

Antonella Riem Natale

The Sea has Many Voices. The Fluid Mother-Goddess World in David Malouf's Ransom

Abstract I: This paper draws on the critical approach implemented by the Partnership Studies Group (PSG, University of Udine), which applies Riane Eisler's *partnership* model to literary texts and focuses on the values of caring, empathy and creativity, often stereotypically described as "feminine", in David Malouf's novel *Ransom* (2009). I will illustrate how in *Ransom* Malouf talks about men, violence and death while gracefully revealing a more sensitive, sensible and different approach to life, which adds a *partnership* dimension, tied to a Goddess figure, to Homer's story of war, pride and grief, and goes beyond the epistemological violence of 'dominator' systems. This more equitable mode of living is one of the fundamental tenets of Malouf's work.

Abstract II: Questo saggio si basa sull'approccio critico del Partnership Studies Group (PSG, Università di Udine), che applica il modello della *partnership* di Riane Eisler ai testi letterari e si focalizza sui valori di cura, empatia e creatività – spesso descritti in modo stereotipato come 'femminili' – nel romanzo *Io sono Achille* (2010) di David Malouf. Illustrerò come in *Io sono Achille* Malouf parli di uomini, violenza e morte mentre rivela con grazia un diverso approccio alla vita, più sensibile e sensato, che aggiunge una dimensione di *partnership*, collegata alla figura della Dea, alla storia di Omero di guerra, orgoglio e dolore, andando al di là della violenza epistemologica dei sistemi androcratici/'dominatori'. Questo modo più equanime di vivere è uno dei fondamenti dell'opera di Malouf.

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This analysis is the result of an interdisciplinary critical approach to literatures in English whereby the Partnership Studies Research Group (PSG) applies Riane Eisler's 'partnership model'¹ to literary texts. The PSG group explores the way authors writing in the varieties of English, including those of indigenous populations, use the coloniser's 'word' to transform the 'dominator' values of colonisation and globalisation into cooperative and 'partnership' codes², where the dynamics at work are caring and sharing rather than exploiting and dominating. In particular, this paper focuses on values that are often stereotypically described as 'feminine'³ in David Malouf's novel *Ransom* (2009), in order to demonstrate how, for the author, these values – present in both men and women – are at the foundation of our humanity and should be at the basis of our society⁴, thus adding a 'partnership' dimension to the classic Homer's story of war, pride and grief.

Award-winning Australian writer, David Malouf was born in Queensland in 1934 to a Lebanese-Christian father and English-Jewish mother. This 'double' (or multiple) origin gave the writer an intense sensitivity for whatever makes us more thoroughly 'human', which is always a focal point in his production. His work has been analysed according to many different critical perspectives⁵, and I myself, have over the years analysed his novels in many articles, focussing on manifold themes. His work, anyway, seems to best represent what the Partnership Studies Group intends when applying Eisler's partnership paradigm to literature. Malouf's narratives often propose models of human relationships (between men and men, women and women, men and women, young and old, etc.) oriented towards peace, mutual understanding and caring.

This is evident in *Ransom*, where Malouf talks about men, violence and death while gracefully revealing at the same time a more sensitive, sensible and different approach to life, which, if absent from the main scene, is always present in the background. The heroes involved unconsciously remember (and long for) a different, more intimate and spiritual relationship with life, 'surfacing' in their unacknowledged feelings, thoughts, fears and anxieties. One of Malouf's aims in

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his work seems to be dismantling and subverting the aggressive masculine 'dominator' ideology which 'rules' our world. In so doing he causes his male characters, who blindly adhere to it, to finally open their eyes – like King Lear at the end of his tragedy, whose awakening also encapsulates lost love and lack of intuitive understanding.

In what seems to be a solely male world, central is the pervasive influence exerted by 'feminine' (Harding 1971) and 'partnership' principles (Eisler 1987; 2007a; Riem Natale 2004a-b; 2007a; 2009; 2010a-b; Riem Natale and Albarea 2003; Riem Natale, Conti Camaiora and Dolce 2007; Riem Natale, Conti Camaiora, Dolce and Mercanti 2010). 'Dominator' views are tested in a very personal and intimate way, which leads to a final inner reconciliation, often embodied in the physicality of the small everyday things encountered in Nature and provided by the Earth Mother, or 'Queen of Heaven' (Stone 1976, 21). These are evident, most times, in the comfort of a silent welcome, in an embrace that is maternal and un-judging, fully accepting and forgiving, and which lulls pain, grief and horror into a deeper understanding of what it means to be truly and fully human.

Malouf's narratives frequently focus on male characters and masculine values, often displayed in the 'dialogue' and relationship between two men; in an interview Malouf affirms that his male characters are "really all one character [...] a way of externalizing a dialogue or a series of revelations" (Davidson 1983, 277)⁶. *Ransom* is no exception to this. Here Malouf's focus is on the 'dialogue' between Achilles and Priam, from one of the most memorable episodes in Homer's *Iliad*, where, after ten years of devastating war with the Greeks, the elderly Priam sets out into the unknown to 'ransom' his son's body from the much younger Achilles. In the *Iliad*, in a very moving scene, the two men meet in their common humanity and their destiny of grief and loss, Achilles' wrath is eased and the two weep together, share food and then sleep, for the first time after so many sleepless nights. For eleven days there is a truce, agreed upon so that Hector's body can be

given the full honours of a hero's death. The *Iliad* ends with the burial of the noble Trojan.

