:

> How had so many details of a thing only he knew, and had communicated to no one, got out of his head and become general currency, begun to make the rounds of barber-shops and shipping offices and barracks and the dinner-tables of the better class of merchants and gentleman farmers" – an event merely dreamed,

> when his moral faculties were for a moment in abeyance in the other-world of sleep, an act, to him impermissible, out of a freer and different life. (257)

- Thirdly, Malouf questions stereotypical representations of gender in his novels. Patriarchy needs clearly differentiated masculine and feminine gender roles, which at the same time correspond to a strictly neat distinction between male and female biological sex that legitimizes heterosexuality. If there is any deviation from this standard norm, it is perceived as a monstrosity that needs to be corrected or purged from the social body.

Malouf presents these stereotypes humorously, so as to relativize them. For example, in *Remembring Babylon,* during one of Mr. Frazer and Gemmy's outings to botanize, Mr. Frazer gets a word wrong, and he scandalizes Gemmy. As always, humour and blasphemy, gender and taboo go hand in hand:

> To get a name wrong was comic but could also be blasphemous. In one case what emerged from Mr Frazer's mouth was an old man's testicle, in another, the tuber came out as a turd. Of course he understood immediately that he had botched the thing and after a good deal of trying amended it, but so scandalously on one occasion that Gemmy was shocked, and looked about fearfully, since the word Mr Frazer had hit upon was one the surrounding spirits should never have heard on a *man's* lips, and he worried a little that some of these things might get into the book. (60)

In this same line, a characteristic of Malouf's style is that he describes some situations or characters as funnily queer. In *An Imaginary Life,* Ovid describes himself, next to Ryzak, as "an hysterical old woman." (52) In *Johnno,* Johnno's girlfriend Binkie is described as "tomboyish." (91) Likewise, in *Harland's Half Acre,* the narrative voice describes Frank's stepmother, whom he never gets to know, in the same terms. (11) However, in *The Conversations at Curlow Creek,* Virgilia, despite possessing many manly qualities, is described as "not a tomboy, not at all" (80). In the same novel, one of the troopers, Kersey, likes to insist to his mate that they look like "a couple of old married

men." (9, 133) In *Remembering Babylon,* Lachlan's foster father, Jock, does not like it when Gemmy wants to hug him. His wife, Ellen, is surprised at her husband's "mixture of forcefulness and almost girlish modesty." (67) In *Ransom,* one of Achille's warriors sucks his fingers in a "maidenly way that is almost comic." (171) This queer language gently questions stereotypical representations of gender.[109]

Furthermore, contradictory gender characteristics and forces of attraction and repulsion coexist in the same character. Sometimes, a male character may exaggerate his masculinity to hide his sensitivity. In *Johnno,* the masculine and overbold eponymous hero of the novel suddenly reproaches Dante his oblivion towards his feelings: "I've loved you – and you've never given a fuck for me, except as a character in one of your novels." (154) On other occasions, intense male bonding alternates with an equally intense male homophobia. In *The Great World*, the narrative voice describes Digger alternatively as hating Vic – "he had something against this cove that was fundamental," and deeply bound to him: "They were made for one another." They get as distant and as close as any two men can be in a way that the narrative voice cannot find words for:

> Under the influence of this arrangement – the close physical unit they formed, the right on occasion to eat the other man's rice, the unpleasant and sometimes revolting duties they had to perform for one another, and which Vic especially carried out with a plain practical tenderness and concern you would not have suspected in him – under the influence of all this, there grew up between them a relationship that was so full of intimate and no longer shameful revelations that they lost all sense of difference.
>
> It wasn't a friendship exactly – you choose your friends. This was different; more or less, who could say? There was no name for it.

[109] Malouf does not use this kind of language in *Fly Away Peter* and *The Great World,* his most patriotic novels.

