

Crime, punishment, and death: Reading finitude and the self in David Malouf's 'The Conversations at Curlow Creek'

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Abstract. The present paper reads David Malouf's 1996 novel *The Conversations at Curlow Creek* as portraying a vivid and realistic picture of events relating to crime and punishment in colonial Australia in the early nineteenth century. The depiction of death penalty accorded to the bushranger Daniel Carney under the supervision of the Irish sheriff Michael Adair in New South Wales thus resonates with numerous historical accounts of incidents that actually happened. The novel, however, does more than only provide accurate historical representation as it also presents Adair as having undergone a rather dramatic transformation in the process of conversing with Carney before the latter's execution. The paper, drawing on the views of the German philosopher Martin Heidegger, argues that a realization of inevitable mortality, of facing certain death characterizes this change in Adair's nature and worldview. It concludes by suggesting that Adair's acceptance of his finitude intimates of a way of being in the world that not only subverts procedures of administering punishment to convicts in colonial Australia but also indicates the limits of polarized identity politics that shapes the country in the present times.

Keywords: realism, transformation, finitude, subversion

David Malouf's novel *The Conversations at Curlow Creek* (1996) has a rather simple plot. Its protagonist, the Irish sheriff Michael Adair, comes to New South Wales in the 1830s to supervise the execution of the bushranger Daniel Carney. As the punishment is scheduled to be meted out the next day, Adair and Carney spend the night conversing with each other. Apart from the impending death penalty to be awarded to Carney, there is another reason though as to why Adair is in Australia. He is looking for Fergus, his companion since boyhood and son of the generous couple who adopted him and took affectionate care of him. Fergus, Virgilia (their common friend) and he presume, left the Irish shores to come to New South Wales to struggle against the oppressive colonial rule and somehow ended up leading a band of bushrangers and escapee-convicts. If successful in the search, Adair hopes to take Fergus along with him while returning to Ireland.

In addition to its simplicity, the plot of *The Conversations at Curlow Creek* also stands out for its plausibility. The whole action seems credible as it attests to historical accounts of contemporary events and circumstances. Historians and other social scientists have thus not only described the significant Irish and Scottish presence in and around Sydney in the early nineteenth century at length but have also detailed the activities of bushrangers and escapee-convicts in the region. Lindsay J. Proudfoot and Dianne P. Hall, for instance, underline that colonial presence in Australia has always been misunderstood to have been homogeneous and has never been segmented in terms of its substantial minority identities like the Irish and the Scots. They also suggest that historiography has been unable to provide an adequate account of the emotional, physical, and political dislocation felt by such minor colonial populations. Consequently, history-writing has been virtually silent on the formation and subsequent development of social groupings like the Irish-Australian and the Scottish-Australian. (Proudfoot and Hall, 1-7) In a similar vein, Jennifer A. McKinnon has highlighted the ambiguity and complexity of the apparently simple and unambiguous appellation "bushranger". She argues that though bushrangers were runaway convicts who lived in the bush and committed serious crimes, it was difficult for them to be distinguished from non-absconding convicts who performed similar actions. The crimes, usually, were of acquisitive nature, thefts of property that entailed aggression and implied threats of violence directed at the victims. Most of such offences—highway robbery, burglary, stealing in a dwelling house and putting persons therein in bodily fear, rape, shooting with intent to kill, murder, stock-stealing, arson, presenting a loaded gun, assault and the like—were recognized as capital and carried the death sentence as punishment. (McKinnon, 5-6)

Perhaps on account of his Irish heritage and the sheer sense of dislocation that the rough terrain of provincial New South Wales causes him to endure, Adair does not quite feel up to the task that the British colonial administration located in Sydney wants him to carry out before Carney's execution. The administration believes that bushrangers like Carney, led in their illegal activities by the now-slain Dolan, had been receiving assistance from Irish revolutionaries. It would therefore require Adair to ask Carney about the same.

'What were you waiting for, that Dolan had to be so cautious?'

'For our tracks to go cold. If we'd slipped into some little settlement and, like, done something.'

... 'Wasn't he maybe waiting for something else?'

'Like what, sir?'

'For someone to contact him. Some group, for instance.'

'Oh', the man said, 'the Irish, you mean. That was just talk. There wasn't no gathering intended, if that's what you mean.'

