Malouf’s invisible city: The intertwining of place and identity in Johnno

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By the time poet David Malouf wrote Johnno (1976), his first work of prose fiction, he was in his late thirties and living in the Renaissance city of Florence. Both European Florence and antipodean Brisbane mirror and enfold the novel’s eponymous hero, Johnno, and his narrator-creator, Dante. The Florentine poet, and by extension his medieval trappings, resonate throughout a tale about growing up in a frontier town far removed from the cosmopolitan centres of the Northern Hemisphere. This Italian connection can be explored further by considering Italo Calvino’s Invisible Cities (1997) alongside Johnno. The depiction of Venice in Calvino’s novel can operate as a point of contrast and comparison to the river city of Brisbane, conjured by Malouf’s Dante.

Johnno and Dante are aware of the bigger world beyond their childhood town, which means that their fates are sealed as wandering heroes. Even Johnno’s nickname, ‘Dante’, evokes the glamour of distant Italian cities (1976: 49). Tantalisingly, we never do find out Dante’s actual name — the one ‘sewn into’ his ‘gym things’ (1976: 49). The tactile reality of a proper name stitched inside the fabric of sporting clothes is perhaps too solid to know, or too corporeal to enunciate. It remains buried beneath the many silences and secrets that propel Malouf’s ode to a place that once — to borrow an image Calvino uses for the fantasy location of Isidora, one of his Invisible Cities — threatened to ‘[contain] him as a young man’ (1997: 8).

Of course, Calvino was not referring to Malouf’s Johnno, and it is fair to assume that neither writer knew of the other at the time they were working in the 1970s. Invisible Cities was first published in Italian in 1972 and its English translation became available in 1974, a year before Johnno. Yet it is worth recognising how Calvino’s poetic meditation on Venice is strangely evocative of the watery terrain of Brisbane. In particular, his labyrinthine metropolis resonates with the winding of Brisbane’s unique river that Malouf describes as disorienting, unlike the ‘Thames, or the Seine, or the Tiber or the Arno’ (1976: 5). The invisible nature of Malouf’s Brisbane and Calvino’s Venice is tied to the idea that both are configured and flooded by water — making certain landmarks temporarily imperceptible. Moreover, the literary rendering of these two cities has the effect of turning their physical reality into a ghostly outline. Calvino’s tribute to Venice with its alabaster columns and sculptured canals, offers a striking contrast to Brisbane’s unwieldy landscape.
of mudflats and mangroves. The importance of Europe, and in this case one of its most celebrated cities, operates as a counterpoint to the unknown town of Brisbane.

**The intertwining of place and identity**

The themes of place and identity interlock in *Johnno*. Most obviously, they connect with Malouf’s depiction of Brisbane as a physical and fictional phenomenon. Brisbane is the backdrop and central mediating principle through which Dante’s and Johnno’s friendship is enabled. Much like the multi-faceted character of Calvino’s Venice, Malouf’s Brisbane is evocative of a complex terrain that conceals things in fostering interior, psychological musings. The internal workings of Dante’s mind reveal an awkward character coming to grips with his individuality. Johnno is central to his coming of age. In fact, his physical body — his youthful vitality and later his unhealthy bulk — functions as a key site through which Dante comes to locate himself. Place and identity are also linked to the novel’s classification as a work of semi-autobiographical fiction. There are echoes and parallels between Malouf and his literary creation, Dante, that blur the boundaries between character and author, fiction and non-fiction. Place as a city, landscape, body, state of mind and text is integral to the very possibility of identity, because these things mediate and articulate it. Although countless criticisms have addressed the significance of place and identity in *Johnno*, few have done so in terms of their intertwining character.

