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THE MYTHIC TRANSFORMATION OF ADAIR IN DAVID MALOUF'S *THE CONVERSATIONS AT CURLLOW CREEK*

In *The Conversations at Curlow Creek* (1996) Malouf plots the transformation of Michael Adair, a product of European Enlightenment values, into the legendary character O'Dare, a figure of early Nineteenth-Century Australian mythology. Malouf's ambiguous Epilogue, which describes the completion of this metamorphosis, is offered as the only credible conclusion to a narrative tracing the effect of the alien Australian landscape on an emerging colonial consciousness. Malouf initially presents the soldier Adair, and Carney, the prisoner he has been sent to execute, as antithetical, and then gradually pares down their dissimilarities, progressively removing Adair's perception of himself as superior in education and rank to the rest of those he meets. Carney is the catalyst for these changes in Adair, and although, like Adair, he is a native Irishman, he becomes a symbol of Australia, and all that Adair's education in Enlightenment values fears: the rugged, the dangerous, the uneducated, a projection of the noble savage. In the early pages, Malouf establishes an Apollonian/Dionysian division between these two characters, a division which is mirrored in the minor characters of Langhurst and Garrety, who both complicate and complement the opposition. The imminent death of Carney prompts self-reflection in most of those at Curlow Creek, but in none so much as Adair, who grows not only to realise his similarities to the condemned man, but also what it is he is looking for in Australia. In the Epilogue, Malouf shows both Adair's internal transformation, and the public transformation of "his" story into a potent colonial myth of escape from death into freedom.

The first page of the novel illustrates Adair's initial alienation from Australia. He views the hut, in which he is about to spend the night, as a tomb, in which the "only light ... came from the doorway behind him" (1). It is almost as though the inside of the hut is a symbolic representation of the coloniser's presence in Australia, as though the only light is that which exists behind him, in the land he has left, in Ireland. As Adair enters the hut, this discomfort is echoed in his thoughts:

What is it in us, what is it in me, he thought, that we should be so divided against ourselves, wanting our life and at the same time afraid of it?... and the choking sense of confinement, as if he had stepped underground, must have confused his senses. (1)

Already only a foot into the new landscape, the darkness seems to have taken over his very being, and his rational mind is clouded. The concept of Australia as a country of darkness and savagery is reinforced by Adair's first reaction to the sight of the recently beaten Carney: "One eye was puffed and closed, the other blinked in puzzlement, and Adair was struck by its pulpiness. So alive" (2). At this point Carney is the epitome of the savage other, an animal disinherited by his country and sent to live, or at least stagnate, in a penal colony disdained by the land that educated Adair. Adair's perception of otherness is not confined to Carney. He also critiques the guards Langhurst and Garrety for their apparent disrespect for military rank and order. Adair's arrogance reaches its peak with his summary of the men's reluctance to fetch him the light that he has ordered:

a mixture of grudging deference and surly independence that was typical ... of the kind of riff-raff that had been recruited out here ... stubborn and indolent, with their own reasons for rethinking every order, who would do nothing till you lost your temper with them; raw youths, farmboys and such, who could ride a little, handle a gun, and were full of spark, but had no notion of rank or discipline. (2)

It seems that the only thing that Adair does not include in this reflection is what he really means, that they have no regard for his authority. By being given access to Adair's past through the memory and conversation sequences in the book, the reader learns of Adair's achievements, his pride in being a self-made man, in rejecting the lax pleasures of Ellersley and carving his own future, in opposition to the feckless lifestyles of his dead opera singer parents and his adoptive Mama Aimée.

Adair instigates a conversation with Carney in the hope of confirming his suspicion that the bushranger Dolan is in fact his foster brother Fergus. His perception of Carney soon begins to change. Initially he attributes Carney's insights into their common human condition to his merely echoing the words of Fergus, for the sole reason that Fergus was educated. When Carney comments upon the world's injustices, Adair asks whether he had heard that from Fergus, and the prisoner replies:

"No, sir. Well, yes, I might of done. But maybe I thought of it for meself. A man will start askin' questions sooner or later, if he's a man at all. Even an ignorant one."

