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Places of the Imagination: Ecological Concerns in David Malouf's "Jacko's Reach"

Abstract I: Nell'opera di Malouf, in poesia e in prosa, è presente un'esplicita attenzione per l'ecologia e un forte interesse verso il mondo naturale, in particolare nel suo rapporto con quello culturale. Spazio e luogo, come la *wilderness* e il giardino, la steppa e l'Impero Romano, il *bush* e la città, sono elementi fondanti del modo in cui Malouf delinea i rapporti individuali, sociali, politici e culturali con la terra. Questo articolo si concentra sul racconto "Jacko's Reach" (Malouf 2002), dove, sotto l'etichetta del progresso, la globalizzazione impone lo "sviluppo" di un luogo di natura. Jacko's Reach, "la nostra ultima macchia di vegetazione", sarà distrutta da "pale meccaniche e gru", per costruire "un nuovo centro commerciale" (124), pubblicizzato in modo ingannevole come una necessità per il bene della comunità. La voce narrante in apparenza descrive un evento consueto, la costruzione di un nuovo centro commerciale, e contemporaneamente critica la distruzione del mondo naturale voluta dallo 'sviluppo' che porta alla disintegrazione della *wilderness* per poterla addomesticare e acculturare. L'articolo si focalizza in particolare sulle strategie narrative di Malouf, che, in modo più rilevante, enfatizzano il potere mitologico del luogo immaginato o ricordato come forma di resistenza alla distruzione dell'ambiente naturale. Nella "dimensione del simbolico" (132), attraverso il ricordo, l'immaginazione, la creatività e il sogno, la totale cancellazione della *wilderness* – sia nel mondo naturale che in noi stessi/e – non può essere compiuta del tutto. Costantemente re-immaginata e ri-configurata nella nostra memoria, la *wilderness* per sempre continuerà a "crescere con forza sotto il cemento" e "nella nostra testa" (133), in una profonda interconnessione visionaria e creativa tra mondo naturale ed essere umano.

Abstract II: Malouf's ecological concerns and interest in the natural world and their relationship with the cultural can be traced in most of his works, both in prose and poetry. Space and place such as the wilderness and the garden, the steppe and the Roman Empire, the Australian bush and the city are fundamental elements in Malouf's delineation of individual, social, political and cultural relationships with the land. This article focuses on "Jacko's Reach" (Malouf 2000), where, under the label of progress, globalisation is enforcing the development of a local natural place. Jacko's Reach, "our last pocket of scrub", will be destroyed by "mechanical shovels and cranes", to build "a new shopping mall" (93), deceptively advertised as a necessity for the benefit of the commu-

nity. The narratorial voice on the surface describes a usual event, the building of a new shopping centre, and at the same time criticises the destruction of the natural world for the sake of progress, which leads to the annihilation of wilderness in order to domesticate and acculturate it. This article focuses in particular on Malouf's narrative strategies, which, more relevantly, emphasise the mythological power of the imagined or remembered place as a form of resistance to the devastation of the natural environment. In "the dimension of the symbolic" (99), through memory, imagination, creativity and dream, the total erasure of wilderness – in both the natural world and ourselves – cannot be fully achieved. Constantly re-imagined and re-configured in our memory, it will be forever "pushing up under the concrete" (99), and "in our head" (100), in a profound visionary and creative interconnectedness between the natural world and the human being.

1. Partnership and Postcolonial

This article connects postcolonial criticism to Riane Eisler's socio-historical work, which the international Partnership Studies Group¹ applies to the study of world literatures, languages and education. Riane Eisler is a macro-historian who uses an interdisciplinary paradigm to examine cultural differences, gender relationships and, more extensively, creative processes of reinvention and re-imagination, in order to find new ways of making difference fruitful rather than destructive, as "diversity is not automatically equated with inferiority or superiority" (Eisler 2002: 161). Eisler founds her work² on what she calls the Cultural Transformation Theory (Eisler 1987: xvii ff), tracing the cultural evolution of Western societies from a "gender holistic perspective":

The first [model], which I call the *dominator* model, is what is popularly termed either patriarchy or matriarchy – the *ranking* of one half of humanity over the other. The second, in which social relations are primarily based on the principle of *linking* rather than ranking, may best be described as the *partnership* model. In this model – beginning with the most fundamental difference in our species, between male and female – diversity is not equated with either inferiority or superiority (Eisler 1987: xvii).

