David Malouf: Wild Lemons

The defining energy of David Malouf’s poetry(as well as his fiction) comes from his need to understand and re-envision Australia as a space and as a collective identity. Malouf does not necessarily rely on Australia’s obvious postcolonial determinants1 which are naturally there but only as they inform what comes across in his work as a distinctive imaginary comprising a set of relations between place, time, self and memory. Am using imaginary here or the notion of an imagined identity because imaginative writing in Australia so heavily borrowed from Europe or English tradition( there were writers like Patrick White who preceded Malouf and were an exception) that fictional reality has been about lives and histories elsewhere rather than the possibility that Australia could be a subject worthy of imaginative representation. Malouf talks about this in an interview2( I will be sending it across) that the recognition that where you live in Australia could be the center took a long time coming. In the interview which is there in your world view edition( with Jennifer Levasseur) Malouf makes a similar comment: Australia as a setting needs to take place because while the physical setting had been completed there was another setting which needed to be completed “in an interior way , spiritual and symbolic”( page 342 in your world view edition). I would really like you’ll to reflect on the idea of the interiorization of the landscape that exists in Malouf(particularly in Wild Lemons). Interiorization means to make it part of the internal world of the self/community. The central means to this end according to Malouf( 342) is how Australians have recognized the need to relate to the Aborigines and also how they may recognize through them the way to connect with the land and relate to the land in the way they(the indigenous people) relate to it, and that is “by taking it inside us and inhabiting it imaginatively as well as physically”( 342, page 331 from the Neustadt lecture in your world view edition). An important aspect to this is the nature of Australian landscape( Malouf talks about this too) which was very different from the landscape other settlers encountered in America for instance or as they may have known in England. The Australian landscape( see Colm Toibin’s interview with Malouf in your edition) invoked feelings of estrangement and anxiety: a geography that did not invite human presence and was not amenable to improvement or use in the way land in Europe and America could be. The helpful way to connect to this vast otherness is the way Aborigines have related to the land which is not as something that can be molded in man’s interest and image but to inhabit it imaginatively, to interiorize it as it may become then an entity that is then sustained and protected.3 Two attributes emerge out of this: the sense of Australia as somewhat imbued with otherness and the consciousness about language coming from the lack of fit between the language and the landscape that it seeks to understand. The concern with language, to recreate imaginatively is to bring the objects of the world into existence not in the world in which those objects always existed but to invest it with a reality in our own minds and on the written page and as Malouf points out in an interview to “bring ourselves home to the world we live in”.4

The question of otherness, the engagement with otherness(the space or geography and idea of Australia) and how we seek to address that otherness is a central preoccupation of Malouf and shapes his imaginative universe/imaginary. Several ideas frame or even constitute this imaginary: an embodied(bodily) consciousness linked to interconnections of memory, time and place. The question of memory exceeds the subjective or is intertwined with community memory. Memory in a land defined by migration and therefore displacement as well as brutality( the annihilation of the indigenous inhabitants) is then also a way of coming to terms with one’s identity and the accommodation of difference and otherness. These interconnections then provide a basis to how Malouf seeks to reinvest the past with a new meaning and at the same time reinvest in Australia with a new imagination.

An important element in Malouf’s exercise/the effort to make the land part of your interior world/to re-inhabit it imaginatively is the notion of time. Malouf sees time as a continuity, a kind of “continuous present”(Malouf’s description). Perhaps you can see this in the structural flow of Wild Lemons or to an extent in Revolving Days. Time, Malouf sees in ‘spatial terms’ and therefore not conceived in a linear line but understood as experienced in a dream or like a medium that we all move through unlike the sense of time as divided into units of days or other such demarcations. Malouf in his discussions on his work speaks about wanting to keep the tense of his work open(in Wild Lemons for example there is the line about present being open etc) carrying forward from the notion of “continuous present”: the question of chronology or “continuous past tense” is cast aside and naturally therefore presenting a different structuring or logic as a result. The notion of time in relation to memory and place as an element in the interiorization of the land is also connected to Aborigine belief in the connectedness between past and present: past as inside of the present in a way that draws together human, nature and the ever present spirit of the world described as Dreaming( Aborigine notion or belief). In his interview( with Levasseur), Malouf speaks of “writing as public dreaming”(341): the inner and the outer becomes connected via a shared language that is dreaming. Dreaming opens up the narrative into a shared wider world: the private inward world reaches into the public dimension. This aspect is manifest in the images used in Wild Lemons: the island “ at midnight humming and rising”, the “ flute tempts out a few reluctant stars to walk over the water”.

Before we get into paraphrasing the poems and analysing them over the next couple of paragraphs, it is important to qualify it( the analysis) by stating that Malouf’s extremely dense and layered lines only get reduced or diminished(in relation to a poetic depth or richness) when we tend to paraphrase. Of course this is true of all good poetry when the premise is the use of language in a way that is not commonplace as different from let’s say clever TV speak. This is particularly true of Malouf’s language and so it is important that we let a certain amount of poetic ambiguity to remain alongside how we may wish to contain the poem within a set of meanings whether it may be colonial settlement or alternate sexuality etc.