Adair accepted this rebuke. There is more to this fellow, he thought, than I've given him credit for. (29)

Eventually, however, the connection between the two men becomes so strong that they even begin to share their dreams. Adair is disturbed by this intimacy:

Amazing that by some process of sympathetic understanding he could feel on the creeping surface of his skin the effect of the man's dream while having no conscious knowledge of it ... Yet here he was sweating in some new opening of understanding between them. (118)

This incident is significant in that it detaches Adair from the logical thought inspired by the Enlightenment teachings of Eamon Fitzgibbons, while at the same time brings him closer to the object of his search. Adair thinks he is looking for Fergus, and by sharing a dream with the other, he is learning to bridge the differences of values that he and Fergus had. Adair's relationship to Carney is, however, much more significant than their mutual dependence upon Fergus.

Malouf parallels the characters of Adair and Carney by giving them similar features, and separating them only by superficial differences based on education and opportunity. It is initially revealed that Carney is illiterate, while Adair was educated in English, Greek and Latin at the Park. When they meet in Australia, Carney is a coarse, condemned bushranger, Adair is a successful and responsible soldier. Despite these differences, however, the characteristics that they have in common predominate. For instance, both Carney and Adair are orphans, and they have both lived in the shadow of Dolan/Fergus. Carney is about to lose his life for his association with Dolan, while Adair has abandoned his old life and travelled across the world on the suggestion that Fergus may be in New South Wales. The second similarity is that both are reluctant to embrace the Australian landscape: they regard Australia as a dark underworld, a grim shadow of their idyllic Ireland. For Carney, there is nothing left in Ireland, no friends, only his tortured memory of the blind girl who may remember something about him. Nothing at all waits for him in Ireland, yet he wants to return. Although he obviously cannot go home, Carney refers to Ireland as Heaven, and his composure on the eve of his execution seems to suggest a hope for return to Heaven. Death for Carney is the only escape from the perils of Australia. In contrast, Adair knows that he is going to return:

What a place this is, Adair thought ... God knows what things have happened here and gone unrecorded by men, or are on the way towards us. Will we ever know the true history of it? The secret history, stored away in the dark folds of the landscape, in its scattered bones, of a paradise found or lost. It struck him now that the real difference between himself and these others was that he could leave the place, and would leave it, but that they belonged and would stick. (116)

Malouf is here suggesting that Adair's and Carney's preference for Ireland over Australia is not because Ireland is superior but because it is familiar. The third and most important similarity between the two men is their reluctance to take

charge of their own lives. Carney runs from one gang to another, in quest of someone else's idea of freedom. Adair has had several influences that made decisions for him: Fergus, to whom he has always deferred and whom he continues to follow; the military; and Virgilia, whom he allows to constrain much of his life.

It is evident that the reason for Adair coming to Australia is to look for Fergus, ostensibly for Virgilia but actually on his own behalf, as Malouf indicated in an interview with Helen Daniel:

When Adair sets out to look for Fergus he's really looking for Fergus on Virgilia's behalf, or so it would seem ... there are lots of times when Adair thinks he is acting for someone else but is in fact acting for himself. (Daniel, 11)

The fact that Adair wrongly believes that he is acting entirely on Virgilia's behalf indicates that he has an agenda that does not quite correspond with the traditional mythic quest. When he embarks on his journey, Adair does have Virgilia's need as his motivation for finding Fergus. But as his conversations with Carney progress, Adair stops mentioning Fergus/Dolan's name, and Fergus is only referred to in Adair's thoughts. Adair does not press Carney for answers, and the reason is that he no longer feels a need to find out. The only reason that he now feels compelled to find Fergus is for his own personal gain, since if Fergus is dead, he can propose to Virgilia. Fergus has stood in the way of Adair's love for Virgilia, and he has scoured the pages of Virgilia's letters for mentions of Fergus:

He waited for it. It was always there. A bald statement, perfectly matter-of-fact among so much extravagant feeling, but he believed, if he put his face to the page, he would feel the extra heat given off by the ink in which she had written ... he knew the emotion she must have forced down in herself to write so casually. (39-40)

Although Adair does not wish Fergus dead, the Adair who arrives at Curlow Creek needs Fergus to be the bushranger Dolan, for the very reason that in his death, the love triangle would be broken, and Virgilia would have no valid reason (in Adair's view) not to marry Adair. For the Adair who leaves Curlow Creek, on the other hand, the stakes are much less obvious.