Michael Stanier’s (1994) “It’s All Lies!” David Malouf’s *Johnno* and Autobiography’ examines identity in relation to the novel’s memoir elements and how this feeds into wider cultural questions concerning Australia’s national identity. Martin Leer’s (1985) ‘At the Edge: Geography and the Imagination in the Work of David Malouf’ analyses place in terms of the many maps that abound in Malouf’s novels, short stories and poems’ (1985: 3). Vivienne Muller’s (1997) ‘Love, Lust and Landscape: Writing About Brisbane in the Last Twenty Years’ explores *Johnno*’s representation of post-war Brisbane, and how it is a site of ‘beauty and boredom’ (1997: 12). She describes the novel as ‘groundbreaking’ in offering ‘an ideological underpinning to place and perspective’ (1997: 13). Certainly Dante and Johnno use Brisbane as a punching bag in fighting for a distinctive identity, but how this is ideological is unclear. Muller asserts that *Johnno* is ‘about apathy, angst and antithesis’, which is not untrue, but the lyricism of Malouf’s prose, and the passion of Johnno’s rages, are too emotional to be apathetic (1997: 14).

Examining place and identity in *Johnno* carries the burden of its critical history. However, these themes require scrutiny because Malouf’s novella is about growing up. In all coming-of-age narratives, identity is central. What makes *Johnno* still vibrant and relevant is the beauty of its language. Malouf transforms the ugliness and pain of puberty into something aesthetic. Even Brisbane, the city that Johnno believes is incapable of poetry, is converted into an elegant place through potent images that move against the current of his angst and despair. Language itself is a place that enables a dynamic intertwining between visibility and invisibility, existence and disappearance. Language writes us as much as we write it. It traverses and shapes identity. It also has the power to erase it. Dante manages to dwell within the folds of his fine language in surviving adolescence.

The poeticism of Malouf’s prose offers readers, wherever they happen to be, with a vivid location that they can access as if returning to the place they had grown
up in (2000: 702). Sensory experience evokes this nostalgia. Malouf draws upon the olfactory power of Brisbane as an aromatic scent-laden sphere in conjuring memories of ‘glossy dark Moreton Bay figs’, whose fruits clutter the guttering of musty old houses (1976: 34). As a place that precedes and exceeds Malouf’s characters, Brisbane operates as a common denominator through which two different protagonists interact.

The vanishing weatherboard town of Dante’s imagination moves between transience and intransigence as the city’s colonial moorings stand solid while less durable structures are torn down, set ablaze, abandoned or rendered unlivable by catastrophic floods. Brisbane is built from the solidity of stone and the porosity of wood, with the latter perhaps too easily replaceable. The impermanence of Malouf’s weatherboard childhood house is lamentable. This once grand old home, lovingly described in his later short story ‘12 Edmonstone Street’, has long since been obliterated, replaced by a dull industrial site.

In all sorts of ways, Johnno is about lost things that pique and haunt the memory — things that are vaporous, like the earthy stench of the city’s mangroves, or the airy delicacy of its ‘tree houses’ (Malouf 1976: 20). The seemingly weightless elevation of houses ‘placed on stilts’ to escape destructive floodwaters elicits the ethereal character of Calvino’s Venice, a place that is always on the verge of disappearing (Calvino 1997: 35). What lies at the heart of Johnno is a conflicted relationship with a hometown and a deceased friend that is never quite reconciled. Such dissent creates a unique dynamic that inspires a tale that flows like the serpentine movement of Brisbane’s flooded river.

The hook
At the outset, we are hooked by the extended ‘time fuse’ of one of Johnno’s pranks (1976: 11). While sorting through the debris of his father’s documents, Dante comes across a copy of the Brisbane Grammar School Magazine of 1949, and his eye falls upon a strange photograph of the ‘Stillwater Lifesaving Team’ — strange because it does not picture twelve athletes but an odd thirteen (1976: 9). Eventually, Dante realises that ‘staring diagonally out of the frame’ is the bespectacled face of Johnno (1949: 10). A forgotten school gag becomes a lasting reminder of his friend’s defiance. Not only was Johnno not a member of the lifesaving team, he also never wore glasses. The joke is intensified by the fact that the spectacles have no lenses. As Dante marvels: ‘So the camera had lied. Or Johnno had’ (1976: 11).