> The old bitterness died hard in Digger. Vic knew that and accepted it. It seemed to Digger at times that Vic sought him out just because of it. But that was *his* business.
>
> There were days when they couldn't stand the sight of one another. That was inevitable up here. They were always on edge. The petty irritations and suspicions they were subject to in their intense preoccupations with themselves made them spiteful and they would lash out in vicious argument. Digger was sickened by the hatefulness he was capable of. And not just to Vic either, but to poor old Doug as well. He would crawl away, humiliated and ashamed. (134)

Finally, gender stereotypes are also problematized as the characters age. We have seen the examples of Dante, Ovid, Frank Harland, Digger and Vic. The case of Lachlan in *Remembering Babylon* is the most dramatic. It implies both a conflict of identities between a softer and a harder self, and a step into adulthood in which, sadly, his harder self prevails. When Gemmy arrives in the colony, they are inseparable. He feels like Robinson Crusoe dragging along his faithful Friday and imagines that, one day, he will become an adventurer or an explorer and Gemmy will be his guide. (54) However, when the grown-ups start to bully Gemmy, their sons start to make fun of Lachlan's pride in having Gemmy always at his heels. Going "in the direction of manhood," which implies being accepted by your male peers, Lachlan distances himself from Gemmy: "It was one of the conditions of his move into an older group that Gemmy could not appear, and he had, gently at first, then coldly, to discourage him." (144) In *Ransom,* old Priam needs to come up with a deed that has never been attempted before if he wants to counteract Achilles' sacrilegious act and ransom the body of his son Hector. As Priam puts it to his wife Hecuba, he needs to come up with "Something impossible. Something *new."* (58) The question the novel answers is what kind of heroism is left to a man in his old age. That is the reason why Priam decides to go to Achilles' camp at night and talk to him man to man, stripped of his worldly accoutrements. Reminding Achilles "what we men are," bound to our mortality as fathers and sons, Priam entreats him to

stop his outrageous attitude, and thus, free himself and return him the body of Hector so that he can finally have a proper burial as it is established by custom:

> Think, Achilles. Think of your son, Neoptolemus. Would you not do for him what I am doing here for Hector? Would your father, Peleus, not do the same for you? Strip himself of all the ornaments of power, and with no concern any longer for pride or distinction, do what is most human – come as I do, a plain man white-haired and old, and entreat the killer of his son, with whatever small dignity is left to him, to remember his own death, and the death of his father, and do as these things are honourably done among us, to take the ransom I bring and give me back my son." (184-185)

- Fourthly, male homosocial desire and male homoeroticism constitute the main driving force in Malouf's novels. To mention two examples, Jim Saddler and Ashley Crowther in *Fly Away Peter,* and Achilles and Patroclus in *Ransom* develop profoundly intimate and trusting relationships. Ashley Crowther has studied for twelve years at Cambridge in England and Germany and, when his father suddenly dies, has to return to Australia as a landowner. One day, in one of his outings, he comes across Jim Saddler, soon discovering that he is a dab hand at ornithology. In spite of their different backgrounds, there is an immediate trust and understanding between the two. Ashley decides to offer him the job of keeping the record of the birds that circulate in his lands: "But he had said, 'Well then, you're my man,' having that sort of power, and Jim was made," (5) and Jim accepts the offer on the spot: "As for Ashley Crowther, he would take the risk. Something in the silence that existed between them, when they just sat about on stumps and Ashley crossed his legs and rested his chin in the palm of his hand, made Jim believe there could be common ground between them, whatever the difference." (7) As time passes, their first impressions are confirmed, and they become close. When Ashley's friends come to visit from Europe, Jim takes them on boat trips around the swamps, where he shows them the local birds. During these tours,

when Ashley needs a rest, he takes a glass of champagne and sits with Jim. Otherwise, they stand at each end of the boat, keeping a balance between the two:

> At either end of the boat they held a balance. That was so clear there was no need to state it. There was no need in fact to make any statement at all. But when Ashley wanted someone to talk to, he would come down where Jim was making a raft of reeds to attract whistlers, or laying out seed, and talk six to the dozen, and in such an incomprehensible rush of syllables that Jim, often, could make neither head nor tail of it, though he didn't mind. Ashley too was an enthusiast, but not a quiet one. Jim understood that, even if he never did grasp what Wager was – something musical, though not of his sort; and when Ashley gave up words altogether and came to whistling, he was glad to be relieved at last of even pretending to follow. Ashley's talk was one kind of music and the tuneless whistling another. What Ashley was doing, Jim saw, was expressing something essential in himself, like the 'sweet pretty creature' of the willy wagtails (which didn't mean that either). Having accepted the one he could easily accept the other.
>
> Ashley did not present a mystery to Jim, though he did not comprehend him. They were alike and different, that's all, and never so close as when Ashley, watching, chattered away, whistled, chattered again, and then just sat, easily contained in their double silence. (35)