Eisler's Cultural Transformation Theory shows the interaction of two cultural paradigms present in most Western and Westernised cultures: the *partnership* and the *dominator*. The *dominator* model centres on "ranking" and operates through "technologies designed to

¹ The Partnership Studies Group (PSG) was founded in Udine in 1998: http://all.uniud.it/?page_id=195. On partnership and postcolonial, see also: Riem 2017.

² Eisler's seminal texts are: *The Chalice and the Blade* (1987); *Sacred Pleasure* (1995), which focuses on the biological rewards for loving and caring behaviours, representing a more evolved way of living on this Earth that is ingrained in our genetic system; *The Real Wealth of Nations* (2007), which proposes a "caring" economics as a response to the world economic crisis. See also: <http://centerforpartnership.org/>.

destroy and dominate" (Eisler 1987: xx). On the other hand, the *partnership* paradigm, works on the principle of "linking" rather than "ranking", and otherness and diversity (both in gender and cultural terms) are positive and enriching elements. Drawing from many scholarly fields, such as macro-history, intercultural studies, sociology, anthropology, archaeology, mythology, archetypal psychology, biology, economy and others, Eisler shows how our cultural paradigms are constructed, not only in literature and art, but also in our everyday reality, by what *stories* we are told and how these shape our frame of mind, culture and belief-systems (Eisler 1987: 75-77). Eisler's work, within the frame of Partnership Studies' literary criticism, forms my critical approach and methodology (Riem 2017: 12 ff), which, in this article, aims at highlighting *dominator* and *partnership* narratives and cultural belief-systems in Malouf's short story "Jacko's Reach" (Malouf 2000: 93-100).

I employ the words *partnership* and *dominator* according to Riane Eisler's perspective, where the word *partnership* is not related to the economic world of finance, but rather to the way we human beings are *partners* with one another and with the cosmic dance of life. Central to Eisler's perspective is also an investigation and study of stories, myths, archetypes and symbols as instruments for denouncing and rejecting the dominator-androcratic model and creating and supporting a cultural transformation towards a partnership-gylanic paradigm (Eisler 1987: 105, 198-203). This attention to the mythologising and creative function of *narratives* is central to Malouf's work.

Dream Stuff (2000), the collection from which my focus story "Jacko's Reach" is taken, displays an interesting ensemble of perspectives on postcolonial Australia. As usual in Malouf, the stories seem at a first reading simple, but they maintain till the very end a strong flavour of mystery, they envelop us in a sort of "luminous halo", engaging us from beginning to end. The narrative voice is often subtly ironical (but never cynical) and at the same time it enfolds us in an imaginative space and time where every contour and limit dissolve to create a *Dreaming* tapestry. Malouf describes "the little sacraments of daily existence, movements of the heart and intimations of the close but inexpressible grandeur and terror of things that is our other history" (Malouf 1990: 283-284). He focuses on the small details of everyday life and distils a profound essence from them, enabling the reader to understand, be there with his characters and feel like them: "Even the simplest objects are imbued with mystery, with an inner light" (Ashcroft 2014: 4).

Malouf's ecological and ecocritical concern against the global wreckage of our environment and planet and his interest in the natural world in its relationship with the cultural can be traced in most of his work, both in prose and poetry. Space and place, such as the wilderness and the garden, the steppe and the Roman Empire, the Australian bush and the city, are fundamental elements in Malouf's definition of individual, social, political, ecological and cultural relationships with the land, which is also "an emotional and philosophical landscape" (Lindsay & Griffith 2014: 2), and their reverberations on the self. The biosphere, human beings and all other creatures in it, sentient and so-described non-sentient, need to be preserved from human exploitation, enslavement and destruction. Malouf's vision of the Earth-as-sacred and a mystery is very close, if not coincident, with most indigenous ancestral traditions, like in Aboriginal lore, where humans are only custodians of the land, not proprietors, settlers, colonisers:

I think the sacred is entirely in this world [...]. I don't see this world as fallen or as less than sacred. [...] I think that to do that is to enter a very dangerous area where you think that the world and the people in it are not sacred and the sacred is somewhere else. That's what seems to me to allow evil in the world. I think that this world is the only world and it is utterly sacred. But the sacred, whatever that is, is *absolutely* in it (Malouf & Indyk 2014: 6).

