BRIGHTNESS UNDER OUR SHOES:
THE REDRESS OF THE POETIC IMAGINATION
IN THE POETRY AND PROSE
OF DAVID MALOUF
1960 - 1982

by

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the poetic foundation of David Malouf’s poetry and prose published from 1960 to 1982. Its purpose is to extend reading strategies so that the nature of his poetic and its formative influence are more fully appreciated. Its thesis is that Malouf explores and tests with increasing confidence and daring a poetic imagination that he believes must meet the demands of the times. Malouf’s work is placed in relation to Wallace Stevens’ belief that the poetic imagination should “push back against the pressure of reality”, a view discussed by Seamus Heaney in “The Redress of Poetry”. The surprise of the poetic as “unpredicted aesthetic value” (García-Berrio, 1989) is significant to his purposes and techniques, as it creates idea-images and feeling-values (Jung, 1921) that bring together apparently opposite ways of knowing the world.

In seeking to represent the meeting of inner and outer perceptions, Malouf’s work shows the influence not only of Stevens but also Rilke and contemporary American poetry of “deep image”. The Australian context of Malouf’s work is considered in relation to Judith Wright’s essay “The Writer and the Crisis” and the poetry of Malouf’s contemporaries. Details of the manuscript development of his first four novels show Malouf’s steps towards a clearer representation of his holistic, post-romantic vision. His correspondence with the poet Judith Rodriguez provides useful insights into his purposes.

Theories and research about brain functions, the nature of intelligence and learning provide an important international context in the 1960s and 1970s, given Malouf’s interest in how meaning forms from perception and experience. Jean Piaget’s view of intelligence and David Kolb’s theory of experiential learning (1984) offer frameworks for reading Malouf that have not yet been considered. The thesis offers a model of poetic learning that highlights the interplay of dialectically opposed ways of forming meaning and points to the importance for Malouf of holding diverse states of mind together through the poetic imaginary.
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CHAPTER 1

Introduction:

Towards the Redress of the Poetic Imagination

Their senses catch it
down from far off, something moves
toward them, edging closer
even than lead pencils,
cats, chalk or the salty
creases in clothes,
an excitement whose crystals
fall through their veins …

… Falling light
strikes upward. Its brightness
creaks under our shoes.

(“Snow”)

The purpose of this study is to investigate the poetic foundation of David Malouf’s works published from 1960 to 1982. Its thesis is that Malouf explores and tests with increasing confidence and daring a poetic imagination that he believes must meet the demanding times in which it finds itself, as well as providing a source of growth for his developing vocation as a writer. His works in this period point to the essential task of the poetic imaginary which is to make and offer through language what might be called the surprise of the poetic. Such surprise is often figured, as in the early poem “Snow”, as “brightness” which transforms all that seems familiar in subject and setting. An unexpected impulse, an excitement “whose crystals fall through their veins”, an enhanced way of knowing about self and the world, are the desired results. Malouf’s works suggest the importance for him of communicating this effect to an audience of engaged readers or listeners. He seeks to make his insights accessible so that the bridge of language is fortified between the growing
specialist realm of the literary and poetic in the popular culture of the later twentieth century and the interests of an educated general readership. He seeks to strengthen language as a vehicle of imaginative making and re-making so that its essential work in forming meaning at all levels of human society, in artistic endeavours and everyday life, is enhanced.

His poetic arises from his experience of and belief in the wholeness of the mind-in-the-body, a concept which I will develop. From this basis, his engagement with the poetic imagination is primarily reflective and functional and revealed through the disclosures of the poetic found in his poetry and prose. While his essays, reviews, interviews and commentaries offer important insights, it is the evidence of the texts themselves, including the work-in-progress in successive re-draftings, which is the focus of this study. Malouf explores the ability of the poetic imagination to grasp what is “near” in perception and to stretch out towards what is “far”, both of which may be apprehended by an intuitive, less-defined human capacity than reason alone. The tensions that arise in engaging with and seeking to hold together the close and distant, as well as the passive and active roles of the writer, are crucial to his practice. He comes to favour the lyrical resolution of these opposing energies at a time when the standing of such a mode becomes more tenuous. With the values that have traditionally informed human artistic expression of all kinds being weighed against the tragedies of world wars and then interrogated from within the intellectual community by critical discourses discerning the bases of language and power in societies, Malouf finds that the poetic he comes to favour must be toughened, tested and opened to continuous transformation if it is to offer itself as an authentic choice for a poet’s voice in the later twentieth century. Why should language be trusted at such a time?
Will a lyrical poetic suffice or offer only, at best, a provisional, self-reflective stance? Can a poetic that values “interiors” as well as “exteriors” stand at all in view of the dominance in western cultures of scientific and technological materialism? How and why might an Australian writer address such challenges and others relating to individual and national identity that are particular to his own country?

His concern for the present use of the poetic imagination can be placed in the context of Wallace Stevens’ view that it “presses back against the pressures of reality”.¹ For Stevens, a poet influential in Malouf’s development, the nobility of poetry is to recognize the tensions within its own making and, by coming to terms with them by poetic means, to offer the wider culture a resistance to violence that threatens from without:

A violence from within that protects us from a violence without. It is the imagination pressing back against the pressure of reality. It seems, in the last analysis, to have something to do with our self-preservation²

Stevens’ view, first presented in a 1942 lecture at Princeton University at a time of immense “pressure of reality” from World War II, was taken up by Seamus Heaney over four decades later in his inaugural lecture as Professor of Poetry at Oxford University in October 1989. Heaney, too, speaks with the violence of “reality” in mind, that of Irish history and of twentieth century totalitarian regimes. Heaney regards the poetic imagination as offering a counterbalancing way through the complexities of human experience across the centuries of poetic writing in western culture. He observes:

If our given experience is a labyrinth, then its impassability is countered by the poet’s imagining some equivalent of the labyrinth and bringing himself and us through it.³

---


Heaney recognizes the limits of this position in terms of achieving political change. Symbolic harmony, no matter how elegantly achieved, may be “not in itself productive of new events” (3). However, he argues against a propagandist role for the poet’s voice and for its part in re-balancing what may be unbalanced at any time in a society. In developing this view, he takes up Simone Weil’s argument in Gravity and Grace, although seeking an imagined rather than a transcendental redress: “If we know in what way society is unbalanced, we must do what we can to add weight to the lighter scale” (4). Heaney interprets this as a call to the poetic imagination to “place a counter-reality in the scales” and even if such “reality” is imagined it has a positive effect if it is “imagined within the gravitational pull of the actual” (4). Such redress will be disclosed through the figuring of the imaginary in the work:

In the fully realized poet, what Simone Weil perceived as the necessary principle of counterweighting or redress will be inscribed in the poet’s imaginative signature … the best poetry will not only register the assault of the actual and quail under the brunt of necessity, it will also embody the spirit’s protest against all that. (6-7)

Heaney sees poetry’s work of redress as offering “a revelation of potential that is denied or constantly threatened by circumstances” (4). He notes that poets in the twentieth century such as Wilfred Owen, Irina Ratushinskaya, Osip Mandelstam and Zbigniew Herbert have worked far beyond private and artistic circles to become solitary witnesses of the value of individual poetic consciousness, often in exile and death, but achieving powerful authenticity through their vocation of affirmation, whether chosen or imposed by political circumstance. Heaney argues for the important role of consciousness in the poetic:

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Poetry, let us say, whether it belongs to an old political dispensation or aspires to express a new one, has to be a model of active consciousness. It has to be able to withstand as well as to envisage, and in order to do so it must contain within itself the co-ordinates of the reality which surrounds it and out of which it is generated. ...[Then] it becomes a power to which we can have recourse; it functions as the rim of silence out of which consciousness arrives and into which it must descend. For a moment, we can remember ourselves as fully empowered beings. (11)

In a revised version, published in 1995 with his subsequent Oxford lectures, he adds:

By offering consciousness a chance to recognise its predicaments, foreknow its capacities and rehearse its comebacks in all kinds of venturesome ways, it does constitute a beneficent event, for poet and audience alike. It offers a response to reality which has a liberating and verifying effect upon the individual spirit. The value and use of a language-based imaginary is reasserted. To redress through poetry also suggests to Heaney guiding human potential (as does a hunter the energies of hounds or deer) in a certain direction, setting a course for “the breakaway of innate capacity, a course where something unhindered, yet directed, can sweep ahead into its full potential”. The poetic as vehicle for unrealized potential, perhaps hidden or yet to be recognised, is a further aspect of its weight of

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5 Seamus Heaney, *The Redress of Poetry: Oxford Lectures* (London: Faber and Faber, 1995), 2. Heaney revises the inaugural lecture so that the poet offers an “experience” of the “labyrinth” rather than a way through it: “its impassability can still be countered by the poet’s imagining some equivalent of the labyrinth and presenting himself and us with a vivid experience of it” (2).


8 Heaney, *Redress: Oxford Lectures*, 15. In the final lecture, “Frontiers of Writing”, Heaney relates the possible redress of the poetic imagination to the troubled Irish situation by offering the figure of the quincunx, the five towers, that might offer a new imaginative alignment of the country’s hostile factions by respecting and holding together its Irish and British traditions (199-200).
redress. In his final lecture in 1993, Heaney comes to regard the “frontiers of writing” as the crossing point between “two orders of knowledge ... the practical and the poetic” and sees each as redressing the other, as suggested by his poem “Lightenings (viii)”.  

Heaney’s view of poetic redress is based on an understanding of the interaction of the “real” and the “imagined” that differs notably from what Richard Kearney, from a philosophical perspective, has termed the “labyrinth of mirrors” figured by the post-modern imagination.  

By the late twentieth century, the image has been re-positioned for many creative artists and intellectuals as parody, quite removed from any basis in an objective exterior or subjective interior. In fact, the European idea of creative imagination as developed in the eighteenth century and the Romantic period and associated with poets such as Goethe, Coleridge and Wordsworth, seems to some an outmoded ideology of middle-class humanism, a play of illusions. In discussing the “poetics of imagining”, from the work in phenomenology of Husserl to the later twentieth century views of Lacan, Althusser, Foucault, Derrida, Kristeva and Lyotard, Kearney concludes:

one might argue that the pre-modern model of the image as mirror (as in book 10 of Plato’s Republic, for example) and the modern model as lamp (as in German Idealist and Romantic notions of Einbildungskraft) give way to the post-modern model of a circle of looking glasses – each one reproducing the surface images of the other in a play of infinite multiplication ... without depth or interiority.  

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12 Kearney, 170.
For Heaney, by contrast, the “labyrinth” imagined poetically presents to the audience not endless mirrors but an alternative connection to an exterior world, a way of re-figuring its complexities and dilemmas. It is most beneficial when it brings together the active consciousness of writer and audience so that its ability to “withstand” and “envisage” is based on “co-ordinates of reality” shared between the work and its social and political context, as in his poem “Funeral Rites” where the urge to revenge political killings is redressed by mythical vision:

imagining those under the hill
disposed like Gunnar
who lay beautiful
inside his burial mound,
though dead by violence

and unavenged.
Men said that he was chanting
verses about honour
and that four lights burned

in corners of the chamber:
which opened then, as he turned
with a joyful face
to look at the moon.\(^\text{13}\)

In Malouf’s works, the energy of the poetic imagination may be viewed in terms of redress, but in ways particular to his world view and purpose as a writer. While perceiving a distinction between interior consciousness and an exterior environment that partly makes and is partly shaped by human awareness, Malouf has a stronger sense than Heaney of the permeable relationship between them. Their interrelationship is ongoing yet not easily defined for Malouf. He explores more closely what Heaney terms the “poetic” and the “practical”. He does so by focusing above all on experience, the making and interpreting

of the “active consciousness” Heaney also regards as essential. For Malouf, the
interweaving of interior and exterior worlds is always dynamically open to the shifting
presence of both at the most intimate, subjective physical level. As expressed in his essay
On Experience:

Experience is always personal. It is always subjective; that is, it is so coloured, as
Emerson suggests, by our disposition and temperament, by the time we live in, by
culture, language and a dozen other imponderables and contingencies, as to make it
impossible for our view of an event, or of the world in general, to be in any way
reliable – at least from the point of view of objective truth.\footnote{David Malouf, On Experience (Carlton, Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2008), 76-77. Malouf
refers to Ralph Waldo Emerson’s Nature (1844), Chapter 1, where it is also observed that the poet is “he whose
eye can integrate all the parts” and that the “lover of nature is he whose inward and outward senses are still
truly adjusted to each other”, both of which ideas are insightful for approaching Malouf’s poetic. See Ralph
Waldo Emerson, Nature, Addresses, and Lectures (London: Routledge, 1903), 13-17.}

Yet, for Malouf experience has its own “truth” that makes the “moment of insight or
vision” crucial in forming a way of knowing that has “the reality and substance of what
can be held in the hand”.\footnote{Malouf, On Experience, 6-7. Malouf discusses a passage from Dickens’ David Copperfield as what he
terms “exemplary” in showing a character crossing the “threshold” from fleeting perception to knowledge (1-6).
He values the literary expression of such moments.} He values the freedom to make meaning from personal
experience, rather than accept knowledge passively as if in an authoritarian regime and
notes that particularly in the twentieth century:

Terror would also be used to suppress all that in being individual and subjective was
a challenge to the state’s monopoly on what was seen as civil and virtuous.\footnote{Malouf, On Experience, 54.}

In the early poem “Snow” (1968)\footnote{Malouf writes on an early typescript of the poem: “Birkenhead: mid ’68. Untimely snow at Whitsun after
lovely spell of sunny weather and flowers at Easter”, David Malouf Collection, University of Queensland,
Fryer Library, UQFL 163/J/L. Material from the Fryer Library collections is identified subsequently by the
abbreviation UQFL followed by the library reference numbers.} the shifting experience of an active consciousness
is felt as an interior flux, physical and immediate, open to the surprise of the moment, “an
excitement” that is palpable as students in a classroom anticipate an unexpected snowfall.\(^\text{18}\) The coming of the change of weather is perceived as something exterior that “moves / towards them” with cat-like stealth, yet it is closer than “the salty / creases in clothes” (\textit{Bicycle} 55). It is within the body, caught, animal-like, by the senses “from far off” and held as interior state. The perception of falling snow refracts through the imagination and suggests “the taste / of stars” and the intuitive otherness of “all that is further off / than flesh” (\textit{Bicycle} 56). It gives light that touches then “strikes upward” from the earth. Interior and exterior blend through sound, sight and texture as the subject steps forward and “Its brightness / creaks under our shoes” (\textit{Bicycle} 56). The moment is enriched and transformed by the sensation, turned unexpectedly towards a refreshed view of experience. What may be read initially as distant objects, evoked in their absence by language, move closer and become present as the reader, in turn, further refracts the images through imagination.

Different ways of perceiving and feeling are blended. A way of knowing based mainly on comprehending through rationality (such as traditional schoolroom learning) is unsettled and then re-balanced. The steady rhythms of the opening stanzas (the teacher’s view) become more exuberant from the third stanza as he too enters into the change of mood: “they brim with light”. The sounds and word rhythms represent the intrusion of direct sensory apprehensions and intuitive bodily responses in a situation where order is usually imposed but is ineffective on this occasion. The exterior becomes interior through “a window square / where trees writhe” and the sky “glows” and “staggers” with wild force:

\[
\text{and nothing today will keep them} \\
\text{quiet or still} \\
\text{in the pinewood desks, or summon}
\]

\(^{18}\text{David Malouf, “Snow”, in Bicycle and Other Poems (St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1970), 55-56. Page references for quotations from this collection are identified subsequently in the text by the abbreviation Bicycle.}\)
their eyes to reflect
figures and cold facts
from the blackboard; they brim
with light, a window square

where trees writhe, sky glows greenish
bronze and staggers white
like surf. (Bicycle 55)

The “light” of knowing based on perceived exteriors is re-balanced by knowing that takes
into account interior states. It is a “brightness” now shared by the teacher; it is “under our
shoes”. Passive reception becomes participating engagement to the benefit of all.

In another early poem, the energy of Malouf’s poetic imagination is figured as
“brightness” of a different kind – that of a tropical sun and a seascape full of motion and
life. The subject in “This Day Under My Hand” signs his name to a legal document and
feels the exterior action, transferring ownership to his sister of a family holiday home in
Queensland, suddenly and unexpectedly charged with strong feeling, bringing to mind
images and memories of place:

    I sign
    my name, it blooms elsewhere
    as salt, gull’s cry, bruised flesh
    of the reef that gasps and thrashes
    its life out in our hands,
    From the dark bay hissing
    like crabs, red tropic suns. (Bicycle 41)

The poem builds to a crescendo, suggesting the subject’s sudden realisation that what had
seemed distant from self (“A world away and nothing / to do with me”) has everything to
do with his identity. His past acquires new relevance and vitality through the redress of the
poetic imagination, a re-balancing of perceptions by making experience personal and
immediate through images that blend interior feeling and external detail in a seascape of
the mind.

Malouf’s earlier poems show a direction that he continues to follow into the early
1970s, taking his understanding of what he terms “interior” and “exterior” into both his
poetry and prose as interactive sites for re-making memory, place and identity. This is
evident in his first novel Johnno based on his experience of growing up in Brisbane, living
in the UK and travelling in Europe and the deaths of his father and a close friend from
schooldays, John Milliner. His work then moves toward a blending of the lyrical,
mythological and historical in poems from “The Little Panopticon” series commenced in
1974, such as “Theologica Germanica”:

    Burning with zeal: whole villages
    consumed with candleflame, the light off the pages of Revelation

    Their shadows grow
    enormous, fall across a countryside, and the burning

    is real: hayricks, convent doors, a neighbour
    bearing fiery witness

    to light the dark that cowers in us.\textsuperscript{19}

Here the energy is not “brightness” from the sun but the force at work in the metaphorical
light and darkness of human history, flamed by a reformation passion for reading and
preaching apocalyptic visions. Its language spreads outward to consume the exterior
world. The poem offers history re-imagined and a counterweight in the form of sober
recognition that it is our history too. It is in our “daily lives” that choices are made which
link personal experience and the history of the times:

\textsuperscript{19} David Malouf, \textit{Selected Poems} (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1981), 100-1. Page references for this
collection are identified subsequently in the text by the abbreviation \textit{SP 81}.
Before we can create
the promised land we need

a wilderness and seven plagues to drive us.
History

is written and re-written,
we read it by candlelight: Leviathan hissing

in a pool of wax, the terrible prophecies. Our daily
lives must make them happen. And they do. (SP 81 101)

Malouf’s poetic imaginary shifts further toward exploring the interweaving of subjective
consciousness with bodily states and mythical referents in Poems 1975-76, with overtones
of the lyrical “deep image” style found in the work of American poets such as Robert
Kelly, James Wright, Mark Strand, W.S. Merwin, Galway Kinnell and Robert Duncan. In
his essay “Notes on the Deep Image” published in 1961, Kelly states:

The present and necessary function of poetry is the transformation of the perceived
world … Transformation aims at the continuum of perceptions. Poetry is this
continuum. Percepts are from dream or from waking, rise from the unconscious or
from the retina of the awakened eye. Poetry, like dream reality, is the juncture of the
experienced with the never experienced. Like waking reality, it is the fulfillment of
the imagined and the unimagined.\(^{20}\)

American poets of this broad grouping in the 1960s and 1970s blend ideas of poetic
imagination and “reality” with perspectives derived from psychological studies, such as
those of Freud and Jung. The boundaries of language where the “imagined” encounters the
shadow of the “unimagined” become favoured sites of the poetic, as in Robert Duncan’s
“The Song of the Borderguard”:

The man with his lion under the shed of wars
sheds his belief as if he shed tears.
The sound of words waits –
a barbarian host at the borderline of sense.

Deep Image: Radical Subjectivity in the Poetry of Robert Bly, James Wright, Galway Kinnell, James Dickey,
The enamored guards desert their posts
harkening to the lion-smell of a poem
that rings in their ears.

– Dreams, a certain guard said,
were never designed so
to re-arrange an empire.

Along about six o’clock I take my guitar
and sing to a lion
who sleeps like a line of poetry
in the shed of wars.21

As well, new insights from scientific research into brain functions and the
neurophysiology of sight inform their approach to poetics. Duncan, for example, asks that
students following his course in “Studies in Ideas of the Poetic Imagination” at Kent State
University in 1971 read scientifically-based references as well as works by many poets
including Ezra Pound, William Carlos Williams and William Blake. The prospectus
indicates that the course will investigate “how ideas of Imagination in poetry relate to the
fields of religion and the psychological and physiological sciences”, with special reference
to the work of Nobel neurophysiologist Sir Charles Sherrington.22

Poets such as Strand, Kinnell and Duncan visited Sydney in the mid 1970s and
interest among Australian poets attracted to such perspectives was fostered by Robert and
Cheryl Adamson through the magazine New Poetry, which published some of Malouf’s
work and to which he was connected through his relationship with Christopher Edwards,
guest editor of Volume 25, numbers 1 and 2 of the magazine in 1977. Malouf’s interest in
exploring how poetic imagination transforms the perceived world, informed by images that

emerge from dream states and the subconscious, is evident in “Twelve Nightpieces” (Poems 1975-76) and in his second novel, both dedicated to Edwards. He commences a narrative tentatively titled Letter from Pontus (later renamed An Imaginary Life at the publisher’s request) in late 1976 with a scene where the exiled Roman poet Ovid feels unpredicted transformation upon discovering a small red poppy, a reminder of his lost homeland. The event becomes emblematic of what Ovid senses is an under-used capacity to recover and transform his understanding not of myths and legends, as previously in his verse, but of everyday “realities” through the poetic imagination. The “practical” and the “poetic” (to use Heaney’s later terms) may function together in consciousness, with the poet’s awareness only a more intense expression of a human capacity at work in making of all kinds. Notably, Malouf adds a phrase, probably quoting James Wright, to an early typescript of the scarlet poppy passage: “I have wasted my life, a real poet: belief.”