At the beginning of *Ransom,* we are told the story of Achilles and Patroclus. Monoetius, King of Opus, comes to see Peleus, Achilles' father, to ask asylum for his son. His son Patroclus, barely ten years old, like Achilles, has killed Amphidamas' son in a fight over a game of knucklebones. When Achilles sees the scene, he is spellbound. There is an immediate sympathy between the two boys that binds them in an indestructible passion, as they relive the death that has brought them together, Patroclus recalling it and Achilles imagining it: "…and for the first time Achilles meets his gaze. Patroclus looks at him. The blow connects, bone on bone. And the

boy, his clear eyes still fixed on Achilles, takes it. With just a slight jerk of the shoulders, an almost imperceptible intake of breath." (13) When Peleus agrees to adopt Amphidamas' son, Achilles and Patroculus know that their destinies have been sealed:

> So it was settled. Patroclus was to be his adoptive brother, and the world, for Achilles, reassembled itself around a new centre. His true spirit leapt forth and declared itself. It was as if he had all along needed this other before he could become fully himself. From this moment on he could conceive of nothing in the life he must live that Patroclus would not share in and approve. (13-14)

To conclude, there is no doubt that David Malouf has made an important contribution to the development of the legend in Australian literary culture. He has fictionalised the history of Australia from the early nineteenth century to the end of the twentieth century, in a way that captures the essence of the legend, but also transforming it. There is no question either that the beginnings of Australian colonisation were male, not only because Australia was a convict transportation colony and the majority of convicts were male, which only worsened its bias and prejudices, but because the frontier and the military were exclusively male cultures. As we have pointed out, whereas Malouf is faithful to the Australian origins in this regard, we also miss an acknowledgement of the important role women played in the construction of Australia. Taking this into account, a further venue of research would be to revise Australian history from the point of view of female authors, or authors that emphasised the experience of women in the construction of Australia's national identity. In this regard, a good starting point would be Rebecca Sparrow's *The Girl Most Likely*. In 2004, it was chosen, together with *Johnno,* as the novel that best represented what it means to be a Brisbanite. (Wikipedia, "Johnno")

Beyond this, Malouf is an inescapable reference among contemporary Australian writers, especially those concerned with men and masculinities. On the grounds of the history of Australia that we have emphasised during the writing of the thesis, writing about men and masculinities is an important tradition in Australian literary culture.

To my knowledge, Tim Winton (b. 1960) and Christos Tsiolkas (b. 1965) are the most prominent Australian authors in this tradition. Their books deal with men's identities and masculine values in a world that is constantly under transformation. Their most popular novels, Winton's *Cloudstreet* and Tsiolkas' *The Slap*, stand as emblematic representations of Australian contemporary society and culture. Tim Winton explores mateship, the adoption of masculine values by women, and the damage of masculine culture in society. In his novel *Breath* (2008), he tells the story of a young boy, Bruce Pike, who fulfils his masculinity by performing dangerous surfing feats. He meets a surfing star, Sando, and his wife, Eve, who was also a surf star but had an accident and is now crippled. Even if at the beginning there is no test of manhood to be happily passed, as in Doris Lessing's short story "Through the tunnel," (Lessing) but a series of increasingly dangerous challenges to be overcome, Bruce and Sando know their limits. However, Bruce finds out that Eve does not, and the novel ends in tragedy. The novel is a meditation on male bonding and the risks inherent in the masculine values of competition and self-overcoming. (Winton, *Breath*) In another one of his recent novels, *Eyrie* (2013), Tim Winton explores the struggles of two adults whom the world has shattered and cannot find their way back. Tom Keely is a former environmental activist who has been politically torn down, and Gemma, a single mother and victim of domestic violence. Their relationship starts when Gemma's son initiates a friendship with Tom, which leads to the two adults getting to know each other. Even though the reader expects that the child's intervention will change the destinies of Tom and Gemma, this never happens. The novel magnificently conveys the agony of not being able to get out of the hole. (Winton, *Eyrie*)

The least that can be said about Christos Tsiolkas is that he is an angry writer. As a second-generation Greek immigrant Australian, he portrays the difficulty his characters have in adapting to an aggressively competitive and homophobic society. In one of his latest novels, *Barracuda,* the main character, Dan Kelly is a second-generation Greek immigrant, like himself, who gets a sports scholarship to a private school in Melbourne for his swimming skills. Unable to keep up with the

high demands of elite sport competition and class stigma, he enters a spiral of self-denial and self-destruction. During a spell in prison, literature completely transforms him.

