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Provocatively calm: on David Malouf as essayist

Abstract:

This article examines the essays of David Malouf, many of which have been recently collected in three thematic volumes: *A First Place* (2014a), *The Writing Life* (2014b) and *Being There* (2015). My starting point is to argue that Malouf's most important essays are politically charged. As a writer-activist he posits distinctive, sometimes controversial, positions, arguing strongly and passionately for alternative ways of thinking about Australia and the world, and indeed alternative ways for human beings to move through, and participate in, the world. However, Malouf is no firebrand: the tone of his essays is relentlessly calm; he brings together the emphatic and the empathetic, and he still tries to convince the reader. This article focuses on the political implications of Malouf's calm but opinionated approach to his essays, as well as on how Malouf sets out to persuade readers.

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Keywords:

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The recent anthologising of many of Australian writer David Malouf's essays, lectures and speeches invites a renewed discussion on the importance of Malouf's shorter nonfiction. The three volumes are organised thematically: *A First Place* (2014a) collects personal, cultural and political pieces anchored broadly around ideas of home and place, people and landscapes, and personal and national identities. *The Writing Life* (2014b) dissects what it means to be a writer at large in the world, with Malouf's focus exegetical to the extent that he reveals things about himself through an acute focus on other writers. *Being There* (2015) focuses on music, art and performance, and also contains two libretti written by Malouf as well as his version of Euripides's 'Hippolytus'.

In response to these three volumes, I here offer some thoughts on Malouf as writer-activist. My starting point is necessarily personal because, in my view, Malouf is a profoundly political writer. As a reader, I respond to him – his poetry and fiction as well as his nonfiction – more in political than literary terms, though it's a blurred line. But in setting the context for a certain discussion, I make no claim that Malouf *must* be read through the sort of politicised prism I happen to favour.

What do I mean when I argue that Malouf is a profoundly political writer? Can his essays tell me, say, who to vote for? Can they offer a solution to, for example, the global refugee situation, including Australia's vexing role in it? Can they explain Donald Trump? Or Vladimir Putin? Or Pauline Hanson? Perhaps not – even greatness, even eminence has its limits – but I open with these expansive questions to reinforce that Malouf, the writer and thinker, engages directly with the world in an uncommonly deep way. Malouf might not be able to 'explain' Australian racism in the way that a GP can explain the origins of the cyst on my wrist, but he demands a broader canvas – and canvass – in ways that open the possibility of renewed and inventive debate. It is common in political commentary, and especially in commentary about political commentary, to hear complaints about short-term policies and outcomes and about the fractious, self-serving and inane nature of political debate (with such complaints most commonly directed at some politicians, some political parties, some true believers of various persuasions, and some elements of the mainstream media). In contrast, Malouf is one writer who, instead of focusing repeatedly on identifying or complaining about the failings of the national conversation, instead actively offers an alternative way of thinking and communicating, albeit a challenging one. Malouf's potency as a political writer is that he somehow writes about 'everything' all at once, but also that he does so in a relentlessly polite and measured tone. He is calm but not becalmed.

While I focus here mainly on Malouf the essayist, I acknowledge that Malouf's novels, short stories, poetry, book-length memoirs and libretti, along with his essays and talks, necessarily combine to give a fuller picture of Malouf the writer. But while each individual piece of Malouf's writing exists as part of the wider context of his oeuvre, each piece can, or should, also stand free. For example, although it is revealing to reflect, as Narelle Shaw does (2002: 49), on the connections between Malouf's 1998 Boyer Lectures, *A Spirit of Play*: *the Making of Australian Consciousness* (anthologised in *A First Place*) and his novel *The Conversations at Curlow Creek* (1996), neither work relies on the other. Another essay about Malouf as a political writer might reflect on the way he embeds political ideas and opinions in his fiction, noting that the

scaffolding of those ideas and opinions sometimes remain visible. But that is not my focus here.