Ransom revolves around this episode, where the pivot of action and meditation are the figures of Achilles, hero of the Greeks, and Priam, king of Troy. Some pages are dedicated to their childhoods, Achilles' friendship and love for Patroclus (10-15), and Priam's shattering experience of war when he was only six, and when his pampered lordly childhood was transformed into a nightmare by war and destruction (63-75). Divided by a conflict, absurd like any other, Achilles and Priam as hero and King are united in their being men of importance, but most of all in their humanity, which is cleverly and deftly built and gradually revealed in the novel. Of possibly greater importance is a character introduced *ex novo* by Malouf in the story: Somax, the old carter who is hired with his two mules, (particularly important is the she-mule Beauty), to accompany Priam, and play the role of his Idaeus during this journey into unknown territories of being. Priam plunges into the 'new' possibilities that 'chance' and a feminine closeness to the other offer him. Another manifestation of Malouf's inner 'dialogue', Somax, with his simple wisdom, will be fundamental in Priam's journey, both from a practical and spiritual point of view, helping him make the leap into that new future he imagined when the Goddess Iris 'visited' him.

Reminiscent of tragedy and like *An Imaginary Life*, *Ransom* is divided into five parts, five acts that do not so much follow the actions of war and heroism, which are somewhat of a backdrop, but above all concentrate on the emotional education and final return to the 'feminine'¹⁷ values of forgiveness, compassion and reconciliation by the key male characters, Achilles and Priam.

Whether they are 'absent' from the scene or simply in the background, feminine figures are an important presence in the novel. Malouf is too gifted a storyteller not to accept that some of his readers, already knowing characters and main events of the *Iliad* would notice what is 'missing' from his narrative and wonder why.

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Clytemnestra and Helen, for example are not mentioned in the text, but theirs is a meaningful 'absence'. Clytemnestra, a central figure in classical mythology, sister or half-sister of Helen, is Agamemnon's wife. According to Riane Eisler (1987, 78-81), Aeschylus' trilogy the *Oresteia* (*Agamemnon*, *The Libation Bearers* and *Eumenides*, 458 BCE⁸), portrays the dramatic social transformation from a 'partnership' oriented to a dominator cultural paradigm. In *Agamemnon*, Queen Clytemnestra kills Agamemnon on his return from the Trojan War, as a punishment for having killed their daughter Iphigenia, purportedly taken with him to marry Achilles, but really to be sacrificed to the Gods in order to propitiate favourable winds. Clytemnestra makes clear to the audience that she has to execute Agamemnon, not because of her personal motherly grief, but according to her social role as head of the clan and queen, within the norms of a matrilineal society.

In *The Libation-Bearers* her son Orestes returns in disguise to kill her, to avenge his father. In the last play the *Eumenides*, or *Furies*, representing the 'old' feminine trinity of a more primordial order of things, are present at Orestes' trial in Apollo's temple at Delphi, the ancient sacred site for Goddess's rites⁹. The *Eumenides* are the protectors of the matrilineal society and executors of justice, and as such have been pursuing Orestes. A jury of twelve Athenian citizens presided over by Athena is to decide whether he is guilty or not of shedding his own blood. Their vote is even and thus Athena herself gives the final vote: Orestes is found not guilty as the mother is declared not to be 'parent' of what is called her child, but only the 'nurse' of the new planted seed that grows in her womb. Athena herself, born from her father's head, is proof that only fathers have a true blood-relation with their children. This total reversal of what is 'natural' represents the male –'dominator'– order being finally established and older 'gylanic'¹⁰ beliefs being either assimilated or disappearing 'underground'. Thus, for example, Delphos (uterus) became sacred to the god Apollo after the 'new' god killed the serpent Python protector of the more ancient Goddess cults. It was the priestess Pythia who originally gave

the Goddess's oracles in a trance and practised feminine rituals in Delphos, before Apollo replaced Her.

Helen is absent too, even if she is indirectly and often mentioned through the beautiful mule Beauty, an enchanter of men who will be remembered even more than all the human protagonists of the story, as we see in the concluding words of the novel: "a little black mule who is still remembered in this part of the country and much talked about. A charming creature, big-eyed and sleek, she bore the name of Beauty – and very appropriately too, it seems, which is not always the case" (219). Helen in the *Iliad* is said to "look terribly like the immortal Goddesses" (*Iliad*, 3.156-158), thus representing a different cultural paradigm, where a woman is free to choose her lover/husband and has the possibility of changing partner and divorce. In a *dominator* society like the Trojan, however, women are men's 'possession', existing simply to be used, taken or 'given', raped, sold or killed, according to their men's will, hence Helen's choice precipitated the Trojan War.