2. Settling and Wilderness

Malouf's writing, together with its intensely poetic and imaginative beauty, presents an ethical and historical discourse aiming at analysing and unmasking Australia as a dominator settler colony, with its violence and absurd holocaust of the Aboriginal world, with its need to *rank*, map and organise an "unmapped" place: "Malouf describes a settler society which hasn't succeeded in settling" (Kerrigan 2000: 26).

The wilderness of the bush, also in the urban landscape, is presented as something that a part of white Australia wants and needs to dominate and colonise, to 'settle', creating borders, palisades, barriers of so-called civilisation. This attitude is typical of what Riane Eisler describes as the dominator model.

In "Jacko's Reach" the idea of *settling* the wilderness (in place and the self) is fundamental for white dominator society, represented by an anonymous 'council'. Under the label of progress, dominator globalisation and colonisation enforce the so-called development of a local natural place, which actually will mean its total destruction, as it often happened with the original/Aboriginal land in all postcolonial countries.

As Eisler says, dominator technologies are "designed to destroy and dominate" (1987: xx), and Jacko's Reach will be destroyed by "mechanical shovels and cranes", to build "a new shopping mall" (93), which is deceptively advertised as a necessity for the benefit of the narratorial we (i.e. us, the local community, the world). This leads instead to the annihilation of the wilderness in order to domesticate, neutralise and acculturate it. This is functional to a dominator undermining of the Aboriginals' natural and ancestral connection with the country, in order to deviously and treacherously annihilate their land-rights and their partnership perspective on life and place. 'Progress', evolution, advance, improvement, expansion and all the other fashionable terms connected to unlimited financial and exploitative growth require the council's action.

On the other hand, for the partnership model Malouf is enforcing in the mythical undercurrent of the story, sustainable economy, slowing down, caring for place and self, loving and playful relationships are the actions that truly matter and that should be focal to our world view. As an ancient Native American proverb says: "Treat the Earth well: it was not given to you by your parents, it was loaned to you by your children. We do not inherit the Earth from our Ancestors, we borrow it from our children"³.

"So, it is settled" (93), the first short and categorical sentence of "Jacko's Reach" deliberately gives the impression of something decisive and final, with no possibility of doubt or impediment. The conjunct adverb "so", meaning "therefore", "thus", "consequently",

³ Native American proverb quoted in Smith 2006: 41.

implies a final and crucial decision, taken after long rational discussion and reasoning. The past participle of the verb settle, “settled”, has a whole series of echoes in Malouf’s narratives, where it refers to Australia as a land of “settlers”; a category often investigated in postcolonial criticism (Ashcroft *et al.* 1989: 133 *ff*).

The statement may seem to imply that the process of settlement will be completed soon, if not for the whole of Australia, at least for this small plot of bush, dangerously intruding into the city, for the place now “has been won for progress” (93). The council’s dominator idea, typical of a predatory colonising approach, is that “those four and a half acres” of bush “were an eyesore” (93) and must be levelled down and *developed*, because, being unkempt, wild, open, dark, strange, uncultivated, they represent a danger for white *civilised* people, so that now:

Our sterner citizens and their wives will sleep safe at last in a world that no longer offers encouragement to the derelicts who gather there with a carton of cheap wine or a bottle of metho, the dumpers of illegal garbage, feral cats, and the few local Aborigines who claim an affinity with the place that may or may not be mystical (93).