...Carney shook his head. He looked desperately unhappy. Adair feared he might at any moment cut the conversation off and turn away. It was shameful, he knew, to harry the man like this, to unsteady his last hour or two with useless doubts. He had no interest in the official rigmarole of unrest and rebellion; not much belief in it either. (Malouf, 98-100)

No wonder then that as Adair continues to speak with Carney, he keeps losing interest in the question of the alleged symbiotic relationship between the bushrangers and the anti-British Irish revolutionaries. Instead, he begins to believe that the convict's leader, Dolan, was actually Fergus. As a result, his words merely serve as an alibi to conclusively establish his view.

...Then looking up with a gaze Adair found unsettlingly steady: 'You know, sir, there's a lot of injustice in the world'.

A statement ordinary enough, but what he heard behind it, or thought he heard, was the echo of another voice. He felt strongly another, a third presence in the closeness of the hut, and with his heart sounding above the rasping of Daniel Carney's breathing, he asked: 'Did you hear that from him? From Dolan?'

The man seemed surprised.

... 'So what did he say?' he persisted. 'About injustice.'

'Dolan?'

'Yes.'

The man's face softened. He sat with his head lowered a moment. 'He said it was why we were fighting. At the end, when things got bad.' (Malouf, 29)

As the night preceding Carney's scheduled execution moves, though, Adair's words to him come to acquire a different color. Despite his best attempts, Adair is unable to keep up his own interest in getting to know more about Dolan and gives into the force of Carney's innocent questions. Carney's doubts, suggestions, and comments make him examine his own beliefs and thoughts in a fresh light. He begins to reconsider the significance of his past life, especially the part which was spent in Ellersley, Ireland, with Virgilia and Fergus as he journeys to New South Wales with its characteristically rugged and distasteful terrain.

... 'I'm sorry, sir. I just thought, you bein' Irish an' that, you wouldn' mind me askin'.'

'Well, so long as you don't expect me to have an answer. What is it?'

There came then the first of the man's awkward questions, each of which, Adair found, caught him on the raw, since they were sent to the center of his own thoughts, his own confusions, as if this illiterate fellow had somehow dipped into the dark of his head and drawn up the very questions he had chosen not to find words for. (Malouf, 28)

It is not just the past, however, that Carney's queries force Adair to reexamine. He must, in the face of them, scrutinize the present as well. Consider, for instance, Carney's question about there being forgiveness in the world for those like him who have committed crimes of great violence and terror. In Adair's mind, it seems to develop into a consideration of the difference, if any, between bushrangers such as Carney on the one hand and the punitive colonial machinery on the other. As both of them indulge in violent means to achieve their desired ends, he cannot perceive any substantial incommensurability between them.

'I was goin' to ask you something. I hope you don't mind.' He rubbed his nose very vigorously with the back of his fist. 'Do you think, sir,' he said after a moment, 'that there is such a thing as forgiveness?'

Adair stared at the man, unable for a moment to focus his mind.

'I mean- you know, for what we done.'

He found his voice after a moment but it was thick with emotion. 'I'm sure there is,' he said... 'If there isn't, there is no hope. None. For any of us.'

The man nodded, but in his scrupulous way was not convinced. (Malouf, 128)

The question as to whether the slain Dolan was indeed Fergus therefore ceases to matter for Adair as the narrative of *The Conversations at Curlow Creek* propels him into rigorous introspection. In such a situation, combined with the simultaneous and constant questioning from Carney, he moves from anchoring his being in the search for Fergus in New South Wales to looking for such a foundation within himself. It is crucial to note, however, that though the novel presents Carney as the principal catalyst that initiates him on the said journey towards self-evaluation and (re)making, it is not the case that Carney comes to replace Fergus/Dolan in his worldview. The nature of Adair's introspection is significantly deeper than that which would involve merely substituting a particular individual with another as the anchor of his being.

That Adair, in considering his place in the world, moves past even the impetus provided by Carney becomes clear as the latter takes the final bath before being executed. While bathing in the waters of the Curlow Creek, Carney attempts to divest himself of everything that is material, human, and earthly. Adair's reaction reveals him to be reading Carney's act as the concluding scene in the rather difficult and painful life that the latter has led. Both Adair and Carney, in fact, appear to be aware of something fundamental and primordial that lies beyond the bath and (even) the execution. Carney, for instance, gets rid of the grime, the muck, and the blood-clots that mar his body. As he cleans his feet off dirt and sweat to reveal their paleness, he seems to be giving up on the part of his self that is linked with the business of his flesh, with his corporeality. In the same vein, Adair too seems to reach a 'quiet' realization, a sense in which the immediate context of his meeting with Carney—a legal obligation to oversee the latter's execution—seems redundant and irrevocably trivial. Witnessing Carney's bath, in other words, makes Adair reach a stage in emotional and cognitive terms where the apparently ordinary leads to an awareness of some potent force that exceeds it thoroughly.

