

**Lives Without Letters: The Illiterate Other  
in *An Imaginary Life*, *Remembering Babylon*  
and *The Conversations at Curlow Creek***

**by David Malouf**

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In his first and most openly autobiographical novel, *Johnno* (1975), David Malouf records the anger and alienation he used to feel as an adolescent at his father's apparent disapproval of his literary aspirations.<sup>1</sup> He recalls how his father would not tire of advising him—a promising young poet who was known as “Dante” amongst his peers and who had successfully published his first poem by the age of sixteen<sup>2</sup>—not to read too much (*J* 51), and how he, in turn, would suspect his father, who had left school at eleven, of never having been able to find any use for literature, of, in fact, never having read a single book in his life (*J* 5). The filial resentments surfacing in *Johnno* and resurfacing again in his later works have drawn considerable critical attention to the ethnic difference that informed Malouf's relationship with his father, a second generation Lebanese whose family “ate garlic and oil, smelled different, and spoke no English” (Malouf “Kyogle” 129). Especially in attempts to assess his notoriously elusive Australianness, literary scholars have been resorting to Malouf's experience of otherness within his own family and treating his cultural identity as a matter mainly of geographical and political self-definition. In perfect keeping with Homi Bhabha's conception of hybridity and his postulation of the essential intangibility of any place outside (or in between) established cultures, they have come to the unanimous agreement that such self-definition represents a particularly complicated enterprise in the case of David Malouf, at home in and away from so many different cultural contexts at once.<sup>3</sup>

Yet, even if Malouf's texts seem to deny any absolute certainty on the issues of nationality and ethnicity, this does not mean that they offer no visions of cultural identity at all. In fact, it is a scrupulously differ-

entiated position that David Malouf, in spite of his diverse cultural attachments, demarcates for himself in his writings. To appreciate this, it seems useful to reconsider those readings of Malouf that stress the special centrality of the theme of language in his oeuvre and describe his fiction as being founded on a unique philosophy of human expression and communication. The following comparison of the novels *An Imaginary Life* (1978), *Remembering Babylon* (1993) and *The Conversations at Curlow Creek* (1996)<sup>4</sup> will attempt to extend these readings by examining a facet so far largely ignored in the critical reception of Malouf's fiction: namely, that of literacy.<sup>5</sup> It will be demonstrated that Malouf, apart from reflecting on language in general, is acutely concerned with the functions of written discourse. Exploring the most diverse aspects of writing, he consistently compares his very own uses of language to those of subjects whose specific literacies lead them to assume a place in culture dramatically different from his own. Their learning may disqualify them as writers, but not as potential readers of his texts; it may forbid them to be either, and it is the latter of these possibilities that seems to attract Malouf's special attention. For him, the equation of literacy with cultural centrality and integration opens up ways of discussing cultural marginality in a far wider context than orthodox literary criticism—which for the purpose of self-legitimization tends to assume that literature is written for and received by homogeneously literalized audiences—could ever afford to do.

It is more than a mere coincidence, therefore, that in his fiction Malouf keeps returning to the theme of literacy and employing it as an index of character as well as a marker of cultural identity. His texts offer portraits of poets, voracious readers, letter writers, chroniclers, teachers, schoolchildren, semi-literate peasants and completely illiterate savages all engaged in acts of creating or deciphering writing at critical moments in their lives, all situated in contexts in which writing represents everything but a self-evident technology and is cherished instead as a kind of exquisite cultural rarity, an indispensable instrument of cultural survival. Apart from thematizing literacy to explore nuances of cultural difference, Malouf also raises the topic to negotiate cultural opposites. Accordingly, in the texts under study here, the antithesis between indi-

viduals able to read and write and those lacking any command of letters constitutes the central axis around which the narratives revolve. Yet, it is not only to base his fiction on the issue of literacy that Malouf keeps returning to it. He also addresses it outside his novels—for instance when he speaks of reading as an “activity that requires a special capacity,” as a very special “physical act of approaching words and touching a world” (Malouf, “Making” 278), when he recalls his first interest in writing *An Imaginary Life* as having been the “problem of the poet who’s exiled not just to a wild place, but beyond the bounds of the language he can use” (Davidson, “Interview” 294) or when he insists that “Australians are and always have been at every level readers, among the most literary, if not literate people in the world” (quoted in Hansson 9).