In a second-hand bookstore with his mother, he recalls that his favourite place in prison was the library. He mentions three books that made a strong impression on him: David Malouf's *Remembering Babylon* and *Johnno*, and William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury.* In a passage in which the narrative voice emphasises the importance of memory over time, Dan acknowledges that he was completely spellbound by *Johnno,* that he read it in one go and could not help starting to read it again that same night.

What better tribute to a living author and his work than to acknowledge his imprint on one of your most emblematic characters?

> … Dan picked up worn copies of Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* and David Malouf's *Remembering Babylon.*
>
> His mother chuckled as she stood beside him at the counter, and paid for the books. 'That looks pretty heavy reading there, mate,' she said as they headed back to the car. She threw him a quizzical look. 'I don't remember you reading much at all when you were at school.'
>
> Dan hesitated. He wanted to say that he'd learned to read in gaol, to really read. He wanted to tell her that the library had been his favourite place inside, that when he read *As I lay Dying* he'd found a voice that made sense of time and space as he was experiencing it in gaol, that it had spoken to him more clearly and more profoundly than any voice he'd ever encountered before: of how the past could not be separated from memory, of how it was not only time that changed people, it was memory as well. He wished he could tell her how he'd read *Johnno* in one sitting at the library table and that he'd started it again before lights out that night. He wished he could tell her about discovering words and how words could become song, something he had never understood at school. Not that he had ever scoffed

> at books; his parents would never have tolerated that – even his father's suspicion of the learned had never extended to learning itself, he loved stories too much. (339-340)

The world changes faster than ever. In the last five years, Malouf has got involved in a dispute around The Ramsey Centre for Western Civilisation in Sydney, for its Eurocentric and right-wing bias,[110] and he seems to have fallen out of fashion. The former is quite surprising, taking into account Malouf's intersectional identity as a gay of Lebanese immigrant origin on his father's side, and the themes he develops in *An Imaginary Life* and *Remembering Babylon*. The latter might be less surprising, taking into account Malouf's exclusive focus on men and masculinities in his novels and the recent pro-feminist new wave involving the entertainment industry such as the #MeToo movement. It is still urgent and necessary to deconstruct the exclusive and excluding young middle-class white heterosexual male and masculine experience of the world, but in a way that also gives a proper voice to women's experience. At this moment, only his latest collection of poetry, *Earth Hour* (2014), is being taught at schools.[111]

[110] David Malouf was interviewed on this topic at the Ramsey Centre in May 2018. The interview can be found on the Internet on the Ramsey Centre's main webpage. (Malouf, *David Malouf reflects on Western civilisation*)

[111] I would like to thank my friend John Ryan, who works as a secondary school teacher in Australia, for updating me about the polemics around The Ramsay Centre and the compulsory Australian school curriculum.

Bibliography

Achebe, Chinua. "An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's 'Heart of Darkness." *The Northon Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, edited by Vincent B. Leitch, Second Edi, W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2010.

Ahluwalia, Pal. "Derrida." *Global Literary Theory*, edited by Richard J Lane, Routledge, 2013, pp. 81–93.

Ahmed, Sarah. *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*. Kindle Edi, Routledge, 2004.

Applewhite, Ashton. *This Chair Rocks: A Manifesto Against Ageism*. Networked Books.

Ashcroft, Bill. *On Post-Colonial Futures*. Continuum, 2001.

Austen, Jane. *Mansfield Park*. Penguin Books, 1966.

Baker, Candida. *Yeacker 3: Australian Writers Talk about Their Work*. Picador, 1989.

Ballyn, Susan, and Lucy Frost. *A Spanish Convict in Colonial Australia (1808-1877). Who Was Adelaide de La Thoreza?* Edicions +Bernat, 2018.