The man reached down, scooped up a double handful and splashed it over his head...Slowly, with what appeared a loving care for the heaviness of his own flesh, he began to wash from his body the grime, the caked mud, the dried blood of his wounds...

And against the sunlit channels that cut the sandy bed beyond, with its occasional stunted shrubs and bushes, and the grey-green foliage of the farther bank, his largeness bulked and imposed itself, the knotted shoulders, the breast to which the tatters of his thin shirt clung like a second skin, its shocking whiteness...

Slowly the man turned and stood with lowered head, observing with a child's interest the paleness of his feet through the swirling water. Almost done with himself now. With the business of washing off the long accumulation of dirt and sweat and blood, with the heaviness of the flesh...

...And at last it was enough. The man simply stood, staring down at his clean feet through the running water. The last of the world's muck was off.

...And Adair?

He too stood watching. Relaxed. Quietened. Subdued to the rhythm of the man's reaching down, time after time, to the water and letting handfuls of it gush then trickle over his neck.

It should finish here, he thought. This is the natural end.

In the man's intense absorption in his task, and his own in watching, was a quietness he had been reaching for, he felt, for the whole of his life, for so long that he could not have said when the yearning for it, amid so much fret and action, had first come to him. Years back, in another country. When he had had no notion—how could he?—of who it was who would be standing here, in what as yet unimagined landscape, watching an action so simple that it was hardly an action at all--

The man looked up then. Their eyes met. The moment was broken. The man moved, lifted his foot from the water, set it down in the clinging grains of sand. Returned, Adair thought, to this other condition we are bound to. Both of us. All of us. The insufficient law. (Malouf, 198-201)

Sadly, Carney and Adair's cognizance of something fundamental compared with the filth and stain of everyday human existence has gone unnoticed in most critical commentary on *The Conversations at Curlow Creek*. Don Randall, for instance, in his otherwise fine study of some of Malouf's work seems to have underread Carney's gesture of giving up on his corporeality in the face of something that renders the body immaterial. As he believes that it is the body that serves as the site of socio-political resistance in Malouf's novels, he overlooks phrases in the bathing scene such as 'paleness of his feet', 'done with himself', and 'heaviness of the flesh' that suggest the opposite i.e. the transience that Carney comes to recognize as the essential quality of corporeality. Unsurprisingly, as a consequence of holding such a view, Randall reads Adair's experiences with Carney as signifying a profitable exchange or transaction for the Irish sheriff. He suggests that 'Adair draws a personal, developmental profit from Carney' as, according to him, Carney is the 'abject other' who possesses 'unconquerable vitality'. (Randall, 159-160)

In contrast with such readings of the bathing scene, the present paper understands it as underlining Adair's realization of his own finitude, of the certainty that he like Carney will also meet the end someday. This suggestion is drawn from the work of the German thinker

Martin Heidegger, specifically the Second Division ('Da-sein and Temporality') of his most well-known treatise *Being and Time*. (Heidegger, 213-398)

As John Haugeland and Richard Polt argue, Heidegger's discussion of death in the Second Division of *Being and Time* is premised on a distinction between mortality on the one hand and perishing and demise on the other. Mortality is a condition, a possibility that belongs to us while demise is an actual happening, a one-time event. Perishing, however, is a biological phenomenon that occurs as organic functioning in an organism comes to an end. All organisms, including humans, eventually perish due to the onset of organic decay in their bodies. Heidegger presents death as the possibility that happens to all human life and underlines what may be an authentic response to the same. He calls the response *Vorlaufen* and it translates into "anticipation of" death or "facing up" to mortality. *Vorlaufen*, in other words, does not mean that we should be worried about when our demise may occur but that we should recognize and accept that our possibilities are finite and our choices, as a result, are limited by the finitude. In Haugeland's words, this implies that 'death is the possibility of no more possibilities.' (Haugeland, 179-183)