His view that imaginative belief, more than merely suspending disbelief, on the part of both writer and reader, is a necessary frame of mind for effectively engaging with the full yet unpredictable potential of poetic imagination becomes more apparent in subsequent works. For instance, in “Ode: Schubert, Sonata in B Flat Major, D. 960 (op.posth.)”, published in First Things Last (1980), the speaker begins:

But this was not predicted: none of the angels
– notebook, night hawk, girl at the box office –
foretold this autumn landscape, the clear gift
shines through all its wrappings, unrolls itself
of haze and is distributed as stubble.

22 Robert Duncan, Prospectus for the course “Studies in Ideas of the Poetic Imagination” (San Francisco, 1972), Robert Edward Duncan Papers, 1942-1978, Item 9, 1972, Kent State University Library, Ohio, USA.

and small stones take the sun.\textsuperscript{24}

Here, Malouf’s poetic imagination presents to the subject images of another natural setting – an autumn landscape, the unpredicted “gift” which “shines through all its wrappings”. It re-makes in expressive language a personal response of subjective correlatives (adapting T.S. Eliot’s term) to the shifting tones and “longer breath” of Schubert’s piano sonata and later in the poem celebrates the poetic as the energy of the “arc that bends beyond / the imaginably familiar”, re-covering what is hidden by “blank mirrors sheeted with our prayers” – not a labyrinth of circular mirrors but an earth recovered that is also a self restored, a place where “Wet furrows shine”:

\begin{quote}
Though we stand staring  
at blank mirrors sheeted with our prayers,  
the pollens glow, the avenues lead out  
from here; we have only to catch our breath, reversing  
the image, reversing time, to walk back into  
the room with its open door and the earth unwrapping  
gifts out of the mist. Wet furrows shine. \textit{(FTL 25)}
\end{quote}

For Malouf, the working of the poetic gift forms the imaginary into patterned language that traces in lines on the printed page his particular way of making and re-making the world. His images, in turn, suggest patterns that highlight the harmonious work of the body and the senses: footprints “creaking” in the brightness of snow and furrows “shining” in the ploughed field. Such images bring together the external world and subject in “illuminations” that originate within things and the ear and eye of the perceiver. His works indicate a consistent and growing belief in the creative act of human imagining as it is expressed in every day life, as well as in works of art. Such a belief in the physical basis of experience offers a counter-weight to a view in Australian society that the creative arts are

\textsuperscript{24} David Malouf, \textit{First Things Last} (St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1980), 53. Page references for subsequent quotations from this collection are identified by the abbreviation \textit{FTL}. 
based on understandings that are unrelated or irrelevant to daily life. Malouf traces through language a distinctive poetic consciousness which, all things being propitious, can be accessible to others. As it is a living awareness, it contains tensions of presence and of absence implicit in language. Malouf increasingly requires his readers to sustain belief and a Keatsian “negative capability” that allows unity of ongoing vision to co-exist with the “realities” of death and disintegration of the physical.

Such belief is explored in successive shorter fictional works in 1980 and 1981 where Malouf tests the efficacy of his poetic imagination. Is its preference for lyricism taking sufficient account of co-ordinates of exterior “realities”? Its potential to motivate destructive violence as well as creative transformation emerges in the terrorist’s commitment to murder the great author in *Child’s Play* and its ethical ambivalence is explored in choices made by characters in the stories “Eustace” and “The Prowler”. Its potential to stand upright as a chosen use of language and to “press back” against the violence without by struggling with an inner violence is felt strongly as Malouf writes, in 1981, what he first calls “the bird book”, which would later be re-titled *Fly Away Peter*. This work severely tests the writer’s belief in the potential of poetic imagination to suffice amid the destructive impact of war. To bring the past into a new relationship with the present through historical and personal narrative provides a foundation for Malouf’s subsequent works of the 1980s: *Harland’s Half Acre* (1984), *12 Edmondstone Street* (1985), *Antipodes* (1985) and *The Great World* (1990).

Malouf’s style of making in language values intuitive as well as rational thought, recognizing the tension between them as a point of discovery. He blends intellect with an exploration of feelings and archetypes, seeking a fuller way of knowing the self in the
world and a greater sense of unity between body, mind and spirit. He allows visions that connect human and natural worlds to emerge in his poetic, while recognizing and seeking to overcome the fissure caused by entering the symbolic realm of language. Malouf constantly engages with interior and exterior, as he explains in a talk he gave at the Warana Writers’ Week in Brisbane in 1983:

I’ve always wanted to work and have worked (uneasily some people might say) between inner and outer, or at the point where objects cross the consciousness and become perception … It’s a point of awareness that engages me. I think it’s where I feel I have most to discover: that is the point at which objects, sensations, resolve any question of object / subject, and move from outside within.  

Consistently and in ways that build and extend correspondences across his works, Malouf’s poetic imagination may be read as inviting readers to experience what Antonio García-Berrio has termed “poeticity”, an “unpredictable aesthetic value” that is unforeseeable and different from the conventional communicative use of language. The long-established use of the term “poetic prose” to describe an important aspect of Malouf’s achievement as a writer suggests that Malouf’s poetic imaginary invokes an effect and an experiential value for many readers which may be compared to the quality García-Berrio has termed “poeticity”. This is a quality perceived by the reader through the writer’s

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encoding of the text but goes beyond words in its aspiration.\textsuperscript{27} If “literariness” has come in recent decades to be regarded, under the influence of critical theory, as a conventionalised linguistic choice deriving from chosen ways of using language to signify to an audience in specific cultural contexts, then “poeticity”, in García-Berro’s terms, needs to be differentiated from “literariness” as surprising in its aesthetic nature. The power of the reader or listener experiencing “poeticity” in and through a text is not guaranteed, he suggests, by any agreed formula of language. It is culturally but also personally determined, depending on the relationship between writer and reader. According to this view, it is not a pre-determined result of socio-economic or political forces which forms that relationship but is able to exceed those boundaries in the intimacy of the moments of reading. It may be regarded as an intensified subjective consciousness, degrees of which may be inherent in reading all texts, but which is particularly effective in a lyrical poetic where its life can be renewed and re-experienced in subtly different ways through each engagement of text and reader.

Such qualities are particularly valued by Malouf. He believes that the “real” and the “imagined” blend in the act of reading through

the spell that is cast on the willing reader by the writer’s voice; the way we internalise the voice and make it, for the time of the reading, our own, so that the experience it brings us seems no less personal and real than what we experience in the world.\textsuperscript{28}

\textsuperscript{27} Jennifer Rutherford refers to experiencing this quality in reading \textit{Johnno}. The novel provides more understanding than it seems to verbally articulate, in her view, and offers an intuitive awareness (“That’s it!”) which the reader grasps. See Jennifer Rutherford, \textit{The Gauche Intruder: Freud, Lacan and the White Australian Fantasy} (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2000), 159-61.

Such a dimension in writing is never guaranteed. For Malouf, it needs to be continuously negotiated between writer and reader:

This is what we, as writers, deal in daily, a dimension, continuously negotiated, of mind, tone, language, where the writer’s consciousness and the reader’s imperceptibly merge, in an intimacy where, all conditions being propitious, I and other, mind and the world, are one.29

When successful, it allows the writer’s voice to enter the single reader’s “absorbed isolation that is one of the unique conditions of our world”30. It is an ideal, bringing exterior and interior worlds together. It becomes, for Malouf, essential to what he terms “the real work of culture”, allowing a freedom to opposing ideas and values so that they invent new forms of synthesis and accommodation through the aesthetic mode:

This business of making accessible the richness of the world we are in, of bringing density to ordinary day-to-day living in a place, is the real work of culture. It is a matter, for the most part, of enriching our consciousness – in both senses of that word: increasing our awareness of what exists around us, making it register on our senses in the most vivid way; but also of taking all that into our consciousness and of giving it a second life there so that we possess the world we inhabit imaginatively as well as in fact.31

It can arise from a diversity of experiences. Unpredictable aesthetic value can be experienced in the mundane as well as in more traditionally located “poetic” settings. The surprise and perceived value of experiencing the world in this way recurs in diverse ways in his works, taking what Seamus Heaney terms “the redress of poetry” into more challenging arenas of engagement. He tests its capacity to hold, to answer and to suffice as well as a celebrating and seeking to extend its powers in and through language.

Malouf’s works are approached in the present study as what Wallace Stevens terms “disclosures of poetry” rather than statements about poetics. The works themselves are the principal “disclosures”, informed by insights Malouf has shared with his readership about the ways he understands his imagination to work and what he has sought to represent by means of it in his writing. Although he is a writer who makes the transforming power of imagination a key focus in his work, he has not to date published a theory of poetics or a philosophy of poetic imagination. The evidence of his body of work is offered as its own statement and it is this approach which is followed here. What is revealed will, of course, have been shaped by ways of perceiving and understanding already framed in the mind of reader and listener. There is no objective observer, but a participant reader who shifts in thought and imagination between the “near” and “far” of the study of texts, as Malouf does in his composing of them. The context of each work is considered in terms of its relation to Malouf’s developing poetic imaginary, noting the way that early figures such as the lure to distract the tiger in “Footnote for a Bestiary”, for example, are appropriated and transformed in subsequent works. Evidence derived from the extant manuscripts of his major works adds a dimension to this study not found in earlier discussions of his development as a writer. Close study of the way a number of his prose works progress through successive drafts reveals more about his intentions in regard to the integration of his poetic imaginary in his works overall.

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32 Stevens, Introduction to The Necessary Angel, vii.

33 David Malouf, “Interiors (8)”, in Four Poets, David Malouf, Don Maynard, Judith Green and Rodney Hall (Melbourne: Cheshire, 1962). Each poem or poem sequence is assigned a number in this collection rather than each page being numbered. References for quotations from Malouf’s section of this collection are identified subsequently by the abbreviation Interiors.
A key energy in Malouf’s poetic is bringing together through representations in language different kinds of consciousness, contrasting ways of knowing about self and the world external to the self. This includes rational and intuitive, verbal and non-verbal modes. Malouf imagines in his works the dynamic interconnecting of the perceived external world where the body is located in space and time, and the mind-in-the-body that negotiates, consciously and unconsciously, that ever-changing relationship. He explores what neurophysiologist Antonio Damasio terms the “images of knowing” associated with such interconnections.\textsuperscript{34} For Malouf, such “knowing” encompasses not only the human world but also that of animals, plants and nature generally. It is firmly based in materiality while seeking ways to “illuminate” the physical life as well as the interconnection of the “inner” world of perceptions, thoughts and dreams. A unity based on “the is-ness of things” is envisioned.\textsuperscript{35} Intrinsic to the relationship is the unique identity of each subject and life form within its environment. Social, historical and cultural contexts are seen by Malouf as constantly shifting and his work suggests that these human contexts are encompassed within the wider realm of other species on a physical earth. His works offer a re-valuing of these constantly transforming interrelationships in the face of traditional categories and conceptual hierarchies.

His purpose in a poem sequence such as “The Crab Feast” (1980) has affinities with the prose poems of Francis Ponge in the phenomenological treatment of “things”, as


\textsuperscript{35} David Malouf, “A Poet Among Others”, in \textit{Neighbours in a Thicket} (St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1974), 47. Page references for quotations from this collection are identified subsequently by the abbreviation \textit{Neighbours}. Quotations from the second edition (1980) are identified by the abbreviation \textit{Neighbours 80}. 
evident in *Le Parti Pris des Choses (Taking the Side of Things, 1942)*. In “The Oyster”, for example, Ponge discovers:

> In the interior is found a whole world, to eat and drink: under a *firmament* (appropriately) of nacre, heavens above settle upon heavens below, to form nothing more than a pool a viscous and greenish sachet, which ebbs and flows to sight and smell, fringed with a blackish lace along the edges.

> Sometimes very rare a formula pearls in their gullet of nacre, whereby is found at once an adornment.\(^{36}\)

The oyster is distinctly itself as physical entity and emblematic of the larger world that is figured as nourishment for humanity. It is object that may become subject, prey to the eye and hand that seeks the pearl as adornment, as the poet, in turn, makes his “formule” of the poem from words (the French “formule” suggesting both formula and small form).\(^{37}\) The relation of the poet and the object is described by Ponge in terms of weight and counterweight in his poem/essay “The Object is the Poetics”.\(^{38}\) Because the human is more than a body and is weighted in nature by capacities such as imagination, memory and feelings, the actuality of the object is needed as a counterweight. By treating it as a “real” object rather than a subjective emanation, humans can begin to redress the imbalance in nature. Ponge regards writing as a way of lightening the scales, of moving over to the other side:

> We must then choose real objects, objecting indefinitely to our desires. Objects that we would choose again each day, and not as our decor, our frame; rather as spectators, our judges; so as to be, naturally, neither dancers nor clowns.

> In short, our secret council.\(^{39}\)

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\(^{38}\) Ponge, *The Voice of Things*, 94-96.

\(^{39}\) Ponge, *The Voice of Things*, 95.
In part VI of “The Crab Feast” the subject confronts the problem of relating to the object as edible creature, asserting that he and the crab share “horizons / of each other’s consciousness” and that he is “Drawn / by unlikeness” to the creature yet perceives similarities:

I grew
like you or dreamed I did, sharing your cautious
sideways grip on things, not to be broken,
your smokiness of blood, as kin

to dragons we guarded
in the gloom of mangrove trunks
our hoard. I crossed the limits
into alien territory. (FTL 33)

It is a distinctly human dilemma – how to create a counterweight to redress the complex consciousness that creates the human interaction with the natural world. Complexity as a human construct of inner and outer worlds is explored in “The Crab Feast” in a way that recognizes the need to respect the “real object” (after Ponge) and the difficulty of achieving any separation (also Ponge’s dilemma) through the mesh of language. The difference in poetic treatment is marked, however, by Malouf’s closer depiction of how the subject’s consciousness shifts between setting, self and object in experience. The subject desires to “have” the object on which it focuses and to “be had” by it, implying a reconciliation through emotion and erotic feeling, as between human lovers, rather than one achieved through the subject’s intellect alone.40 Ponge’s play of language, often seemingly quasi-scientific in tone, offers a subject’s reflection and contemplation of the object at a greater distance. In the prose poem “Rain”, for example, there is less concern

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40 In part I of “The Crab Feast” the subject states: “There is no getting closer / than this. My tongue slips into / the furthest, sweetest corner / of you” (28). In part X the subject asserts, “We are one at last. Assembled here / out of earth, water, air / to a love feast. You lie open / before me. I am ready. / Begin.” (FTL 37)
with the nuances of the subject’s experience and with lyrical effect than is found in
Malouf’s “Snow”:

Rain, in the courtyard where I watch it fall, comes down at very varied speeds …
The striking at the ground of the vertical filaments, the gurgling of the gutters, the
minuscule gong strokes multiply and resound at once in a concert of no monotony,
not without delicacy.\(^{41}\)

By comparison Malouf’s purpose of learning to access ongoing self-transformation
through engaging the poetic within its lived context becomes apparent. He wishes to
identify with the object, even to be absorbed in it, as well as to step back from it to discern
the relationship through conceptual thinking. His empathy with Ponge’s work is more
apparent in a prose poem such as “The Cycle of the Seasons” where the ongoing effort of
trees to produce new leaves in spring, despite the inevitable fall of autumn and barrenness
of winter, points to a natural mode of faith in the relentless being of nature:

Tired of having restrained themselves all winter, the trees suddenly take themselves
for fools. They can stand it no longer: they let loose their words – a flood, a vomiting
of green. They try to bring off a complete leafing of words … but all they are saying
is “trees” … Always the same leaf, always the same unfolding, the same limits … In
short, nothing can put an end to it except this sudden realization: “There is no way
out of trees by means of trees.” One more fatigue, one more change of mood. “Let it
all yellow and fall. Let there be silence, bareness, AUTUMN.”\(^{42}\)

In poems such as the Schubert “Ode” and “Reading a View” (both published in 1980)
Malouf is pleased that the cycle of leaves continues, that there is “no way out of trees by
means of trees”, as this exemplifies the hope of continuity in the phenomenology of nature.

If humans adapt such a view from the experience of nature, the poems suggest, a faith is
possible, even in a time of cynicism and disillusionment, based on the materiality of the
earth rather than in any traditional spiritual transcendence:

\(^{41}\) Ponge, *Things*, 23.

\(^{42}\) Ponge, *The Voice of Things*, 40-41.
new leaves enter
the scene, start for a point of clipped perfection
they’ll never reach, who belong always to nature
and fall. But green returns, that is the point.
These fallings are part of it (FTL 55)

“Reading a View” concludes with the subject’s belief that “A leaf would show us where”
our direction might be:

We trace a lower path at the garden’s edge, tending whatever
flaps, wads, spirals, hurls up sparks. The landscape
burns to be replaced. We are moving into
autumn, we say, or somewhere in that direction.
A leaf would show us where. (FTL 24)

To place Malouf in the context of the concerns explored by Ponge reveals his international
focus in poetry and his concern to take his poetic imaginary back to the foundations of
perception as it becomes knowing of diverse kinds.

In this regard, Wallace Stevens and Rainer Maria Rilke are both important influences
on Malouf’s poetic from his university days in Brisbane in the 1950s onwards. While it has
been argued that W.H. Auden’s “dispassionate tone” is a significant influence on Malouf’s
eyearly published work and there is certainly evidence of this, Stevens’ exploration of the
tensions between what he terms “reality” and “imagination” also provides an important
frame of reference for Malouf’s own developing poetic architecture of “interior” and
“exterior”, apparent in the title (“Interiors”) for his selection in Four Poets published in
1962. Such a title asserts a position of imaginative redress in his particular cultural and
historical context of mid-twentieth century Australia. In a society which he saw as much
focused on surfaces and exteriors, he values the interiors of consciousness found in Rilke’s
poems and studies poets such as Wordsworth, Hölderlin and Goethe, among others, and

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43 Don Randall, David Malouf, Contemporary World Writers (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007), 22.
novelists such as Melville and Proust. The figure of the angel (after Rilke) is an important emblem in many of Malouf’s works, suggesting the just-discerned “voice”, “presence” or “stranger” that comes towards consciousness when it is open to a more intuitive way of knowing, as in the poem sequence “Preludes”, part V:

A shadow enters;
the rest of course must follow. So we wait, eyes covered
by the hand of one who steps out of the fog
behind us.

Let the angel
speak before you answer. The first word
that flows into your head,
but now, will be the last word of its text. (FTL 9)

A process of personal learning about diverse ways of knowing becomes more consciously represented as Malouf’s works develop, particularly the way a person makes meaning to form what Damasio terms “the autobiographical self” in which

Sets of memories which describe identity and person can be reactivated as a neural pattern and made explicit as images whenever needed. Each reactivated memory operates as “something-to-be-known” and generates its own pulse of core consciousness. The result is the autobiographical self of which we are conscious.44

His poetry engages with images from “the autobiographical self” from early published works such as “At My Grandmother’s” (1961) and his prose takes on this quality as he works for over a decade to write his first novel Johnno. The much faster composing of An Imaginary Life in the mid 1970s suggests a sense of release into what Robert Kegan has termed (from a constructivist-developmental perspective) “the evolving self” in which polarities and dichotomous choices are seen as based in the dialectical context of the evolution of meaning-making within the subject.45 Malouf represents this in fictional terms

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44 Damasio, 174.

by allowing the character Ovid to recognize his “predicament” of exile and re-shape his polarized concepts such as “civilized” and “barbaric”, thereby establishing a re-integrated identity through evolving his way of making meaning. Insight emerges for Ovid through images that come towards his awareness from a blending of the intuitive mind and the external environment, from his past and present, requiring an offering or appeasement to cross the boundary from the silence of pre-verbal consciousness to representation in language. Such images may seem to take on an ambiguous life of their own (like the tiger’s face in the hunter’s silver ball in “Footnote for a Bestiary”) making the subject their vehicle and achieving a freedom of imaginative play from which the subject may suffer or learn. Alternatively, they may be given an existence separate to the subject, as in the case of the Wild Child, from whom Ovid learns what is unexpected yet of great value to his way of making meaning from experience.

It is with a desire to find what he might discover in these encounters with the imaginary that Malouf chooses his vocation as a full-time writer, expressing the paradox of “near” and “far” in a physical re-location to Italy for much of the year from 1978 onward so that he can connect with sources of inspiration that, ironically, are deeply based in being Australian. His works from 1978 to 1982 represent a particularly rich period of achievement – the libretto for Richard Meale’s Voss, poems collected in Wild Lemons and First Things Last, short stories, Child’s Play and, of particular importance for his future

ongoing way: “each qualitative change, hard won, is a response to the complexity of the world, a response in further recognition of how the world and I are yet again distinct – and thereby more related” (85). Reflecting contemporary interest in how the human mind changes over a lifetime, Kegan dedicates his book to Jean Piaget and prefaces it with an epigraph from Ovid’s Metamorphoses: “My intention is to tell / of bodies changed / to different forms ... The heavens and all below them, / Earth and her creatures, / All change, / And we, part of creation / Also must suffer change.” (trans. Rolfe Humphries).

46 Kegan discusses this process as a type of “natural therapy”, The Evolving Self, 266-67.
writing, *Fly Away Peter*, based on the Australian experience of World War I. These works, together with essays and reviews of Australian literature for journals and newspapers, show important growth in Malouf’s exploration of the role of counterbalance that the imaginary, and especially the poetic imaginary, could take in bringing to new generations of readers a sense of personal connection with the past, leading to an enriched engagement with the present and belief in the possibility of the future.