The narratorial voice is obviously male, and is seemingly expressing his satisfaction for what is happening, putting himself among the “sterner citizens” who approve the dominator idea of progress and “improvement”. However, already in this opening passage, there are obvious signals of another register and meaning, where the narrator’s imagination is at least curious and fascinated by the secret and maybe mystical events taking place in Jacko’s Reach. Only outsiders take refuge there – they are refugees, escaping from *civilisation* / globalisation, drug addicts, alcoholics, the few local Aborigines left (an obvious hint at their systematic extermination) and *feral* cats, which represent the uncultivated wilderness and the ferocity of the bush, of untamed, unsettled nature. This wild place in Nature, recollection and dreaming will completely captivate the narrator at the end of his journey in memory and imagination.

3. Unsettling the Settler

Typically in his work, Malouf immediately starts to deconstruct the absolute statement and assertion of the first sentence, and to instil doubts, counter-meanings, other possibilities in the reader’s mind. Until the council’s decision, Jacko’s Reach was a sort of recess, outside the flow of time and as yet untouched by the progressive concreting of the city. This thin line of wilderness acquires multifarious meanings in the minds and hearts of those who, like the narrator, now grown up, look back with nostalgia to the secret pleasures and mysteries of the place.

Jacko’s Reach, was “once known, and so marked on *older maps*, as Jago’s” (94). The Shakespearian reference connotes this last vestige of the bush as something that can betray *civilisation* as enforced by the council. It can *unsettle*, deceive, awaken dark memories, base instincts, unruly dreams, sex, violence. Mapping is another typical Maloufian *topos*, and it seems to be an action involving not only space and place but also time and the inner time of the self. Malouf here has in mind an older geographical, psychological and mythical map.

Jacko’s Reach is an area of nature, related to the sensual (and sexual) pleasures of the body, traversed by undaunted adolescent passions, adult fears and rage, vindictiveness, drunkenness, loose habits, sin. It is an area akin to the ancient Pagan world of medieval fes-

tivals and carnival days of licence, excess and sensuality, like "Fool's Day, when the spirit of mockery was let loose and a place found for disorder within the world of order and rule" (Malouf 2001: 115). Moreover, "Jacko's Reach" has a dangerous "affinity" with the local Aborigines, "which may or may not be mystical"; it is in communication with "native" animals and birds, and even "seeds", freely travelling "miles on a current of air" (93). The council needs to put an end to this proliferate life, its seeds flying freely in the air and wildly inseminating the carefully organised, civil *space* of the rational dominator mind. There is an implicit fear that Aboriginal seeds may travel freely to white girls and women, or vice versa, in a contamination of *purity*. In this sense Jacko's Reach is a clear reminder for the council that the land:

had received the imprint of culture long before we [non indigenous Australians] came to it. It had been shaped by use and humanised by knowledge that was both practical and sacred. It had been taken deep into the consciousness of its users so that all its features, through naming and storytelling and myth-making, had a second life in the imagination and in the mouths of women and men (Malouf 2001: 49).

The council, the law, wants to keep at bay this repressed knowledge of the existence of an Aboriginal Indigenous Australia and therefore also eliminate an unacknowledged sense of guilt for wanting to settle it. They aim at pulling down the area, because it is still full of Aboriginal storytelling and myth-making. It is an appropriative dominator act to destroy those stories and those myths, together with the more recent ones, belonging to the narrator and his friend's youths. These personal and collective stories and mythologies have been mixed together in an unorthodox and unacceptable fashion, thus presenting a permanent challenge and provocation to dominator stability and fixed law, as juxtaposed to partnership fluidity and interconnected creative intricacy. Jacko's Reach is also symbolic and evocative of an *uncontrollable* area of the unconscious, where old memories, ideas, hopes, phantasies, can slither into the characters' "unruly" dreams and *unsettle* the settlers (93-4). In the dominator idea of control, life needs to be restrained in its overgrowth and contained within the limits of what is *acceptable*, moral, *right*, decent, proper.