However, although Malouf systematically avoids weighing different levels of literacy and the different forms of consciousness they generate against each other (even where he stresses the power of the written word or where he points out the limitations of writing as a mode of self-expression), there seems to be a tendency in the reception of Malouf’s work to favour his characterizations of highly literate individuals and to read his portraits of illiterates or semi-literates primarily as fulfilling a more subordinate role, e.g. that of foils or even lesser counterparts to his lettered protagonists.<sup>6</sup> Analogously, Malouf’s novels have been interpreted as offering above all a view of language ‘from within’—i.e. as a limited and limiting system of structures and rules which the creative mind must seek to transcend or else endure as painful entrapment.<sup>7</sup> Particularly when such interpretations are premised on the assumption that the colonial subject’s search for authenticity leads him/her on a journey that is “ultimately centrifugal” and culminates in “ego renunciation” and a “dispersion of meaning” (O’Brien 80), another highly significant perspective on language—which David Malouf himself takes notable trouble to incorporate in his works—tends to be bypassed.

It is precisely by including in his narratives subjects completely devoid of any discursive skills and assigning absolute centrality to their linguistic marginalization and disempowerment that Malouf relativizes the (Romantically pessimistic) view of language as confinement, almost to the point of exposing such scepticism as a kind of cultural luxury or sen-

timental self-indulgence afforded by Western literates and *litterati* typically oblivious to the material disadvantages suffered by those not able to share their learning. Land claims, elaborate reports stipulating some colonial subject's duties to the crown, orders of arrest or execution, and sentences to life-long exile put down in writing, legalized through their existence on paper repeatedly feature in Malouf's novels to exemplify uses of language through which individuals are locked not only *into* but just as securely *out of* a culture. If language itself constitutes a closed cultural space, as Malouf's texts assert repeatedly, exclusion from it forms at least as painful an experience as entrapment within. Irresistibly drawn to the written word and the truths it promises to hold in store for them, Malouf's non-literate characters try (mostly in vain) to undertake journeys from the margins of epistemological certainty towards its alleged centre, from ego renunciation to self-expression, from a realm in which meaning seems oddly fragmented and intangible to a world in which ready-made meanings are always and easily available. It is thus that Malouf's approach to questions of postcolonial otherness and the problem of its linguistic representability, so frequently addressed by postcolonial theorists and critics, obtains special theoretical pertinence. In accommodating not only the limitations of the *writing* subject's expressive scope, but also the far more 'essential' or 'basic' limitations experienced by the *unlettered* Other, Malouf's texts clearly approximate the notion of post-colonial subalternity propounded by Gayatri Spivak, who in her seminal paper "Can the Subaltern Speak?" insists that "the subaltern cannot speak. If it could speak, thank God, it would not be subaltern at all" (271–313). Spivak's suspicion of postcolonial theories simply arguing away subalternity as a silence which only has to be heard to be broken, seems also to underly Malouf's narratives which, rather than conceiving of the subaltern as mute and inaudible, grant him/her the ability to *speak* while asserting that he/she is certainly not able to *read* or *write*.

Malouf thus departs from the rather popular metaphorical identifications of cultural liminality or alterity with 'speechlessness,' 'voicelessness' or 'silence' for the sake of historically more accurate descriptions of the status of subalternity which take into account the centrality of writ-

ing, literacy and literature both as constituents of culture and as formative aspects of cultural identity. In fact, as they regularly identify writing and reading as cultural practices performed mostly in silence, his texts *must* seek alternative ways of conveying linguistic inferiority and depravity. While it is the most learned and enlightened characters in his novels who can afford to abstain from speech even when questioned by others, to withdraw into silence whenever they choose and to devote themselves to quiet reveries, the convicts, half castes, barbarians and savages do not possess this means of discursive self-denial, resistance or escape. Instead, their portrayals insistently draw on traditional equations of non-literacy with orality and, in so doing, reinforce such binarisms, as those between writing and speech, culture and nature, spirituality and corporeality. The barbarians to whose world Ovid is exiled and the mystical wolf child he captures with their help—Gemmy Fairley, who, after sixteen years with an Aboriginal tribe, joins a white settlement in the Australian outback—and Daniel Carney, the escaped convict, are, in spite of their subaltern status, neither inaudible nor inarticulate. Nor do they ever have the opportunity to undergo the kind of temporary voicelessness through which some of Malouf's more privileged characters move to a higher understanding of the world.<sup>8</sup> They wince, grunt, moan, yammer and howl to save their lives, resort to atavistic utterances in a “no language” or in “some whining blackfeller’s lingo” and occasionally to rudimentary forms of English—“[. . .] and even those so mismanaged and distorted you could barely guess what [they were] on about” (*RB* 40). Its ungrammaticality turns the illiterate’s orality into an unbridgeable difference, relegating the unlettered subject to the position of “the archetypal ‘other,’” of “Caliban [. . .], the orphaned bastard with close links to the animal world, representing a shocking, primitive and abominable *alter ego*, an alternative fate” (Jolly 297). Coupled with detailed depictions of uncontrolled facial expressions, wild gesticulations and unconscious movements, the speeches of Malouf’s illiterate characters combine to images of their bodies as unidentifiable shapes—“an agglomeration of rags [. . .] with its knees drawn up [. . .]” (*CCC* 1–2) for instance, a “hulk of flesh still pouring out fetid warmth” (*CCC* 2), a “thing [. . .] not even, maybe, human” (*RB* 2), “a scarecrow [. . .] its