The choices we make then, as we anticipate death, are resolute as they lead to the world at large becoming clearer for us. We do not, in such a scenario, subordinate the past and the future to the present but imagine the present to be gaining a fresh and significant meaning from the past and the time yet to come. The enterprise is inherently risky as it entails our resolute commitment to living in the light of the certainty of our end. The strength of resoluteness, however, should not be overestimated as it cannot guarantee that we shall be authentic in the future as well. Resolutions, according to Heidegger, therefore need to be reaffirmed in the face of our tendency to fall into irresoluteness. (Polt, 86-100)

The question that needs to be asked, in the context of our discussion of Adair from Malouf's *The Conversations at Curlow Creek*, is whether Heidegger is calling on *us* to live authentically, to face up to the condition of our finitude. As far as Haugeland and Polt are concerned, they believe that Heidegger indeed conceives of a personal transformation to be the prerequisite to understanding *Being and Time*. Polt argues:

...Since some ways of life are more insightful than others, it seems clear that a philosopher must live as insightfully as possible. Heidegger claimed as early as 1919 that "genuine insights" require "the genuineness of a personal life". He consistently holds that the correctness of theories depends on a more basic unconcealment that pertains to our Being-in-the-world. It follows that seekers of truth, such as writers and readers of philosophical texts, must not only construct the right theories, but also *live* in the right way. (Polt, 94)

The epilogue to Malouf's novel answers, to a great extent, the question as to whether Adair continues to live up to the realization of mortality and finitude after Carney's execution. It relates a conversation that takes place between Adair and his friend Saunders over a meal. As they meet the day before Adair is to set sail for Ireland aboard the *Hyperion*, Saunders tells him about a rumor that has spread throughout the colony in New South Wales like wildfire. Most people there have come to believe that the Irish officer "O'Dare" had ultimately saved the convict's life. The following constitutes what is reported to Adair:

At the last moment Daniel Carney had been saved—that was the nub of it. The Irish officer who had been sent out to oversee the hanging had all along been in on the thing, but had played so skillfully his part of lawman and public official

that even the prisoner had been deceived. Some sort of unmasking had taken place during the night they had spent locked up together. At dawn the prisoner, still shackled, had hobbled down to the shores of a large lake, or inland sea. His chains were removed and he was allowed to wash. While the other troopers watched from a distance, a boat paddled by natives appeared, who were involved it seemed in the ordinary business of spearing fish. But suddenly the natives produced muskets, and under their covering fire, the officer and the convict both had clambered into the boat and been whisked away into the mist, the natives being in reality members of a settlement of disaffected ticket-of-leave men and runaway convicts who, over the nearly forty years of the colony's existence, had created, on the shores of a freshwater sea teeming with every sort of wildlife, a rival colony, a shadow Sydney as large almost as the original. Anyway, the officer, whose name was O'Dare, had become the hero of the hour, a true embodiment of the spirit of Irish resourcefulness and derring-do, and Daniel Carney a martyr miraculously resurrected; or O'Dare was a hateful renegade and confounder of the rule of law and Carney a dangerous rebel, once more on the loose. (Malouf, 207-208)

To check if there is any truth to the rumor, Saunders details further, the Governor of New South Wales wants to send out a party of men supplemented with horses, oxen, and collapsible boats to the sea. Saunders then asks Adair if he has indeed been offered the chance to lead the said party. Reluctantly, Adair accepts that the offer has been made but also adds in the same breath that he has politely declined the same. He suggests that he refused to lead the group as he had already added to the fascinating history of the colony in New South Wales, made his contribution to the mythology of the place. And, as if underlining his view, he attests to the "price" that he has had to pay for the strangeness that he has encountered there. The price is nothing but almost a giving up of his previous self, a self that did not have the resolve to face up to the truth of mortality and stayed limited to thinking of human existence in terms of limitless potentiality and possibility. That self is now being left behind in Australia and it will be the 'new' self which will sail to Ireland.

