

## Critical Appreciation of David Malouf's Wild Lemons

Starting with a basic paraphrase the opening lines introduce the idea of time, and time as "continuous present". The lines

Through all those years keeping the present

Open to light of just this moment

Suggest past as inside the present and vice versa. The tense in these lines is cryptic or ambiguous. The present always opens through those years as the path that was found signaled 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 geographic imaginary, the track (the promise) starting across "blazed trunks" (to burn with flames, very bright) to be "set down among wild lemons". In the rugged terrain the tree trunks weathered by years of intense sunlight and heat held a promise of bright future, a happy destination. The track obviously leads to the place where the wild lemons grow. And the use negative to suggest a positive- "the track would not lead nowhere"- is a remarkable linguistic audacity.

Yet was the trajectory already mapped out? The lemons were there because others were there before who planted them. Perhaps it is a spot where secret communions were held, a place where they would communicate while sitting among the thorny wild lemons tress tasting "the tough-skinned fruit". Perhaps it is a place of burial where "our bodies were expected at an occasion". This suggests a communion with Nature while the existence of the lemon tree is a proof that perhaps our ancestors were there much before and planted the lemon tree. The resilience of Nature is brought out succinctly by the use of the word "tough -skinned fruit". In line eleven the fruit is called "sunlight to be sliced" for drinks. It has rich associations as the round yellow-coloured fruit rich in vitamin C is as healthy as sunlight promoting vitamin D. These wild lemons have adapted themselves to various climes and times and have survived through the ages.

From line thirteen onwards the poet's thoughts travel towards his beloved country Australia, surrounded by the waters of the ocean. Sitting still at its bay the poet describes its warmth as if it were a living, breathing entity "humming and rising" to the concerns of its country people. It is heatstruck yet "lapped by clean ocean waters/ at dawn". The poet proceeds to contrast the present with the sunny warmth of the past that he has imaginatively evoked. He is now at another European country with a different weather, different clime. Yet in the alien land Nature continues to his senses. There "a flute tempts out a few/ reluctant stars to walk over the water." The same body that had enjoyed sliced sunlight in Australia is now in a European country. There too Nature continues to delight the senses and the lemon gin satisfies the buds of this transcultural poet.

The pronouns used "us", "we", "our" ("bodies") are 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". It is 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’s future.

The lemons too are 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 four.

Malouf emphasizes that our sleep is continuously in the dark and what goes on is Time. The passage of Time is unstoppable as it moves into the present and melts into the future. Thus what changes or is constant is time. The Maloufian notion of time is ‘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) 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 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” (wild 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.