Adair's frustration in the love triangle that has persisted since the childhood he shared with Virgilia and Fergus is largely due to Virgilia's hesitation to reciprocate his affections, except for the rain incident in Chapter Four. The only other physical aspect of their relationship was when Virgilia was nursing Eamon and: "kissed him, in a sisterly way" (174). Virgilia appears to prefer Fergus's rebellion, the chaos which counterbalances Adair's order and stoicism.

Although Adair is angry with Fergus for not noticing Virgilia's feelings, it provides him with the role of confidante when Fergus overlooks her. Therefore if Fergus is dead, there is no place left for Adair in Virgilia's life, unless he asks her to marry him, and this double bind presents further complications. If Fergus is alive, Adair has to face the risk that he may never marry Virgilia, even though it is very unlikely that Fergus would marry her either. But if Fergus is dead, Adair can no longer play the part of comforter, he and Virgilia will have nothing but themselves to talk about. Adair's insecurity at the beginning of the book suggests that he dare not ask her to marry him for fear of refusal. The old Adair, if I can call him that, is constantly tying himself in knots with rationality and doubt, and it is this aspect of his character that makes his transformation in Australia all the more significant.

In an interview with Barbara Williams in 1990, Malouf discussed the notion of characters and people in everyday life being allowed to have second chances:

One of the things that happens—I see it very strongly in books of mine—is that people get second chances at their lives, and they also get second chances inside the book. Characters can get pinned on the page by the author, and he never gives them a chance to be seen in any other, more generous way, from some maybe different point of view. I want always to do that ... Just when you think you've seen the character and got him fixed, I like to give him a second chance in your view, by allowing him to be different. (Williams, 85)

Although the change in Adair is much more subtle than Malouf's summary here suggests, it is clear that the eve of Carney's death, and the landscape itself, have given Adair a new chance at life. Though the text employs something of a mythic quest structure in which the hero leaves home in search of his estranged foster brother, the prize that awaits the successful quester is never fully stated: what is his reward for finding Fergus—Virgilia's love, himself, or self-knowledge?

The quest for Fergus becomes a search within Adair for an understanding of Fergus/Dolan, and also of himself and Virgilia and the complex interrelationship between them; but Carney's presence interrupts the typical quest narrative. Carney offers much more to Adair than his association with Dolan. Adair is made to feel special as Carney treats him not only with respect, but also as a father-confessor. In childhood, "There was in (Adair) a need to be of service, to be necessary" (40), but with Carney, it is more than just changing a nappy, or consoling a drunken, weeping woman. Adair feels no sense of obligation to be kind to Carney. Instead he discovers a connection with him that he has never felt before, not even with Virgilia or Fergus. The only other person with whom he seems to have such an intense relationship is Paddy,

whose watch he carries with him, a gift that was given, not out of pity for an orphan, but out of love.

Despite the developments in Adair's character his true epiphany does not occur until Chapter Ten, when his emergence from the hut is described in a completely different manner from his arrival the previous day:

Adair stepped out into the early light ... He took a deep breath, expanding his lungs. His soul stretched—that is how he thought of it ... clear-headed, abounding in health, aware with a new keenness as he looked about and stepped into the beauty of the scene ... it struck him last night as bleak and denuded ... Now it had a kind of grandeur. (194)

The new Adair's enlightenment is completed by the sight of Carney bathing himself in the creek, washing himself free of the "world's muck." The sight of the prisoner, and the beauty of this scene, are the epitome of dreamlike poetry and Adair reflects that: "It should finish here ... This is the natural end" (200). The narrative of the events at Curlow Creek is cut off abruptly after this, the fate of the prisoner is not described, and the notion of a second chance becomes far more important to the new Adair.