These works show Malouf valuing the often hidden moments of people’s experiences, the unspoken recognitions that may transform the self. Malouf regards this to be particularly important in the Australian context as people from diverse settler cultures seek to inhabit in imagination the places where they actually live and come slowly to appreciate that indigenous people lived there before them and knew the land in their own way. The desire to align what is experienced and what may be imagined, so that both enrich each other, is a significant source of creative energy and tension in Malouf’s works, suggesting a post-colonial sense of the local as a source of nurture for consciousness as well as a site of predicament for competing values within the settler culture – the role of the English language as imperial and local signifier, for example – and between indigenous and settler cultures. The local and international publishing history of these works gives insights into the dynamics of cultural production that poetry and novels particularly encountered in Australia in the 1960s and 1970s, a production to which Malouf contributed through initiatives such as the Paperback Poets series from University of Queensland Press, commencing in 1970.
While the ideas of Martin Heidegger have been discussed in relation to Malouf’s themes and ways of thinking, this study will also consider reading strategies suggested by the theories of Carl Jung. His view of introverted and extroverted ways of knowing self and the world, as expressed in *Psychological Types* (1921), together with his concept of “individuation” will be considered in relation to the way a character such as Ovid is represented in Malouf’s fiction. Joseph Campbell’s related work on the hero’s journey towards self-discovery offers useful insights into the way Jim Saddler experiences his changing world in *Fly Away Peter*.

Malouf’s works can be located not only in regard to developments in contemporary literature but in the context of theories of cognitive development which became influential in western cultures in the later twentieth century, particularly following the greater recognition from the 1960s onwards of the work in genetic epistemology of Jean Piaget. Piaget’s concepts of assimilation (inward organization), accommodation (outward adaptive coping) and equilibration (ongoing re-stabilising of an organism), discussed in *The Psychology of Intelligence* (1947), appear especially relevant to Malouf’s view of how

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47 For example, in Paul Kavanagh, "Elegies of Presence: Malouf, Heidegger and Language", in *Provisional Maps: Critical Essays on David Malouf*, ed. Amanda Nettelbeck (Ndlands; Centre for Studies in Australian Literature, University of Western Australia, 1994), 149-62.


Fig. 1. Structural dimensions underlying the process of experiential learning and the resulting basic knowledge forms. David A. Kolb, *Experiential Learning: Experience as the Source of Learning and Development* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall PTR, 1984), 42.¹

¹“Learning is the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience. Knowledge results from the combination of grasping experience and transforming it. And since there are two dialectically opposed forms of prehension and, similarly, two opposed ways of transforming that prehension, the result is four different elementary forms of knowledge. …[divergent, assimilative, convergent, accommodative] … This view is largely consistent with that of Piaget, although his work had tended to highlight the role of transformation processes over the prehension process, whereas I will seek … to give both aspects equal status” (Kolb, 41-42).
perception becomes conscious meaning in the mind, while his belief in the
interrelationship of life forms is empathetic with Piaget’s view of the embedded nature of
all organic life in dynamic living systems. Applying a constructivist-developmental
approach in areas of personal learning and psychological development, David Kolb
developed a theory of “experiential learning” (1984), bringing together perspectives on the
dialectics of making meaning from experience, following the work of Carl Jung, Jean
Piaget, John Dewey and Kurt Lewin.\(^5\) His theory offers an integrated view of learning that
includes experience, perception, cognition and behaviour. Figure 1 shows Kolb’s model of
the structural dimensions that he regards as underlying experiential learning and the basic
knowledge forms that result. The theory has been influential in the fields of adult learning
and organizational management for the past two decades\(^6\) and offers, perhaps surprisingly
in the literary domain, perspectives for the reader on the ways Malouf’s poetic engages
with contrasting ways of receiving and transforming experience, an important feature in
his poetry and in the development of his characters. Kolb’s theory is of particular interest
because it is contemporary with Malouf’s developing sense of the significance of personal

\(^5\) Kolb, *Experiential Learning*, 1-38. Kolb’s theory is based on what he regards as an ethical purpose: to
increase the chance of human survival in a world we increasingly create by our actions. He sees human beings as “the learning species … [that] long ago left the harmony of a non-reflective union with the ‘natural’ order to embark on an adaptive journey of its own choosing. … The risks and rewards of mankind’s fateful choice have become increasingly apparent to us as all our transforming and creative capacities shower us with the bounty of technology and haunt us with the nightmare of a world that ends” (Kolb, 1-2). Kolb’s view indicates a concern that is a background to the creative arts in the 1970s and 1980s in western societies and continues to be so in the twenty-first century. Malouf’s work seems to share the view that human learning, in all forms, is essential in shaping past, present and future consciousness.

\(^6\) See, for example, P. Honey and A. Mumford, *Manual of Learning Styles* (London: Peter Honey, 1982)
and *The Learning Styles Helper’s Guide* (Maidenhead: Peter Honey, 2000); Patrick Whitaker, *Managing to
and Victoria J. Marsick, “Organizational Learning and Transformation”, in Jack Mezirow and Associates ,
*Learning as Transformation: Critical Perspectives on a Theory in Progress* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass,
Fig. 2. Modes of poetic learning: a model with reference to Malouf's works and Kolb's theory of experiential learning.
learning in encoding space and forming meaning from experience that is both subjective and objective. The theory’s continuing relevance in discussions about learning is evident in publications that seek to bring together education and more recent research in neurobiology, such as The Art of Changing the Brain by James E. Zull. The 1980s saw the publication of important studies that challenged and extended contemporary concepts of learning and intelligence, including Howard Gardner’s Frames of Mind: The Theory of Multiple Intelligences (1983) and Jürgen Habermas’ The Theory of Communicative Action (1984). That Malouf’s creative purposes might be placed in relation to thinking in these domains has not, as yet, been investigated.

His poem celebrating childhood learning, “Nostalgia”, offers an example of the different dialectical modes in Kolb’s model interacting in the structural dimensions underlying experiential learning: concrete experience/abstract conceptualization; reflective observation/active experimentation. Using terms drawn from reading across Malouf’s work, Figure 2 adapts Kolb’s model to suggest a framework of learning that is poetic in its reliance on imagination and language to create meaning expressed in literary forms and to enact the surprise of the poetic motivating personal change. Of course, not all of Malouf’s poems follow such a model and its terms point to recurring elements in the varied patterns of his works rather than a predictable cycle or fixed schema. However, his most widely recognised works in fiction and poetry seem to drawn upon these elements in individual ways.

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The subject in “Nostalgie”, for example, first apprehends in imagination through a narrative of memory:

On my heels among canna-stems, in the little India of under-our-backyard-steps. I suck on cake-crumbed fingers, sweet mud-chocolate, dropped and the sweeter for it, snatched back again, dusted with earth. ‘Don’t fuss,’ the old wives crooned, ‘he’ll swallow a peck of that before he’s done, a few grains more won’t hurt him.’ They didn’t, they never have; I’m still eating. Useful so early on to get acquainted and take no harm from it, the angel who comes to us in so many forms, warm sandpile Eden, new world city, all we inherit of dirt that balls in a sweaty palm, the crust and daily dross and excrement, the golden muck, and will be there in our mouths when breath, that ghostly wafer, is gone – last taste on the tongue of what came first and Madeleine to the rest: to savour which, illuminate crumb by crumb, will take at least another lifetime.  

Feeling-images emerge through reflection (“sweet mud-chocolate”, “warm sandpile Eden”, “golden muck”) so that readers/listeners may enter the experience and apprehend with their own sensory imaginings and reflections. Taking the reader with him, the subject then steps back from the recreated “immediacy” of remembered apprehensions to comprehend the physical and social contexts in which they occurred (“the old wives crooned”, “new city world”). He forms a concept of the efficacy of the childhood experience for his adult life (“I’m still eating. Useful so early on to get / acquainted and take no harm from it”). The poetic extends into active experimentation as a blended “near/far” way of knowing shapes the “becoming” form of the poem. The poet turns reflection into action: he will “savour” life and “illuminate [it] crumb by crumb” as the

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55 David Malouf, Selected Poems (North Ryde, NSW: Angus and Robertson/Harper Collins, 1991), 112. Pages references for quotations from this collection are identified subsequently in the text by the abbreviation SP 91.
writing of the poem indicates. In so doing the subject transforms the apprehensions that provide the energy of the poem into a way of knowing perceived through the mind/body (and the reader’s mind through eye and ear). Such knowledge is projected and tested through the poetic and the subject brings the circle of learning to a concluding celebration. He finds that such a way of finding out about the world still suffices after a lifetime of creative making through poetic language. The “nearness” of the earth, outer and inner becoming one in the subject (“I’m still eating”), is the essential discovery and leads to acceptance that earth “will be there in our mouths when breath, / that ghostly wafer, is gone”.

The poem’s integrity derives from a finely balanced play of modes of what may be termed poetic learning, beginning with apprehension and moving through reflection, comprehension and active extension to a vision of illumination that extends beyond temporality before returning to the “near” of the senses, feelings and intuitions. While the interacting of the modes may vary in Malouf’s work and no strict order need be followed, moments of at least partial resolution or insight are often the desired outcome, opening the way for further apprehensions of what is “near”. As Kolb notes in offering his model: “The process of learning [may be likened] to a musical score that depicts a succession and combination of notes played on an instrument over time”.56 The model highlights potentials of learning that inform Malouf’s work, as a musical instrument offers possibilities of different melodies and patterns of sound being played upon it. The gaps between its points of reference also suggest the sites of disturbance where opposed ways of taking in and processing experience are most in tension. With reference to Malouf’s

56 Kolb, 62.
poetic, the model may be figured as constantly being made and re-made, with (after Heaney) a “rim of silence” from which consciousness emerges and into which it returns like Malouf’s “silence approaching music” (“At the Ferry”). It presumes a silence that is felt as presence within and between the words and lines of a text. Part of the appeal of a lyrical mode to Malouf may be found in the way the reader’s imaginative engagement with the “I” of the poem re-energises and transforms with each reading the pattern of learning, suggested by Figure 2.

Critical readings of Malouf’s works commenced with reviews at the time of publication in newspapers and magazines. Scholarly articles on and research into his work at an international level have increased since he was awarded the first International IMPAC Dublin Literary Prize in 1996 for Remembering Babylon, the Lannan Foundation Literary Award for fiction in 2000 and, in the same year, became the 16th Laureate of the Neustadt International Prize for Literature. As yet, however, there is only a handful of book length studies of his work: Philip Neilsen’s Imagined Lives: A Study of David Malouf (1990), Karin Hansson’s Sheer Edge: Aspects of Identity in David Malouf’s Writing (1991), Ivor Indyk’s David Malouf (1993) in the Oxford Australian Writers series and Don

57 Heaney, Redress: Inaugural Lecture, 11.

58 David Malouf, Typewriter Music (St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 2007), 22. Page references for quotations from this collection are identified subsequently in the text by the abbreviation TM.

59 A detailed list of reviews and biographical material to 1990 is given in Philip Neilsen, Imagined Lives: A Study of David Malouf (St. Lucia: University of Queensland, 1990), 206 - 14. Subsequent references to Neilsen’s study are placed in the text.

60 See, for example, World Literature Today 74. 4 (2000) which features articles on a range of Malouf’s work to mark the award of the Neustadt Prize. Among these articles are Paul Sharad, “‘A Delicate Business’: David Malouf’s Shorter Prose” (758-68), Andrew Taylor, “The Bread of Time to Come: Body and Landscape in David Malouf’s Fiction” (715-23) and Carolyn Bliss, “Reimagining the Remembered: David Malouf and the Moral Implication of Myth” (725-32).

More recent publications include a discussion of *An Imaginary Life* and *Remembering Babylon* from a post-colonial perspective in Bill Ashcroft’s *On Post-Colonial Futures* (2001) and important articles by Andrew Taylor and Ihab Hassan.\(^{63}\) *David Malouf: A Celebration* (2001) was compiled by Ivor Indyk for the Friends of the National Library of Australia and contains useful background to his work, as well as appreciations of his work by Indyk, Judith Rodriguez, Vivian Smith, Nicholas Jose and Colm Tóibín.\(^{64}\) Articles by Natalie Seger (2005) and Stephen Benson (2003) have discussed such areas as the role of music and opera libretti in Malouf’s work and his depiction of “transcendence” in poetry and prose.\(^{65}\) Importantly for the approach taken in

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this study, reference to Malouf’s work is now found in broader scholarly contexts and multidisciplinary studies such as Paul John Eakin’s “Autobiography, Identity and Fictions of Memory” (2000). Discussing Malouf’s concept of extended memory in *12 Edmonstone Street* (1985), Eakin comments:

> The startling climax of his compelling sketch of his childhood home … is the recognition that memory does not preserve the past; instead, it interferes with its recovery … Because the body changes and consciousness alters, the recovery of the past – autobiography’s project – is, in a deep psychological and neurological sense, impossible … [memory] is constantly revising and editing the remembered past to square with the needs and requirements of the self we have become in any present.66

His paper was presented at a conference in May 1997 at Harvard University that brought together neuroscientists, cognitive psychologists, literary scholars and medical specialists with the theme *Memory, Brain, and Belief*. That Malouf’s focus on shifts in perception, consciousness, intuition and the autobiographical self is a significant area for further scholarly research has become more apparent in the past decade. The relatively few studies available of the subjective experience of intuition, for example, may help explain why literary scholars have had little to draw upon in recognizing or investigating such an area in Malouf’s work. Claire Petitmengin-Peugeot in her article “The Intuitive Experience” (1999) comments on this unusual “forgetting”, despite the historical importance of the notion of intuition in western scientific and philosophical discoveries, and concludes that it is partly a difficulty of expression:

> Our language [French in this case] provides few concepts to describe the interior movements of going down into the sensations of the body, of calming the mental activity and of renouncement, which make up the gesture of letting go [just before an intuitive experience may occur] … in what category can we put the interior images

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which emerge during intuition, which seem to be neither remembered nor constructed.\textsuperscript{67}

In a passage in \textit{Fly Away Peter} such as that presenting Jim Saddler’s final moments as he prepares to be called over the trenches to enter a battlefield in World War I, such intuitions and sensations are the core of the reading experience Malouf offers. When Ovid feels himself merging into the earth at the conclusion of \textit{An Imaginary Life}, the reader’s engagement with such a subjective experience is crucial. Commentators have so far reached for terms such as “lyrically comprehensive”, “transcendent” and “poetic” partly because of the inherent difficulty for conceptual language in entering “this immediate, pre-representational and pre-discursive experience of the world [in which] all our cognitive activity seems to be rooted”.\textsuperscript{68} Approaches that draw from cross-disciplinary perspectives have the potential to extend and broaden the critical frameworks already available because they allow greater credibility to the non-verbal experience that may or may not move towards language. As this study aims to show, it is Malouf’s ability to enter such experiences and bring them successfully into the reader’s awareness that constitutes an important aspect of his achievement as a writer. Because intuitive experience may appear to challenge positivist, language-centred views and may occur unpredictably for the subject as a “slow ripening” or as an impulse “surging” or “leaping”, not obviously controlled by rationality, its appeal to the “deep image” poetic is understandable and its relevance to Malouf’s desire to re-balance the processes of knowing is evident. In the late

\textsuperscript{67} Claire Petitmengin-Peugeot, “The Intuitive Experience”, in \textit{The View From Within: First Person Approaches to the Study of Consciousness}, eds. Francisco Varela and Jonathan Shear (Thorverton, UK: Imprint Academic, 1999), 76.

\textsuperscript{68} Petitmengin-Peugeot, 77.
1960s Robert Bly writes of the notion of a poet “leaping” among the different parts of the mind as he composes:

In ancient times, in the “time of inspiration”, the poet flew from one world to another, “riding on dragons”, as the Chinese said ... They dragged behind them long tails of dragon smoke ... The verse of Beowulf still retains some of that ancient freedom. The poet holds fast to Danish soil, or leaps after Grendel into the sea. That leaping – really a leaping about the psyche – is what disappeared. The corridors of the unconscious ... gradually became blocked in Europe ... [Now] a vast effort is being made once more to open the doors of association. When the poet is in the middle of a poem, about to set down a word, how many worlds is he free to visit? How swiftly does he leap from one part of the psyche to another? ...St John of the Cross said, “If a man wants to be sure of his road, he must close his eyes and walk in the dark.”

In Bly’s view, the poet should associate images originating in all parts of the psyche and avoid the limitations of a certain technique or over-reliance on the objective. As will be argued here, Malouf’s approach engages with more than poetic association in evoking the imaginative interaction of deep modes of knowing whose shifting interactions suggest the way experience becomes intuitive and overt meaning in the mind.

Established approaches to Malouf’s work to date often make use of related concepts that suggest apparent tensions in his work such as those between silence and language, mapping of mind and sense of place, transcendent vision and grounded identity, exile and homecoming, presence and transcendence, community and individuality, urbanity and primitive, intimacy and distance. Lacan’s concept of the “imaginary phase” of early childhood development has also been related to Malouf’s works, notably An Imaginary Life, by Ashcroft, Nettelback and Taylor, among others. These are all certainly useful in considering Malouf’s works and the approaches tend to complement each other rather than offer opposing readings. The intersections of the poetic and the prosaic in Malouf’s fiction

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have long been noted but there has been little movement past the concept of "poetic prose" in critical writing since the 1970s and there needs to be an examination of its underlying assumptions. It posits a distinction between poetry and prose that has become historically less tenable over the past century and which needs to be reconceptualized in approaching Malouf's work. As the generic boundaries have shifted, the notion of an opposition between them has weakened. The concept of poetic imagination has been extended into the more innovative forms of prose writing. A sense of strain has developed between Malouf's works and some of the critical frameworks being used to describe them. His creation of a fictional artistry of perceptions through individual narratives of learning and consciousness can be related to new, tentative insights into the human mind that broadened definitions of intelligence and learning in the mid-twentieth century. For the writer making an ongoing discovery of these aspects of his experience through imaginative writing, traditional generic labels tend to limit the ways in which commentators understand the achievement of these works. His prose is often valued for being lyrical and poetic in its imagery and cadences, while later poems are criticised for being too prosaic and abstract in their complexity. Neither term, used this way, sheds much light on the foundations of his individual signature as a writer.

Following Claude Levi-Strauss's notion of oppositional pairs as foundational to language, the production of meaning and the structure of myths, Philip Neilsen in his study *Imagined Lives* discerns "three basic oppositional sets" in Malouf's fiction. He sees all other oppositions as transformations or variations of these three: wholeness/incompleteness, nature/culture, and change/stasis (Neilsen, 45-46). These offer, in

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Neilsen’s view, a core of interrelated themes and motifs to which Malouf returns in each work, only adding to them in a sparing way. Neilsen maps “discursive transformations” of the basic oppositions that include more detailed differences such as places made/unmade; metropolitan centre/edge; settled/nomadic; machine/organic; and belonging/exile (Neilsen, 46). He sees the resolution or partial resolution of opposites in Malouf’s works achieved through several “agents” including imagination, language, history (or memory), the machine, or the organic. Transformation is usually involved, permitting a protagonist to achieve a closer relationship with nature and to be reconciled to death (Neilsen, 46).

In his thematic study of Malouf’s work, Ivor Indyk discerns a “primitive semiotic”71 linked to the migrant experience underlying Australian settler culture and a post-romanticism, especially in the fiction, though this is traceable also in Malouf’s poetry. He notes the sometimes paradoxical interplay of what he terms desire and distance, of social surfaces and primitive depths, especially in the fiction. In Indyk’s view the expression of desire is important in Malouf’s work and is especially linked to masculine identity from a homosexual perspective. In patterns of father-son, elder deceased brothers, invisible twin brothers and possible lovers, Indyk finds a recurring “paradox of exclusion and inclusion, of defection and allegiance” in Malouf’s writing (9). He also discusses the connection of emblems, idea images, analogies and metaphors that are crucial to the pattern of Malouf’s work, as the author himself has stated in interviews (47-48). A displacement of the social realm in Malouf’s concepts of language and change is discerned and he regards imagination, language and nature as the concepts on which Malouf most depends to achieve a sense of unity and continuity (27). Malouf’s “yearning for continuity” produces,

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71 Indyk, David Malouf, 89. Subsequent page references are placed in the text.
in Indyk’s view, “effects which seem too deliberate, too elaborate, in their reaching backwards and forwards in time, inwards and outwards across space”, as in “The Gift, Another Life” where “the descent to the primitive ground of life is as abrupt as it is extreme” (78). It will be argued here that Malouf’s interest in listing objects and evoking the primitive and the beyond, both of which Indyk finds at times overstated in terms of significance, can be related to the author’s sympathy with a poetic that re-engages with the perceived grounds of being as a response to the crisis in language felt by writers after World War II. Judith Wright’s essay “The Writer and the Crisis” (1952) and the work of a variety of American poets in the “deep image” style – work with which Malouf was familiar – offer insights in this regard from Australian and international perspectives.

The essays in Provisional Maps bring together a range of views on Malouf’s fictional exploration of identity, culture and history, of mapping the body and space, and also comment on his play Blood Relations and opera libretti. In the introduction, Amanda Nettelbeck writes of Malouf’s “characteristic lyricism that blurs the boundaries between established literary genres”. She identifies the author’s “consistent interest in the processes of mapping, of history-making, of identity and place” and relates this to an Australian culture “still deeply concerned with its own form” (i). She also refers to two post-colonial questions which can be regarded as important in Malouf’s work: the ways cultural images of identity come into being and the construction of national myths.

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72 In chapter 4 of this study, the poem’s evocation of “primitive” life is read in the context of insights gained from contemporary concerns about ecological survival.