In a brief 'Author's Note' at the beginning of *A First Place*, Malouf separates what he calls private writing and public writing. For him, poems, novels and short stories 'are written out of inner necessity … They are entirely personal' (2014a: ix). In contrast, Malouf says, the pieces collected in *A First Place* were 'from the beginning someone else's idea' (2014a, ix). While he still sees the nonfiction as personal in the sense that they stem from his personal history or views, he goes on to say that,

> … their purpose was from the beginning public; they belong to that part of my life that is conscious and considered rather than dreamily obscured till it demands to be expressed; to the world, that is, of analysis, and of opinion and discourse. (2014a: x)

Chris Wallace-Crabbe, in the midst of a mixed review of Malouf's pleasingly odd collection of four narratives, *Untold Tales* (1999), suggests that 'here and there I am alerted to something a little puddingly about the prose, almost as though Malouf had been required to speak on public occasions rather too often of late. Lighten up, Dave, I find myself saying' (2000: 45; see also Sharrad 2000: 761). But Wallace-Crabbe offers no evidence in support of his claim that Malouf as public intellectual undermines Malouf as writer. I endorse Paul Sharrad's mild rebuttal of Wallace-Crabbe:

> Becoming a national treasure can confer a certain ponderous substance, I suppose, but more probably it has helped move Malouf's recent writing toward essays, stories, and sketches and away from extended novels. This is not a bad thing if it has allowed him to maintain his facility with the evocative image and the lyrical cadence that characterized his early 'poetic' style. (2000: 761)

Whatever the reasons that Malouf writes shorter nonfiction, those pieces offer something distinctive and genuinely important to the Malouf oeuvre, the Malouf story, the Malouf worldview. This is even more the case with the anthologised pieces, which now speak directly to each other as well as to readers. With Malouf's public (nonfiction) versus private (fiction, poetry) distinction in mind, it is evident that his essays are a reasonably straightforward mode of communication. Yes, he adopts a storytelling voice in his nonfiction – readers are not literally sitting at his kitchen table, sipping tea, reaching out to grip David's arm at a good bit or raising their eyes to ask him a question. But even though his essayistic storytelling voice is adorned or constructed, it nevertheless speaks directly to the reader and it contains far less narratorial and plot mediation, far less allegory, than his fiction. I am not suggesting Malouf's essays are more 'truthful' than his fiction or poetry. Rather, I suggest his essays offer something distinctive – and that, in turn, David Malouf as public intellectual (Rooney 2009) is no mere distraction from David Malouf, eminent but hidden novelist and poet.

The first line of Malouf's essay 'When the Writer Speaks', a 1998 address to English PEN anthologised in *This Writing Life*, reads 'The real enemy of writing is talk' (2014b: 29). Immediately, though, he goes on to complicate his own bold claim. Indeed, the public-private divide Malouf identifies is itself an enduring theme of his oeuvre. Writing about Malouf's poetry, for example, Michelle Borzi says, 'his poems are about matters of the earth, the mind and the shaping power of imagination … there is also a

private documenting in art of what it means for this poet to speak with a public voice as a literary figure and as a citizen' (2014: 80). Significantly, Malouf addresses the issue for other writers too. In 'When the Writer Speaks' he reflects on German writer Thomas Mann's struggle between inner creativity and the outer world of Nazism and war. In so doing, Malouf again makes a distinction between 'the imaginative writer, the poet, the teller of tales whose business, as he would see it, is with discovery' (2014b: 30) and 'argumentative or expository writing' (31). His account of Mann is deeply empathetic:

> What [Mann's] private diary entries reveal is how unnatural it is for the artist to enter the world of political action and to speak there rather than in his own place on the stillness of the page. Mann is deeply torn; his reactions, from day to day, are contradictory, he wants to save himself from all of this. He does speak out at last, but, being Mann, is also aware of the irony of his position; of the unpolitical man's having become after, as he puts it, 'an itinerant preacher for democracy — a role whose comic element was always plain'. (2014b: 41)