4. The Mythic and Symbolic Dimension

However, from a symbolic and mythic perspective, if Jacko's Reach may disappear from the physical world, it will still resist complete forgetfulness and obliteration. It will become an inner place of darkness, a secret space, a sort of black hole in the cosmic spiritual realm of the soul. From there, stories, myths, legends, dreams will be allowed to seep through, flourish and thrive. These stories and dreams manifest repressed areas of the psyche, memories willingly forgotten as bearers of truths the civilised and "sterner" Ego does not want to see anymore: "Daydreams by themselves remain unproductive. But art and literature that has anything to say to people, by denying ideology's hold over their imagination, is utopian" (Ashcroft 2014: 2). Because art and imagination cannot be controlled, dominator ideology represses creativity and pushes it into the subconscious. However, from the partnership perspective, imagination is more powerful than any form of constraint and limitation.

All of Jacko's mythic force will come to the surface even when the place is destroyed. Myth will push upwards and forwards, upsetting the dominator order of the scientific mind, geared to control and repress. Myth will take things back into a sort of white Dreaming, lulling *citizens* into another understanding of the Self and others:

[the wilderness] still lies like a shadow over even the most settled land, a pocket of the dark unmanageable, that troubles the sleep of citizens by offering a point of re-entry to memories they have no more use for – to unruly and unsettling dreams. Four and a half acres (93-94).

Indeed, relevantly, the story focuses on the mythological power of the imagined or remembered place as a form of *eco-psycho-logical* resistance. The characters in the story well know that, in a "ghostly, dreamy area of [themselves]" (98), even if Jacko's Reach will disappear under concrete and *improvement*, its wilderness will forever stay, alive and present, in their hearts, dreams and memories:

The possibility of building over it was forestalled the moment it got inside us. As a code-word for something so intimate it can never be revealed, an area of experience, even if it is deeply forgotten, where we still move in groups together, and touch, and glow, and spring apart laughing at the electric spark. There has to be some place where that is possible.

If there is only one wild acre somewhere we will make that the place. If they take it away we will preserve it in our head. If there is no such place we will invent it. That's the way we are (99-100).

This intimate inner place / space is akin to the *mundus imaginalis* (Corbin 1977), situated between the pure intelligible world of the spirit and the sensible one of matter. Before entering creation, things reside in this middle world of imagination, and go back to it, once they dissolve from the physical plane. In "the dimension of the symbolic" (99), through memory, imagination, creativity and dream, the total erasure of wilderness – in both the natural world and ourselves – cannot be fully achieved. Constantly re-imagined and re-configured in our memory, subconscious mind and heart, it will be forever "pushing up under the concrete" (99), and "in our head" (100). As Ashcroft points out: "The name alone can secure a place in the imagination that remains protected from the destruction of its possibilities. It will be a 'wild place' not locked down by predictability, or 'development'" (Ashcroft 2014: 6).

In spite of dominator physical destruction, for Malouf it is the partnership mythic, symbolic, imaginative energy that prevails:

A land can bear any number of cultures laid one above the other or set side by side. It can be inscribed and written upon many times. One of those forms of writing is the shaping of the landscape. In any place where humans have made their home, the landscape will be made one. Landscape-making is in our bones (Malouf 2001: 51).

Landscape-making through the visionary power of the dialogical partnership word is more powerful and resilient than landscape-destroying. In Jacko's Reach, Aboriginal dreaming creatively intersects with non-indigenous memories, visions and imaginative pursuits, as Tóibín observes, "by imagining others in all their humanity, we are actually participating in something pure and strange and mysterious but also direct and powerful" (Lindsay & Griffith, 2014: 3).

Imaginative power is also what Eisler stresses as instrument for positive transformation and change:

[...] as evolutionary theorist Ervin Laszlo points out, "bifurcations in human social systems also involve a large element of choice". Humans [...] "have the ability to act consciously and collectively", exercising foresight to "choose their evolutionary path" (Eisler 1987: 186-187).

There is nothing that can stop us from imagining and ever creating things, myths and stories anew, that then become our *realities*, for that is the way human beings are. As human beings on a frail and ecologically endangered Earth, we should all remember and embody the following Aboriginal definition of our earthly passage: we are all visitors to this time, this place. We are just passing through. Our purpose is to observe, to learn, to grow, to love ... and then we return home. To say it with Malouf, from another intense story of this collection, "Closer": "Open your heart now. Let it happen. Come closer, closer. See? Now reach out your hand" (2000: 25-32).

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