74 Nettelbeck, Introduction to Provisional Maps, i. Subsequent page references are placed in the text.
Nettlebeck emphasises the importance of language in these processes, citing Gayatri Spivak’s view that “we know of no world that is not organized as a language, we operate with no other consciousness but one structured as a language” (i–ii). In identifying Malouf’s writing with this view, Nettlebeck states that “His is a territory defined by language and memory, in which the knowledge of ‘being in’ the world … is made and kept real by the power of words” (ii). However, Malouf’s approach to Australian national identity is seen here as tentative and exploratory, with Malouf’s “process of narrative invention” suggesting a way to create mythologies of space and cultural formation (ii). The way his writing accommodates different and sometimes apparently conflicting perspectives is highlighted, Nettlebeck observes, in the essay collection that follows:

A recurring feature of Malouf’s work … is its capacity to suggest both a Romantic idealism and what might be defined as a post-colonial conception of language, world and subjectivity. In one sense and following what he defines as Heidegger’s ‘primitive and anti-Platonic’ considerations of the ‘oneness’ between words and worlds, Malouf’s writing articulates the possibility of a world in which ‘the word and the object are absolutely one … all my writing is an attempt to make that true’ [quoting an interview with Paul Kavanagh] … Malouf forges a tentative but persevering balance between potentially oppositional ways of viewing and of knowing the world. (iii)75

This last viewpoint is one that is particularly suggestive for the study offered here. If perceiving experiences and processing those perceptions in the imagining mind are theorised as basic features of a first order and second order experiential learning, a learning process becomes of central importance in Malouf’s work and in his poetic imaginary, as modeled, for example, in an adaptation of Kolb’s theory. The oppositions discerned in Malouf’s work by the use of critical terms such as “body” and “transcendence” can be positioned as points of tension and growth in an ever-shifting

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75 For Malouf’s comment in his interview with Paul Kavanagh see “With Breath Just Condensing On It”, *Southerly* 46.3 (1986), 253.
dynamic of learning. While commentators are often concerned to understand how his works value both “here” and “beyond” or “not here” at the same moment (as in the ending of An Imaginary Life, for example), these states of mind may be read as aspects of the transitional workings of an “enchanted loom … a shifting harmony of subpatterns” (after Charles Sherrington’s metaphor of waking consciousness). To experience the process of making meaning in mind and body, valuing diverse ways of knowing and holding different “minds” together, becomes a feature of Malouf’s imaginative approach. There is no one stopping place but a commitment to ongoing change and transformation of the self. The reader’s own dynamic of learning interacts with that of the author and the representation of it embodied in the text. To enrich the making of consciousness is the aim, with artistic works embedded in the overall formation of cultural meaning.

To ground his intuitive perceptions in evidence from an exterior, “objective” view (a testing that becomes important for his poetic), quasi-scientific vocabulary occasionally enters the imagery from Poems 1975-76 onwards and suggests the influence of popularized speculation arising from research in the 1960s on the function in the two structural hemispheres of the brain and discussion about the primitive origins of the brain still active in its primitive “reptilian” formations. In “The Crab Feast” (1980) “the concept, blue, / is intolerably complex as / our cells are, each an open universe / expanding beyond us” (FTL

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76 Charles Sherrington, Man on His Nature (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1940), 225.

77 For example, in “Twelve Nightpieces (VII)”: “A seed sleeps under the tongue / In one half of the brain / it dwindles / in another quickens climbs the right / side of my mind / is luminous footsteps / arriving in a field”, Poems 1975-76 (Sydney: Prism, 1976), no pag. Research into the effects of surgical disconnection of the two hemispheres of the brain to assist epileptic patients is reported in R.W. Sperry, M.S. Gazzaniga and J.E. Bogen, “Interhemispheric Relationships: The Neocortical Commissures; Syndromes of Hemispheric Disconnections”, Handbook of Clinical Neurology, eds. P.J. Vinken and G.W. Bruyn (Amsterdam: North Holland Publishing, 1969), 272-89. A tendency to over-simplify the workings of the hemispheres occurred in popular psychology in the 1970s and 1980, following the publication of the “split brain” research.

78 Paul MacLean, A Triune Concept of Brain and Behaviour (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1973).
34). By the mid 1980s he is writing in some detail, in the essay “12 Edmondstone Street”, about “the experiencing mind-in-the-body” and the “tissues of perception, conscious and not” that constantly change internally and in response to the environment in which the subject dwells.79 The relation of the sensual perception of objects to the primitive awareness of the body in Malouf’s thinking is apparent in a passage suggesting the “forgetting” that would be needed to take ourselves back in time:

We would have to give back to oblivion the antibodies and complex immunity systems that for nearly four decades now have freed us into a lighter being, a safer and more biddable nature ... We would have to cleanse our skin of its contact with nylon and acrylic ... we would have to step out of the body that has been born in us under the touch (on parts of the old one we barely knew existed) of hands, mouths, tongues – a creature stranger that any sheep-child, and only shyly emergent, but eager already to explore the universe. (Edmondstone 65)

Ways of knowing based deeply within the interaction of body, mind and environment are an important aspect of Malouf’s awareness.

In a brief historical overview James Tulip, in his edited collection David Malouf: Johnno, short stories, poems, essays and interview, mentions Malouf’s role in the changing scene of Australian literature, particularly his role in the developments that occurred in Australian poetry in the 1960s and 1970s. Tulip notes what he terms Malouf’s “gift for sensing the advanced interests of poetry on the international scene”, 80 noting the influence on his work of poets such as Robert Lowell and Phillip Larkin in the 1960s.

Among Australian poets, Tulip notes similarities between Malouf’s poetry and that of John Blight whom Malouf praises in an essay published in 1981 for “the sureness [Blight] feels in moving away from objects – sea things – as a focus for his vision towards a free

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79 David Malouf, “12 Edmondstone Street”, in 12 Edmondstone Street (London: Chatto and Windus, 1985), 64. Page references for quotations from this collection of essays are identified subsequently in the text by the abbreviation Edmondstone.
association of the various aspects of his experience". In Tulip’s view, the development of a “dramatising consciousness” is one of the features of Malouf’s style and a “process of discovering fit subjects for this ‘theatre of the mind’ describes his advance to maturity as a writer” (xii). It is noted, for example, that in the 1960s poem “Snow”, subject and object are held together as “a fine psychological stasis, but one with dynamics of expectancy” (xi). The intertextuality of Malouf’s poetry and prose is regarded by Tulip as “an essential aspect of his total work”, although a division is suggested between the different kinds of composing by the late 1970s:

His later poetry in Poems 1975-1976, Wild Lemons (1980) and First Things Last (1980) moves, however, towards a difficult abstractness and theoretical analysis, a geometry of writing as it were, while his prose breaks through into clarities of surface, of characters and detailed contexts. The transformation in Malouf as an artist in the mid-1970s is a focus for a larger shift in Australian literature generally. (xv)

As will be explored in this study, these poems can be read from another perspective when the importance of the underlying processes of perceiving and learning is discerned in the earlier works. As Malouf continues to explore diverse, sometimes oppositional, ways of knowing and expressing self through spoken and written language, he comes to the borders of that territory by the late 1970s and, after An Imaginary Life, embraces alternative possibilities suggested by other artistically-based languages. In the collection First Things Last (1980), the poems “An die Musik”, “Ode: Schubert, Sonata in B Flat Major, D. 960 (op.posth.)” and “Ode: Stravinsky’s Grave” make notable use of syntax influenced by Malouf’s experience of musical forms. In an interview with Jim Davidson in 1980, he comments on the shape of his poems at this time:

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80 Tulip, David Malouf, ix-x. Subsequent page references are placed in the text.

something like those very very long rhythmic units, those very long breaths in Schubert’s sonatas; these became models for what you would like to do in verse rather than, as was the case earlier, the clarity of the picture. To that extent the poems have now for me largely become interesting musically.82

As this study will argue, Malouf’s growing sense of the musical in his poetic imagination may also be related to his greater confidence in seeking to integrate rational and intuitive states of mind by the late 1970s, part of his re-balancing dynamic of learning from experience. His work with Richard Meale on the opera Voss may have been influential in this regard from 1978 onwards. The modes of mind perhaps familiar to a musical composer seem to gain presence in Malouf’s poetry. The non-verbal, intuitive sense of knowing has been related in Petitmengin-Peugeot’s research to an attentive gesture of interior listening, a mode where the subject notices interior images, sounds and echoes (‘I focus on myself in order to receive the echo of the other’83). Seamus Heaney may be referring to such an experience in “Personal Helicon” where he represents his interest in looking into wells in childhood. He still finds their resonant darkness appealing as a source of poetic inspiration in adult life:

Others had echoes, gave back your own call
With a clean new music in it.

. . .

I rhyme
To see myself, to set the darkness echoing.84

However, a limitation of this approach may occur when the subject allows feelings and conceptual thinking to grasp the intuition too immediately, applying an interior commentary that disturbs or overburdens what has been “heard” within. This may be the

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83 Petitmengin-Peugeot, 67, quoting research with a subject “Alain, 86”.

84 Heaney, New Selected Poems, 9.
cause of unease that commentators have felt in regard to some of Malouf’s poetry from the mid 1970s onwards. There is too swift a “leap” for the reader from apprehension to comprehension (after Kolb’s model) rather than taking time to establish the felt experience he invites the reader to enter, an awareness that is important in the overall balance of the work. The sensory detail and greater time for reading allowed in his prose, as in Fly Away Peter, makes the experience more readily accessible to and strongly felt by the reader. Malouf is able to explore moments of intuition in more depth in fiction at this time.\(^{85}\)

Damasio, unusually using the poetic as evidence from a neurophysiological perspective, makes a reference in this regard to lines from T.S. Eliot’s Four Quartets as an example of the moment when the subject first begins to “know” in a basic form through the modification of the non-conscious proto-self:

Sometimes all you notice is the whisper of a subsequent verbal translation of a related inference of the account: Yes, it is me seeing or hearing or touching … T.S. Eliot might as well have been thinking of the process … when he wrote, in Four Quartets, of “music heard so deeply that it is not heard at all”, and when he said “you are the music while the music lasts”. He was at least thinking of the fleeting moment in which a deep knowledge can emerge – a union, or incarnation, as he called it.\(^{86}\)

Malouf’s increasing preference for a musical mode of poetic may express his deep commitment to such fleeting, almost subconscious intuitive experiences that are almost like hearing music. His poem “At the Ferry”, published in Typewriter Music (2007), suggests the continuity of such a view in his writing:

A light as of axe-handles
swinging through fogbound scrub. Touch
wood. ‘This is the last
time you will see all this. This is

\(^{85}\) See, for example, Imogen Harcourt’s perceptions of Jim Saddler in Fly Away Peter (London: Chatto and Windus, 1982), 24. Page references for quotations from the novel are identified subsequently in the text by the abbreviation FLP.

\(^{86}\) Damasio, 172.
the last thing you will see,’
the stranger at my side, no stranger, whispers.

I come with empty pockets
to the boatshed at the end of
the ramp, the river’s breath stilled to a slow cloud beneath me.
And wait. And stand waiting.

Close by, either
behind or close ahead,
damped in the dampened air,
music. ‘This is
the last thing you will hear,’ the stranger
whispers. His last word.

I stand and listen.
Silence
approaches. A silence approaching music. (TM 22)

The subject’s living consciousness is heightened in the first lines, then altered to become
like “damped” music, with the word play in the mist-like image of “dampened air”
blending physical sensation and the musical effect. The ear turns this way and that to catch
the sound which is “either / behind or close ahead”. The final word of the “stranger”, a
Charon-like figure at the ferry to the underworld (a figure that is also sensed by Ashley
Crowther as he observes Jim Saddler while both are boating on the swamplands (FLP 31),
ends the subject’s hearing of verbal language (“His last word”) yet language continues on
in the final stanza as the speech in silence of the autobiographical self, telling its
apprehensions as silence approaches. Yet such “silence” is also “approaching music”, a
faint almost-caught vibration similar to an intuitive sensation within the mind and body.
Past, present and an intimated future are held together. The “music” of consciousness and
a nuanced patterning of sound beyond consciousness are made present for the reader’s
imagination, paradoxically, through words. The careful and subtle patterning of these
lines, with the sounds vocalising each image suspended like notes on an underlying
silence, reveals the importance in Malouf’s poetic imaginary of these foundational elements: language, music and silence weaving their every-changing patterns in the “air” of consciousness. Such a poem is a tribute to the intuitive as well as the rational mind.

In terms of the model of poetic learning, “At the Ferry” touches on all the modes in its brief span, giving the reader a sense that it evokes much more than its nineteen lines appear to contain. The subject apprehends (“A light”), reflects upon it (“as of axe-handles / swinging through fogbound scrub”). He comprehends, at least partially, his situation (“This is the last / time you will see all this”) and the idea-image of the knowing “stranger” emerges as mentor for a seemingly final journey. The subject seeks to extend his understanding by taking action (“I come with empty pockets / to the boatshed”). His steps and sense of place are then suspended by “waiting”, allowing the idea-image of “silence” to come towards him. By envisioning “A silence approaching music” the subject reaches out beyond what the senses may know, yet relates this to the feeling-value of music, an affirmation that holds together what is “far” (silence/unheard) and “near” (music/heard). It requires the whole of the subject’s being to achieve such a moment. It is what Vic’s stepfather, a poet, recognizes as the role of the poetic imagination, as expressed at Hugh Warrender’s funeral in The Great World:

To make glow with significance what is usually unseen, and unspoken to – that, when it occurs, is what binds us all, since it speaks immediately out of the centre of each one of us; giving shape to what we too have experienced and did not till then have words for, though as soon as they are spoken we know them as our own.  

Digger finds the words “had struck a chord in him” reminding him of an earlier thought of “what it is that cannot be held on to but nonetheless is not lost” (GW 284). The

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87 David Malouf, The Great World (London: Chatto & Windus, 1990), 284. Page references for quotations from the novel are identified subsequently in the text by the abbreviation GW.
permanence of the impermanent and the “chord” again suggest a musical metaphor that can be related to the intuitive and to broad patterning of experiential learning. Gaston Bachelard’s comments in regard to the intuitive, “listening” nature of being seem relevant to Malouf’s poetically shifting geometries of “inner” and “outer”:

Sight says too many things at one time. Being does not see itself. Perhaps it listens to itself. It does not stand out, it is not bordered [Bachelard’s emphasis] by nothingness: one is never sure of finding it … for often it is in the heart of being that being is errancy. Sometimes, it is in being outside itself that being tests consistencies.\textsuperscript{88}

James Tulip offers the insight that Malouf’s style “brings writer and reader close together in all that he writes”.\textsuperscript{89} This important feature of his work is noted also by Ivor Indyk in his introduction to David Malouf: a Celebration. He observes:

The great moments of intimacy in his novels all have the quality of poetry. One thinks immediately of the ending of An Imaginary Life [or] the scene in the prisoner-of-war camp in The Great World. Malouf’s language at these moments beats with a pulse, in breath-like rhythms bringing the scene so close that one seems to share in the enchantment of the characters. At the same time, the visual quality of the scene – its clarity as an image – holds it at a distance.\textsuperscript{90}

As this study seeks to show, closer exploration of how “near” and “far” co-exist through the dynamic of experience represented in his work and what that dynamic aims to achieve will lead to a broader understanding of Malouf’s achievement, complementing existing readings. His artistic drive to bring together different kinds of possible consciousness, both embodied and in imagination, breaks the boundaries of discourses such as intellectual theory, poetry, prose and drama. Reading across his works over the decades offers the reader the insight that human consciousness as an individual experiences it moment by


\textsuperscript{89} Tulip, David Malouf, xxiv.

\textsuperscript{90} Indyk, David Malouf: A Celebration, 2.
moment is only loosely bound by its own created concepts. The creation of identity in
Malouf’s work, as Karin Hansson investigates in her study Sheer Edge, is always
negotiated amid the impermanence of “reality” as it is perceived, an awareness she
compares with the Hindu concept of “maya”( the illusion of concepts of reality) and the
Cosmic Dance which symbolises the movement of cycles of creation and destruction, “the
rhythm of birth and death as the basis of all existence”.91

Critical study of Malouf’s work to date has certainly investigated the contrasting
schemas that he seeks to remake into a more seamless approach to human experience. An
approach which recognizes that such opposites are part of an ongoing process of redress in
a poetic of learning is useful as it brings to greater critical attention discussions about the
nature of intelligence that were occurring at the time. It is not so much the ongoing validity
of certain cognitive and psychological frames of understanding that is argued here
(although they remain significant in their respective fields) as research in neuroscience and
human development is a frontier of ongoing discoveries, but they offer a richer context in
which to place Malouf’s clear emphasis on mind-body experience as an integrated whole.
The action of redress is a continual one, from this perspective, and any apparent solutions
and reconciliations need not be troublesome in themselves but placed as moments of
individual growth, always open to present experience. Don Randall recognizes this when
he comments on Malouf’s “continuous concern with encounters between self and other …
[leading to] a creative unsettling of identity”.92

The category of the subject must be posited, as a useful fiction, in any given moment
of experience, but the subject only sustains its relationship with living being through

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91 Hansson, 160.

92 Randall, David Malouf, 1.
encounter, connection, and exchange with instances of the other, the not-I, and through the transformation thereby provoked.\textsuperscript{93}

To achieve and value such openness which in turn makes fresh understanding possible, is an important and pressing issue in western cultural thought in recent decades as issues of global consequence are considered, such as the human relationship with the environment. Malouf’s work is visionary in its time as it shows a growing awareness of the underlying dynamics of human consciousness that constantly remake what is perceived as “meaning” and “reality”, and as a corollary, the human expression of identity in society, culture and history.

While the influence of studies in psychoanalysis is expressed in a work such as Jennifer Rutherford’s *The Gauche Intruder: Freud, Lacan and the White Australian Fantasy*,\textsuperscript{94} a further framework is still needed which recognizes, at least tentatively, that Malouf’s works offer imaginative descriptions of how experience is formed and transformed in consciousness and flows into the secondary making of the artistic work so that the reader is invited to enter and re-imagine its process as a lived experience of signifying. As notions of “inner” and “outer” are explored further in Australian writing and literary studies by attention to such works as Gaston Bachelard’s *The Poetics of Space*,\textsuperscript{95}

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\textsuperscript{93} Randall, *David Malouf*, 192. Randall’s study focuses on the ethics of Malouf’s imaginary, relating his work particularly to post-colonial perspectives, but also recognizing the essential role of the dynamics of a subject’s inner and outer worlds.

\textsuperscript{94} Rutherford discusses the qualities in the novel that suggest a surprise to the reader (158-75) and relates such intuitive realization to what she reads as the novel’s illumination of “an Australian cultural law that disallows a necessary playing and transgressing on the edge” of the Thing (citing Lacan’s concept of desire that cannot be signified). The character Johnno, Rutherford argues, is a “gauche intruder” whose life of excess and tragic death draws attention to what is denied in the ordered, plain speech generally favoured by Australian culture.

\textsuperscript{95} See, for example, *Southerly* 65.3 (2005). The editor, David Brooks, notes Malouf’s essay “12 Edmonstone Street” and the stories of Helen Garner and Gerald Murnane as particular examples of works which explore the encoding and reading of space in an Australian context (Editorial, 6).
research in areas such as cognitive science and neurophysiology also requires recognition. The insights that might be shared between these disciplines and that of literary scholarship are now being more fully explored, as the collection *Memory, Brain, and Belief* exemplifies.

Malouf’s comments in 1981, reviewing some volumes of Australian poetry from the 1970s, point to the sense of redress that he believes the poetic imagination can provide at that time. The poet should assert that there is a way to encounter the “face of reality” that allows for “affirmations” and that to do so may mean going beyond the recognised boundary of the known:

A poet … cannot be too intelligent, but his intelligence may be of a kind that is restricting and he may need, at times, to let if fall away in favour of some other agency. Poetry, even in the face of reality and with all its honest intelligence about it, has to make affirmations and risk saying more than it knows to be true.96

The “risk” includes the possibility of experiencing an unpredicted moment of surprise, a sudden “brightness” that, as figured in “Snow”, is “like the feathers / of angels, sky-flakes / blessing the dull cobbles / and slant black roofs, bare playground, / pond” (*Bicycle* 56). In 1980, another figure in the Schubert “Ode” invites the subject and the reader to step outside the “solemn cloud” of one kind of knowledge into another that allows entry to “the charmed circle of things”:

No longer to be
singular, absorbed in a solemn cloud
of knowing too much to enter the charmed circle
of things, that is the key. Take heart, we say.
Take heart, take all, and make of it what you will. (*FTL* 54-55)

In the years between these two poems, Malouf does much to explore his earlier imaginary and to extend its range, showing that he learns most deeply through an always dynamic

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and shifting poetic of the learning subject. His ideal, and that of this study, is to be open to the approach of the unexpected surprise of the poetic, the “moment of touching” in “Sheer Edge” (*Bicycle 60*), so that we might turn towards greater possibility.
CHAPTER 2

Finding the Right Tone:
First Publications in the 1960s

Only remember, / Tigers are unpredictable
(“Footnote for a Bestiary”)

Reflecting in 1983 on his own beginnings as a writer over three decades before, Malouf
observed that: “I write, and have always written, both prose and poetry … I prefer to
talk about each of those things in relation to each other. I don’t think a writer works or
thinks in categories, like prose now, poetry another time”. ¹ Malouf likes to posit a
distance of intent between the conscious acts of the writer and the dynamic that arises
from within the work itself, preferring to speak of “what the writing gets done rather
than what the writer does”. ² In this sense, what readers have termed “poetic prose” is
more than a surface feature of Malouf’s style. It arises from his understanding of what
may become possible during the unpredictable, unfolding relationship of artist and
work. For Malouf, form and genre are flexible elements that may change to suit what is
required to carry forward the work in its own terms, an attitude assisted and influenced
by the open forms in poetry and prose favoured in more innovative British, European
and American writing of the mid- and later twentieth century.