'Even if it was an involuntary one, mere fantasy, and made under a false name. The fact is,' he said after a moment, 'I am tired of all this. It has cost me something. You may laugh—I do myself—at the absurdities that have come of it, but the thing itself—'

He did not go on. The rest of what he might have said dived underground, like one of those elusive rivers they had been speaking of, and Saunders, one eyebrow raised like a hook, was left hanging. He had no wish to speak of Daniel Carney, still less of Fergus; to add to speculation and mystery by admitting he had his own purpose in being at Curlow Creek, and how much of himself he had left there—of his real self, of Adair—no less deeply buried than they were under a night, with its secrets and veiled desires, that was not the opposite of day but, for those who had entered its rich depths, the simultaneous underside of day, the swarming underside of life as it is lived, and as he would live it again, up there on the other side of the globe. (Malouf, 210)

The problem of reading the nature of the transformation that Adair undergoes in the colony inevitably leads us to ask questions about its rendering in the narrative of *The Conversations at Curlow Creek*. How are we to understand, for instance, the figuration of the rumor about the

Irish sheriff O' Dare letting the convict Carney escape in the novel's epilogue? Ostensibly, of course, it presents a rather sharp break within the realistic mode of telling that the narrative utilizes till the end. Yet, the rumor is also fundamentally that which is not true but is believed to be so. As a result, it marks the frontier of a zone in which the sharp lines between the actual and the possible are blurred. Or, to put the same in other words, the rumor signifies the fictional being (taken as) the true within the *fictional* world of Malouf's text.

Most criticism on Malouf's novel under discussion has unfortunately tended to read the episode about Carney's rumored escape in literal terms assuming, in the process, not only a stable subaltern position for the escapee-convict but also as some sort of deus-ex-machina for the narrative itself. Helga Ramsey-Kurz, for instance, argues in the essay 'Lives Without Letters: The Illiterate Other in *An Imaginary Life*, *Remembering Babylon*, and *The Conversations at Curlow Creek*' that 'the ultimate intangibility [of the illiterate and disappearing other] renders the narratives that tried to contain him incomplete.' And, in the process, the readers of Malouf's novel come to doubt the text's very reliability. (Ramsey-Kurz, 126-127) Departing from such readings of the novel, the present paper pays attention to the way the form of the novel itself has been understood to undertake a critique of the canonically established stringent binary distinction between the fictional and the real. Additionally, it underlines the fact that the figuration of the counterfactual in fiction necessarily entails the latter playing out only against the horizon of possibility and, therefore, history. In other words, the counterfactual cannot be understood if it is divorced from the historical context which surrounds it in the first place—the context of colonial crime and punishment in colonial New South Wales, for instance.

The noted critic Frank Kermode has identified the form of the (modern) novel as being characterized by the imperative to reimagine the relationship between fiction and reality. He suggests that modern novelists (must) allow room for different versions of reality, "including what some call mythical and what some call absolute", despite the paradigmatic form that they inherit from their preceding writers. (Kermode, 132) Read in this vein, the rumor that marks the epilogue of *The Conversations at Curlow Creek* is therefore that which the people in provincial New South Wales take *as if* it were the truth and their gesture indicates the incontrovertible mingling of the real with the imaginary. Drawing on Sartre's reflections on the novel, Kermode explains this "as if" as follows:

Novels, says Sartre, are not life, but they owe our power upon us, as upon himself as an infant, to the fact that they are somehow like life. In life, he once remarked, 'all ways are barred and nevertheless we must act. So we try to change the world; that is, to live *as if* the relations between things and their potentialities were governed not by deterministic processes but by magic.' The *as if* of the novel consists in a similar negation of determinism, the establishment of an accepted freedom by magic. We make up *adventures*, invent and ascribe the significance of temporal concords to those 'privileged moments' to which we alone award their prestige, make our human clocks tick in a clockless world. And we take a man who is by definition *de trop*, and create a context in which he isn't. (Kermode, 135)

Moreover, as argued by Catherine Gallagher in her acclaimed work on counterfactual characters in fiction, the counterfactual cannot contradict the historical and must function in its backdrop. With regard to the representation of Napoleon in Tolstoy's fiction, especially *War and Peace*, she argues that the Russian writer takes great pains in his narrative to create the impression that 'the fictional moments are plausibly consistent with the historical record'.

Additionally, she suggests that though Tolstoy's narrator attempts to build a case against Napoleon's importance as an *individual* in the way French and European histories have turned out over the last three centuries or so, he is remarkably precise in his account of the events of the Battle of Borodino. He, in fact, accurately describes the Emperor's whereabouts, his positions, his speeches, and his commands. (Gallagher, 320)

Even if one were to go with the argument presented in this paper thus far, it would perhaps still not be unreasonable to ask if our daily lives, our very quotidian existence is indeed marked by the event of the unexplainable. Experiences like the one that Adair has in New South Wales, it would seem then, are extraordinary and terribly rare even as they have the capacity to alter the mode of being of those who go through them. Arguing in this manner, one could suggest that such occurrences are *impossible* in the real, material world we inhabit despite Heidegger's sincere belief in the mutual translatability of thought and action in the anticipation of death. Derek Attridge's argument about "everyday impossibility" presented in his celebrated study *The Singularity of Literature* throws some significant light on this problem.