If the dichotomy between the public and the private helps explain Malouf's different approach to nonfiction, the constructive tension between the general and the specific helps explain Malouf's particular approach to nonfiction. In 'My Multicultural Life', first delivered to an Australian literature conference in Italy in 1984, and anthologised in *A First Place* (2014a: 17-33), Malouf tracks myriad threads of his upbringing: his English (and lapsed Jewish) mother and his Lebanese (and Catholic) father; his paternal grandparents ('Every now and then my grandfather asks for something and I get up and get it for him, though he speaks no English and I understand no Arabic' (2014a: 22)); his mother's attachment to all things English; the family's corner shop (groceries, fruit, creaming sodas) compared to its private courtyard (a grapevine and ropes of garlic), weekends on the coast (even his mother 'becomes more "Australian" down here' (2014a: 25)), the pull of American cinema; and a great deal more.

Malouf allows these many contexts to pile up, but anchors them in a moment and place fixed in time and space: a Saturday night in 1943 in wartime Brisbane, when Malouf is aged nine. It's a layered but precise performance aimed squarely at countering what Malouf calls the myth of Australian uniformity. Take this one glorious sentence as evidence of what Malouf can do with just a few words: 'I am a Catholic like my father, who is very simply pious (my mother insists he is a saint), but I am also anti-Catholic out of loyalty to her' (2014a: 23). According to Malouf, the only way to 'challenge the generalising tendency that comes from the domination of one voice' is to be specific (2014a: 19). He does this – persistently in his writing, not only in 'My Multicultural Life' – by using his own life and times: 'I offer myself as a specific example but a general case' (2014a: 19). If this amounts to Malouf taking a stand – a challenge, as he puts it – to stereotypes around uniformity, then he does so convincingly. Nonetheless, he sets a task for sympathetic readers, requiring them not merely to work through and respond to his essay – to speak back to Malouf, if only in private – but to then engage in their own acts of specific storytelling, different but perhaps complementary to Malouf's, to further undermine myths and stereotypes.

Later in 'My Multicultural Life', Malouf links his personal and specific commentary to a wider perspective:

> The truth is that nations, like individuals, can live simultaneously in different places in the same place, and are no less complex and resourceful than minds are in using diverse, paradoxical and sometimes contrary influences to make something that will be entirely their own. (2014a: 33)

These words are both comforting and challenging. On the one hand, they suggest that the Australian nation *can* transform, it *can* embrace the reality of its diversity, it can resist stereotypes, it can go beyond false 'solutions' or over-simplified 'problems'. But on the other hand, by what actual mechanism might the specific overcome the general on a national stage? Full of promise and optimism, the sentence is also confounding because, typical of Malouf (Sharrad 2000: 762), it becomes epiphanic as it reaches for the biggest of big pictures. Writing about Malouf's Boyer Lectures, Ihab Hassan suggests that, 'This particular first place – no theological Eden, mind you, just a first place – is nonetheless the place from which a writer's imagination begins to expand till it encompasses the whole landscape of the universe' (2014: 240). It's a political vision that is thrilling because it starts new debates, and yet it is not – a key word for the twenty-first century – an obviously practical vision.

Some of the themes present in 'My Multicultural Life' recur across much of Malouf's writing, including diversity, Australia's national identity, people and landscapes, and the importance of language. According to Ramona Koval, Malouf 'has always been conscious of the idea of what it means to be Australian' (2014). She goes on to link Malouf's cultural and historical focus with his grounding in poetry and literature. I agree with Koval: although *A First Plac*e, with its focus on identity, contains more of Malouf's most important and lasting shorter nonfiction, *The Writing Life* demonstrates how foundational his deeply inquisitive investigation of other writers – mostly (but not exclusively) male and canonical – is to his views on Australia.