Wild Lemons: Interpretation.

Starting with a basic paraphrase the opening lines introduce the idea of time, and time as “ continuous present”: the lines “ Through…moment” suggest past as inside the present and vice versa. The tense in these lines is cryptic or ambiguous…the present always open through those years as the path that was found signalled or held a promise of a moment into the future at a place “that would not take place without us”. The time flow is fused with a geographic imaginary, the track( the promise) starting across “blazed trunks”( to burn with flames, very bright) to be “set down among wild lemons”. Yet was the trajectory already mapped out? The lemons were there because others were there before who planted them. The pronouns used “us”, “we”. “our”( “bodies”) tied to a geography or geographic imagination in a logic of complementarity, for example in the lines…“our bodies were expected at an occasion up ahead that would not take place without us”. Important to emphasise the use of a bodily consciousness: the land or geography is experienced bodily, as the embodied experience of a place shapes the place or how a place or landscape is set up or imagined and felt. The body takes in/absorbs the landscape( “ clouds melting into the tomorrow of our breath, a scent of lemons” or the “warmth of our island sitting still…lapped by ocean waters). Set down among wild lemons, bodies were expected “ahead” and “at an occasion” (the future) which would not happen without them because there were those who came before and had planted those lemons. Perhaps it means that those who were set down among the lemons(planted by the natives)—the settler community now has to participate in the shaping of the country/future. The lemons too were now adapting to their own ends and in an island set to its own rhythm( “sitting still…humming and rising…but back”).The present too is always transforming, unlocking unknown futures. No destined end( “ Though to what out there…”) and as evening comes and starlings gather the silence is broken by a flute that makes stars move over water. In spite of the transformations, the poet speaker lies on the same track, the same body in a similar repeated pattern of day and night( sleep). The “body tags along”…with what we may ask” The self/other selves/bodies? And “as promised”…resonates with the promise in line 4. What changes or is constant is time, the Maloufian notion of time as ‘continuous present’: their breaths of tomorrow carrying the “scent of lemons” but who are now thriving( “run wild”) in another country, and yet not lost their identity/character, “smelling always of themselves”. The reference here is to movement/migration which is the defining energy of Australia. Earlier in the poem the lemons were suggested to have adapted to other ends, and perhaps they are replanted now( in the concluding line) holding on still to their character/integrity and perhaps reconciled with the settlers who have absorbed their scent in what may appear like a utopian imagination of different cultural universes intersecting in Australia: “ the present is always with us, always open”.

A central aspect of Malouf is his avoidance of obvious reference to identity politics though they are not absent( and as Ashley Tellis points out in his essay in your edition) but require careful study to uncover it. While Malouf objects to his work being seen as in anyway representative of gay identity( as a reflection of Malouf’s own sexual orientation), several of his poems including Revolving Days and Wild Lemons can be read in relation to sexual politics and a discourse of body that is present in these poems. In Wild Lemons, the body is metaphorized as the wild smelling lemons( this is a reading available in Ashley Tellis’s piece too) negotiating a track( “rough track”) across “blazed trunks” and nurtured by the warmth of an island. The “path” which was set down as a “promise”(perhaps by the poet speaker to his partner) into the present. But what that might be( the present is always open) and to what end is unknown or not fixed. Only a mystical vision of “reluctant stars” moving over water is offered. Perhaps this is a reference to the uncertainty or apprehension that is present in the context of homosexual desire. The poet speaker is on the same track in a different season with the same body. The body “tags along”(with mind/self/other) as night gives way to day to see what transpires. What goes on is time and tomorrow’s breath carrying the scent of lemons that “run wild” in another country but still “smelling of themselves”. The integrity of the body remains. The promise may continue into the present or the present may always be open to transformations or possibilities but what is certain is the connection we have with our body: the body which will always smell of itself.

Revolving Days.

The title of the poem suggests similar use of continuous time and the interrelations of time, memory, and place that signals the past as existing inside the present and vice versa. The intersection is the source of the experience of the poet speaker and the emotional clarity the speaker is able to attain about it. While in many ways this is a simpler poem( the subject of loss or failure in love) a valuable contrast can be made to Neruda’s “ Tonight..” on the same subject. Neruda’s poem comprised the problematic of (what we had already discussed in class) the absent female voice or agency, male gaze that sets it up as a very male tradition of writing about love. As a contrast Malouf’s speaker( and the speaker’s lost love) is ungendered and while it may not have Neruda’s evocative redolent images(“blue stars shiver in the distance”) but Malouf’s conversational style( reminiscent of Donne’s love poetry or the poetry of the contemporary Philip Larkin though Larkin was very consciously anti-Romantic) in Revolving Days and some of the lines in the poem speak to the overwrought state of being in love such as “urgencies that boom under the pocket of a shirt” or the sensual intimacy(such as “…we have not yet taken back the life we promised to pour into each other’s mouths” ) of what is termed as a mistake but “has lasted” and retained its power over the poet speaker as the title of the poem suggests even though as the poem indicates the love may now be one-sided. The poem’s( Revolving Days) ending, a sense of resignation perhaps, a mixture of hope and denial of hope is poignant suggestive of the speaker’s continuing pain and not without a sense of wryness or a hint of self-mockery while in the case of Tonight painful as it might be for the speaker, the pain is diminished by the grandiosity of the last line… “these may be the last lines I write for her” etc. Again this is how I feel and perhaps many of you disagree.