Carney has thus served his purpose as the magical creature of the archetypal quest myth, who helps the hero obtain the secret and reap the rewards of his quest. In the Epilogue that follows, Adair spends his last days in Sydney Town hearing stories of the Irish soldier O'Dare and the prisoner Carney whom he supposedly helped to escape from execution at Curlow Creek. Despite the currency of the story, the people who tell it to Adair do not connect him with the fictional O'Dare. When he is pressed by the ex-army surgeon James Saunders to disclose the real events that took place at Curlow Creek, Adair's refusal to do so is not only symbolic, but offers a way for Malouf to end the novel whilst allowing the narrative to acquire the status of myth.

The reason that the ambiguity of the Epilogue is essential to the integrity of the narrative can be explained best in the author's own words:

Without there being any doubt about the fact, given Adair's temperament, he would go through with it, Adair too would rather let Carney off. He would rather have him escape into the world of nature and out of the world of law. (*Australian Book Review*, 12)

Adair's refusal to deny or confirm Carney's escape allows two possible readings, each with its own improbabilities, to exist in tandem. If Adair had executed Carney, it would indicate that the conversations and the self-reflection that took place during the night were superficial, that Adair was only as

compassionate as the law allowed him to be, and thus that the old Adair continued. If Adair had decided not to kill Carney, that would suggest that he had foregone all sense of the duty that had so dominated his life. In an extra-fictional world, this option is less likely, as there were witnesses who would have intervened in one way or another. But there is also a third scenario, supported by the ambiguous Epilogue, that is the evolving myth, the legend which requires no logic other than enacting a passionate, widely-shared wish-fulfilment. For Adair to reveal the "truth," would turn the narrative into history, but as Adair wanders the streets of Sydney he becomes aware of the variations of the O'Dare and Carney legend. As Saunders tells him:

People are hungry for diversion. For news, for gossip. It needn't be true. All it has to do is satisfy their notion of what might be true, their need for some bit of unexpected event that has the shape of a decent story—preferably, like all good stories, an old one in a new form. So you see, my friend you do not quite get away. You leave here this shadow of yourself—not your real self, that would not serve—but this other more romantic, more outrageous self that fits the story and grows as it is passed on. (204)

Despite its echo of Jorge Luis Borges, this makes a statement about all myths, that they are only incidentally about the people involved in the original story from which the myth evolves. Saunders explains to Adair that he is not Michael Adair to those who will pass on the legend, but rather a figure whose shape, features and height will change with every re-telling of the story. So Adair is able to leave Australia with the knowledge that another version of his experience there will live on in the narrative-starved colony. He will return to Ireland with the knowledge that he has given a legend back to the mystery of the country that changed and liberated him. His experience of Australia, and in particular his conversations with Carney, have made him more fully aware of himself. Having lived a life of obligation, he now is free to choose his own path. The fact that Adair is going to return and ask Virgilia to marry him, regardless of the consequences, suggests that if she refuses he will be able to walk away, because he has left the Fergus/Dolan situation where it belongs, in the unknown, in silent understanding. It is ironic that both Carney and Adair, despite their aversion for Australia in the first part of the book, will be there in spirit for as long as their story is told.

The ending of the novel is thus by no means a corner into which the author has painted himself—Malouf has stated that he first arrives at the endings of his books, and then works backwards, filling in the pieces. Regardless of how *The Conversations* was written, its ambiguous ending enacts Adair's personal self-discovery and empowerment and Carney's, and humanity's, right to a second chance. The "death" of Carney, even as a metaphor, allows the hero for the first time in his life to be truly free. Adair's successful quest also challenges

the traditional view that the penal colony beginnings of Australia inhibited its cultural development. Malouf argues instead that the colony had much to offer both the convicts and their accompanying soldiers, and that they too, however reluctantly and even unknowingly, had stories to offer in return, stories that attested to the liberating agency of the new country for prisoners and custodians alike.

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