leathery face scorched black” (*RB* 3), or a strange creature “[. . .] as lean as a stick, with all the ribs of his torso showing under the tanned skin [. . .]” (*IL* 48). Analogously, Malouf offers open comparisons of his invariably more noble than ignoble savages with wild beasts or utterly pathetic animals. Gemmy Fairley is likened to “a wounded waterbird, a broilga, or a human that [. . .] had been *changed* into a bird” (*RB* 2) and at another point to a “sea-calf” (*RB* 27), an “in-between creature [uttering cries in his sleep which] were proof that although he had the look of a man, he was not one, not yet” (*RB* 28). Taking in the strong smell emanating from the badly injured body of Daniel Carney, Adair is reminded of “some previous animal occupant, sheep or goat” (*CCC* 1), and watching the wolf child in captivity, Ovid observes how he “howls, scratching at the wall like an animal, spitting [and], showing his teeth and [. . .] claws” (*IL* 106).

As Delrez and Michel-Michot have pointed out, it is through such reductions of the subaltern (convict, black, half-caste, barbarian or wolf child) to some subhuman species that Malouf does seem to make himself liable to charges of ethnocentric or even racist prejudice.<sup>9</sup> To sustain such charges, however, one would have to ignore the intricate manoeuvres he employs to locate xenophobic responses to otherness in contexts where the ethical codes of his (post)modern readership do not apply. Setting *The Conversations at Curlew Creek*, *Remembering Babylon* and *An Imaginary Life* in the nineteenth century, and in antiquity respectively, Malouf finds ways of exploring the *full* range of human responses potentially possible *without* the ‘censoring’ or corrective control of a public climate informed by clear notions of political correctness. It is only from the point-of-view of the twentieth-century reader that these responses—which vary greatly between unease, fear, repulsion and hatred on the one hand, and curiosity, pity, tenderness and love on the other—represent straightforward cases of political acceptability or unacceptability. Malouf’s characters on the other hand, must suffer major disorientation as they try to find the ‘right’ attitude to the ever so alien Other, thus supplying Malouf with a matrix through which he is able to re-examine established assumptions of the benefits and desirability of human civilization and of literate culture.

While implicitly conceding in the process of such re-examination that tolerance of cultural difference might (but only *might*) be an achievement of twentieth-century civilization, David Malouf refuses explicitly to comprehend civilizing progress in principle as a safeguard against barbarity. Indeed, he seems profoundly sceptical of the moral superiority of ‘civilized’ human beings over the kind of ‘savages’ he portrays in his writings, yet at the same time places great hope in the possibility of moral improvement through cultural advancement. To resolve this obvious contradiction, he gradually deconstructs the opposition which he initially establishes in his narratives between figures representing untamed wilderness and figures personifying carefully cultivated control, replacing this opposition by a wider array of characters and broadening the spectrum between the poles of savagery and culturedness, barbarity and civilization.