Barnes, Julian. *Through the Window*. Kindle Edi, Vintage, 2012.

Barry, Peter. *Beginning Theory. An Introduction To Literary and Cultural Theory.* Manchester, 2009.

Bartlett, Thomas. *Wikipedia "Irish Rebellion of 1798."* https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Irish_Rebellion_of_1798. Accessed 9 Aug. 2019.

Beauvoir, Simone de. *The Coming of Age*. W. W. Norton & Company Ltd., 1996.

---. *The Second Sex*. Vintage, 1997.

Bennet, Tegan. *David Malouf Interviewed by Tegan Bennett Daylight at Sydney Writers' Festival.* https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1MgFgpMpEBM. Accessed 15 Aug. 2015.

Bhabha, Homi. "Are You a Man or a Mouse?" *Constructing Masculinity*, edited by S. Berger, M., Wallis, B., Wason, Routledge, 1995, pp. 57–65.

---. *The Location of Culture*. Routledge, 2010.

Bishop, Elisabeth. *Complete Poems*. Chattus & Windus, 1983.

Bloom, Harold. *Shakespeare. The Inventions of the Human*. Penguin, 1998.

Bourdieu, Pierre. *Masculine Domination*. Stanford University Press, 2001.

Brantlinger, Patrick. "Victorians and Africans: The Genealogy of the Myth of the Dark Continent." *"Race," Writing and Difference*, edited by Henry Louis Gates Jr., Chicago University Press, 1986, pp. 185–222.

Brod, H., and M. Kaufman, editors. *Theorizing Masculinities*. 1994.

Brooke, Allen. "Robinhood in Australia." *The New York Times*, 19 Jan. 1997, https://www.nytimes.com/1997/01/19/books/robin-hood-in-australia.html.

Buchbinder, David. *Studying Men and Masculinities*. Routledge Kindle Edition, 2013.

Burns, Shannon. "The Interview." *Wet Ink*, vol. 17, 2009, pp. 295–301, https://www.emeraldinsight.com/10.1016/S0163-2396(02)26021-4.

Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble*. Routledge, 2007.

Carey, Peter. *True History of the Kelly Gang*. Faber and Faber Ltd, 2000.

Cerezo, Marta, and Ángeles Concha Muñoz. *Ejes de La Literature Inglesa Medieval y Renacentista*. UNED, 2010.

Coe, Jonathan. *Number 11*. Penguin Books, 2015.

---. *What a Carve Up!* Penguin Books, 2008.

Coetzee, J. M. *Foe*. Penguin Books, 2010.

Connell, R. W. *Masculinities*. Second Edi, Polity Press, 1995.

Connell, Raewyn, and Rebecca Pearse. *Gender in World Perspective*. Third edit, Polity Press, 2015.

Connell, Raewyn W. *Southern Theory*. Polity Press, 2007.

Conrad, Joseph. *Heart of Darkness*. Penguin Classics, 2007.

Crespo, E. "Introducción General." *La Ilíada*, Gredos, 2006.

Culler, Jonathan. *Literary Theory*. Oxford University Press, 2000.

Daniel, Hellen, and David Malouf. "Interview with David Malouf." *Australian Humanities Review*, no. 3, 1996.

De Heer, Rolf. *Ten Canoes*. Palace films, 2006.

Defoe, Daniel. *Robinson Crusoe*. OUP, 2007.

Derrida, Jacques. *Espolones*. Pre-textos, 1981.

---. *Limited Inc*. Edited by Gerald Graff, Northwestern University Press, 1988.

---. *Monolingualism of the Other or The Prosthesis of Origin*. Stanford University Press, 1998.

---. *Of Grammatology*. The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997.

---. *Politics of Friendship*. Verso, 1997.

---. *The Beast and the Sovereign Vol. 1*. The University of Chicago Press, 2009.

Dyson, Edward. *The Conquering Bush*. http://www.telelib.com/authors/D/DysonEdward/prose/belowontop/belowontop24.html. Accessed 8 Sept. 2016.

Falcus, Sarah. "Literature and Ageing." *Routledge Handbook of Cultural Gerontology*, edited by Julia Twigg and Wendy Martin, Routledge, 2015, pp. 53–60.