By puzzling over who lied — the camera or Johnno — what is implied is that there is a strange honesty about his friend’s jokes. Although Dante sees Johnno’s joke as ‘a deliberate bending of the facts’, he also recognises that this trick is as carefully set up as Mr Peck’s camera (1976: 11). Photographs lie. They lie in the sense that their subject matter is telescoped, selected and edited, leaving the bigger world outside the frame unrecorded and unknown. In a sense, Johnno tricks the camera by foregrounding the orchestrated nature of formal photography. This pictorial record of Johnno’s sense of humour becomes the catalyst through which Dante narrates his life. He also repeats, almost as an apology, that he was ‘writing a book about’ Johnno ‘from the moment they met’ (1976: 12). It is with this feeling of predestination that Malouf’s narrative unfurls.
Initially, Johnno’s buffoonery ignites Dante’s memoir. But there is a serious side to these antics. His pranks rail against the conservatism of Brisbane society in the mid-twentieth century. He is a self-created anarchist, who in Dante’s eyes is also a living form of literature. Johnno accuses Dante of being a romantic when in fact it is Johnno who is the romantic. In attacking the mediocre and the ordinary, what he betrays is a deep longing for the dramatic and exciting. Johnno’s drunken and sober rages against friends and bystanders resist a way of being that is compromised and settled. His outburst in front of punters and housewives in the Tattersall’s arcade — ‘It’s all lies!’ — carries a dual sense of levity and seriousness. The heavy side of the equation is anchored in the anxiety of being nothing to no one in a no-place where people suffer without significance. Johnno announces that Brisbane is ‘too mediocre even to be a province of hell. It would have defeated even Baudelaire! A place where poetry could never occur’ (1976: 84). Over forty years later, Matthew Condon’s account of Brisbane also imagines it as a place whose dullness is characterised by a ‘lazy brown river that inspires no poetry’ (2010: 239). The embarrassment of living in what Dante describes as ‘the most ordinary place in the world’ leads to Johnno’s departure for more enticing spheres, followed a few years later by his earnest biographer (1976: 52).

In search of lost things

Writers, painters and poets all over the world have sought solace in places other than their homelands. For the American novelist Henry James, Europe and eventually England became his adopted home. James Joyce fled the gloomy environs of Catholic Ireland to gain refuge in Trieste, Zurich and eventually Paris. The Geraldton-born poet and novelist Randolph Stow departed Australia for England early in his writing career. The painter Jeffrey Smart left his hometown of Adelaide to find solace in Tuscany, where he and Malouf would later often meet up. The blurring of Johnno’s fiction and non-fiction can be found in the fact that its author also left Australia for England and then Europe — a sojourn that parallels Dante’s overseas experience. In Johnno’s case, he abandons Brisbane for Africa — which is perhaps surprising since it disrupts a tradition of leaving the new frontiers of America and Australia for the old world of Europe. One might at first wonder whether this is another one of his gags, yet it is not. He is trained in the earth-bound science of geology, and on this basis he gains employment in a copper mine (1976: 46, 97). This is unexpected because for so much of the novel we are led to believe that he is an intangible, incorrigible sprite incapable of solid work. The sudden idea that there might be something more to Johnno than his outlandish capers has the effect of making Dante question his own place in the world.

The importance of place as a built and natural environment is significant in Johnno. But in this book, place is not just about the terrain one occupies. It also includes the invisible and the intangible sphere of the imagination that traverses and influences one’s sense of selfhood. Leigh Dale and Helen Gilbert argue that one of the most recurring metaphors in Malouf’s writings revolves around ‘discursive contestations and relationships between bodies and landscapes’, where there is a rich interplay between what is central and marginal (1994: 86). The centre of Dante’s discursive and psychological world is both Johnno and his childhood memory of Brisbane. However, he also finds himself often displaced by a friend who is
never settled. Johnno’s identity is uncompromisingly fluid, making it difficult for his chronicler to locate himself in relation to him. Here, Dante wonders anxiously over Johnno’s change of attitude at school:

If Johnno was not Johnno where did any of us stand? . . . I was utterly bewildered . . . I had used him as a marker . . . I didn’t know where I was. What made me resentful, I think, was his refusal to stay still. I had found for Johnno a place in what I thought was my world and he refused to stay there and play the minor role I had assigned him. He had suddenly developed complexities of his own, complexities I hadn’t allowed for. (1976: 47–8)