His view of form in composition also relates to his wider view of form and
shape in the individual life. He has a personal belief in “the shape of your life” that can
reveal “your real life and what is also your real being”. ³ To live and work in harmony

¹ Malouf, “A ‘Narrative’ Tone”, in Tulip, David Malouf, 270.

² Malouf, “A ‘Narrative’ Tone”, 274.

³ “One of the things that’s said in Johnno is that the Johnno character’s real attempt to escape is from
the real story of his own life, by telling himself another story and trying to make it happen all the time.
But you really can’t escape from that, or if you do, you’ve simply distorted what was your real life and
what is also your real being”, Malouf, Interview with Jim Davidson, 296.
with that shape of life is a kind of grace, even in difficult circumstances, one that for the writer can lead to an understanding of the power of imagination as well as of “reality”. Writing of Marcel Proust’s achievement in *Remembrance of Things Past* [*A la Rêchercher du Temps Perdu*] Malouf praises “the power of those dreams themselves, the magic of naming, the super-reality of language itself, which can, in another form, restore and remake reality and in doing so proclaim the primacy of the acts of memory and mind”.  

It is a kind of redress where the “end is always a new beginning” whose real existence is in the energy generated in the mind by the words themselves, “the acts of reading, of writing”. One senses the identification that Malouf might like to make by 1983 with what he sees Proust’s narrator idealising at the conclusion of his great work:

> Here finally, in coming to the heart of Swann’s tragic failure, the narrator finds the truth about himself. He *does* [Malouf’s emphasis] have a task, since the “truth that was made for him” has, by a kind of grace, been revealed to him in his own lifetime. He is a writer.

These two perspectives of the work and the life as emerging frames of action and belief form gradually for Malouf from the fifties to the mid-seventies as he finds his “voice” as a writer in poetry and prose. They offer a foundational sense of meanings to be discerned, a purpose to fulfil, thus motivating ongoing action. What might be termed a personal mythology develops for Malouf, leading him toward his own balance of interior consciousness and exterior world, of private and public consciousness. It becomes his counter-force to what he speaks of in 1978 at the Adelaide Festival of Arts as “something in our [Australian] environment that makes poets give up early, like Slessor or Ray Matthew … or leads them to settle into the comfortable habit of

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repeating themselves in an atmosphere of wide national celebrity but diminished energy and significance”.

The problem for the developing writer is:

what it is that will keep him writing and growing in the assurance that he has a whole body of work to draw out of himself … One of the things that disturbs me most … is how few of our local writers have managed to do this, as Kikle and Yeats did, for example, or Frost or Stevens or Auden or William Carlos Williams – and I choose only those poets whose literary period has been coincident with our own.

Malouf finds strength and confidence in the role models of the major poets of European and American, as well as British and Irish traditions. They are an important resource for his personal attitude and belief in the writer’s vocation. There is a sense of gifts that are part of the international community, able to be nurtured both through and despite the particular context of one’s home culture.

His long-time friend Judith Rodriguez (then Judith Green) provides an impression of the adolescent Malouf already pursuing his creative interest:

One day when I was 13 [Malouf was 15 at the time], I was invited to the Malouf’s three-storey brick house – very sophisticated for Brisbane in 1950 – built against the hillside in a narrow gully off the river. On the way up the carpeted stairs from the living room, Jill [his sister] opened the door and said: “This is my brother and he’s writing a novel.” And so he was - a boy with dark curly hair and large dark eyes, working at a large typewriter and undoubtedly writing a novel. The room was full of bookcases; squads of maroon-bound classics. I read Collins Classics - shared a taste for Dumas - but David’s seemed most superior editions, and there was even a miniature book or two.

This brick home in Arran Avenue, Hamilton is, of course, not the earlier traditional Queensland Federation-style wooden home in Edmondstone Street, South Brisbane in

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8 Malouf, “Contemporary Australian Poetry”, 34.

9 Judith Rodriguez, ”Away in the Sixties”, in *David Malouf: A Celebration*, ed. Ivor Indyk, 7-8. Malouf’s extant manuscripts show that he has always preferred to compose with pen and paper and a manual typewriter. His handwriting is usually fine and small and the paper for first drafts seems to be whatever was at hand at the time, often small notepaper written closely on both sides. First handwritten drafts are usually typed onto quarto pages, by himself or a chosen typist, as a work progresses through further drafts.
which Malouf grew up and which provided his early experiences recounted in *Edmonstone Street*.

The young Malouf wanted to write from the basis of his own language and life experiences growing up in Brisbane and its surrounding Pacific coastal areas. Born in 1934, he was part of a generation of Australian children who experienced a war-time childhood, with American troops stationed in his own area of South Brisbane in the early 1940s. In writing poetry, he first found “a tone [Malouf’s emphasis] that seemed right for me. That is, [the poems] spoke up for my experience in a way that seemed to me, at that time, to be full”. ¹⁰ Malouf first focused on writing poetry after reading Kenneth Slessor’s *One Hundred Poems* as a schoolboy, some six or so years after the collection was brought together in 1944. He had been given a copy of Slessor’s work in his last year at Brisbane Grammar School by an old boy of the school. In Slessor’s work Malouf found ways in which his own experience “might be dealt with in a language that wasn’t either Victorian or Elizabethan”. ¹¹ He then read T.S. Eliot and, with more impact, Wallace Stevens, W.H. Auden and Louis MacNiece who were still contemporary poets composing new work during Malouf’s years as an undergraduate and then lecturer in Elizabethan drama at the University of Queensland. Malouf viewed keenly films of all kinds, including European films, and liked to discuss with friends how their visual effects worked on the viewer’s perception. ¹²

The work of Rainer Maria Rilke was also an important influence from the early 1950s onwards. Malouf now recalls that he first read Rilke in 1951, beginning with *The Tale of the Love and Death of Cornet Christopher Rilke*, then moved on to *New Poems, Duino Elegies* and *Sonnets to Orpheus*. It was reading Auden that had first led him to

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¹⁰ Malouf, “A ‘Narrative’ Tone”, 270.

¹¹ Malouf, “A ‘Narrative’ Tone”, 270.

¹² Rodriguez, 8-9.
Rilke and he came to know the poems very well, reading the translations by J.B. Leishman and Stephen Spender. Rilke’s work appealed to Malouf because of its “absolute inwardness … A consciousness grasps the subject as it emerges by both objective and subjective means”.\(^{13}\) In Malouf’s view, Rilke’s work allows the reader to find the spiritual in another idiom, something that was important for an Australian poet writing at that time and different, for example, from the work of Slessor. Rilke’s work differed from the more objective stance of most Australian writing and seemed to Malouf a kind of “fantasia” inviting another kind of consciousness. He liked the way the subject in Rilke’s poetry emerged in a way that could not be guessed at or immediately placed by the reader.\(^{14}\)

In addition to these features recollected by Malouf, there is also the sense in Rilke’s poetry that the sustained moment can both create and reveal the familiar, the remembered and the self yet to be discovered. It creates an imagined experience in time that seems slowed to give memory and reading a greater effect. This would be important for a writer wanting to give his life experiences a newly-felt imaginative existence, especially those from his childhood. A poetic such as Rilke’s asserts the belief that this is precisely the heart of the Orphic experience:

> And slept in me sleep that was everything:  
> the trees I’d always loved, the unrevealed,  
> readable distances, the trodden field,  
> and all my strangest self-discovering.\(^{15}\)

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\(^{13}\) David Malouf, Interview with the author, 27 November 2003, Chippendale, Sydney (Appendix E).

\(^{14}\) Malouf, Interview, 27 November 2003. The opening paragraphs of *Fly Away Peter*, for example, make use of this technique in Malouf’s own style. The reader is not immediately sure if it is a bird that is being represented or a mechanical object, an early aeroplane, or some imagined artifice that hovers seeking identity in Jim’s (and the reader’s) mind.

\(^{15}\) “Und schlief in mir. Und alles war ihr Schlaf. / Die Bäume, die ich je bewundert, diese / Fühlbare Ferne, die gefühlte Wiese / Und jedes Staunen, das mich selbst betraf”, *Sonnets to Orpheus* I, II (1923), trans. J.B. Leishman, 2\(^{nd}\) ed. (London: Hogarth Press, 1946), 36-37. The subconscious experience that reveals the everyday world in another way through sleep and dream also becomes important in Malouf’s work as, for example, in *An Imaginary Life* (New York: Braziller, 1978), 23-25. Quotations from this edition of the novel are identified subsequently in the text by the abbreviation *AIL*. 
How does Malouf’s poetic voice figure “inner” and “outer” aspects of experience in his first published poetry? Apart from some early pieces in school and university magazines, his first published poems appeared from 1960 to 1962 in *Meanjin Quarterly*. Judith Rodriguez recalls that “I was the one who dared to send a couple of the absent David’s poems to Clem Christesen for *Meanjin*. David at 25 [living and teaching in the UK from 1959] wasn’t sending them anywhere and seemed indifferent about publication”. These poems written in the 1950s had been left in Malouf’s flat at his family home in Hamilton, Brisbane. Judith and another friend had gone through them and sent them to the editor. The poems included “When Secret Springs Unlock”, “And Speak of Miracles” (both published in 1960) and “At My Grandmother’s” (published in 1961). When he returned to Australia for several months in 1962, Malouf sent five more poems to *Meanjin Quarterly*, four of which were published that year: “Footnote for a Bestiary”, “Family Photographs”, “Maiden Aunts” and “Hotel Room Revisited”.

Malouf’s early published poems explore desire, belief and language with an intensity that is based in the body yet seems abstracted from it, a situation not dissimilar to that felt by Ovid before he discovers his imagination’s source of belief in *An Imaginary Life*. “When Secret Springs Unlock” contrasts seasons of fertile and infertile “speaking” of love’s desire, using an Old Testament metaphor of “wilderness” to convey the state of the subject’s heart. The underlying measure of the four foot

16 Rodriguez, 11.


18 All titles of poems by Malouf have been capitalized in keeping with editions since *Selected Poems* (1981), although his earlier work often appeared with only the first word capitalised.

19 The four poems appeared in *Meanjin Quarterly* 89.xxi.2 (1962): 182-84.
iambic line and use of half rhymes based on consonance (such as “bud” / “good”) show Malouf’s poetic “voice” to be more formal at this stage than in the open forms that characterize his later verse:

    Easy when secret springs unlock
    The wilderness and green faiths bud
    For heart and fallow tongue to speak
    Of love and prove their logic is good.

    But now, in a season when no creed
    Hammers its logic through my speech,
    When tongue is plagued and Aaron’s rod
    Withers, and mortal fevers itch

    At the stricken loin, I plant this seed
    Deep in the promise of your love.\textsuperscript{20}

“And Speak of Miracles” reveals a subject excited by love’s re-kindling, like a prophet touched again by the spirit’s fire:

    I had not sought a miracle
    New flesh upon the old wound’s scar …

    And now, like doubting Thomas, I
    Must take my logic back and speak
    Of miracles in this latter day:
    Unscathed in your body’s flame I walk.\textsuperscript{21}

In these poems, the importance of “logic” and intellect is evident, as well as strongly felt emotive states. However, even physical desire seems to be made external to the subject’s body by the choice of images (“in your body’s flame I walk”) rather than entered fully as an aspect of the self. Malouf greater trust in a poetic engaging his intuitive ways of knowing still lies ahead.

The images in “At My Grandmother’s” and in “Family Photographs” begin to find their basis in the poet’s own geographical location, re-working other literary

\textsuperscript{20} Meanjin Quarterly 80.xxiv.1 (1960): 83

\textsuperscript{21} Meanjin Quarterly 81.xix.2 (1960): 156.
influences (Rilke’s “Before Summer Rain”, for example, is suggested here) into an emerging Australian voice:

These portrait studies
now drain from eye, lip, cheek, their fictive colour
like corals in the sun.\(^{22}\)

In a letter to Judith Rodriguez soon after he travelled to London in 1959, Malouf comments on the way he is becoming accustomed to his new surroundings. It is indicative of the way perception, feeling and memory are vitally linked in his experience at the time, as is evident in these early poems:

It is only when you have seen a place, a street for example, a dozen times or more that you begin to have a feeling for it, a sort of odd affection that makes you feel that you may after all belong here, simply because you have overlaid the ugliness of the place itself with a veil of your own memories and feelings. There are many places in London that have assumed this quality for me.\(^{23}\)

Malouf particularly identifies a “European preoccupation with the inner life” and contrasts it with the generally more outward Australian temperament, which is clearly to him “neither English nor European”.\(^{24}\) This places his habits of mind in a position of tension, attracted to both ways of dealing with experience, but especially the inner vision. One the one hand, he writes of longing for

those long views you get in Australia, with no … houses to humanize the scene and no evidence of man’s having farmed the land and shaped it to his own uses and his own ordered vision of what is beautiful and true.\(^{25} \) 

On the other, he expresses the view that his poems are very personal and based on interior ways of thinking and feeling. He writes from Brisbane in 1962 that “all the

\(^{22}\) “Family Photographs”, Meanjin Quarterly 89.xxi.2 (1962): 183. Rilke’s poem “Vor dem Sommerregen” builds a mood of childhood fears through external and internal consciousness: “Es spiegelten die verblaschenen Tapeten / das ungewisse Licht von Nachmittagen / in denen man sich fürchtete als Kind.” (“And reflected on the faded tapestries now: / the chill, uncertain sunlight of those long / childhood hours when you were so afraid.”), The Selected Poetry of Rainer Maria Rilke, ed. and trans. Stephen Mitchell (New York: Random House, 1989), 34-35.

\(^{23}\) UQFL 75/DM 5, 1 July 1959, London.

\(^{24}\) UQFL 75/DM 3, 22 April 1959, London.

\(^{25}\) UQFL 75/DM 3, 22 April 1959, London. These ideas expressed in 1959 are echoed in the words given to Ovid, AII. 28.
important things in my life, all the things that really influenced me, have been ‘interior’
things that had very little relation to the physical presence of local places”. 26 He also
expresses a view of local places as resistant to integration in the white settler’s sense of self:

the most powerful presence in Australia is the land itself which has shaped us in
a way we do not realize … which has not yet accepted us or allowed us to think
of it as our own. 27

The awareness of resistance in Malouf’s sense of place adds further to the tension he
expresses between “inner” and “outer” worlds. He writes of polarities of “involvement
and distancing … the real secret lies in the word ‘interiors’ which I am very fond of (I
would like to call my poems ‘Interiors’)”. 28 It was, in fact, the title for Malouf’s
section of the shared collection, Four Poets. However, his gradual revaluing of his local
background and its remaking in his poetry and prose is an important feature of
Malouf’s development as a writer over the next ten years. It requires him to explore the
way he deals with interior and exterior experience to arrive at a sense of personal
meaning and, flowing from that, how he will figure images of the complex process of
thinking and feeling in his work. What does it feel like to know and value a place, a
person, an experience or an object? How is such knowing formed in individuals and
cultures over time? Why is such knowing significant to the subject? How can the writer
bring imagined ways of knowing and feeling to the re-imagining mind of the reader?
What value might the reader gain from the experience? It is Malouf’s particular way of
imagining the flow of a fictional consciousness, cross-fertilising his “interiors” with the
exterior world that brings him what he recognizes as a “right tone” in narrative prose as
well as verse.

26 UQFL 75/DM 23, 10 March 1962, Brisbane.
27 UQFL 75/DM 3, 22 April 1959, London.
28 UQFL 75/DM 3, 22 April 1959, London.
In developing his focus as a writer, Malouf’s experience of Australian landscape is a strong motivating force. It was not an urban wasteland or a dry desert he knew but the fertile lushness provided by the natural environment where he grew up in southern Queensland in the 1930s and 1940s. In 1955, during his university years, Malouf also had an experience that extended his view of what appeared to him to be untouched aspects of the land and its wildlife little featured in Australian settler awareness or literature. He spent five days on a holiday trip in an area called the Valley of the Lagoons in far northern Queensland. What impressed Malouf most was the quality of light there and the vast array of birdlife living in the extensive swamps and lagoons. It gave him a lasting impression of another kind of Australian habitat, seemingly uninfluenced by human presence. He recognized its importance as a source of future writing:

I knew always that I would write something one day that would owe its existence to them [the great flocks of birds he had seen] and would try to give that existence back.  

That “giving back” was expressed in 1981 when he came to write *Fly Away Peter* and, fifty years after the event, in the short story “The Valley of the Lagoons”, published in the collection *Every Move You Make* in 2006. The writer’s imagination (re)presents a necessary gift, shaped through the art of language, to his source of inspiration held in memory. Malouf’s lasting impression of the Valley of the Lagoons was also a point of reference when Malouf compared Australia with what he discovered in the UK and Europe during a decade and more of travel.

In February 1962 Malouf returned to Australia and, encouraged by Rodney Hall’s enthusiasm, worked consistently on poems in preparation for a new joint publication, *Four Poets*. On 17 February he writes to Judith Rodriguez that he

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29 David Malouf, Afterword to *Fly Away Peter*, UQFL 163/B/VII-3, 130. The Afterword is discussed in more detail in chapter 6 of this study.
particularly likes the syllabic poem “Difficult Letter”, finding its “lack of rhetoric, its quietness” appealing.\textsuperscript{30} It was just three days after this letter, on 20 February, that his close friend, John Milliner, drowned. The death shocked Malouf. His thoughts about Milliner were an important source of creative expression first in the poem “The Judas Touch” (\textit{Bicycle and Other Poems}) and then as an extended novel-in-progress which, over the next decade, finally became \textit{Johnno}.

\textit{Four Poets} was published during 1962 by F.W. Cheshire with the assistance of a grant from the Commonwealth Literary Fund.\textsuperscript{31} The “Publisher’s Note” to \textit{Four Poets} points to the limited audience that poetry attracted in the marketplace at the time:

Books of verse do not appear because there is a public clamouring for them, but because there are poets – “new” and “established” – who shout and demand to be heard. This anthology is a step, deliberate rather than cautious, to close the gap between those who write and those who read poems. Its concept arises from the disturbing difficulty of presenting the work of young poets in individual volumes – a procedure so costly, and, in the end-result, often so unresponsive that it might well bring the publication of new poetry to a standstill.

Fourteen poems by Malouf appear in the company of new work by Don Maynard, Judith Green and Rodney Hall. Malouf, Hall and Maynard compiled the work by July 1962 (Green was in the UK at the time) and Malouf also wrote a number of new poems for the collection.\textsuperscript{32} He revised earlier poems such as “In An Antique Land” and “Childhood Illness”, often dissatisfied with what he produced when these poems became “more and more complicated with time”.\textsuperscript{33} He felt overall that the poems were “the beginning of an attempt to come to terms both with myself and with the tradition”,

\textsuperscript{30} UQFL 75/DM 21, 17 February 1962, Brisbane.

\textsuperscript{31} Writers of Malouf’s generation benefited from a stronger financial commitment to the arts at a national level after World War II. In 1968 the Commonwealth Literary Fund was replaced by the Literary Arts Board, and then reconstituted in 1973 as the Literature Board of the Australia Council. Malouf was invited to be a member of this new Board and was active in its affairs from 1973 to 1975 when he resigned. It brought him into closer contact with leading cultural figures at the time such as A.D. Hope and Manning Clark who were also Board members.

\textsuperscript{32} These new poems included “Unholding Here”, “Epitaph for a Monster of Our Times” and “Sheer Edge”, Malouf, Interview with the author, 27 November 2003.

\textsuperscript{33} UQFL 75/DM 30, 4 June 1962, Brisbane.
even if in a rather tentative way. Malouf concerned himself closely with the publication details, including the cover design, type face, and lay out of the pages. It was planned as an edition of five hundred copies in Australia and two hundred in England. James Tulip has observed that this anthology “signalled the emergence of a new generation of Australian writers several years ahead of the ‘generation of ‘68’ ”.36

The first poem in Malouf’s “Interiors” section is “In An Antique Land” which enunciates a subject-in-process whose travels in “antique” cultures offer views of self as well as external objects of interest. As Malouf’s own family had an immigrant background from Lebanon and the UK, he could draw on direct experience of close relatives who had to come to terms with living “elsewhere” than their place of birth and “speaking in other tongues”. For him, the notion of the “traveller” has deep resonance with his family life, as well as with his journeys of discovery in Europe:

Living in other places, speaking other tongues, is never
exit from that city that behind all destinations, beckons with its lights (Interiors no. 1)

The traveller seeks some idealised experience of another place and another self which are both more desirable than what has already been experienced:

we move in a mirror’s labyrinth, seeking always, behind the reliquary gesture, marble footnote to an era’s accomplished ritual,

image of a self more real than stooping, dust-stained traveller: at Athos, by pine-torchlight, rows of Byzantine faces on a wall. (Interiors no. 1)

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34 UQFL 75/DM30, 4 June 1962, Brisbane.
35 UQFL 75/DM 31, 9 June 1962, Thursday Island (while returning by ship to the UK).
36 Tulip, David Malouf, 218.
The poem offers a sense of disappointment with what travel has brought as “all rooms are furnished with the same / voices that betray us with the old lies”. There is nothing new to be learned here, only the limitations of history and self to be recognised. The poem suggests a self that has reached the limits of desire for constant travel and change for its own sake. Its evoked moment is one of frustration. Its implied opposite is a moment of awareness and insight when a fresh external view releases in the self an internal energy and a new sense of apprehending external and internal together. This early poem points to an ongoing desire that motivates Malouf’s subsequent writing.