Flanagan, Richard. "Freeing My Father." *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 2013.

---. *The Narrow Road to the Deep North*. Vintage, 2013.

Flannigan-Saint-Aubin, Arthur. "The Male Body and Literary Metaphors." *Theorizing Masculinities*, edited by Michael Brod, Haryy and Kaufman, Sage Publications, 1994, pp. 239–58.

Foucault, Michael. *History of Sexuality Vol. 1*. Penguin Books, 1978.

Freud, Sigmund. *The Uncanny*. Penguin Books, 2003.

---. *Totem and Taboo*. Routledge, 2001.

Garton, Stephen. "War and Masculinity in Twentieth Century Australia." *Journal of Australian Studies*, vol. 22, no. 56, 1998, pp. 86–95, doi:10.1080/14443059809387363.

Girard, René. *Deceit, Desire and the Novel*. The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976.

Goi, Eleonora. "Eleonora Goi in Conversation with David Malouf." *Le Simplegadi* ., vol. XII, no. 13, 2014, pp. 105–16.

Grazia, Margreta. "The Scandal of Shakespeare's Sonnets." *Shakespeare Through the Ages*, edited by

Harold Bloom, Infobase Publishing, 2008.

Gullette, Margaret Morganroth. *Aged by Culture*. The University of Chicago Press, 2004.

---. *Agewise*. The University of Chicago Press, 2013.

Gutterman, David S. "Postmodernism and the Interrogation of Masculinity." *Theorizing Masculinities*, edited by Michael M. Brod, Harry and Kaufman, Sage Publications, 1994, pp. 219–38.

Guyer, Paul. *Kant*. Routledge, 2006.

Hackett, J. Edward, editor. *House of Cards and Philosophy*. John Wiley & Sons Inc, 2016.

Hassall, Anthony J. "The Wild Colonial Boy - the Making of Colonial Legends in David Malouf's The Conversations at Curlow Creek." *Antipodes*, no. December, 2000.

Heideger, Martin. *Being and Time*. State University of New York Press, 1996.

Hughes, Robert. *The Fatal Shore*. Vintage, 2003.

Hurston, Zora Neale. *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. HarperCollins e-books, 2004.

Indyk, Ivor. *David Malouf*. Oxford University Press Australia, 1993.

Jacobson, Howard. *Pussy*. Jonathan Cape, 2017.

JanMohamed, Abdul R. "The Economy of Manichean Allegory: The Function of Racial Difference in Colonialist Literature." *"Race," Writing and Difference*, edited by Henry Louis Gates Jr., University of Chicago Press, 1986, pp. 78–106.

Jonson, Ben. *Volpone (Bilingual Edition)*. Edited by Purificación Ribes, Ediciones Cátedra, 2002.

Kavanagh, Paul. "Elegies of Presence: Malouf, Heidegger and Language." *Provisional Maps: Critical Essays on David Malouf*, edited by Amanda Nettelbeck, The University of Western Australia, 1994, pp. 149–62.

Kiernan, Brian. "Australia's Postcoloniality." *Antipodes*, vol. 14, no. 1, pp. 11–16.

Kimmel, Michael S. "Masculinity as Homophobia." *Theorising Masculinities*, edited by Harry Brod and Michael Kaufman, Sage Publications, 1994, pp. 119–41.

Kirk, G. S. "Introduction." *The Illiad*, Oxford University Press, 2008, pp. vii–xviii.

Knightley, Philip. *Australia*. Kindle Fil, Vintage, 2001.

Kosofsky Sedgwick, Eve. "Gosh, Boy George, You Must Be Awfully Secure In Your Masculinity." *Constructing Masculinity*, edited by Maurice Berger et al., Routledge, 1995, pp. 11–20.

Lane, Richard J. "General Introduction." *Global Literary Theory*, edited by Richard J. Lane, Routledge, 2013, pp. i–xxxi.

---, editor. *Global Literary Theory*. Routledge, 2013.

Lessing, Doris. *Recollections*. Nelson, 1980.

Libros de Cíbola. https://librosdecibola.wordpress.com/2016/08/29/resena-washington-irving-sleepy-hollow-rip-van-winkle-el-novio-de-ultratumba-editorial-trifaldi/. Accessed 2 Aug. 2019.