In *An Imaginary Life*, Malouf relativizes the juxtaposition of Ovid and the wolf child through the representation of the barbarians, an “only relatively savage” (*IL* 23) group of people and yet “an order of beings” utterly alien to Ovid, beings “[. . .] who have not yet [. . .] become fully human, who have not yet entered [. . .] society and become Romans under the law” (*IL* 20). In *Remembering Babylon*, he assigns a similar in-between role to a group of settlers who though proudly convinced of their cultural superiority allow themselves to degenerate into uncivilized brutes in self-defence against the Australian outback and its natives. In *The Conversations at Curlew Creek*, the binary structure of the narrative is neutralized by way of the inclusion of a small party of troopers who seem more like perfect embodiments of the popular Australian archetype of the escaped convict turned bushranger than respectable members of the British army. Collective, or at least, group consciousness thus crystallize in Malouf’s narratives between distinctly literate and illiterate subjectivities that offer “an intriguing infracontext regarding [. . .] the powers of language for the colonised ‘Calibans’ and [. . .] for ‘the colonial mind’[. . .]” (Hansson 18).

It is within this infracontext that the conflicts between the cultural positions outlined in Malouf’s novels erupt, destabilizing the emergent sense of belonging in the otherwise still poorly rooted communities de-

veloping on the margins of civilization. For them, the foreignness of the Other signifies an unpleasant reminder of their own dislocation in the hostile land they try to inhabit. Thus threatened, paradoxically, by the Other's sameness, they are driven to reject his assimilation, which presents itself at its most dangerous the very moment that Other begins to make use of their language. Accordingly, when the wolf child utters his first word in the tongue of the barbarians, the woman holding him in her arms pushes him from her, terrified that this might be a sign of somebody else's soul having been snatched away (*IL* 118). With similar horror and suspicion, Gemmy Fairley's adversaries observe his endeavours to speak English and eventually choose to feel affronted by Gemmy's advances, angrily dismissing him as an offensive "parody of a white man," an "imitation gone wrong" (*RB* 43). Sensing a "mixture of monstrous strangeness and unwelcome likeness" (*RB* 43) in Daniel Carney, the troopers at Curlow Creek also scrupulously avoid any contact with their captive, keenly awaiting the execution that will silence him forever and mark the completion of their order: "acceptable work," as far as they are concerned, just like "[d]ealing with the blacks," which means, tracking them down and killing them (*CCC* 20). For the barbarians in *An Imaginary Life* and the settlers in *Remembering Babylon*, the annihilation of the Other constitutes an equally lawful measure against the contamination of their society through the Other's linguistic assimilation a measure to which they readily resort, unaware of thus reducing themselves to agents of the very baseness with which they charge their victim in order to justify his prosecution.

By sharp contrast, it is, if anyone, the well-read and lettered in Malouf's texts who manage to avoid such ironic self-degradation. Their culturedness appears strangely out of place in the settings to which they find themselves exiled. There seems to be no need for learnedness in the desolate lands outside human civilization, "the beginnings," as Ovid calls these lands, in which all is "unmade earth [. . .] flat and featureless, swamp in summer, a frozen waste in winter, without a tree or a flower or a made field" (*IL* 30). Writing itself becomes pointless where, in the hours of darkness, the boundaries laid down by the white man



[. . .] revert [. . .] to being a creek-bed or ridge of granite like any other and [give] no indication that six hundred miles away, in the Lands Office in Brisbane, this bit of country had a name set against it on a numbered document, and a line drawn [. . .] empowered with all the authority of the Law [. . .] (*RB* 9),

or where news from Europe is “dead and stinking by the time it turns up,” and the popular mind, therefore, chooses to resort to plain gossip to satisfy its hunger for diversion, indifferent to the truthfulness of the circulating rumours (*CCC* 204). In a place “so dry and cursed, with nothin’ in sight that a man can get a handle on, an’ every day so hard” (*CCC* 51), the written word, in turn, loses its validity. Promises become lies, sentences pronounced in the name of justice turn into unjust punishments.

In such worlds, a kind of subversive disregard for any authority officially installed by writing prevails and is vented on anyone committed, however innocently and idealistically, to upholding literate civilization. The troopers at Curlew Creek scoff at “mister bloody O’Dare” for his superior airs (*CCC* 24), likewise the younger males at the settlement of Bowen scoff at foolish Mr. Frazer for his interest in the foreign environment, and at “the old girl,” Mrs Hutchence, for her strangely extravagant life in her equally extravagant house which poses an unfathomable puzzle to them, a curiosity “in a language they [cannot] read” (*RB* 83). And “I am the least person,” Ovid declares, “a crazy, comic old man, grotesque, tearful, who understands nothing, can say nothing, and whose ways, so it must seem to these dour people, are absurdly out of keeping with the facts of our daily existence” (*IL* 17). They all know that the real cause of their outsider position amongst their fellow exiles or expatriates is their literacy and the literate practices in which they engage.