Dante’s self-absorption is refreshing to read. What the passage reveals is the fragile nature of identity when it is contingent upon others — and, in this case, the unpredictable character of Johnno. The agonising question over one’s place and identity is repeatedly asked in Malouf’s novel. Before this moment of questioning, Dante recounts a favourite adage of his mother’s: ‘“Show me your company,” she would recite largely, “and I’ll tell you what you are”’ (1976: 19). Dante is not sure whether Johnno is his company and he suspects that if he were to ask for his friendship, then he would likely be rejected (1976: 19). Dante swings between being associated with Johnno while also not being quite good or bad enough to be in his gang. This sense of not belonging, or of not quite being one’s self, threads throughout the narrative. Dante’s utter bewilderment concerning Johnno does not stop at childhood — it permeates their relationship. This is felt most strongly during moments of farewell, where the awkwardness and uncertainty of their connection is made explicit:

Outside in the street we walked uncomfortably towards Johnno’s tramstop. I tried to think of something to say, or do, that would be adequate to the occasion, adequate to what I would want later to recall. But what? We were almost at the corner. Suddenly I was caught in a Dostoievskian bearhug. ‘Goodbye Dante,’ Johnno sobbed, close to my ear, and he was gone — (1976: 104–5)

Dante’s interior anguish is sensitively represented in this public scene, where he cannot find the words or actions befitting the occasion. Malouf’s use of repetition in the passage captures the anxiety of not knowing what to say, or how to act. In all of his apparent self-possession, Johnno acts for Dante. In this rare instance where Johnno speaks, he does what is most surprising, for he is not the jocular, teasing con artist we expect but an affectionate and emotional companion. This jars with Dante’s image of him as a cool and streetwise rogue. Dante moves in a daze, thinking, ‘Awful! Awful! Awful! I burned with embarrassment. I had just stood there, still and unresponsive . . . Awful! I had never been so ashamed in my life’ (1976: 105). This sense of deep shame conveys more than just a feeling of embarrassment. It suggests something deeper going on in the mind and heart of Dante, something to do with a secret self that has not been allowed to emerge. Much of the novel’s emotional heart lies in Dante’s deep sense of regret for never quite knowing his friend or fully accessing his mind. In this instance, it is about the pain of not knowing how to say goodbye. There is something profound about this kind of suffering — profound because it is true.

Dante’s overwrought sense of inefficacy is also suggestive of repressed sexual longing. Being gay in Brisbane in the mid-twentieth century was a crime, and even
later when it was legal it would have still been very difficult to deal with. However, Malouf’s preface to the novel’s 1998 edition asserts that Johnno is ‘not a gay novel in disguise’, and that if he had wanted to write a gay novel he would have done so (1998: xi, xiv). He goes on to acknowledge that although Johnno and Dante have same-sex experiences, they do not see themselves as being defined by their involvements (1998: xiv). Perhaps Malouf’s resistance to label Johnno a gay work of fiction is motivated by a desire to resist classification? Classifications serve a purpose, but they also have a tendency to narrow one’s purview. Certainly the novel chronicles a love relationship between two men: whether or not this means that it has to be understood as a gay novel remains unclear. The importance of identity and place is relevant here because Malouf’s refusal to locate his novel as a work of gay fiction leaves open other possibilities. It also means that he bequeaths his characters a kind of liberty that prevents them from being defined by their sexual experiences. This is a liberty not often acknowledged by normative heterosexuality.

Literary texts should also be expansive enough to generate all kinds of readings. Johnno is not a flimsy plot-driven narrative that provides a sketch of two male characters who cannot name their love. On the contrary, it is a carefully crafted work of fiction that provides readers with the opportunity to encounter the beauty of language. Dante’s pain and suffering concerning his friend Johnno is buffered and transformed into something aesthetic by his articulate and agile mind. The ability of art to make something beautiful out of misery should never be underrated. For example, Dante’s poetic imagination is able to transform Johnno’s ugly vision of Brisbane into something fine and resplendent:

I liked the city in the early morning. The streets would be wet where one of the big, slow cleaning machines had been through. In the alleyways between shops florists would be setting out pails of fresh-cut flowers . . . It was so fresh, so sparkling, the early morning air before the traffic started up . . . I had the feeling as I walked across deserted intersections, past empty parks with their tropical trees all spiked and sharp-edged in the early sunlight, that it might even be beautiful. (1976: 82–3)