It is interesting to contrast the spare and guarded vocabulary of “In An Antique Land” with the more lush and evocative language of the following four poems which are grouped under the heading, “Interiors from a Childhood”. These poems are “At My Grandmother’s”, “Family Photographs”, “Maiden Aunts” and “Childhood Illness”. While “The Year of the Foxes” displays the poet’s emerging narrative voice in 1963, the earlier “At My Grandmother’s” introduces an inner narrative impulse, viewed through the subject’s eye that was soon to be blended with the external details in the later poem. In the four childhood “interiors” he begins to enter with confidence and curiosity his own particularly imagined world, one he has known from the inside out, peopled with characters related to his own life. It is touched by dangers felt or imagined, a world of homely objects that may be all at once ordinary, exotic, ominous and mysterious. These facets are woven into a subtle and complex history that is an “inner” and an “outer” story: an evocation of the making of self and of the world that acts upon and through the self in its own constant transformations. It is here that one key aspect of Malouf’s later novels begins. Features of his narrative style are latent in the open forms, flow of extended cadences and precise language of the early poems.

An afternoon late summer, in a room
shuttered against the bright, envenomed leaves;
an underwater world, where time, like water,
was held in the wide arms of a gilded clock,  
and my grandmother, turning in the still sargasso  
of memory, wound out her griefs and held  
a small boy prisoner to weeds and corals,  
while summer leaked its daylight through his head. (Interiors no. 2)

The scene unfolds for the reader/listener's ear in concise phrases of time, place and  
season. The reader is invited to enter this space imaginatively, to observe it in a certain  
way that holds together its subjective impressions and objective details. A sombre and  
threatening mood is created by the careful placement of “shuttered” pushing against the  
image of “bright, envenomed leaves”, a summer “outside” that is suggestively active  
and hostile to its exclusion by the adult and which later tries to break into the room and  
the child’s mind. It is perhaps the way the grandmother sees the world as “envenomed”  
that threatens to dominate the child, an “underwater world” where the child is a  
drowning prisoner, caught in the “weeds and corals” of her memories and grief. He  
feels submerged, holding the skeins “like trickling time” that his grandmother winds  
into balls (“the old grey hands wind out his blood”). Her past is elsewhere, giving the  
child’s world a dual frame of reference that threatens his ability to enjoy his own  
present world. The action is in the mind, the memory and projected into the scene  
which then adds its own “objective” elements (“the parrot screeching soundless / in its  
dome of glass, the faded butterflies”). In this way the reader experiences a sense of  
reinforced sensations: what the child feels and the “I” of the poem remembers is a  
creation of what was both “outside” and “inside”. The reader moves back and forth  
between these dual perceptions.

Malouf’s use of interweaving phrases is evident here. The reader is carried  
forward by word rhythms, the underlying metre of blank verse, repetition of words and  
sounds that reinforce the atmosphere evoked:

and feared her voice that called  
down from their gilded frames the ghosts of children  
who played at hoop and ball, whose spindrift faces
(the drowned might wear such smiles) looked out across
the wrack and debris of the years, to where
a small boy sat, as they once sat, and held
in the wide ache of his arms, all time, like water.
and watched the old grey hands wind out his blood. (Interiors no. 2)

The vocabulary draws together the everyday and the connotative use of words in a style
that aims to communicate, not to obscure in any way. There is a movement from one
image into another that links objects and feelings. For example, “faded butterflies / like
jewels pinned against a sable cloak” (second stanza) carry into the image of the
grandmother’s fearful “stiff, bejewelled fingers / pinned at her throat or moving on grey
wings / from word to word” (third stanza).

It is notable that the four “Interiors from Childhood” portray a subject troubled
by time’s passage, anxiety and mortality. The family photographs are “ghosts caught in
the birdie’s-eye of time” which are faded “like corals in the sun”. The remembered-
child-subject of the poem is again a watcher who also sees the sun taking the life-
colours from his own hand. Everyday objects – the maiden aunts’ crochet hooks, the
mirror in the child’s sick room – are touched by passion draining away and a threat of
disorder. In an ostensibly safe, ordered and planned existence, the experience of
disorder is unsettling for the subject of the poems. Other poems such as “Difficult
Letter” and “Epitaph for a Monster of Our Times” point to a breakdown of
expectations, the former in a close relationship and the latter in the politically-based
sacrifice of social responsibility to bureaucratic efficiency, especially in contemporary
warfare.

Two more poems stand out in this collection as anticipating the forward
direction of Malouf’s work: “Unholding Here” and “Sheer Edge”. Both are spare in
their use of language and balance metrical patterns with conversational rhythms.
“Unholding here” introduces the intimate voice of a speaker watching another in sleep.
The reader is brought into close proximity with the imagined scene as if overhearing someone thinking aloud, yet able to experience the inner connections the speaker is forming. The reader comes to a position of both looking at and looking with the subject, guided by the details the poem offers as points of imaginative attention. These points are linked by the underlying metaphor of “curling” and it reciprocal action of “unholding”:

Unread, the book you asked for
lies open on the sill,
it’s pages in the sunlight
curling as the wave
curls on its dark, your brown
fingers in half-sleep
involuntary curl;

and waking at your side,
I watch, unholding here,
fingers, pages, waves –
an evocation of
related absences:
the dream, the poem unread,
the sea’s perfected arc. (Interior no. 5)

These life images are delicately stated, with short lines and punctuation slowing the pace to give each thing named its “moment” in reading (“fingers, pages, waves”). Yet the poem suggests desires still unrealized, the ideal grasped (“the sea’s perfected arc”) yet never fully held by just this moment, the “related absences” made present only by the “evocation” that is the poem itself. The speaker’s “unholding” is an action that releases the tension of “curling” while still “holding” it in the images created. The energy of the poem seems to be shared between writer and reader in the act of reading/listening, an important aspect of Malouf’s later prose style. It is interesting retrospectively that “Unholding here” is the poem Malouf feels “most doubtful about” at the time, perhaps a comment on the emerging and still tentative nature of its personal style for him.  

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“Sheer Edge”, written in 1962, is in its first version in *Four Poets*. It has a slightly revised form by 1970 in *Bicycle and Other Poems* and further changes in punctuation are made for *Selected Poems* (1981). The first stanza refers to the landscape of Stradbroke Island in Queensland where Malouf liked to spend weekends. He altered the final line (“a gesture, a poem”) when a critic commented negatively that his poetry seemed to be “just a gesture”, underestimating the importance that Malouf ascribed to the term. In the later version, the line becomes “the moment of touching the poem”. This poem suggests the tentative and sometimes dangerous nature of poetry’s creative moment: the poem is like a nest built precariously by gulls on the cliff edge where “dry weed clutchess for life”. The use of imagery from the local context with which he was so familiar is noticeable here. For the poet writing in the darkened room, however, the external world seems to drop away (“all floors / sink to abyss”) and the tension of composing with words that continually “slide off” can be “sheerest fall”:


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though words slide off and fingers
  touching, fail to hold,
here also may flower,
  precarious as dry
weed or grey gull’s nest,
  a gesture, a poem. (Interiors no. 11)
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Malouf is becoming more aware of his own habits of mind, making them a theme of his creative expression. His liking for the poetry of Wallace Stevens, for example, at this time expresses this interest. He now recalls that he first encountered Stevens’ work through his friend John Milliner. To give greater resonance to the

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38 Malouf, Interview with the author, 27 November 2003.

39 The 1970 version reads “though words slide off, hands / catching, fail to hold / here also may flower, / precarious as weed / or grey gull’s nest, the moment / of touching – the poem”, *Bicycle 60*. From *Selected Poems* (1981) onwards, the final line is punctuated as “of touching, the poem”, *SP 81* 3.

40 Malouf recalls that on a weekend vacation John Milliner was late to catch a ferry and finally arrived with books for both of them to read. He then revealed that he had stolen the books from a bookshop and the volume he gave Malouf that day was Wallace Stevens’ poetry. Malouf kept that early Stevens’ edition (Faber, 1953) at his home in Campagnatico, Interview with the author, 27 November 2003.
apparently exterior surface of daily experience and to represent the interior experience of the poet’s mind is important in Stevens’ “An Ordinary Evening in New Haven”, for example. Here a distinction between the terms “interior” and “exterior” is framed in relation to the differing purposes of the philosopher and the poet. The former desires to give the mind’s crafted logic an outward life and the latter desires to re-make the keenly perceived world into an expression of self. Both use and value language ideologically as a force to re-shape the world as in its “original earliness” of life, but through different modes of mind rather than physical creation:

    It is the philosopher’s search
    For an interior made exterior
    And the poet’s search for the same exterior made
    Interior: breathless things broodingly abreath
    With the inhalations of original cold
    And of original earliness.41

While Stevens seeks what he terms “a supreme fiction … in which men could propose to themselves a fulfilment”, it is not a satisfaction easily achieved when reason and intuition seem to represent complementary but differing views of reality.42 Stevens comes to regard the poem itself and imagination as the highest achievement:

    Within its vital boundary, in the mind.
    We say God and the imagination are one …
    How high that highest candle lights the dark.
    Out of this same light, out of the central mind,
    We make a dwelling in the evening air,


In which being there together is enough.  

More secure than Malouf’s precarious weed or gull’s nest, Stevens “Poem That Took the Place of a Mountain” searches

For the outlook that would be right,  
Where he would be complete in an unexplained completion.

The exact rock where his inexactness  
Would discover, at last, the view toward which they had edged,

Where he would lie and, gazing down at the sea,  
Recognize his unique and solitary home.

Malouf’s poem “An Ordinary Evening at Hamilton” (written in 1973) is a response to Stevens’ influence and a step beyond it, revealing his own understanding of the physical blending of inner and outer. Stevens’ distinction between “reality” and “imagination”, the former based principally in the outer world and the latter in the individual mind, becomes in Malouf’s belief a unification of the observed and perceived through the experience of being. It is not limited to the poet’s perception, although heightened there, but is inherent in the way any individual makes meaning in everyday life from sensory input, established thought patterns and from experience. Malouf assumes he is “at home” in his own mind wherever he is, something that Stevens found less secure for himself. In Malouf’s poem

The garden shifts indoors, the house lets fall  
its lamp light, opens  
windows in the earth…

…Familiar rooms  
glow, rise through the dark – exotic islands; this house

a strange anatomy  
of parts, so many neighbours in a thicket:  
hair, eyetooth, thumb.  (Neighbours 12)

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44 Stevens, “The Poem That Took the Place of a Mountain”, in Collected Poems, 512.
Malouf approximates the work of the poem with that of the mind and consciousness, not just the imagination, when he comments that “the poem changes those objects into perceptions … the house has become the house of the body … the point from which the thing is experienced in itself [Malouf’s emphasis]”. He appears more confident than Stevens that “reality” and “imagination” are terms for processes intimately interwoven in the physical fabric of the body, a shift that may reflect the new research into the biology of the mind being made generally available in the mid-century and confirmed by his own developing experience as a writer in the 1960s. Stevens’ work nonetheless remains for Malouf an important point of reference upon which to build and from which to differ.

Malouf’s reading of Marcel Proust’s work, too, offers two different ways – not unrelated to Stevens’ view - for the writer to approach his imaginative task: through the “pure intellect” and “the subjective impression”:

This book, more laborious to decipher than any other, is also the only one which has been dictated to us by reality, the only one of which the “impression” has been printed in us by reality itself … The ideas formed by the pure intelligence have no more than a logical, a possible truth, they are arbitrarily chosen. The book whose hieroglyphs are patterns not traced by us is the only book that really belongs to us … Only the impression, however trivial its material may seem to be, however faint its trace, is a criterion of truth.  

For Proust it is the “subjective impression” apprehended and extracted by the mind that leads to “greater perfection” and “pure joy”. As he notices the images, sensations and impressions that come of their own accord from his memory, Proust believes

it was precisely the fortuitous and inevitable fashion in which this and the other sensations had been encountered that proved the trueness of the past which they brought back to life, of the images which they released, since we feel, with these sensations, the effort that they make to climb back towards the light, feel in ourselves the joy of discovering what is real. (139)

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45 Malouf, “A ‘Narrative’ Tone”, 274.

Pointing to the underlying dialectical rhythms of thought, Proust compares the poet’s use of “subjective impression” with the scientist’s use of experimentation, the former working from “impression” to “intelligence” and the latter from “intelligence” to “impression” (140). Proust sees this dialectic revealing a unique personal vision that is essential to an artistic work:

it is a revelation, which by direct and conscious methods would be impossible, of the qualitative difference, the uniqueness of the fashion in which the world appears to each one of us, a difference which, if there were no art, would remain forever the secret of every individual. (152)

To discover such vision requires, for Proust, that the writer or artist value a more intuitive mode of mind able to “travel back in the direction from which we have come to the depths where what has really existed lies unknown within us” (152). As Malouf seeks his own “voice” as a writer he pays increasing attention to his own impressions of childhood and youth, including the past he inherits through his family’s cross-cultural background and which contributes, perhaps, to his own restless sense of being “outside” everyday society at different times in the 1960s.  

In an overview of the decade after the publication of *Four Poets*, Malouf identifies “The Year of the Foxes” as the poem “in which I first hit a tone that was to suit me for the best part of ten years afterwards”. It was written in about 1963 in Birkenhead, England, where he taught at St Anselm’s College for several years. The narrative impulse of the poem brings together vivid childhood memories, again a focus as in Malouf’s first published poems, and polarities such as suburban/nomadic and tamed/untamed. Exterior details and interior thoughts and feelings are linked to create a

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47 After moving back to Australia from the UK, for example, Malouf writes to Judith Rodriguez: “I can’t get used to things here. … It just feels foreign … like living in very thin air at a high altitude. … I’ve stopped being interested in the outside world, because I know I’m outside it”, UQFL 75/DM 192, 4 December 1969, Sydney.

48 Malouf, “A ‘Narrative’ Tone”, 270.
“home” re-made by memory and imagination, one that is disturbing to the child subject as the dead fox furs play on his mind:

I slept across the hall, at night hearing
their thin cold cry. I dreamed the dangerous spark
of their eyes, brushes aflame
in our fur-hung, nomadic
tent in the suburbs, the dark fox-stink of them
cornered in their holes
and turning (Bicycle 1)

The use of varied sound patterns, cadences and open forms of line in the poem indicate the direction of Malouf’s style. The rhythm of the run-on lines is important in creating an impression of what Malouf terms “a proper narrative tone”. Malouf comments:

What it delivers within the narrative tone and the setting is a set of correspondences and associations that evoke, I hope in a surprising way, a world: a view of nature and of society and history that is not acted out as a story, or argued in any way, but hit off in flashes – in a way that belongs … to poetry.

Words of single stress related by consonance that is plosive or fricative are often a feature, such as “thin cold cry” and “dark fox-stink”. The force of breath held and then released contributes to the reader’s sense of foxes “cornered in their holes”, panting, as the child might, in fear. Domestic objects are represented by softer sound-names and linked by assonance and consonance such as the precise semi-plosive “t” sounds in “Noritaki teacups”, “tall hock-glasses”, “stems” and “demitasses” and the long vowel /aː/ in “Noritaki”, “barley”, “glasses”" and “demitasses”:

Among my mother’s show pieces –
Noritaki teacups, tall hock-glasses
with stems like barley-sugar,
goldleaf demitasses –
the foxes, row upon row, thin-nosed, prick-eared, dead. (Bicycle 1)

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49 Malouf, “A ‘Narrative’ Tone”, 271.

50 Malouf, “A ‘Narrative’ Tone”, 271.
In this way, the delicacy of the objects and their significance is suggested, beyond the everyday cups and glasses found in the kitchen. They become vessels of memory, sweet “like barley-sugar”, of childhood, named to evoke their re-appearing. The fox furs become more threatening in such unexpected company but are tentatively domesticated as they are draped across a young woman’s shoulder for her date with a GI escort, a social encounter that might, however, hold its own dangers for the lady.

The movement in Malouf’s works of the 1960s between inner and outer and from object to perception comes to represent a fictional dynamic of personal experiential learning, creating “the book … [whose] impression has been imprinted in us by reality itself”, in Proust’s terms. He keeps returning with deepening curiosity to show how limited views of self and others might be remade or redressed by means of poetic modes of mind and language. This is an important aspect of Malouf’s achievement as a writer, and especially an Australian writer in the late 1960s and early 1970s when ways of thinking were being challenged and changed in Australian society and politics. If identity in a mainly settler and immigrant society remains fluid and experiential, as Malouf comments in 2003 in his essay *Made in England*, imaginative artists have key roles to play in offering alternative ways of understanding the past, configuring the present and projecting the future.\(^{51}\) His writing also reflects a convergence in the wider international context of discourses about intelligence and experiential learning, as yet little explored in relation to his work or in literary histories of this time, and a focus in later chapters of this study.

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51 Malouf writes that “the identity argument in Britain (or Canada or here) is not made in terms of blood and soil … [but] in terms of the social and emotional ties between individuals based on shared experience – shared occasions, ceremonies, symbols and the emotions they give rise to. … The advantage of this form of identity, and especially for an immigrant society, is that in being experiential rather than essentialist, it is also, as the old Roman version was, transferable; it can be acquired”. *Made in England: Australia’s British Inheritance*, Quarterly Essay, vol. QE 12 (Melbourne: Black Inc., 2003), 58-59.
He commenced publication at a time when a sense of crisis in communication was being discussed in literary and cultural contexts, both in Australia and internationally. Judith Wright’s essay “The Writer and the Crisis” (1952) offers useful insights into the issues. Her work is referred to here in some detail because it bridges the Australian and international contexts and offers similarities between her views and themes in Malouf’s later works. Malouf now recalls that he was aware particularly of the work of Judith Wright and of Gwen Harwood while he was living in the UK in the 1960s. Wright’s prophetic and meditative tone appealed to him. Looking back on Wright’s and Malouf’s works, it is evident that both respond sympathetically to views on language’s origins and influence, valuing especially the intuitive, apprehending and image-making capacities of the poetic imagination, as well as its engagement with intellect.

In her essay Wright reviews J.L. Hevesi’s Essays on Language and Literature, a collection of essays by French writers Proust, Valéry, Sartre, Paulhan, Ponge and Parain, first published in 1947. She finds a renewed and urgent need to re-imagine the human worldview through personal engagement with self, everyday objects and experience as the ongoing basis of language. She sees a particular place for the poetic imagination in this quest while acknowledging the narrow audience that much contemporary poetry attracts. Writing of “words in the Atomic Age”, Wright suggests that the human “problem is that of having outgrown [our] world-picture, and therefore also the language in which that picture was formulated”. In a highly differentiated modern culture “something in us which was once a universal and necessary part of personality” has been suppressed, leaving human creative capacities diminished and impoverished” (178-79).

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52 Malouf, Interview with the author, 27 November 2003.

53 Judith Wright, “The Writer and the Crisis”, 169. Subsequent page references are placed in the text.
The redress of this situation, in Wright’s view, requires the recovery of the poetic use of language, including its anthropological and psychological roles. Wright discusses the work of Edward Sapir and Lucien Lévy-Bruhl as well as French writers and philosophers.\(^{54}\) Referring to Valéry’s essay “Poetry and Abstract Thought” she paraphrases his view that “words retain the core of meaning around which they first took shape” and that only “in their poetic use can words form a true bridge for the experience to cross from one mind direct to another” (173). She then notes that the “distinction between prose and poetic properties in the word is carried further by Francis Ponge” (173). Ponge writes in “Concerning the Pebble”:

You have but to fix your attention on the first object to hand; you will see immediately that no-one has ever examined it, and that the most elementary things about it remain to be said … I propose to every man the opening of trapdoors in his inner self, a journey into the depths of things … and for the first time, millions of particles, grains, roots, worms and minute animals, until then buried, are brought to light. Of infinite resources of the depth of things rendered by the infinite resources of the semantic depth of words?\(^{55}\)

Because the poet is the creative artist who works most closely with the “depth of things”, it is through poetic methods such as image-making and metaphor that language

\(^{54}\) Wright quotes Sapir’s view from *Language: An Introduction to the Study of Speech* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, World, 1921) that “Language in its fundamental forms is the symbolic expression of human intuitions” then she comments that “As an art, not a logical structure, it springs from deeper levels than immediate consciousness” (175). Wright makes more extensive reference to Lucien Lévy-Bruhl, *How Natives Think [Les fonctions mentales dans les sociétés inférieures]* (1923), trans. Lilian A. Clare (New York: Knopf, 1926), to put forward the view that it is not the esoteric use of language that remakes human frames of understanding: “If our words are to have communicable meaning in the daily world, they must be about that kind of [human everyday] experience” (172). In Lévy-Bruhl’s view, what he calls the “primitive mind” created language through a synthesis of object, experience, emotion and sensation, apprehended as a unity. This was a participatory experience in which “all idea of duality is effaced … and the subject is the same time himself and the being in which he participates … The primitive mind does not objectify nature thus. It lives it rather, by feeling itself participate in it” (quoted by Wright, 171). These views are in sympathy with Malouf’s portrayal of the Wild Child in *An Imaginary Life*. The Child’s apparently participatory experience in nature is contrasted by Ovid with the objectifying tendencies of his own language, with the poetic use of language offering a bridge between them. See the passage: “It is his consciousness that he leads me through on our walks … like the poems I have long since committed to memory” (*AIL*, 93).

\(^{55}\) Francis Ponge, "Concerning the Pebble" (1933), in *Essays on Language and Literature*, ed. J.L. Hevesi (London: Allan Wingate, 1947), 128. Malouf’s prose poem “The Switch” is in harmony with such as view: “I lie down in the dark among the shufflings, the flutterings. One of these sounds, if tracked to its source, would be my heart. What are the others? I settle for the dark. I lower myself into it and drift. It enters my ears … touches the secret place on my surface that is the switch” (*FTL*, 26).
might regain its authentic link with individual experience as a unified apprehension.