Doubly exiled on account of their learning and devotion to literate culture, the most lettered characters in *The Conversations at Curlew Creek*, *Remembering Babylon* and *An Imaginary Life* eventually begin to associate and even to identify with the other outsider, the illiterate outlaw, savage or wolf child. Realizing the necessity of transcending the limitations of their own civilization by learning a new mode of percep-

tion and expression from the Other, they enter a form of symbiosis with that Other, which leads them to a new awareness of the limitations of their own language and literacy. As a consequence, Ovid begins to appreciate the language of the barbarians, which he finds “oddly moving” and not at all like the Roman tongue, “whose endings are designed to express difference, the smallest nuances of thought and feeling” (*IL* 65). The barbarians’ language, he explains, “is equally expressive, but what it presents is the raw life and unity of things. Somehow it seems closer to the first principle of creation, closer to whatever force it is that makes things what they are and changes them into what they would be” (*IL* 65). In similar fashion, the poet later on in the narrative identifies the Child’s language as a medium of poetic self-expression not unlike writing:

He also assumes, on our walks, the role of teacher, pointing out to me tracks in the grass and explaining with signs or gestures of his body, or with imitation sounds, which bird or beast it is that has made them. [. . .] All this world is alive for him. It is his sphere of knowledge, a kind of library of forms that he has observed and committed to memory, another language whose hieroglyphs he can interpret and read. (*IL* 93)

In contrast to the violent, even life-threatening antagonisms that evolve between Malouf’s most subaltern characters and those opposing them for lack of better understanding, the relationships between the illiterate Others and their highly literate counterparts are informed by an almost uncanny, nearly perfect mutual understanding—an understanding impossible to achieve by conventional means of communication. Initiation into the world of the Other presupposes the acceptance of the inefficacy of ordinary language and the remembering or re-learning of an earlier, more original tongue. “Not the words, sir. I’m no good for words,” Carney therefore answers when questioned about the songs he and his fellow rebels used to sing (*CCC* 102). Instead of words, at Adair’s request, he delivers a melody which generates the first moment of silent harmony between the two men:

The man's voice was rough, and shaky at first, but he held a tune well, and as he warmed to it there was, in the close dark of the hut, a sadness, a kind of beauty too, in the way the melody rose and was held a moment, a long high moment, on the man's breath, prolonged in the exaggerated Irish fashion, Adair thought, that had a natural theatricality and sense of performance to it.

The shape it made created its own following silence, and they sat, both, in the ease of it. Once again they were, as the old tune lingered, just two men in the one place, in the one moment together, and far from where they had begun. (*CCC* 102–103)

Perfect concordance between Adair and Carney is restored at another point when their conversation subsides and they fall asleep. Still sleeping, Adair senses that he has been taking the other's breathing for his own "as if Carney had taken the job of drawing breath for both of them, so that when the man spoke he was startled, had to catch back, he [Adair] felt, the responsibility of breathing for himself, an old habit that for a space he had been in danger of losing" (*CCC* 103). The scene is reminiscent of a similar oneness developing between Mr Frazer and Gemmy Fairley, who, likewise, manage to discover "some new opening of understanding" (*CCC* 118) in the absence of ordinary speech and 'ordinary' writing. Their "silent communing" (*RB* 65) is an essential part of a co-operation between them that makes Gemmy

the hands and eyes of the enterprise, the breath too when it came to giving things a name, as Mr Frazer was the agency for translating it out of that dimension, which were 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. (*RB* 66)

In remarkably similar manner Malouf describes the final stages of the forever metamorphosing relationship between Ovid and the Child, in

which the poet, so alienated from nature by learning, at last regains a sense of corporeality and wholeness while the wild child sheds his corporeality, transcending his physical existence and changing into some immaterial godlike being:

Wandering along together, wading through the high grasses side by side, is a kind of conversation that needs no tongue, a perfect interchange of perceptions, moods, questions, answers, that is as simple as the weather [. . .] as thoughts melt out of one mind into another, cloud and shadow, with none of the structures of formal speech. It is like talking to oneself. (IL 145)

The literate's merging with the illiterate Other, his (her) arrival at what he (she) considers a total "sympathetic understanding" (CCC 118), marks the completion of his (her<sup>10</sup>) journey beyond literacy. Adair's glad departure for Ireland, Ovid's reconciliation to exile and his peaceful death, or the completion of Mr Frazer's visions through Janet McIvor, who devotes her adult life to the study of the language of bees—whatever turns out to be the narrative's calculated destination is reached only at the expense of the scriptless character who must invariably disappear before the novel's closure. In fading out of the lives of Daniel Carney, Gemmy Fairley and the mystical wolf child, Malouf dissolves the images of these characters, letting them disintegrate back into the obscurity from which they have emerged, without offering any clues as to their futures. This omission assigns them a place in the past, a role as mere objects of recollection, of retrospective commentary, of projection and speculation, geographically and temporally, literally and metaphorically far removed from the territory that the written text demarcates.