Kathy Gollan, reviewing *A First Place*, summarises Malouf's broader project in this way:

> Malouf charts the successive post-settlement periods of cultural self-confidence and insecurity as the colony came to terms with the strange new land — represented in art, poetry, gardens, architecture. Overarching it all is a tension, which he sees as a useful one, between geography and culture, our inherited European culture and the antipodean environment. Or as he sometimes calls it, between Time and Space. (Gollan 2014)

Luke Slattery offers a similar if slightly different interpretation. In suggesting that 'Malouf's abiding theme – the refractions of nature and culture through the conundrum of masculine identity – is one of the great Australian stories' (2015: 42), he praises Malouf but also identifies limits. I agree with Hassan that Malouf's vision encompasses 'the whole landscape of the universe', but 'the universe', here, means Malouf's universe, not necessarily mine, driven by *his* specifics applied to *his* universal.

Koval, Gollan and Slattery – just as three examples – all offer plausible interpretations of Malouf the nonfiction writer. Beyond that, any firm conclusions about Malouf's abiding themes will, and should, differ from reader to reader – because how I react to Malouf's words, how he makes me think, how I choose to respond or not respond, are all factors that contribute to Malouf's legacy. Malouf's most important theme *for me*,

and a key reason why I think of him as a highly political writer, is his willingness and ability to place Australia in the world. Hassan talks about 'Malouf's at-homeness both in Australia and in the world' (2014: 242), suggesting something comfortable and relaxed. However, I find Malouf's particular sort of internationalism a challenge to Australian readers. It acts as a direct rebuttal to attempts to define Australianness through appeals to fake unity and simplistic jingoism. But even beyond shallowness of the 'you're either with us or you're against us' variety, Australians have a capacity – inadvertently or deliberately – to exclude the rest of the world, to see ourselves not only surrounded by water but also living in a bubble, in splendid isolation. Perhaps that is a failure of the collective imagination, or perhaps it is the opposite: a mark of a too-ingenious collective imagination. Either way, it gives succour to a limited and isolationist vision of Australia, manifesting in both the big picture and in micro-level political debates. Importantly, in the context of Australia and the world, Malouf recognises his position of privilege: 'Like a good many writers, I suspect, who have spent their whole lives on the light side of history, I am haunted by the lives of those who have found themselves in darker places and in darker times' (2014b: 44).

Malouf sets out to directly challenge this limited worldview – Australia in splendid isolation – by directly connecting Australia to the rest of the world. To give one example from Malouf's fiction, his celebrated novel *An Imaginary Life* (1978), ostensibly about the Roman poet Ovid, deals allegorically but overtly with Australia's struggle to find, refine and maintain its identity given its physical and intellectual location on the world's underside (Allington 2011: 32). Malouf's nonfiction asks questions and tells stories from a more direct but still distinctly Maloufian perspective. For example, his 2003 Quarterly Essay, *Made in England: Australia's British Heritage*, starts with thoughts about war but also a love of culture and a recognition of the English language as 'our' language – even if Malouf recognises that 'a *shared* language is not necessarily the *same* language' (2003, italics in original). The essay is most significant as a searching inquiry into Australia's British heritage and US ties:

> The close relationship with the United States that this embodies has for Australians been there from the start. Our relationship with Britain has always been one in which the third term, either open or unstated, is 'America'. Any approach on our part to the one has always involved a shift in our dealings with the other and our relationship with each has been modified, over the years, by their relations with one another. (2003)

In his essay 'Escaping the Circle of Hell', first published in 1988 and anthologised in *The Writing Life*, Malouf makes the following observation about the Australian poet Peter Porter:

> Porter knows more than most poets and uses what he knows. Our age is self-conscious: the world we inhabit is a vast museum – call it History, or Art, or the History of Art. For Porter, the exhibits are still alive and active. (2014b: 307)

Malouf's own 'exhibits' are similarly very much alive and active. His world, as the three volumes of anthologised essays show, starts from his Brisbane childhood in the time of World War Two, and extends to the war- and war crimes-dominated twentieth century. It contains his personal response to landscapes in Australia and elsewhere,

Ancient Greece, the Roman Empire, an intellectual embrace and engagement with great writers and great writing, opera, and a good deal more (Allington 2015). These various elements are not mere themes or points of interest or distinctiveness. Rather, they combine to help form a worldview that looks intensively inwards (within Malouf himself and within Australia) and outwards.