In Revolving Days the poet speaker is reliving/imagining a memory of youthful love as an older version or image of the speaker presents itself … “knotting my tie in a mirror …in the next room you are waiting…while I choose between changes to surprise you”. The next stanza continuing the line of thought: “Revolving days. My heart is in my mouth again”. Past/Present/Dream/Memory are contiguous worlds. There is no drama in the ending as the scene(imagined scene or memory) does not lead to a meeting( with the lover in the next room) or for the speaker to square up to the lover. Writing instead to notify his(if one can use the pronoun since the text does not indicate any gender) presence but unobtrusively in a gesture of denial or self-abasement that is however not without a sense of self knowledge.

The ending not without wry humour conveys the speaker’s pain but concealed by a light ironic touch. Naturally this is true of all relationships( or the representation of relationships) but may also be seen particularly connected to gay relationships or their histories which tend to be fraught with difficulty, uncertainty and even inevitable failure( obviously on account of the social situation).

Can we see Revolving Days as an example of gay poetry? Certainly some elements of gay identity are here noticeable—the attention to colourful shirts(“ What I remember is the colour of the shirts”), conscious self-fashioning, unrequited love or the inevitable failure or loss(“We never write”). Of course one can argue that these elements are present in heterosexual contexts as well. Malouf in particular has never directly referred to his gay identity in his work though he has been always been open about his own sexuality. Perhaps this is about the examination of love in the past and the acceptance that it will continue to resonate/trouble our minds. Hence the title Revolving Days. There is pain and yearning but also an ironic acceptance of it. Yet it is also hard not to think of it in relation to homosexual desire or relationships. The term gay( it has a specific history and set of connotations) may not be useful. The use of such a term can limit the poem’s expanse and not just in terms of its potential universality but it can also mask the trials and painful histories of homosexual relationships that the poem does signal.5

End Notes

1. The question of whether Australia should be included in a postcolonial context given its character as a White settler colony which was based upon the decimation of Aborigine culture and community is subject to debate. To define Australian identity as postcolonial would imply a denial of the experience of colonization of the indigenous community and yet Australia’s history too is connected to its inception as a convict colony and part of a certain history of British colonization. Within postcolonial studies however largely postcolonial is a term identified with the regions of South Asia, Caribbean and Africa. However there is also the understanding that Australian history comprises the identity of the Australian as simultaneously both oppressor and the oppressed. Some scholars like Nathanael O’ Reilly( in the book Postcolonial Issues in Australian Literature, published 2010) therefore insist that there is more than one way of becoming postcolonial.
2. A Conversation with David Malouf. Ray Willibanks. Antipodes, Vol 4, No 1( Spring1990)pp.13-18.
3. The question of interiorization is not without imperial connotations. The scholar Amanda Nettlebeck speaks of Malouf’s nostalgia for a “fullness of identity” in her ‘Narration of Space in David Malouf’s Work’ as somewhat akin to an imperial impulse.
4. This is connected to the metaphysics of naming( which Malouf talks about) and you can connect to how Walcott speaks of it in his poem: naming or the power to name “defines us as a human”( Malouf), and enables us to make an object our own. The question of imagination is central too. As Malouf points out places become real not through “fact” or “observation” but as “ imaginary places”( 326) because they become more felt and lived places once they find artistic representation through imagination.
5. Ashley Tellis’s essay in your world view edition speaks of the body politics in Malouf and has interesting observations on the applicability of the Gay label etc. Most scholarly work on Malouf is focused on his fiction given that he is better known for his novels than poetry. Ray Willibanks’s conversation with Malouf( which I will be posting on the group) is useful to understand Malouf overall and what Malouf’s own ideas are in relation to his work, artistic identity and the subject of Australia. In your world view edition, you could read the interviews with Levasseur and Toibin. For the essays apart from Tellis, reading Don Randall, Amrita Singh and Dipti Nath could complement my lecture notes. I am trying to see if I can get hold of anything scholarly and specific on Malouf’s poetry as relevant to your course. Malouf’s not easy but if you think of his work in terms of an imaginary for Australia and in relation to it the discourse of body, memory and identity( sexual/political) it could be one way to approach his work or any question on him. I have tried to offer a detailed analysis of the poems but if anything remains unclear feel free to write on my personal number.