In *An Imaginary Life*, *Remembering Babylon* and *The Conversations at Curlow Creek* alike, the sudden removal of the scriptless Other from the script constitutes an unexpected turn of events countermanding what the novels seem to have anticipated all along as the final outcome of the Other's appearance in the text. Carney's escape from his long-expected execution, Gemmy's sudden return to rain country and the mystical wolf child's survival of the first person narrator Ovid rupture the narra-

tives' logic, denying the kind of ending that the Western reader might find the most appropriate conclusion to a non-literate's career: namely, an ending in the form of the scriptless subject's assimilation into literate culture by way of alphabetization. David Malouf's illiterate or non-literate protagonists never learn to read or write. They never become fully part of the literate community with which they have come into contact, nor does their position vis-à-vis the world of letters ever change any more than their object position within the letters and pages that contain them. Consigned to a world "utterly beyond [. . .] human imagining" (*IL* 149), utterly beyond the discursive boundaries of writing, they cannot transcend their subaltern status, despite the fact that Malouf grants them an increasingly audible and increasingly dominant voice as he shifts in his descriptions of illiteracy from renderings of muteness in his portrayals of the wolf child and the barbarians, via illustrations of inarticulation in his characterization of Gemmy Fairley, to evocations of a powerfully persuasive orality as marking the speeches of Daniel Carney.

Still, the silence that ultimately results from their sudden and unexpected disappearance is never entirely one of defeat, for it forces the literate witnesses of their escape (including the reader) to acknowledge the possibility of a life without letters, of a world quite apart from the one represented in letters, a world into which no literate can follow the scriptless Other. This in itself poses a complex epistemological dilemma to the literate and, at the same time, a chance of triumph over the world of letters to the unlettered self. His ultimate intangibility finally renders the narratives that have tried to contain him incomplete. In the end the reader of *An Imaginary Life*, *Remembering Babylon* and *The Conversations at Curlew Creek* cannot help feeling that the novel has been brought to a conclusion without the crown witness having been heard so that with the exit of the only other authority on the truthfulness of the story, he/she comes to doubt the text's reliability.

The ending of *Remembering Babylon* provides what is probably Malouf's most telling deconstruction of the authority Western literate cultures like to assign to the written word. It describes Gemmy's last visit to the schoolhouse where he expects to retrieve those notes that the

schoolteacher and Mr. Frazer took about his past when he first arrived. Not understanding Gemmy's request, the schoolteacher hands over to him a pile of ill-written exercises that he has just been marking, "all blotches and scratchings out" (*RB* 178). Gemmy, however, takes them for the sheets onto which his life and his spirit had been "drained out of him" in the form of "black blood" (*RB* 21). At last outside the boundaries of the settlement in the known landscape of rain country, where "all the things, as he met them, even in their ashen form, shone on his breath, sprang up in their real lives," he surrenders the writings to the pouring rain, watching the paper "turning pulpy, beginning to break up in his hands, dropping like soggy crumbs from his fingers into puddles where he [leaves] them, bits all disconnected . . ." (*RB* 181). Gemmy is convinced that this is a sign that the spell of the written word has been broken and he himself granted permission to escape the story over which he has lost control. At the same time, the fact that the *wrong* papers have disintegrated in Gemmy's hands and the *right* ones been preserved is ironically stripped of its relevance. For through Gemmy's own departure the narrative is deprived of the only agent who could ever verify the contents of whatever written record remains of his existence. With these records thus invalidated, the narrative loses any claim to historical truthfulness and is reduced to the function of declaring its own fictionality. It is the admission of the relativity of truth or, better even, of the relative truth-value of any discourse (even of writing) that the story of Gemmy Fairley finally defines as the main task of literature. As Hansson notes, "The *name*, the *word* and the *story* become fictional elements [in Malouf's fiction] of the same complex and foregrounded character as the 'map', the 'gap' and the 'edge'" (107–8). In this process of merging of the thematic complexes of language and space, Malouf's texts never fail to make clear that the place inscribed by writing always remains absolutely finite and that it borders on a terrain as unknowable to the literate as the world of letters remains to the non-literate—as unknowable, yet no less worth knowing.