Attridge argues that the event, in that it is extraordinary, does not necessarily imply that it is uncommon, rare, or impossible. For him, the wide scale on which creativity and inventiveness get expressed— "from the minute to the monumental"—is a testament to the fact of their everydayness. Attridge takes the example of the everyday phenomenon of 'laughter' to buttress his point further. He suggests that we laugh as we respond to otherness and the response manifests in terms of a physico-psychological affirmation of a work's inventive coalescing of diverse cultural materials. And even if there exist multiple explanations for laughter, none of these can predict as to when and where it might erupt. For Attridge then, laughter is an unpredictable, eventful response to a singular event. (Attridge, 133-134)

On the basis of the above discussion, it can thus be argued that Malouf's *The Conversations at Curlow Creek* maintains a delicate balance between historical plausibility and fictional possibility in its depiction of the events surrounding the execution of the escapee-convict Carney under the supervision of the Irish sheriff Adair in colonial New South Wales. The contextual accuracy, as attested to by the accounts of historians discussed in the beginning of the present paper, provides a well-laid out backdrop for nascent prospects to develop and prosper in the novel's narrative. The possibility in question, of course, is Carney and Adair's realization of their necessary and inevitable finitude which not only indicates the transience of their corporeality but also underlines the limits of their self-identification—in terms of nationality, nature of work, and humanity—in the process. The rumor about Carney's escape that Adair does virtually nothing to curtail is a testimony of the latter's resolute commitment to the force of having witnessed, contemplated, and realized the essential end that all humans must encounter and live in responsible anticipation of.

The question that faces us thus, to paraphrase the title of Nikolai Chernyshevsky's 1963 novel, is what is to be done in the present scenario when we read Malouf's novel under discussion. The question is especially important for a society like contemporary Australia that finds itself sharply polarized and at the crossroads on a variety of issues like climate change and the fear of mass extinction, the 'place' of the aboriginal peoples in the 'national' imaginary, gun-control, checks on immigration, and the significance or otherwise of religion in an increasingly secular, scientific, and modernizing milieu. It would seem in this situation that works like *The Conversations at Curlow Creek* would hardly have anything to contribute to these pressing concerns. However, if we were to carefully peruse the current debates on climate change and the Anthropocene, for instance, it would appear that the novel's suggestion about a balance

between non-identitarian historical awareness and our acceptance of our necessary and inevitable finitude can indeed be of great relevance.

Let us take, for example, the case of Fernando Flores and B. Scot Rouse's articulate argument about the relationship between ecological finitude and ontological finitude. In the essay 'Ecological Finitude as Ontological Finitude: Radical Hope in the Anthropocene', they argue that our collective undoing of the hospitality extended to us by our planet implies and presents itself in the backdrop of the constitutive susceptibility of all human worlds to meet their eventual collapse. However, the fact that we are dying, according to them, does not absolve us of the responsibility towards future generations to emerge in a new world. In other words, even as we cannot imagine what that world would be from our present perspective, we must bring about practices that prepare genuine and fresh possibilities for those yet to arrive on the scene.

How can we bring about such practices? Flores and Rouse suggest that we need to be increasingly receptive to whatever is gathering in the present, in the historical moment that we inhabit. This would entail, for instance, recognizing and creatively responding to the fact that 'new practices, along with new entities, technologies, identities, and ultimately new understandings of what is important and possible, *emerge on the margins of the present* and shape our trajectory into the future.' (Italics in original. Flores and Rouse, 184) The development, they believe, would lead to the appearance of a new configuration of practices that will cast a fresh light on the horizon of our possibilities as human subjects. They term this initially unfocused and faint but revitalizing glow *fulgor*, in line with the Heideggerian sense of *Lichtung* i.e. the open space or field in which events occur.

Wouldn't it be fair to say then that Malouf's novel *The Conversations at Curlow Creek* also participates in the process of making us increasingly aware of our historical present? By portraying Carney and Adair as cognizant of their inevitable finitude as human beings in a specific socio-historical context, it indeed invites us to consider the manner in which we can understand the very now in which we exist and respond to it in new and creative ways.

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