

War as “Point de Capiton” in the Inscription of the Subject in the Symbolic in David Malouf’s *Fly Away Peter*

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Abstract

It is illuminating to examine how the Australian novelist, David Malouf delineates rare facets of the psychological life of his protagonists in his fictional oeuvre. He situates his central characters in historically dense and psychologically disrupting ambience provided by the socio-cultural contexts of Australia. Having been dislocated by a traumatic childhood and marginalised by the social order, Malouf’s central characters are marked by an overwhelming desire to be recognised by the Other. What serve as signposts in their path of desire for recognition are the significant features of Australian culture and history. They evolve into dominant signifiers for the Australian subjects and intervene decisively in their lives. Malouf examines how war emerges as a “point de capiton” that temporarily arrests the meaning of a host of floating signifiers in defining “Australian-ness” or “identity as an Australian” in his seminal work, *Fly Away Peter*. This paper attempts to chart how war quilts the self-conception of the protagonist in the Symbolic Order.

Key words: Australian, David Malouf, *Fly Away Peter*, Imaginary register, Jim Saddler, Lacan, Other, Point de Capiton, Symbolic realm, War

Participation in the Great War as a global event becomes a defining moment for the cultural identity of the young Australian nation and when the news of the war reaches the shores of Australia, the subject position of Jim Saddler—the protagonist of Malouf’s *Fly Away Peter*—as a young male Australian entails his enrolment as a soldier. [1] However, having been denied an easy assimilation into the Symbolic structure, Jim cannot grasp the significance of this momentous political and social event and hence his initial response to the war is marked by indifference.

The war, as a signifier, is perceived differently by the Imaginary and the Symbolic registers of his mind. At the level of the imaginary, Jim sees it as an irrational element of disintegration that only ruptures his sense of being unified and whole. At the Symbolic, he views it as a necessary sign of social significance. Chapters 5 to 8 of the novel vividly capture the way in which the Other functions to direct his desire. When the girl at the saddlers tells him, "I reckon you'll be joining up," his reply is a bewildered "Why?" Her intensity and vehemence overwhelms him momentarily: "The girl's eyes hardened. 'Well I would, she said fiercely, 'if I was a man. I'd want to be in it. It's an opportunity.' She spoke passionately, bitterly even, but whether at his inadequacy or her own he couldn't tell."

The excitement shown by the young men in Brisbane, the same question posed by yet another girl at the Criterion, and the huge procession at night unsettle Jim further: "He felt panicky. It was as if the ground before him, that had only minutes ago stretched away to a clear future, had suddenly tilted in the direction of Europe, in the direction of *events*, and they were all now on a dangerous slope. That was the impression people gave him. That they were sliding." Through these scenes, Malouf attempts a dramatisation of how the subject is overpowered by the harsh demands of the Symbolic. The subject's desire turns out to be the desire of the Other. It is the desire for attaining what the Other desires, through which the subject hopes to realise his fictional finalism.

Jim is now made to believe that participation in the war is the only way to achieve social significance. In Sean Homer's words:

It is also the discourse and desires of those around us, through which we internalize and inflect our own desire. What psychoanalysis teaches us is that our desires are always inextricably bound up with the desires of the others. . . . These unconscious desires and wishes of others flow into us through language—through discourse—and therefore desire is always shaped and moulded by language. [2]

With the tragic news of the slaughter of Australian soldiers at Gallipoli, Jim is able to imbibe "the new seriousness" that has entered their lives and "felt the drag upon him of all those deaths." The rest of Jim's psychic encounters take place in the backdrop of the warfront in France, the delineation of which is replete with horrid images of trench life—death and mutilation from shelling, decaying corpses, the fearless rats that fed on corpses, and the stinking mud and water—that recur in Malouf's later war novel, *The Great World*. [3] His works become part of a major sub-genre of Australian literature that appropriates the nation's war experiences.