It is this realization that leads Dante to a better understanding of his deceased father. Grasping the ineffectuality of the extravagantly literate life he used to share with Johnno, he begins to appreciate the far less

learned exchanges in which he would engage with his father as a no less salient aspect of his cultural identity. Reconciled to his father's otherness, the author/narrator of *Johnno* concludes his reflections on his late friend with an epilogue on his father. This epilogue remains symbolically restricted to the description of two books that Malouf retrieves from the last of his father's belongings to be cleared away. One of the books is a big old-fashioned ledger containing the meticulous account of "every deal he had ever made, every property he had ever bought or sold, every turning his life had taken in the world of public triumphs and disasters" (J 166). The other is a biography on James MacRobertson, founder of the biggest chocolate factory of the Commonwealth, a book "wide and flat with a royal blue cover" and titled *A Young Man with an Oil-Can*, "a book," as Malouf puts it, "that my father turned to as other men in other places have turned to Homer or the *Pilgrim's Progress*, the palpable record of a great national mythology" (J 168). Quite significantly, it is not the actual text recounting MacRobertson's success story, but a number of colour plates of which Malouf offers a detailed description. "They, of course, were incomparable," he reminisces, "and seemed as beautiful to me then as anything I had ever seen or could imagine, [ . . . ]" thinking of the layer of the finest tissue through which one would peer as through "the frosted glass of a sweetshop window" to discover the full range of the MacRobertson products on display:

Lift the tissue, take a deep breath, and there they were. A jar of boiled lollies, glistening pink and yellow, and in every conceivable shape: scallop-shells, ovals, little barber-pole cylinders with pinched ends, medallions with roses in their depths, even some bite-sized candy-striped pillows that smelled (I could actually smell them) of a medicinal spice like the ambulance tent at Scarborough. (J 167–168)

While Dante remembers Johnno as someone for whom books were but "receptacles to be emptied of their contents and thrown away" (J 107), and imagines his friend seated on a camp stool, somewhere on Lake Victoria, hunched over a volume newly arrived from Blackwells in Oxford, only to toss it, upon consumption of the last page, over his

shoulder, into primeval African mud (*J* 107), he himself resolves not to discard the mementoes of his father. “I hadn’t the heart to burn *The Young Man With an Oil-Can*, Dante/Malouf admits, “it would have been like putting a match to the National Gallery” (*J* 170). In concluding his first novel with this declaration of love for two books so different from the kind of books he normally reads, for two books treasured by a person otherwise apparently completely indifferent to any kind of reading matter, David Malouf puts into practice what he is to define even more explicitly as the goal of literature in his later works: he utilizes literary language to articulate his appreciation for that which lies outside the declared domain of literacy and in so doing confronts the literate mind with its own limitations. Rather than their transcendence, it is the recognition and explicit acceptance of these limitations as prime determinants of one’s cultural identity that, for Malouf, ultimately justifies the literary exercise of translating into writing, however inaccurately, an otherness as alien and inaccessible as an illiterate’s. “Maybe, in the end, even the lies we tell define us,” Malouf after all suggests, “And better, some of them, than our most earnest attempts at the truth” (*J* 170).

## Notes

- 1 This work has been supported by the Austrian Science Fund through a *Charlotte-Bühler-Habilitations-Stipendium* for the project “Without Script: Illiteracy in the Anglophone Novel.”
- 2 Malouf, David. “Johnno: A Novel.” *David Malouf: Johnno, Short Stories, Poems, Essays and Interview*. ed. James Tulip. St. Lucia: Queensland UP, 1990. 49. Henceforth page references to *Johnno* (=J) will be given in the text.
- 3 Cf. e.g. Hansson, Karin. *Sheer Edge: Aspects of Identity in David Malouf’s Writing*. Lund Studies in English 33. Lund: Lund UP, 1991. 8–14; Tulip, James. “David Malouf as Humane Allegorist.” *Southerly* (December 1981): 392; Heseltine, Harry. *The Uncertain Self: Essays in Australian Literature and Criticism*. Melbourne: Oxford UP, 1986. 182; Attar, Samar. “A Lost Dimension: The Immigrant’s Experience in the Work of David Malouf.” *Australian Literary Studies* 13.3 (May 1988): 308–321; or Herghenhan, Laurie. “Discoveries and Transformations: Aspects of Malouf’s Works,” *Australian Literary Studies* 11.3 (May 1984): 328–341.
- 4 Malouf, David. *An Imaginary Life*. Sydney: Pan Macmillan Publishers Australia, 1980. *Remembering Babylon*. London: Vintage, 1994. *Conversations at Curlow Creek*. London: Vintage, 1997. Page references to these editions will be given