Wright comments:

The essentially metaphorical force behind the growth of language – the extension from the named to the unnamed by bringing the two together in some dynamic relationship – is the very process of poetry. The conveying of the otherwise incommunicable by means of an image, the seizing on relational meaning … is precisely poetic method. This faculty of image-making and relation is also the faculty which brings into being any truly new insight, in whatever discipline … sometimes in literature, sometimes in science, or wherever the growing point of thought may be located at the time. (176)

Quoting Ezra Pound’s view of the image as “the word beyond formulated language … from which, and through which, and into which, ideas are constantly rushing”, Wright identifies the process of poetry with innovative thinking, with the image as its source (177). She favours Ponge’s direction of opening “trapdoors in the inner self” that may lead to “discovering close at hand the new vision … which could turn the world from a desert tract whose possibilities are all explored, into a new and unknown place of endless creative possibility” (179).

In her Foreword to Because I Was Invited, published in 1975, Wright again points out that poetry is first an expression of human creativity, rather than a subject for reading and literary study. She finds some hope that by the 1970s there is a turning away from “dehumanization towards a revival of our decaying capacities for imagination, vision and creation” (vii) and argues for a greater valuing of the senses and feelings. In her view, the problem remains of “how to stay human in our times” and this is linked to renewing our respect for the living world:

We can rejoin ourselves in creative responsibility and participation with what we call “Nature” – which is also ourselves – or we can die with it. Perhaps we have enough time to choose the first alternative. (vii)

Her definition of the human is linked to a new vision of nature and the environment and the interaction of the human with these perceived realms. As people come to

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56 The element of welcome surprise and the unpredictable in innovative thinking can also be compared with García-Berro’s theory of poetics in literature as an unpredictable aesthetic value.
understand the external world in a fresh way, so they might redress the imbalances that have developed in how they perceive themselves and their use of nature’s resources.

Wright’s view may be seen to involve an ideological process of re-learning so that individuals and society will change. It means acquiring changed ways of perceiving and imagining. These arise from the desire to extend what is already accepted as knowledge in order to experience the world afresh and perceive its interrelationships, human and non-human, more deeply. An ideal of wholeness is evoked, redressing Wright’s sense of the incomplete and fading use of human capacity. In Wright’s view, poets drawing upon the physical environment of Australia as a source of creativity should perceive the land in a less threatening way. “Somehow our landscape threatened our identity,” she observes in the essay “Some Problems of Being an Australian Poet”, and this threat was “increased by the sheer size and emptiness of the country itself, and the isolation of its patches of urban settlement. There was all that distance outside, and all that distance inside, the country” (50).

Wright favours the Wordsworthian view that “Nature was itself a living and creative force, capable of actively arousing, not merely passively receiving, the human imagination”, a view that faded during the nineteenth century with the growing domination of materialist and rationalist philosophies and industrial practices (71).57 She sees the early Romantic impulse carried forward by Baudelaire in “Correspondences” and then taken into the poetry of French symbolism that came, finally, in her view, to favour the subjective world of the poet’s vision over the apparently objective world:

Symbolism became an attempt to intuit poetically the principle by which the external object becomes a human meaning – by which the “out-there-ness” of things becomes an “in-here-ness” … a new attempt to answer the question: what is the relation between the creative imagination and the world it acts upon? …

57 Her comment is made in “Romanticism and the Last Frontier”, a revised version of lectures given for the Commonwealth Literary Fund at the University of Sydney, 1958.
Symbolism was a step away from the core of the problem ... towards pure aestheticism ... the Symbolist vision became a private and subtle one, into which it was increasingly difficult to enter ... overt meanings faded into musical relationships of language. (74-75)

These views, expressed in 1958, are relevant to the issues Malouf is working through on a personal level as a writer in the 1960s and subsequently. Wright’s discomfort with later symbolist writing is caused by what she regards as its overly private intentions and its turning away from the objective world. Her criticism implies a view of the poet as communicator and interpreter in a cultural context, rather than an isolated visionary moving beyond the limits of language. It was a direction expressed in her own poetry during the next decades, a poetry of strong social comment which nonetheless holds on to many aspects of the Symbolist aesthetic that she praises, for example, in Christopher Brennan’s work.58

Ovid in An Imaginary Life and the pattern of main characters in Fly Away Peter (Jim Saddler, Ashley Crowther and Imogen Harcourt) express Malouf’s liking for both the individual visionary poet (although one initially mourning the loss of connection with his language and Roman culture) and everyday characters who are engaged with their social world. While at times reaching for what may be beyond the limits of language, most of his characters remain loyal to the physical, the everyday and to common speech. Perhaps responding to a tendency towards realism in the presence of what has been perceived as Australia’s challenging natural environment, Malouf, like Wright, remains loyal to his own intuitive responses while recognising the pressing claims of the social and political world of which he is inescapably part.59 He believes

58 In John Hawke’s view, Wright and her contemporaries were seeking Symbolist corollaries for their own Australian experience, adapting the landscape and history to symbol. See John Hawke, "The Moving Image: Judith Wright’s Symbolist Language", Southerly 61.1 (2001), 164.

59 Malouf comments in an interview in 1980 that “there’s been a move in the seventies to believe that people are imaginatively absolutely free, that they only have to make an aesthetic or philosophical choice, and reality can be completely dissolved, will disappear. Growing up in the fifties you couldn’t ever have believed that, because the limits on your absolute freedom were all too clear. … if a war occurs
he belongs to an exterior reality that he cannot let go, even when it may seem he has
removed himself from it, as expressed in the poem “This Day, Under My Hand”
discussed in Chapter 1). His past acquires new relevance and vitality through the truth
of the “subjective impression”, in Proust’s terms.

In a re-working of “This Day, Under My Hand” for the Selected Poems
published in 1981, Malouf introduces additional stanzas focusing on the dream-like
quality of memory and contrasting the work “under my hand” in signing a document
relinquishing legal ownership and the work of imaginative writing reclaiming a source
of personal identity. In this version “each lost thing shines” caught “alive in the net” of
dream impressions and memory, bringing interiors and exteriors together in the
experience of the poem:

Under
the shadow of my hand,
night fills the house, climbs into
its cupboard, its beds.

In one of them a child
is dreaming: sea fog
trickles from a fist.
It seeps through hoop-pine branches
and a jetty’s planks still warm from
the sun, rolls under
a barbed-wire fence, flows into
his mouth. Midnight comes on.

He sleeps. Morning approaches
the far side of his head.
There are dreams we cannot keep
at a distance: salt, gull’s cry
each lost thing shines and thrashes
alive in the net.
From the dark bay hissing
like crabs, red tropic suns. (SP 81 18-19) 60

[Malouf refers to the Korean War] you’re in it – there’s no way out. You can’t re-think it”, Interview
with Jim Davidson, 291.

60 Malouf returns to the 1970 version in Selected Poems (1991), 8-9. The poem suggests some of the
themes in “The Crab Feast”.
The influence of a Freudian view of the unconscious is evident. Lionel Trilling in his essay “Freud and Literature” in the collection *The Liberal Imagination* states that “the Freudian psychology is the one [mental system] which makes poetry indigenous to the very constitution of the mind”. In Trilling’s view, Freud “has not merely naturalized poetry; he had discovered its status as a pioneer settler, and he sees it as a method of thought. … it was left to Freud to discover how, in a scientific age, we still feel and think in figurative formations”. When added to Ponge’s injunction to “open trapdoors in the inner self”, Trilling’s commendation of Freudian psychology gives value to the importance of the intuitive as well as the rational mind for poets seeking their own directions at this time. It invites the exploration of inner and outer aspects of the psyche and the links between them from a quasi-scientific perspective, giving confidence to a poet that a work such as “This Day Under My Hand” is representing what is generally acknowledged to occur in forming meaning from personal experience. Even if the way the interaction occurs remained mysterious or problematic because of limited scientific evidence, its “actuality” received greater assent from the educated readership of the time. The psychological basis of poetic language was valued as a foundation and potential transformer of mind, an aspect developed further in work on the subject-in-process such as that of Jacques Lacan and of Julia Kristeva.

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61 Malouf acknowledges Freud’s influence in the fourteenth Herbert Blaiklock Memorial lecture on 26 September 1984: “One observes in Freud’s description of how the mind works how essential architectural features are, trapdoor, cellars, attics.” See “A First Place: The Mapping of a World”, in Tulip, *David Malouf*, 267.


63 Trilling, *The Liberal Imagination*, 53.

64 The psychoanalytic experience has rediscovered in man the imperative of the Word as the law that has formed him in its image. It manipulates the poetic function of language to give to his desire its symbolic mediation”, Jacques Lacan, “The Function and Field of Speech and Language in Psychoanalysis”, *Écrits*, trans. Alan Sheridan (London: Tavistock, 1977), 106. See also Julia Kristeva,
as active participant in constructing knowledge rather than a passive recipient of formal, institutionalised models of learning. The work of Jean Piaget in genetic epistemology and cognitive development became better known internationally and was significant in changing views of how human intelligence changes from infancy into adulthood, stimulating increased discussion of how the child should be educated in society.\textsuperscript{65}

Malouf’s particular interest in Rilke and Stevens, both poets who value the symbolic potential of language and the crafting in verse of its aesthetic beauty, can be placed in the context of the still influential romantic-symbolist aesthetic in Australia in the late 1950s. Judith Wright comments retrospectively on its longevity, then challenged, in 1971 in “Australian Poetry after Pearl Harbour” (Wright, 129-37).\textsuperscript{66} She notes the international impact of the “terrible achievement of Hiroshima” which had “left many people deeply shocked and questioning the whole development of thought which has led up to it”.\textsuperscript{67} The aftermath of World War II led to deeper consideration of the role an international community of creative artists might play in preventing future conflict. Works in translation became more readily available and voices from a variety of cultures promised new directions for those wanting to look beyond the boundaries of provincialism and established canons of literature.


\textsuperscript{65} See Jean Piaget, \textit{The Origins of Intelligence in Children} (New York: International Universities Press, 1952). At a time when psychologists were interested in measuring intelligence by the number of questions a child answered correctly on a standardized test, Piaget researched the different ways children thought when they answered. His research caused him to develop a theory of cognitive development to better understand how children’s thinking changed over time.

\textsuperscript{66} Originally titled “Australian Poetry since 1941”, \textit{Southerly} number 1(1971): 19-28. Wright states that “While the Romantic-Symbolist tradition in Australia relied much more on the romantic than the symbolist component, and is, if not at an end, now seriously challenged, I don’t think its persistence has done us any harm” (135).

\textsuperscript{67} Wright, Foreword to \textit{Because I Was Invited}, ix.
Wright again provides useful comments on the post-war period in “Some problems of being an Australian poet”:

After the ‘Ern Malley Affair’, and with the great growth in the universities that followed the war, English and American influences and more academic standards of excellence in poetry began to prevail. The problems of poetry here were not solved by these new influences, but they began to look less important. We felt ourselves as part of a wider world. … It remained to accept ourselves for what we were and work out our problems with the tools that condition offered. (58)

It is notable that even poets of apparently different poetic outlooks in Australia such as A.D. Hope, James McAuley and Judith Wright, as well as the younger Malouf, Vivian Smith and Bruce Beaver all found Rilke a significant poetic influence, as did many younger American poets such as Robert Bly, Galway Kinnell and Robert Creeley. The compulsion to “work out our problems”, as Wright expresses it, drew poets to one such as Rilke who engaged deeply in the early decades of the twentieth century with the crises in aesthetics, theology and constructing an individually authentic and sustainable worldview through poetry. The search for new sources of poetic integrity transcended nationality and motivated artists to look again at various sources, including those of antiquity as well as across cultural and linguistic differences.

The importance of beginning with what one knows from personal experience and working with “the tools that condition offered”, as Wright suggested, is evident in Malouf’s early works and was strengthened by his reading of contemporary poets such as Robert Lowell and Sylvia Plath.68 Malouf now recalls that he first read a poem by Lowell in The New Statesman and this prompted him to purchase Life Studies when it appeared in 1959. He also purchased For the Union Dead (1964) and liked the way

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68 Plath’s best-known collection, Ariel, appeared posthumously in 1965. Her poems linking the symbolic and the actual brought the substance of her own difficult life strongly into her work. The crisis of the subject is felt in the work of both Lowell and Plath.
Lowell used his personal life as a basis for the subject’s experience in his poems. For Malouf, Lowell’s poetry showed effective ways for a poet to achieve this style.\textsuperscript{69}

In tracing Malouf’s development as a writer in the 1960s it is necessary to consider both poetry and prose, as he was composing both during this time, although publication was unsought. In January 1963, Malouf writes in correspondence to Judith Rodriguez that he needs time to remold and rethink his ideas in general and his ideas on poetry in particular. He sees the consequence as being a period of slow gestation of works and long silence. The \textit{Four Poets} work was now behind him and could be used as a point of departure.\textsuperscript{70} By May he had commenced working “on the Johnny M. thing” but did not have time to make much progress because of work commitments.\textsuperscript{71} However, by November he comments at some length on the process of composing in prose as he is experimenting with it for this work:

\begin{quote}
What is most difficult is the actual prose. The thing has to be written in big blocks, rather the way Mozart’s operas are constructed, with a good deal of unity within them. This means that the shape of the action in each block has to be absolutely right, and this depends primarily on getting the paragraphs to work with and against one another and needs a very firm idea of large rhythmic units – more perhaps than I have the means of handling at the moment. Still, I’m getting there.\textsuperscript{72}
\end{quote}

In December the novel was “almost finished in its first draft … the bare bones done in something like five weeks. I feel immensely heartened”.\textsuperscript{73} In an important comment on his use of experience, Malouf writes of the composing process as requiring a new approach:

\begin{footnotes}
\item[70] UQFL 75/DM 38, January 1963, 12 Vaughan Road.
\item[71] UQFL 75/DM 51, May 1963. These early drafts are not extant.
\item[72] UQFL 75/DM 66, 29 November 1963, Newcastle.
\item[73] UQFL 75/DM 68, 14 December 1963, Newcastle.
\end{footnotes}
I have been fascinated by... the way bits and pieces of experience come to the surface, things that one had forgotten and that emerge somehow with a dramatic unity and significance they didn’t have at the time. ... I’ve never written anything in the novel line before that was really of much personal significance to me. The experience I was using derived from books, or perhaps I hadn’t got far enough into [Malouf’s underlining] the situation to strike root and let the real experience come up.  

Malouf had at first thought that “interiors” were his main creative source but he came to realize the value of his personal experience in its exterior setting, its unique place and time. He needed to allow what life has written already within him (to use Proust’s terms) to emerge in his composing. Then the external details of memories, people and events acquired deeper significance. The crossing point of “inner” and “outer” was becoming an enriched place of personal learning and growth for him, leading by the 1970s to his creation of life in Brisbane as a subject for fiction, something not previously offered in quite that way in Australian prose.

Little if any of his early work on the novel survives, as extant manuscripts date mainly from 1967. Folder 2 of the collection in the National Library of Australia is annotated by the author as “Notes, very early versions going back before May 1972 – some of them written in Birkenhead in 1967, others at Darlington Rd. in late 1970 & the first weeks of ’71. All previous to the version prepared in Florence, May-August 1972. A great deal of this hand-written”.  

An intriguing page in Folder 2, however, contains a handwritten story on the reverse side of a letter drafted to the London Press Exchange in 1963. In the letter Malouf seeks employment as an advertising copywriter and introduces himself as “an Australian, aged 29”. The story is about “Michael” (the

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74 UQFL 75/DM 68, 14 December 1963, Newcastle. There are intimations here of Ovid’s words in the “scarlet poppy passage” (A.IL. 31-33), especially from an early typescript: “I who ... barely recognize a flower when I see one by its true name – knowing only the names as they occur in the authors... I sit now naming them in their real colours, their real fragrance”, UQFL 163/C/II-2. The passage is discussed in more detail in chapter 4 of this study.

75 David Malouf, Literary Manuscripts 1967-1974, National Library of Australia, Canberra, NLA MS 5614, Folder 2. No pagination was given for the documents in Folder 2 at the time the research for this study was undertaken.
name first used for Johnno) and narrates an incident in which he visits Michael’s home and has in his pocket a small model car, eraser and screwdriver as they return to the train.\textsuperscript{76} This may be a surviving remnant of the earliest work on the novel, seeking ways to imagine the character “Michael” and the narrator’s complex relationship with him. Malouf writes later that John Milliner’s death by accident or suicide “haunted me for nearly ten years” as he “had managed to drown himself in the Condamine [River], at a place and in a depth of water where no one could drown”.\textsuperscript{77} Malouf sees his attempts to write \textit{Johnno} as a coming to terms with “my uneasy sense of having failed or betrayed him” (Preface, \textit{Johnno}, xi). He wants to face up, as rigorously as I could, to what I might discover about myself, my role in Johnny’s suicide, if that is what it was, and about the world that had made us both, a world he had violently rejected … and about which I … remained undecided, ambivalent. (Preface, \textit{Johnno}, xi)

In an early typescript of the novel (perhaps 1963, but more probably 1967) the author tries to see the character of Michael but also sees himself with his two faces “neither of them my own”:

\emph{Where will I begin? With any one of them, I suppose. Any one of these memories, objects, faces, set down upon the page like a saucer of milk set for a tiger, might tempt him back into its circle; and maybe if I began with his room – his room at the old house that is – and set each back in its proper place – not in order, for it was never that, but in the disorder in which he kept them – they might serve, held together by the magnetic net of his ownership, to trap him again. If the room were real enough he might be drawn back into it.}\textsuperscript{78}

In a later draft (“Michael” has become “Johnny”) the narrator writes of him as having “the terror of the savage who must wear clothes … forgetting his wild, free, cruel island

\textsuperscript{76} The short draft appears to offer the basis of a similar incident in the published novel. See \textit{Johnno}, 41-43. Dante steals the objects from a shop to impress Johnno but feels embarrassed and ashamed when he shows them to Johnno, realizing that the other boy interprets the theft as revealing how Dante sees him, rather than as a daring prank. Dante finally leaves the objects in the train on the way home. The clandestine capture of images becomes a recurring theme in Malouf’s work.

\textsuperscript{77} David Malouf, Preface to the Anniversary Edition of \textit{Johnno} (St Lucia: University of Queensland Press 1998), xi. Subsequent references to this edition of \textit{Johnno} are placed in the text.

\textsuperscript{78} NLA MS 5614, Folder 2.
with its airborne mysteries” like a Caliban figure. He “stands outside all the successes … the making do of my generation – and refuses to come in. His presence out there is disturbing”. The apparently tamed, ordered life of the narrator and the more unfettered, disordered life of Johnny are represented as two aspects of the need for a greater wholeness desirable in a society living on the surface of things.

There is a close relation between these draft passages and the imagery in the poem “Footnote for a Bestiary”, confirming the cross-fertilising of composing in poetry and prose for Malouf. In January 1963 he describes the poem to Judith Rodriguez as “my best” among the works published in Four Poets. The poem takes its epigraph from T.H. White’s The Book of Beasts quoting the medieval tale of a nobleman who steals a tiger cub and is pursued as he rides away by the swift and angry tigress (Figure 3).

Fig. 3. The tiger in The Book of Beasts: Being a Translation of a Latin Bestiary of the Twelfth Century, ed. and trans., T.H. White (London: Cape, 1954), 12.

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79 NLA MS 5614, Folder 2.
80 UQFL 75/DM 34, 14 January 1963, Wallasey, Cheshire.
When he is about to be caught the rider “cunningly invents the following ruse: he throws down a silver ball and the tigress, taken in by her own reflection, assumes that the image of herself in the glass is her little one” and halts her pursuit.  

Each creature in a medieval bestiary was considered as a type of moral and even mystical entity, bearing a message for the human reader, as well as being a part of nature. The devotion of the tiger, lured by the image in the mirrored ball (and thereby negating the advantage of her swiftness) is suggested by the story, as well as the “skill” (or deceit) of the hunter in stealing the prized tiger cub, against the odds, for his own purposes. The story is polysemous suggesting more than one layer of correspondences for each of its mythemes. It seems to encapsulate the fear and fascination of luring the “exotic” or the “unknown” and also of encountering alternative images of the self in doing so. The mirrored roundness of the glass ball offers access to another way of perceiving. Figure 4 reproduces the illustration from a similar mid-thirteenth century bestiary held in the Bodleian Library, Oxford MS. Bodley 764. It presents a coloured and more elaborate version of the smaller drawing T.H. White reports he “traced … from a photostatic copy of the original” twelfth century Latin manuscript (Cambridge University Library, II.4.26) for The Book of Beasts to which Malouf refers.

Malouf seems intrigued by the tale and offers his own view of it in relation to the emergence of forces that are desired but dangerous:

> It is of course debatable, but tigers seem not so playful now as when our fathers took them with silver balls; or I should say,

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81 “Footnote for a Bestiary”, “Interiors” no. 8, in Four Poets. The poem was first published in Meanjin Quarterly 89.21.2 (1962), 182. Malouf’s epigraph quotes White, 12-13.