Australia's participation in the two World Wars and the Vietnam War, and the extent to which it affected the cultural life of the young nation are closely reflected in the literature of the successive decades. The literary response to World War I was predominant in fiction and the most notable works include Frederic Manning's *The Middle Parts of Fortune: Somme and Ancre 1916* (1929), Leonard Mann's *Flesh in Armour* (1932), Frank Dalby Davison's *The Wells of Beersheba* (1933), and Lesbia Harford's *The Invaluable Mystery* (1987). Australia's initial experience of war continued to provide both theme and setting to novels produced decades after the event. The lament over the loss of human values reverberates in the war novels of Martin Boyd such as *Lucinda Brayford* (1946) and *When Blackbirds Sing* (1962). As Jennifer Strauss observes: "Possibly the novel required a period of gestation for the aesthetic comprehension and shaping of wartime experiences, a result eventually achieved in works as different as Roger McDonald's *1915* (1979), Patrick White's *The Twyborn Affair* (1979), or David Malouf's *Fly Away Peter* (1982)". [4] Though these novels unravel different perspectives of the war experience, most of them view war as a defining moment for Australian identity and character.

The literary response to the Second World War was more prolific and diverse in poetry as well as fiction. "The quarter-century which began with the declaration of war against Germany in September 1939," according to Chris Wallace-Crabbe, was "a short era in which poetry and poets assumed unusual significance in the mapping of Australian culture." [5] This is evidenced by the outstanding works of such poets as Max Harris, Muir Holburn, Mary Bell, James McAuley, Geoffrey Dutton, Francis Webb, Kenneth Mackenzie, and A. D. Hope.

The output in the field of fiction was still more remarkable during the period. Carole Ferrier offers a detailed discussion of the novels that present a bleak picture of wartime conditions in Australia (198-202). [6] The works Ferrier cites include Kylie Tennant's *Ride On Stranger* (1943), Eleanor Dark's *The Little Company* (1945), Katharine Susannah Prichard's *Winged Seeds* (1950), Eric Lambert's *The Twenty Thousand Thieves* (1951), Dymphna Cusack and Florence James' *Come In Spinner* (1951), T. A. G. Hungerford's *The Ridge and the River* (1952), and David Forrest's *The Last Blue Sea* (1959). The tremendous impact of war is conspicuously

revealed in many other works like Nevil Shute's *A Town Like Alice* (1950), Xavier Herbert's *Soldiers' Women* (1961), George Johnston's *My Brother Jack* (1964), and Randolph Stow's *The Merry-Go-Round in the Sea* (1965). Patrick White's novels like *Voss* (1957) and *The Twyborn Affair* (1979) also engage with the postwar conditions in Australia.

That war became such a compelling subject for most of the leading writers points to its indelible mark on the Australian consciousness. The First World War, commonly referred to as "the Great War," was of particular significance to the nation as it provided them with the legend of Anzac and Gallipoli. Anzac—acronym for the Australian and New Zealand Army Corps—staged a heroic fight for eight months, sacrificing thousands of soldiers, to capture the Gallipoli peninsula from the Turkish force. The landing of the Australian army at Gallipoli on 25 April 1915 in support of the Imperial Force became a defining moment in the history of the nation. As Adrian Caesar points out:

The 'bush myth' and the 'Anzac legend' are two . . . intimately related systems of language and image. Both are about character traits and nationality. The Anzac myth postulates the idea that the Australian 'character' was tried, tested, and not found wanting in the crucible of war, so that Australian nationhood was confirmed on the heights of Gallipoli in 1915. [7]

The Australian soldier soon acquired the name "digger," which, according to Macintyre, refers "to the egalitarian fraternity of the goldfields," a notion promulgated by subsequent literary works. [8] The latter war section of *Fly Away Peter* too depicts the stoic endurance of a group of men through a series of poignant images and appalling scenes. Even the long horrid journey to the war front at Armentières in wagons that stunk of animals taken to slaughter-houses, was itself an exhausting and draining experience for many. Lying in ambush in the trenches near the German lines for eleven days amid the stench of rotting corpses and rat droppings and under the deadly threat of bombing broke their spirit.