- within the text together with the abbreviations *IL* for *An Imaginary Life*, *RB* for *Remembering Babylon* and *CCC* for *The Conversations at Curlow Creek*.
- 5 One exception is Lee Spinks who touches on the issue of literacy and writing in “Allegory, Space, Colonialism: *Remembering Babylon* and the Production of Colonial History.” *Australian Literary Studies* 17.2 (October 1995): 166–174.
- 6 Cf. for instance Bishop, Peter. “David Malouf and the Language of Exile.” *Australian Literary Studies* 10.4 (October 1982): 419–428; Dever, Maryanne. “Secret Companions: The Continuity of David Malouf’s Fiction.” *World Literature Written in English* 26.1 (Spring 1986): 62–74; Hansson, *Sheer Edge*, or Nick Mansfiel, “Body Talk: The Prose of David Malouf,” *Southerly* 45.2 (June 1989): 230–238.
- 7 As Avis McDonald puts it, for Malouf “language has a central role both in the experience of exile and in the attainment of transcendence.” Laurie Herghehan, too, attributes great importance to “moments of imaginative transcendence and transformation” in Malouf’s writings. Likewise Karin Hansson observes that the “analysis of his attitude to language on the whole and especially to the English language” enables Malouf to describe and inscribe a “country of the mind,” and to create for himself a “nonterritorial ‘Australianness.’” The “non-territoriality” posited by Hansson suggests a rather open form of cultural belonging to a rather open cosmopolitan space in which the problems especially of naming aspects of Australian landscape, so frequently referred to by David Malouf himself, lose all their urgency. By contrast Marc Delrez and Paulette Michel-Michot, with exactly these problems in mind, refuse to interpret Malouf’s works as celebrations of language, let alone of the English language. Instead they ask whether the “problem of representational uncertainty at the crossroads between cultures” has not had the sad and de-creative effect of silencing Malouf on urgent issues of Australian history and politics. They answer their own question by finally conceding that Malouf does negate the authority of European languages and pronounce the inefficacy of his own texts as transcriptions of otherness. Equally, Susie O’Brien reads *An Imaginary Life* as a declaration of the “provisionality of all constructions of meaning” through which Malouf performs “the writer’s necessary quest beyond the boundaries of conventional language” in response to the “cultural and linguistic ruptures endemic in post-colonial society.” (McDonald, Avis. “Beyond Language: David Malouf’s ‘An Imaginary Life’.” *ARIEL: A Review of International English Literature*, 19.1 (January 1988): 46; Herghehan, “Discoveries and Transformations” 328; Hansson, *Sheer Edge* 14–16; Delrez, Marc, and Paulette Michel-Michot. “The Politics of Metamorphosis: Cultural Transformation in David Malouf’s *Remembering Babylon*.” *The Contact and the Culmination*. Eds. Marc Delrez and Benedicte Ledent. Liege: L3—Liege Language and Literature, 1997. 164; O’Brien, Susie. “Raising Silent Voices: The Role of the Silent Child in *An Imaginary Life* and *The Bone People*.” *SPAN: Journal of the South Pacific Association for Commonwealth Literature and Language Studies* 30 (April, 1990): 80, 74.)

- 8 One of the most striking instances of such a cathartic experience in Malouf's oeuvre marks Janet McIvor's transformation into an adult female at the moment when a swarm of bees descends upon her "before she could complete the breath she had taken, or expel it in a cry [. . .] thickening so fast about her that it was as if night had fallen [. . .]" (*RB* 142).
- 9 Cf. Delrez and Michel-Michot, "The Politics of Metamorphosis."
- 10 Malouf's interest is almost exclusively in quests of *male* subjects. Only if one considers his treatment of Janet McIvor in *Remembering Babylon* does a specification of his protagonists' gender seem really necessary.

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