The resistance to certainty, to saying outright that the scene is beautiful, captures part of the novel’s charm. Dante’s refusal to be emphatic reveals a searching and inquisitive mind. There is a generosity in Dante’s early morning vision, where florist shops, deserted streets, parks and spiky tropical trees reveal themselves in the sparkle and shine of an emerging sunlight. The poetic figures of assonance and alliteration call up a fanciful city that shimmers and gleams while its citizens sleep. Dante’s affirmation of Brisbane’s distinctive qualities — its fecundity, extraordinary sunlight and heavy air — counters Johnno’s savage rages against a place that to his mind is ugly and boring. Here Malouf’s narrator almost embraces the Florentine poet’s love for his city, described in Johnno as being ‘immense’ in fulfilling ‘his whole being’ (1976: 51). The Florentine Dante’s affirmation of his city is unequivocal, whereas for Johnno’s Dante there is a resistance to accepting Brisbane as a force that has shaped his existence. In fact, this is considered a ‘fearful prospect!’ (1976: 51). The exclamation mark mimics the spontaneity of speech. We can almost hear Dante’s sense of alarm. He elaborates that, ‘Brisbane is so sleepy, so slatternly, so sprawlingly unlovely!’ (1976: 51). The alliteration here is evocative of the sultry somnolence of South-East Queensland’s summer weather.
Malouf’s invisible city

Malouf’s Australian Dante wanders the streets in Brisbane in search of ‘one simple object’ that ‘might be romantic, or appalling even, but there is nothing’ (1976: 52). And so he comes to the grim conclusion that Brisbane is ‘simply the most ordinary place in the world’ in a state that he believes to be a joke (1976: 52). His deep sense of loathing is extended to include Australia. As he asks, ‘Why Australia? What is Australia anyway?’ (1976: 52). The country is ‘Impossible! Hardly worth thinking about’ (1976: 53). However, Dante — and by association his author — think about Australia a great deal. Frequently, Dante thinks about Brisbane, Queensland and Australia. Unlike Johnno, who leaves as soon as the opportunity arises, Dante hangs on for three more years before departing. He waits so long in the hope that life might reveal itself ‘here, on home ground, where I could recognise the terms. In Europe, I thought, some false glamour might dazzle me out of any recognition of what was common and ordinary’ (1976: 109). His tenacity in seeking answers ‘here’ is not rewarded as his expectations shrivel ‘into nothing like burning cellophane’ (1976: 110). Although we encounter a defeated Dante, the beauty of his language manages to retrieve a form of aestheticism, even in his despondency. The image of his hopes set ablaze and shrivelling up like the torrid burning of cellophane leaves a chemical smell of depression. After giving his hometown a chance and being disappointed, he follows his friend, who by now has been away for over three years.

Purification

In a relatively rare moment when Johnno speaks, Dante records his rage against a city, state and country against which he has railed for years:

I’m going to shit this bitch of a country right out of my system . . . Twenty fucking years! How long do you think it will take me, do you think, to shit out every last trace of it? At the end of seven years you’re completely new . . . New fingernails, new hair, new cells. There’ll be nothing left in me of bloody Australia . . . I’ll say to myself as I squat on the dunny, there goes another bit of Australia . . . And at the end of seven years I’ll have squeezed the whole fucking continent out through my arsehole. I’ll have got rid of it forever. All this. (1976: 98)

What is striking about Johnno’s unfettered anger is its scatological character. The idea of expelling Brisbane out of one’s arsehole is visceral and ugly. Calvino’s description of Beersheba, which operates as another variation on the city of Venice, also describes the obscenity of excrement as the ‘prolonging route of human bowels, from black hole to black hole’ (1997: 112). For a moment, both Malouf/Johnno and Marco Polo/Calvino — the boundaries between characters and authors are porous here — jolt us into remembering the abject reality of our bodies, whose shit ‘splatters against the lowest subterranean floor’ (1997: 112).

Twenty years later, Andrew McGahan’s first novel, Praise (1992), also set in Brisbane, embraces a scatological sensibility through crude references to the body. In both Johnno and Praise, the failings of human bodies are symbolic of a larger and more general failing in society. In these novels, Brisbane is both the source and symptom of a generalised depression that is difficult and grotesque. McGahan’s Praise is also about growing up in this city. Early in the novel, its first-person
narrator, Gordon, sets a bleak and tactless tone by offhandedly describing his defecation: ‘And then I was on the bowl, letting the shit go’ (1992: 5).