But even as he accommodates disparate threads, Malouf attempts to allow the specific to triumph over the general. If it's polemical, it's particularly and perhaps peculiarly so, because he leaves so much to readers – in other words, to people he wishes to persuade. As Malouf puts it, 'I think in the end that people are changed not by an argument but by being put into a situation that requires an act of imagination on their part, which changes them by making them *see* in a new way' (Malouf, quoted in Sharrad 2000: 762). In 'When the Writer Speaks', Malouf argues that the more argumentative or expository writing 'knows, and the more, at the very moment of writing, it can draw on what it knows, the richer the writing will be, the more focused, the more wide-ranging and convincing' (2014b: 31). While this seems an obviously true assumption – one I agree with, at least in principle – it's also worth unpacking Malouf's assumptions. For one thing, given Malouf's interests, his version of knowledge tends to draw most often upon the western canon – another writer, or reader, might bring an entirely different and contrary set of 'knowledge' and assumptions. For another thing, deep research and knowledge cannot guarantee argumentative writing that is 'convincing' or that is politically or ethically beyond reproach.

Recently, the novelist and critic James Bradley made the following observation about Australia:

> For what it's worth I think the problem is part of a deeper issue with Australian culture across the board, which is that we are almost incapable of distinguishing criticism and debate from personal attack. It's a problem that cuts both ways. Not only are we lousy at criticising something or somebody without attacking them personally, we're almost incapable of interpreting criticism without treating it as a personal attack. (Menzies-Pike 2016)

Bradley's observation encapsulates one disquieting element of the state of the Australian national conversation. Although there are many constructive voices and perspectives (including Malouf, including Bradley), the current dominating mode of discourse favours yelling – the fostering of mutual antagonism and denigration masquerading as rigour, and the celebration of a hectoring tone and of mutual contempt, often seemingly for its own sake and at the cost of measured, detailed and open debate. In contrast, reviewing *A First Place*, Kathy Gollan says that 'what comes across in these essays is Malouf's special brand of mildness, his genuine fondness for the ordinary, his dislike of posturing' (2014). Similarly, Rooney describes Malouf's 'public style' as 'urbane, inclusive and generous' (2009: 120). Reflecting on Malouf as public intellectual, she describes his 'public style' as,

> … unflappable: always moderate, circumspect and courteous. He presents an urbane and engaging approach to public conversation, and appears totally uninterested in divisive political point-scoring … Has he found a way to think aloud in more

> nuanced ways amid the rivalries and objectifying pressures of public life? (2009: 120)

Writing about the experience of reading David Malouf, Rooney writes that, 'We drift along with his softly undulating phrases, experiencing each separate breathing moment, until we arrive at the still pool where all resolves into a quiet, crystal clarity' (2009: 119). While Rooney reflects – engagingly – on the beauty, lucidity and calmness of Malouf's prose, the descriptive flourishes she offers – drifting, softly, undulating, a still pool of water, quietness, and so on – do not resonate with me as a reader of Malouf. While I find much of Rooney's assessment of Malouf as public figure convincing, I do not interpret him as 'such a benign figure' (2009: 121). I see him as the opposite, precisely because his polite way of arguing and persuading is itself an act of political and cultural defiance.