Lindsay, Patrick. *The Spirit of the Digger*. Harper Collins Publishers, 2011.

López Vega, Antonio. *1914 El Año Que Cambió La Historia*. Kindle Fil, Santillana, 2014.

Lyoard, Jean-François. *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*. Manchester University Press, 1984.

Macintyre, Stuart. *A Concise History of Australia*. Cambridge University Press, 2009.

Malouf, David. *12 Edmonstone Street*. Vintage, 1999.

---. *A First Place*. Knopf, 2014.

---. "David Malouf, Less Murray, David Rowbotham: Three Talks." *Australian Literary Studies*, vol. 11, no. 3, 1984.

---. *David Malouf. Johnno, Short Stories, Poems, Essays and Interview.* Edited by James Tulip, University of Queensland Press, 1990.

---. "David Malouf Reflects on Western Civilisation, the Classical World, and Australia's British Inheritance." *The Ramsay Centre for Western Civilisation*, https://www.ramsaycentre.org/david-malouf-reflects-on-western-civilisation-the-classical-world-and-australias-british-inheritance/. Accessed 20 Aug. 2019.

---. *On Experience*. Merlbourne University Press, 2008.

---. "Report From Champagne Country." *Poems 1959-89*, 1992, https://www.poetrylibrary.edu.au/poets/malouf-david/poems/report-from-champagne-country-0226067.

Malouf, David, and Colm Tóibín. "David Malouf by Colm Tóibín." *BOMB*, vol. 101, no. Fall, 2007.

McGonegal, Julie. *Imagining Justice. The Politics of Postcolonial Forgiveness and Reconciliation.* McGill-Queen's University Press, 2009.

Moore, Clive. "Guest Editorial: Australian Masculinities." *Journal of Australian Studies*, vol. 22, no. 56, 1998, pp. 1–16, doi:10.1080/14443059809387357.

Moretti, Franco. *The Way of the World*. Verso, 1987.

Morgan, David H. J. "Theatre of War: Combat, the Military, and Masculinities." *Theorizing Masculinities*, edited by Harry Brod and Michael Kaufman, Sage, 1994, pp. 165–82.

Morgan, Sally. *My Place*. Fremantle Press, 1987.

Murrie, Linzi. "The Australian Legend: Writing Australian Masculinity/ Writing 'Australian' Masculine." *Journal of Australian Studies*, vol. 22, no. 56, 1998, pp. 68–77.

---. "The Australian Legend: Writing Australian Masculinity/Writing 'Australian' Masculine." *Journal of Australian Studies*, vol. 22, no. 56, 1998, pp. 68–77.

Museum of Brisbane. *David Malouf and Friends*. 2014.

Nandy, Ashis. *Intimate Enemy*. Oxford University Press, 2008.

Nettelbeck, Amanda. *Provisional Maps: Critical Essays on David Malouf.* The University of Western Australia, 1996.

Newton, Michael. *Wild Girls & Savage Boys*. Kindle Fil, Faber and Faber Ltd, 2010.

Nielsen, Philip. *Imagined Lives*. University of Queensland Press, 1996.

Nietzsche, Friedrich. *Beyond Good and Evil.* Cambridge University Press, 2001.

Noyce, Phillip. *Rabbit Proof Fence*. Becker Entertainment, 2002.

Prideaux, Sue. *I Am Dynamite! A Life Of Nietzsche*. Tim Duggan Books, 2018.

Randall, Don. *David Malouf*. Manchester University Press, 2007.

Reeser, Todd W. *Masculinities in Theory*. Wiley-Blackwell, 2010.

Richardson, John. *Heidegger*. Routledge, 2012.

Robinson, Ken. *Do Schools Kill Creativity?* https://www.ted.com/talks/ken_robinson_says_schools_kill_creativity. Accessed 8 Aug. 2019.

Rooney, Brigitte. "Interview with David Malouf." *Australian Literary Studies*, no. 1, 2010, pp. 82–96.

Rudd, Kevin. *Apology*. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b3TZOGpG6cM. Accessed 8 Aug. 2017.