The era of McGahan’s novel is not Brisbane during and soon after World War II, but a town that has weathered two decades of Joh Bjelke-Petersen’s government and the political fallout of the Fitzgerald Inquiry in the late 1980s. There is a consistent mood of depression in Praise that is sustained by its disaffected narrator. This resonates with the character of Dante as a young adult. Once he grows out of his childhood romance with war, and after the three-year absence of his histrionic friend Johnno, Dante finds himself at a loose end. The twenty-something narrator-characters of Gordon and Dante similarly experience Brisbane as a nether region of tedium offering no grand romance, but operating instead as a tepid backdrop to their desultory lives. However, unlike Dante, Gordon is content to be directionless since this means he can lounge indefinitely in a drug-induced haze.

Interestingly, Nathanael O’Reilly argues that Johnno is representative of a ‘long tradition in Australian fiction of disparaging suburbia’ that is connected to another ‘long tradition of disparaging most Australians’ (2006: 20). Certainly, Johnno’s rages and Dante’s disappointment attack the provincial character of a town whose insularity is at odds with the cosmopolitanism of European centres. However, ‘the long tradition’ to which O’Reilly refers to was arguably not so lengthy when Malouf penned his first draft of Johnno in the early 1970s. At this time, Patrick White’s work gave powerful literary expression to this sentiment. His 1963 short story, ‘Down at the Dump’, dramatises the small-mindedness of suburban life. But not all of his characters are poisoned by parochial values: three protagonists challenge convention by breaking from a kind of stultifying conservatism that confines women’s sexuality to marriage, and that tries to maintain class difference.

This short story, published a decade before Johnno, offers a great deal of hope by placing faith in the young Meg Hogben and Lummy Whalley, who strike up a genuine friendship despite the hypocritical values of their parents (1963: 172). In the spirit of White’s short story, Johnno also affirms the value of friendship. The rapport between Dante and Johnno is developed through navigating the conservative sphere of Brisbane. The suburban values of their environment provide the needed element of conflict against which Johnno and Dante are able to define themselves. By default, Malouf’s vision of suburbia is affirming because it enables identities to be forged and an important friendship to flourish.

There is no ideal world or landscape ingrained in Australian literature. The search for an ideal sphere is tied to the desire for purity and perfection. Johnno provides a very wise answer to this pursuit by showing its futility. The material reality and fragility of our bodies, and by extension our built environments, consume and exhume us in all sorts of symbolic and elemental ways, which means that no matter where we live we will always be burdened by our mortal limits.

The larger than life character and body of Johnno are certainly not exempt from being affected by his environment. This is particularly the case when Dante finally catches up with him in Paris, finding an emaciated figure looking surprisingly fragile, unlike ‘the big, raw-boned’ friend of four years ago (1976: 114). Although Johnno has not yet hit the seven-year mark of renewal, Dante sees a transformed character:
I also saw now what it was that had happened to Johnno, what it was that was so different about him. His violence was no longer a private disorder. It was part of a whole society’s public nightmare. He was free of himself. Cured. (1976: 120–1)

It seems that Johnno has met his match in Paris, since his violence is ‘no longer’ a distinguishing factor, but a generalised social ‘nightmare’. To be ‘free of himself’ in the sense that he is not so easily individuated is perhaps not a cure but another way of being imprisoned. In truth, Johnno is desperate to get out of Paris and escape poverty. Talk of visiting other European countries such as Sweden or Spain is a passing fantasy, as is the ultimate dream of going to Nepal — a land of purification in Johnno’s mind (1976: 123). Greece is another option, but for now he cannot afford to go anywhere except to the Christian Dior Salon near the Champs Elysée, where he admires ‘taller than lifesize’ models whose make-up and skimpy clothing provide an odd religious experience (1976: 125–6). Finally, Johnno settles in Athens, where he claims to be ‘re-generated’ and ‘resurrected’ (1976: 130). When Dante reconnects with him there, he finds that this resurrection has produced a plumper version of his friend. Johnno’s ‘larger possibilities’ are embodied in a fast-developing flesh (1976: 131). No longer a lean and hungry Parisian, in this state Johnno strikes Dante as forced to the point of being false. Again the question of identity is foremost, with Dante wondering over Johnno’s behaviour and how it could be anchored to his ‘vision of him’ (1976: 131).