Similarly, Hassan argues that, 'there's no ponderousness in Malouf – all that heaviness that comes with ego, all that vain weight – there's only natural dignity' (2014: 240). While I endorse the broad thrust of Hassan's description, I wonder about the word 'natural'. Whatever Hassan intends by it – and he is honouring a friend as well as praising an eminent writer – it implies an effortlessness that is, to me, the opposite of Malouf's achievement. If Malouf possesses on the page what seems like 'natural dignity', that reflects an achievement that is hard fought, sentence after sentence, idea after idea. Hassan also says that the 'alliance of high artistic achievement with modesty, humor [sic], and probity is among the rarest of gifts' (2014: 239). The 'alliance' Hassan identifies sounds like a skill, a craft, a slog, developed over time, rather than a 'gift'.

In any case, saying that Malouf avoids divisive politicking is not the same as saying he is disinterested in persuading readers. Consider the opening lines of *The Happy Life*, his 2011 *Quarterly Essay*: 'Happiness surely is among the simplest of human emotions and the most spontaneous. There can be no one, however miserable the conditions of their daily existence, who has not at some time felt the joy of being alive in the moment' (2011: 1). The key phrases here – 'surely is' and 'there can be no one' – are emphatic and obvious attempts to direct readers and to impose certain parameters on the discussion. Similarly, consider the opening line of this 2003 essay: 'I don't think anyone these days would deny that Anzac Day has established itself in the minds of Australians as the one day that we celebrate as a truly national occasion' (2014a: 236). Again, Malouf implies a collective belief in order to frame the discussion as he wishes to frame it. It is not a fault or a flaw – but Malouf is far from passive.

Rooney argues that Malouf's pronouns 'perform a particular magic', using the example of the novel *An Imaginary Life*:

> The narrator is Ovid, so the 'you' and 'we' refer to his fellow Roman citizens, from whose presence the poet has been exiled … The 'you' and we', however, extend effortlessly, organically, across the abyss of time, to 'us' … 'We' not only encompass contemporary cosmopolitan readers, but readers from settler nations, including Australians engaged in the postcolonial work of 'clearing, grafting, transplanting' and making our landscapes. (2009: 119)

Sharrad offers a different perspective, stating that the narrator in the short story 'Bad Blood' (from the 1985 collection, *Antipodes*) 'suggests that we can only ever tell the

stories we know from our own place in culture and time … hence the consistently middle-class, white-male outlook of the "we" … in Malouf's stories generally' (2000: 767).

The use of pronouns works differently in Malouf's nonfiction. Writing about *A Spirit of Play* (the Boyer Lectures), Rooney hones in on the 'insistent first person plural pronoun positioning and guiding readers' (2009: 134). She adds that, '[i]t is a pronoun that invites but also, unintentionally, excludes' (Ibid.). I am not sure to what extent this excluding is unintentional, but, in any case, I find the use of 'we' and 'us' in Malouf's nonfiction discomforting. I want to reply: 'Please speak to me, but please don't speak for me.' Malouf's use of the pronouns 'we' and 'us' in his nonfiction can sometimes, as Rooney says, act in an inclusive way (he is, after all, writing about 'everything'). But more often, it has a corralling effect unless actively resisted, even if – or, perhaps, especially when – mitigated by genuine politeness and gentleness.

Rooney asks if the particular qualities of Malouf's approach to opinion-making 'carry him further than some of his peers in national debate?' (2009: 120). It's an intriguing question with no ready answer, other than the personal. I see Malouf as an essential part of the Australian national conversation because of his distinctive approach – gentle, highly distilled, erudite, superior – and because he tackles, rather than tinkers with, big ideas. He is a writer-activist whose deep thinking is central to his conclusions and to his art – and, importantly, he does not attempt to hide this deep thinking, instead revelling in it. For example, it is possible for a reader to remain suspicious of the western canon while also finding Malouf's engagement with great books and writers captivating and energising. Perhaps most importantly, Malouf rarely gives readers, or at least this reader, conclusions fixed or tangible enough to let them believe that merely reading his work itself amounts to active political engagement. In other words, his work does not prop up informed apathy. Malouf's approach is very different to that of activist polemicists who set out to provoke and it is very different to overt satirists, but the challenge he presents is – or should be – just as unsettling.

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