The most nightmarish of all experiences for Jim came with the enemy's bombing. He could never again think of the scene, where, lying stunned in a pool of blood, Jim heard the screaming from his young friend Eric Sawney who had both his legs torn off above the knee, while his mate Clancy Parkett was "blasted out of existence." Jim becomes more and more disturbed as his mind now gives way to utter desperation. He comes to suspect the very purpose of this huge enterprise that demanded innumerable lives and can no longer comprehend the reality in the Symbolic. The agonized cries of Eric and the boy's anxiety about his own future blur Jim's vision of the world: "Faced with his losses, Eric had hit upon something fundamental. It was a question about the structure of the world they lived in and where they belonged in it, about who had power over them and what responsibility those agencies could be expected to assume."

It also becomes a moment of self-realisation for Jim, as the pathetic voice of the boy reminds him of his own father: "it was the voice of a querulous old man, who had asked for little and been given less and spent his whole life demanding his due." Months of incessant fighting and deaths of everyone he had known well in his company drive Jim almost insane. If he survived, it was only to witness more gruesome scenes. When he visited his dying friend, Bob Cleese, at the hospital, he could only regard him "with horror and was ashamed that he should feel disgust." Almost on the verge of derangement, Jim is no more able to comprehend or endure the immensity of his experiences. Malouf poignantly presents Jim's terror and trepidation of the war: "The war, or something like it with a different name, would go on growing out from here till the whole earth was involved; the immense and murderous machine that was in operation up ahead would require more and more men to work it, more and more blood to keep it running; it was no longer in control."

If war appears to be a "murderous machine" for Jim, it is because machine had always been an agent of disintegration: the harvester that battered his brother to death; the bi-plane that scattered the birds; and the war planes that spread violent death with gas-shells and bombs. The haunting figure of Jim cast against the "disintegrating power of that cruelty in metallic form" looms large in the last part of the novel.

As though once again failing to find meaning in the Symbolic, Jim's mind searches for birds in the war-torn land. He records the presence of skylarks, a yellow wagtail, and graylag geese, which was the only way to "keep hold of himself and of the old life that he had come close to losing." It certainly gestures towards the Imaginary which alone can now render any meaning to his existence. It is in this realm beyond the world of war and outside the boundaries of the Symbolic order that Jim can have any sense of living. This is evident from the way he regarded the birds as "of life and the air" in contrast to the rats in the filthy trenches that were "familiar of death, creatures of the underworld."

These constant eruptions of the Imaginary into the Symbolic serve only to intensify the dislocation of Jim's mind. Chapter 17 is replete with powerful images of dissolution through which Malouf attempts to reveal the intangible sense of disintegration that Jim's mind undergoes. The actual experiential realm of the mind, the real, as Lacan postulates, cannot be mediated through language as it lies beyond all representation. Mortally wounded in a bombing Jim felt that he too was drifting with the clouds which eventually dissolved into the sky. He saw further images of islands that "dissolved, like a pill developing fuzzy edges in a glass of water," and a wounded bird that "threw faint colours from its wings as its blood beat feebly into the earth."

When he came around from his dreamy thoughts, Jim lay among those awaiting death or amputation. Malouf employs italicization as a narrative technique to render Jim's unconscious feeling: "*I am in the wrong place*, Jim thought. *I don't belong here. I never asked to be here. I should get going.*" In his final vision, Jim sees himself digging the earth with Clancy Parkett and a whole line of men in ragged uniforms as though to escape from the Symbolic—this "dark pocket of time" in which Jim has utterly failed to realise any significance. As observed by Wynne and others, the title of the novel is drawn from the popular children's rhyme, "Two little dicky birds sitting on a wall, / One named Peter, one named Paul. / Fly away Peter, fly away Paul, / Come back Peter, come back Paul!" and it undoubtedly points to Jim's desire to "fly away" for a secure space. [10]

The protagonist lives in the last chapter through the memory of Imogen Harcourt who has come to know of Jim's end and Ashley's safe return from war. To quote John McLaren, "Reality in Malouf's work is neither an external world that is given nor an inner life of pure subjectivity, but is the product we build from the constant dialogue between these two realms." [11] *Fly Away Peter* eloquently depicts the failure of the human subject to find complete signification in the Imaginary or the Symbolic realms. Jim Saddler seeks to define his identity through the war that serves as a "point de capiton" but the floating signifier fails to anchor him securely in the Symbolic.

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