It seems that purification is impossible, even if the body can regenerate itself every seven years, because Johnno is not ever free of himself — at least not as long as Dante is his biographer. He is trapped within Dante’s version of events, it being only Dante’s point of view to which we have access.

Home

In the final chapters of Johnno, the two friends return to their city of origin. It is Christmas time and Dante is in a difficult love affair with a girl from Grafton. The unnamed woman is the reason for his return — not, to his parents’ disappointment, a job. After four years abroad, the narrator feels as if nothing has changed. The promise of purification has failed. The desire for enlightenment is also unreachable. Dante feels that he has returned to a city of ghosts, of which he is now one. Then, when he is at his most desolate, looming out of the rubble of his memories and emotions comes Johnno, walking along Queen Street looking huge in ‘an olive-green safari jacket, shorts, desert boots’ and with him is a ‘spring-haired figure’ identified as the Mango (1976: 145). Out of the darkness, Johnno has unexpectedly appeared — this time as a ghost himself. Neither Dante nor the reader finds out the reason for his return. We are only told that he has a well-paying job as an oil surveyor in the Condamine region.

Whatever happened to destroy his dreams of Nepal and its purifying powers remains unknown. Dante muses over the seven-year journey that took Johnno to the Congo, Paris, London, Hamburg and Athens, only to return to Brisbane and, worse still, to the remoteness of the Condamine. Perhaps the only clue to his return can be taken from drunken mutterings about destroying the myth (1976: 149). Whatever myth Johnno is referring to in his tanked depression is never explained, just as his demise soon afterwards remains a mystery.
The bloatedness of Johnno’s ghostly reappearance on Queen Street foreshadows his death by drowning. The question of suicide remains open. However, Dante tends to the side of suicide as he contemplates the terrible irony of his friend who, in the end, is consumed by Australia. Sadly, he never ‘freed himself of the whole monstrous continent’, instead becoming one of its many drowning victims (1976: 151). Alternatively, Johnno’s embrace of death as the final frontier carries a resolute defiance. Perhaps it is he who has consumed the whole monstrous continent in being not its casualty, but its most brazen conqueror. These two opposed possibilities remain unresolved like the ambiguous love relationship between these friends.

What survives the book is a poetic sensibility, wedded to an enduring sense of resistance born out of the struggle to forge an identity that is not compromised by the values of growing up in big country town — indeed, a colonial outpost. The aestheticism of Malouf’s language also allows ‘a different city to appear’, one that is conjured, transfigured and even temporarily rendered ‘crystalline’ (1997: 155). As a third character, Brisbane locates, exasperates and ultimately contains its two male protagonists. Malouf deploys the well-known trope of using a city to shape the actions and emotions of characters. He is acutely aware of this tradition — in fact he was determined, in his own words, to put Brisbane ‘on the map’ and ‘to make it, in all its particularity, a place that would exist powerfully in the lives of readers in the same way that Dickens’s London does, or Dostoevsky’s Petersburg’ (2000: 701). He certainly achieved this ambition.

Johnno sings like a poem whose melody is at once elegiac and whimsical, nostalgic and satirical. The world of Brisbane as both a body and a mind encircles and contains its two young male characters. Perhaps in the end Johnno does escape from his psychological and environmental hell by determining his death. This, however, is not Johnno’s finale. The phrase, ‘it’s all lies’ survives him, as does his photographic prank. Dante’s memories also keep him alive.

Malouf’s poetic rendering of mid-twentieth-century Brisbane also keeps alive old memories and desires that otherwise would have by now become invisible. Part of the power of Johnno is caught up within Dante’s desire for a city that spreads beyond his body, becoming a version of Calvino’s ‘immense metropolis’ that both liberates and enfolds (1997: 162–3). The promise of fulfilling such potential germinates secretly within us all, and among the places we inhabit.

References
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