Russell, Cameron. *Looks Aren't Everything. Believe Me, I'm a Model.* 2012, https://www.ted.com/talks/cameron_russell_looks_aren_t_everything_believe_me_i_m_a_model.

Said, Edward W. *Culture and Imperialism*. Vintage, 1994.

---. *Orientalism*. Penguin Classics, 2003.

Sarup, Madan. *Post-Structuralism and Postmodernism*. University of Georgia Press, 1993.

Scott, Kim. *Interview with Author Kim Scott*. 2011, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RO8rI1W1u3Q.

---. *That Deadman Dance*. Bloomsbury, 2010.

Scully, Pamela. "Race and Ethnicity in Women's and Gender History." *Global Literary Theory*, edited by Richard J. Lane, Routledge, 2013.

Seal, Graham. *Inventing Anzac*. University of Queensland Press, 2004.

Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky. *Between Men. English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire*. Columbia University Press, 1985.

Shakespeare, William. *King Lear*. Penguin Popular Classics, 1994.

Sousa Santos, Boaventura, and María Paula Meneses. *Epistemologías Del Sur*. Ediciones Akal, 2014.

Spinks, Lee. "An Imaginative Life: David Malouf Interviewed by Lee Spinks." *Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, vol. 44, no. 2, 2009, pp. 5–14.

Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. "Can the Subaltern Speak?.Pdf." *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, Macmillan Education, 1988, pp. 271–313, http://www.mcgill.ca/files/crclaw-discourse/Can_the_subaltern_speak.pdf.

The Bible, Revelation 20, The Defeat of Satan. https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Revelation+20%3A7-10&version=ESV. Accessed 14 July 2014.

Trías, Eugenio. *Lo Bello y Lo Siniestro*. DEBOLS!LLO, 2011.

Tsiolkas, Christos. *Barracuda*. Atlantic Books, 2013.

Tyler, Anne. *The Accidental Tourist*. Knopf, 1988.

White, Hayden. "The Historical Text As Literary Artifact." *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Literary Criticism*, edited by Vincent B. Leitch, W.W. Norton, 2001.

White, Patrick. *The Twyborn Affair*. Vintage, 1995.

---. *The Vivisector*. Vintage, 1994.

---. *Voss*. Vintage, 1994.

Whitehead, Stephen M. *Men and Masculinities*. Polity Press, 2008.

Wikipedi "Slavery Abolition Act 1833." https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Slavery_Abolition_Act_1833. Accessed 17 Aug. 2016.

Wikipedia "Aboriginal Population in Australia." https://www.creativespirits.info/aboriginalculture/people/aboriginal-population-in-australia. Accessed 15 Aug. 2016.

Wikipedia "Burma Railway." https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Burma_Railway. Accessed 14 Aug. 2016.

Wikipedia "El Niño-Southern Oscillation." https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/El_Niño–

Southern_Oscillation. Accessed 18 Aug. 2016.

Wikipedia "Getae." https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Getae. Accessed 1 Jan. 2014.

"Wikipedia 'Hekla.'" *14 July 2014*, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hekla. Accessed 14 July 2014.

Wikipedia "Hyperthymesia." https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hyperthymesia. Accessed 5 Aug. 2016.

Wikipedia "Johnno." https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Johnno. Accessed 19 July 2015.

Wikipedia "Lesko Uprising." https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lesko_uprising. Accessed 12 July 2014.

Wikipedia "May Coup in Poland." https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/May_Coup_(Poland). Accessed 12 July 2014.

Wikipedia "Moirai." https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Moirai. Accessed 15 Aug. 2016.

Wikipedia "Nestorianism." https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nestorianism. Accessed 14 July 2014.

Wikipedia "Ovid." https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ovid. Accessed 1 Jan. 2014.

Wikipedia "Polish Contribution to World War II." https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Polish_contribution_to_World_War_II. Accessed 12 July 2014.

Wikipedia "Rip Van Winkle." https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rip_Van_Winkle. Accessed 2 Aug. 2019.

Wikipedia "Voss Opera." https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Voss_(opera). Accessed 8 July 2014.

Willbanks, Ray. "A Conversation with David Malouf." *Antipodes*, vol. 4, no. 1, 1990, pp. 13–18.

Winton, Tim. *Breath*. Picador, 2008.

---. *Eyrie*. Picador, 2013.