83 Barber, 28-29.

84 White, 229.
the tigers I have known (who may not be the same rare species as this printed beast, rampant among the flowers) were cooler cats, subtle, malicious creatures, whose green eyes were not to be beguiled out of their menace by parlour tricks with balls and images. (*Interiors* no. 8)


Images arising from memory and from the more unconscious sources of the mind are suggested, as Malouf is finding in his writing about Michael/Johnny. His particular recollections of a speedy Triumph Tiger Cub motorbike which he owned in the 1950s and “taking my first spin in a Tiger Moth” aeroplane would perhaps be among the more
powerful “tigers I have known” referred to in the poem. Rather than the mirrored ball as a foil for the powerful tiger (whatever its form) which may cause you to “wake at midnight to the scraping / of claws at your sill”:

    I’d suggest
    some likelier foil: a dish of milk perhaps,
    set at your threshold, or a hand extended
    to stroke the sleek black fur. Only remember
    tigers are unpredictable; a trick
    may serve you once or twice; a friendly gesture
    may bring some great cat purring round your knees;
    but equally, they may be no more potent
    than charms, or prayers, or – well, a silver ball. (Interiors no. 8)

By imagining his character’s former surroundings vividly enough, the objects and memories Malouf “[sets] down upon the page like a saucer of milk” might release fuller images revealing the character he is seeking. The spherical shape into which the rather docile medieval tiger looks in the Cambridge manuscript of the bestiary may have suggested the notion of the saucer of milk, especially as there is no reflected image evident, as in the Bodleian illustration. Malouf warns that that these “tigers” of imagination may be unpredictable and even dangerous, releasing more than just memories and images from the psyche. The author’s acts of imagining and composing may resemble, at times, the daring hunter who captures the wild cub and, at other times, the rampant, eager tiger, confused and challenged by images of self in the “silver ball” and finding unexpected, hidden energies emerging through the writing. The separate frames for the depiction of the hunter and the tiger in both manuscripts and the swirling foliage surrounding the tiger as it focuses on the mirror ball seem to place the animal in a realm connected yet removed from the action of the hunter on the galloping horse, as if the tiger cub itself has been grasped from a dream by the waking mind.

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85 Malouf recalls riding the motorbike “back and forth between Brisbane and the surf at Broadbeach”, On Experience, 45-46.
Malouf’s style of naming objects in Johnno can be read with this insight in mind: they are not merely lists to him, but potent vehicles for assembling and giving new energy to feelings and memories. It is implied that readers will add further associations of their own if the details are communicated in a way that arouses their imagination. This is an alternative view to that of Ivor Indyk who sees many objects named together in Malouf’s fiction as “catalogues [of] ... inert detail” in which there is a “denial of significance”.\footnote{Indyk, David Malouf, 41.} He makes this comment particularly in relation to Johnno. The details of the narrator’s parent’s possessions in the “Prologue”, for example, “offer no sense of order, other than that in which the details are noticed; there is no attempt at interpretation”.\footnote{Indyk, David Malouf, 1.} If the objects are considered as “lures” appealing to the depths of the narrator’s memory and, behind that, enticing the author’s imagination, their presence can be seen as evocative. This is suggested in the way the objects are introduced, with the storehouses of wonders in great museums mentioned:

Her dressing-table was the Library of Alexandria, a suburban V. and A. Just opening the drawers was like stepping back into my earliest childhood. There were the heirlooms I liked to play with, neatly assembled in an ivory case: my grandmother’s wedding ring and a tiny garnet brooch ... a bloodstone seal with my grandfather’s initials, E.M., and a replica of the anointing-spoon used at the coronation of Edward VII; packets of pins, needles, hooks-and-eyes, buttons, hairpins; and dozens of Paton and Baldwin pattern books, with photographs of favourite sweaters and cardigans I had worn ... I felt like a housebreaker as I tumbled the contents of the drawers on to the carpet – or a grave-robber, stumbling in among the ruins of an abandoned empire. (Johnno 9)

By linking the perusal of these family objects with, surprisingly, an act of theft, Malouf’s writing again suggests the importance of the “tiger” story. It is as if the narrator is encountering things that he desires but which are not yet fully taken into his sense of self to become truly his. To comprehend them fully is, at first, like stealing them from the past. Such an act may bring danger to the self as well as fulfilment. How
will they be viewed in the mirrored, silver ball of the imagination? The objects are both “external” and “internal”, full of his memories, random only in the same way that recollections may be touched off in the mind, apparently in a haphazard fashion. However, the hidden ordering of the mind is implied which constructs and sustains the autobiographical self from one moment to the next. Their listing imitates his fresh apprehending of them, inviting the reader to imagine the world they evoke. He is re-imagining them as feeling-images, able to come “inside” the self like the city of Brisbane whose “elusive, as yet non-existent poetry” he seeks by writing the narrative (Preface, Johnno, x). According to this reading, the objects are sensually present and anything but “inert” in that they spark off fresh understanding for the narrator. He engages in a new way with the “reality” of his own life and that of his family. It is not just the objects but the experiential process of which they are part that is crucial here.

Malouf was still working on early drafts of “Michael” in 1964, using what he describes as “my usual patch-work method”. This meant the work was not being written in sequence. The end and the beginning had been drafted before the middle section, sometimes in blocks of three to five thousand words at a sitting. Two areas of prose writing that he finds require his particular attention are pace and relevance:

If you can only get [the text] to move first, the words can be juggled with later … one has to get out of the habit (from verse writing) of trying to make everything relevant … So many of the details … have to be there to give the work any real texture, any illusion of life. One learns, at last to write in paragraphs rather than sentences, to think in big rhythmic units rather than small ones.

As he continues to work on the novel he finds that “what it is really about” becomes more apparent to him in unexpected ways that he had not consciously planned.

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88 UQFL 75/DM 69, 9 January 1964, Newcastle.
89 UQFL 75/DM 69, 9 January 1964, Newcastle.
90 UQFL 75/DM 70, 30 January 1964, Newcastle.
completes about twenty thousand words that he thinks he will have other people read, something Malouf comes to favour as a way of “testing” the effect of a work-in-progress. He was also writing “a good deal of verse” at this time but says only some of it “may survive the six month test.”

Early in June 1964 Malouf writes to Judith Rodrigues that he has completed another fifteen thousand words of the novel in eight days. The way characters interact in the fiction is his focus of interest:

the characters are involved with one another in quite a different way; they play roles in one another’s inner life … that are significant, and the tension of the novel lies in the place where the inner and outer actions clash, where the characters attempt to impose on the outer action some of the significance and dramatic coherence that their inner lives contain.

This is an important insight for Malouf’s later works. The effort to bring into some alignment the tensions between the inner and outer life is a crucial point of growth for many of his characters. It can be externalized in Malouf’s fiction as a point of physical danger, as for Jim in Fly Away Peter, for example, when his going to war represents just such an effort. It is a testing of his inner life. Malouf brings into his writing the polarities conceptualised from his own experience and makes them a creative energy. Later, he comes to regard these polarities as possibly linked to the open/closed, private/public, garden/wilderness and inner/outer contrasts of growing up in his first Queensland home and the effect on his view of consciousness of the particularly unpredictable urban design and colourful tropical climate of Brisbane. By the end of June 1964 he had abandoned writing the novel as personal circumstances intruded on the flow of his creative work.

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91 UQFL 75/DM 78, 22 May 1964, London.

92 UQFL 75/DM 79, 10 June 1964, Newcastle.


94 UQFL 75/DM 80, 26 June 1964, London.
A significant event in Malouf’s development as a writer was the sudden death of his father in Brisbane in September 1964. Malouf flew back to Australia to be with his mother and sister and returned by ship to the UK in November. In an early typescript version of Johnno (1967?) the following passage occurs (later deleted):

Then two years ago my father died, and by some kind of transformation that I have not yet come to terms with, I did know who I was at last: that I became firm and solid at last. Such things are a mystery. Perhaps we all remain children, somehow, till we father a child of our own or until that other strange familiar figure who has fathered us leaves us to stand in the world alone at last and we discover the power at last to create ourselves … Being able to write about Johnny began with my father’s death and my being ready at last to write about myself.95

While the passage would have a fictional element that distances it from autobiography, the impact of two deaths in three years, that of John Milliner and then of Malouf’s father, generated significant creative tensions. A new kind of self-discovery became possible. Outer events were significantly touching his inner life, heightening Malouf’s sense of the power of language and imagination in coming to terms with events and motivating him to re-shape them through the reflections and refractions of writing.

By early 1965 Malouf writes to Judith Rodriguez that he has finished a long story of ten thousand words, a short play and about thirty poems. He has begun also to write arts reviews for the Canberra Times, including an account of an interview with Peter Porter in London. He decides to resume part-time teaching at Birkenhead. By July 1965 he says he has

enough [poems] for a very ‘varied’ volume: twenty-nine new pieces and seven from Four Poets. Some of the new things are quite long … nothing is really finished. But I can see the shape of the thing as a whole … it does make me more confident about individual poems if I can see them as stages in my own development, or at least in a [Malouf’s underlining] development. I have changed a great deal since Four Poets, I think.96

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95 NLA MS 5614, Folder 2.

96 UQFL 75/DM 97, June/July 1965, Birkenhead.
An important poem in the writer’s development from this period is “Snow” which draws on his now familiar working environment of a school. As discussed in Chapter 1 of this study, "Snow" offers a moment of discovery amid a traditional situation of learning: the realisation that there are other ways of knowing than those found in studying “figures and cold facts / from the blackboard” (Bicycle 55-56). It is a forward-looking distinction in Malouf’s work. Using the figure of a stealthy cat, a further version perhaps of the approaching tiger in “Footnote for a Bestiary”, the poem suggests moments of realisation rather than potential danger. The poem gives a central place to what can be shared and yet transformed – the everyday experience that opens new perspectives when the imagination intervenes. Such transformation argues for the efficacy of the poetic in the social and cultural context, both as a way of apprehending what “reality” might be and of using the power of language to communicate such insights. The poet seeks to raise poetry’s value as a discourse of influence, demonstrating that it offers enhanced ways of perceiving and responding to life’s experiences, key capacities for human resilience. It is not an elitist but rather a communal poetic that Malouf values as “brightness” that is found “under our shoes”.

Another side of poetry’s potential for transforming the everyday is expressed in “Bicycle”, also written in the 1960s while Malouf was residing in England. Here the common means of transport becomes less a blessing than an uncanny presence, “a light-limbed traveller” and “some forest deity, or deity of highway / and sky” which exerts its influence in a manner both comic and troublesome, altering the mood of the space it occupies and forming symbolic contours in the subject’s mind:

To the other inmates of the room, a bookcase,
two chairs, its horizontals speak
of distance, travelling light. Only the mirror

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97 Slight alterations in punctuation and choice of words were made for a later version in Selected Poems (1981) 24-25.
remains unruffled – holding
its storm of light unbroken, calmly accepting
all traffic through its gaze. Appease! Appease! (Bicycle 58)

Again the figure of an offering to conciliate an aggressor is included, although the subject recognizes that it is “absurd” to lay out, on this occasion, not a saucer of milk for a tiger but a “saucer of cold sweat” from his imaginative labours. What “news” might the bicycle bring, the poem implies, and who might the travellers be? The openness of the subject to the psychic space where symbolic formations emerge is evident when he invokes the “messengers” of time who appear as fantastic, mythopoeic creatures in approaching night, as if from a bestiary of the surreal. The bicycle, “the godhead invoked in a machine”, draws forth more than a token offering from the daylight world:

Now time yawns and its messengers appear:
like huge stick-insects, wingless, spoked with stars,
they wheel through the dusk towards us.

the shock wave of collision still lifting
their locks, who bear our future
sealed at their lips like urgent telegrams. (Bicycle 59)

The apparent order of the poem with its three-line stanzas seeks to contain the imagined “otherness” of the bicycle, although the pressing energy of the encounter is felt in the incomplete phrases, varied lengths of line and diverse punctuation. What the poem conjures finally threatens to exceed the boundaries of its clever images, a disturbance for the reader as well as the subject. The poem suggests Rilke’s “Der Panther”98 and also the figure of the poet as conjuror (“der Beschwörende”) who is able to use poetic imagination and language to create a “reality” blending the invisible, mysterious and

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98 Rainer Maria Rilke, “The Panther”, in Selected Poetry 24-25.
uncanny with everyday things, without the superstition of leaving milk or bread on the
night table.\textsuperscript{99}

Different modes of language are apparent in the poem. There are standard terms
denoting everyday objects (such as “living-room” and “streets”) as well as fictional-
narrative indicators that give the poem a story-like form (“Since Thursday last”, “Now
time yawns”). The symbolic referents such as “deity of highway and sky”, “angel of
two geometries” and “its messengers appear like huge stick-insects”, give a mythical
dimension to the pragmatic act of placing a bicycle in a living room. The initial sense
of light-hearted verbal play through metaphor and personification moves rapidly
towards a more troubled awareness of archetypal figures approaching through
subconscious psychic drives, not easily predicted in the poem’s title. As in “The Year
of the Foxes”, the poem may be read as aiming to unsettle yet intrigue the reader,
creating a feeling of poetic surprise (after García-Berro’s “poeticity”). This is
enhanced by a displacement of everyday temporality when the future approaches
through the poetic imaginary, wanting to communicate its news through “urgent
telegrams”.

The development of Malouf’s interest and artistry in creating such poetic effects
continues in prose as well as poetry.\textsuperscript{100} The illuminating energy of refracted light
creaking “beneath our shoes” in “Snow” and the mystery of the fantastical messenger-
gods of “Bicycle” find another form in the appearance of fabled centaurs in a dream

\textsuperscript{99} “Going to bed, never leave on the table / bread or milk, forcing the dead to rise.- He shall invoke
them, he who is able / to mingle in mildness of closing eyes / their appearance with all that we view;”
(“Geht ihr zu Bett, so lasst auf dem Tische / Brot nicht und Milch nicht: die Toten zieht - / Aber er, der
Beschwörende, mische / unter der Milde des Augenlids / ihre Erscheinung in alles Geschehene;”),
Sonnets to Orpheus, I, vi, trans. J. B. Leishman, 44-45.

\textsuperscript{100} García-Berro argues in A Theory of the Literary Text that “those verbal structures that are
poetically effective in a given text are extremely uncertain; they turn out to be poetic in one context and
not in another. The best proof against those of the opinion that the aesthetic and poetic effect is to be
located in formulas of pure cultural consensus is this changing and uncertain condition from one text to
another of the poetic capacity of verbal structures. The poetic suggestion of verbal constuctions with
effects privileged in a particular author, take Cervantes as an example, is never again present in the work
of those who reiterate them” (88).
sequence in Part I of *An Imaginary Life*. The creatures are “terrible” gods, urgently desiring not appeasement and saucers of sweat but whole-hearted belief. By the time the piece was first drafted in 1976, the demands for the subject have been raised considerably by the visitors from the nocturnal realm:

They were gigantic, and their power, the breath of their nostrils, the crash of their hooves, the rippling light of their flanks, was terrible. (*AIL* 24)

They are “uttering cries – not of malice … but of mourning. Let us into your world ... Let us into your lives. Believe in us. Believe” (*AIL* 24). The rhythmic patterns of the prose passage and the poem “Bicycle” are related in phrases such as “they wheel through the dusk towards us” (*Bicycle* 59) and “they began to wheel in great circles about me” (*AIL* 24). The “flow of breath” of the centaur that approaches Ovid makes him “listen for another meaning” (*AIL* 24). It brings “something in me that was its reflection” from within himself, a further working of the image of the tigress looking into the mirrored ball (*AIL* 25). The “urgent telegrams” in “Bicycle” become the unknown “word” of the centaur, its silent language suggesting to Ovid that if he could grasp its meaning he might be able to find his future: “What it is out there that is waiting to receive me” (*AIL* 25).

The subject is required to engage deeply with these “gods”, to believe in their existence and allow such belief to guide his future. Malouf’s imaginary is favouring more deeply a poetic mode that gives what may be termed literary verbal constructions the surprise of the poetic, its unpredictable openness to the transforming moment. Idea images carry into visions, extending “far” in imagination yet returning “near” through the subject’s senses of sight and hearing. The use of this mode seeks to mend the crisis of language (in Judith Wright’s terms) and assert the value of the poetic among the competing discourses of the time. By communicating a wider sense of the “real” to his audience, Malouf hopes to catch readers’ senses so that “something moves towards
them”, as in “Snow”, that is not predicated but has a desired aesthetic value extending thought and feeling. To achieve such a moment in writing is never guaranteed, of course, by any set of rhetorical devices or pattern of images. That Malouf begins to succeed in conveying the effect in different texts and genres is a foundation for his developing reputation in the 1970s and beyond.

The recurring pattern of approaching figures in Malouf’s work gives his concept of “interiors” a more complex frame of reference as he finds the intersections between interior and exterior are increasingly felt in his own experience. By 1980 he refers to the coming of “annunciating angels” (suggesting Rilke’s influence) in the following way:

There are lots of figures and subjects and pictures and sounds that keep recurring … I really do think of them like a whole set of annunciating angels, waiting to tell us whatever it is. But we have to be very careful to let them speak first … these figures must be allowed to come right up to the edge of a poem or a piece of writing, even if they are dismissed. Certainly more and more what I try to do in writing … is to put myself in contact with these obsessive figures – or whatever they are …. there’s no subject of any poem; just yourself and those figures and somewhere the language in between.101

In the UK in 1967 Malouf was disturbed by Australia’s involvement in the Vietnam War and he travelled to London to join an anti-war demonstration held there. At this time he re-commenced work on the Johnno/“Michael” novel. The surviving manuscripts and typescripts show much correction and re-drafting, certainly more so than Malouf’s later manuscripts. They focus on the narrator’s childhood, his experience of wartime and his return to Brisbane after being abroad. For the child the relation between his inner and outer world can be fearful. An early handwritten version of a passage (some of page 25 in the published text) shows the way in which the narrator’s

101 Malouf, Interview with Jim Davidson, 295-96.
sense of the outer world invading his inner world creates a tone of anxiety. At first, it seems quite playful, an adult recollecting a child’s unfounded fears:

I should confess then, between the ages of five and eight, despite all sorts of evidence to the contrary – like the wallmaps in our spare room and the war news five times a day – I was quite convinced that the war really took place under my bed at night; that the moment the light was switched off, Hitler and Mussolini arrived with their paraphernalia.

A typescript version in Folder 2 (slightly later) elaborates the details of the handwritten draft with handwritten corrections and margin notes also evident. The child’s fear is now more strongly evoked and it gathers its credence from the evidence apparent to the child’s mind:

But the war, for me, had quite another dimension. Despite all sorts of evidence to the contrary, like the wallmaps in our spare room and the new-broadcasts that came wavering over the undersea cables from way far away, I was convinced that the struggle really took place under my bed: the moment the light was out, Hitler and Mussolini arrived with their paraphernalia of barbed wire, bayonets, tin-helmets, hand grenades, with the sole purpose of reaching up over the bottom of the bed, or down over the top, and dragging me into that strange black and white world I knew only from newspaper photographs and the hazy newsreels I saw when we went to the pictures; a world without colour, like the night itself, where everyone was a victim, pale, luminous, with flesh already frazzled around the edge, and where being a child whose curly hair and apple cheeks everyone wondered at was not protection at all.

The development of this passage to its published version by 1975 shows a significant refinement. Drawing on the concept of another way of knowing, here polarised as “daylight reality” (“this was only half the truth”) and nightmare, the text introduces not only the earlier details of the room and the accoutrements of war, but also the foliage surrounding the tropical home as an active participant in the fearful world of the child’s night mind:

Giant staghorns leapt through the papered glare of my bedroom window, and our fernery beyond, with its mossy fish-pond and slatted frames

102 The manuscript version is written on two small pieces of paper and there are drafts of a poem on the reverse side of both pages (“Somewhere as ever / in time and out”), NL A MS 5614, Folder 2.

103 NL A MS 5614, Folder 2.
hung with baskets of hare’s foot and maidenhair, sprang up in shadow around me, an insubstantial jungle there was no way through. I choked. Hitler and Mussolini … burst in upon me bearing their terrible paraphernalia of barbed wire, bayonets (Johnno 25)

The reader can now understand why the child believes as he does and can enter into his represented perceptions and feelings. The child’s fear acquires its own logic and evidence, revalidated by the memory of the narrator. The black-and-white newsreels further reinforce it. It is a world “without colour, like the night itself, in which everyone was a victim” and in which children are seen “climbing up gangplanks, or being herded into trains” (Johnno 25-26). Yet the child’s terrors “came to seem truer to the real history of our times, as it was finally revealed to us” (Johnno 26). “Reality” may thus be approached in various ways in the text. What is valued as evidence becomes tentative and is itself the product of certain ways of perceiving and feeling. The comparison of the early drafts and the published text is an important indicator of the direction of Malouf’s work at this point. His use of the extended, complex sentence is noticeable. It builds detail upon detail and heightens feeling through sound patterning and verbal energy. In this published passage, for example, repeated plosive sounds convey the force with which these war terrors invade the child’s thought-pictures and the verbs such as “leapt”, “sprang”, “burst”, “reach up” and “drag” are aggressive in tone (Johnno 25).

After four years teaching at Birkenhead Malouf decided he should move on and in April 1968 had an indication from the University of Sydney that employment might become available.\textsuperscript{104} He returned to Brisbane by August and then moved to Sydney to take up a senior tutorship in the English Department from 1 September. He soon became friendly with his new colleague Vivian Smith, also a poet and lecturer in English, who had a room opposite his own in the university quadrangle. His secured a

\textsuperscript{104} UQFL 75/DM 158, 23 January 1968, Palm Grove.
permanent position by November which allowed future sabbatical leave and was given lecture topics to prepare for 1969 that included American authors such as Nathaniel Hawthorne and Herman Melville, post-World War II American novels and Jacobean comedy. James Tulip in the English Department also shared his interest in American literature and became a close friend.

Malouf writes hopefully as he commences his new appointment that “I’ll have plenty of time for my own work.” 105 He soon found that he had stepped into a very busy teaching schedule and an exciting literary scene with many unexpected opportunities, especially in poetry. He was surprised that Douglas Stewart had included his work in the Anthology of Australian Poetry and that editors Thomas Shapcott and Rodney Hall had placed his poems in New Impulses in Australian Poetry. They “simply took it for granted that I was part of what was happening that was new. I’d better get going, I thought (I was already over thirty) and produce a book. These recognitions can be decisive. So is timing.” 106 With his return to Australia, Malouf moved towards refining and seeking publication for some of his poetry of the 1960s and the shape of his life as a writer emerged more clearly.

105 UQFL, 75/DM 176, 18 September, 1968, Forest Lodge, Sydney.