Clytemnestra and Helen are absent from *Ransom* because these two important figures in the myth are connected to a more ancient 'feminine' world and power structure. Even if at the time of the story both are still physically 'alive', the Goddess's world they stand for has been shattered, transformed from a 'partnership' (or 'gylanic') to a 'dominator' male world, where only war, violence and possession are central: "within the very structure of the contemporary male religions are the laws and attitudes originally designed to annihilate the female religions, female sexual autonomy and matrilineal descent" (Stone 1976, 228). These Goddess's representatives and priestesses have already been 'replaced', by more complacent and submissive women, who, for fear of being punished, accept their passive secondary role, their inferior position, and submit to the patriarchal society.

In *Ransom*, Hecuba, Priam's most important wife, mother of many of his sons, to a certain extent is one of these subjected women. She accepts the new male power-system, she agrees to her husband's many other women, she suffers the

effects of the war on her family and children, in spite of the great inner strength and power she shows when Priam talks to her of his plan to *ransom* their son's body (54-63). She represents a noble yet pathetic figure. In the *Iliad*, in order to entreat Hector not to face Achilles, she bares her breasts that fed him as an infant, trying to make him remember their powerful 'natural' bond in the physical body but to no avail. In the novel, the very bosom which bore Hector to the world becomes the seat of her immeasurable anger and fury. The same avenging fury moves the Eumenides and Clytemnestra, the difference being that a patriarchal dominant society does not allow Hecuba to act it out or do anything about it, except lament and grieve:

"I carried him", she whispers, "here, here", and her clenched fist beats at the hollow under her heart. "It is *my* flesh that is being tumbled on the stones out there. [...] I was in labour for eighteen hours with Hector. That is what I recall when I think of his body being tumbled over the stones and left out for the dogs to tear and maul" (51-52).

Hecuba vehemently reasserts her rights as mother, her physical and spiritual connection and tie to her children. Indeed, "the suppression of women's *rites* has actually been the suppression of women's *rights*" (Stone 1976, 228). In 'gylanic' societies, as elder woman having a prominent social role, as the wise old one who knows, her womb would be seen as the sacred cave of the Goddess's insight and intuitive intelligence constantly giving birth to harmony, wisdom and peace. Yet, another order of things 'rules' the world. Now she is allowed a limited space of power only within her family circle. She feels herself to be only an old and useless woman, and her womb empty and hollow for it cannot nurse the male's seed anymore. Her relationship with Priam, though, is deep and tender and Priam in his

confession to her, after the visitation of the Goddess Iris, tells her about his inner fears and pain thus acknowledging his vulnerability and her inner strength.

Hecuba, though, has interiorized the patriarchal norms and fixed rules and is "more tied to convention than she believes" (55). She is shocked by Priam's confession and by the dream-vision he intends to actualize of going to Achilles' camp without the regalia which would distinguish him. In his renewed connection with the Goddess, Priam understands that only by being 'vulnerable', only by acknowledging and accepting their own emotions, will men truly embrace 'chance', mutability and free will, and be included in the Goddess's vision once again.

Apart from Priam's fragility in his old age, his 'opening' to the 'new' is due to the apparition of Goddess Iris. Iris, the rainbow Goddess connecting Sky and Earth in her wonderful colours, is a testimony of the spiritual nature of even the smallest thing in the universe. It is a common belief in most ancient traditions that heaven was originally connected to earth through a rainbow. At the culmination of this divine pathway, the seven colours blend into a bright, white beam of pure light. Egyptians called these seven coloured 'veils' the Seven Stoles of Isis. Isis is connected to the Milky Way: in her cow form, her legs firmly planted in the four corners of the world, she overflows the cosmos with her milk, universal nourishment for body and soul (Walker 1988, 343-344). Iris/Isis, who brings her gift of freedom, novelty and 'chance' to Priam and humanity, is the "Oldest of Old, the Goddess from whom all becoming arose" (Stone 1976, 219). Iris probably began as a form of Kali-Maya, the pre-Vedic goddess of the rainbow, with her seven different coloured veils veiling and unveiling the Goddess's cosmic dance. Kali Maya is the Greek Maia, the virgin mother of Hermes; he is related to Iris being a messenger between humanity and the gods. Hermes is the 'trickster' who does not love violence but is satisfied with playing his flute, he is the winged god of travellers, thieves and rascals, protector of flocks and herds and concerned with fertility and

abundance, father of the horned Pan. Hermes will accompany Priam and Somax in the last part of their journey to Achilles' camp.

Connected to these divine presences, not only as a counterpoint but as a memento of the simplicity and beauty of all aspects, forms and expressions of life are two other women Malouf introduces who are significantly related to Somax and are 'common' people: his daughter-in-law and his granddaughter. In part three, when he sets out into the unknown with Somax, Priam will slowly come out of his rigid world of 'form' to enter the simple and ordinary way of life that the carter represents, especially in the way Somax talks about his private and innermost feelings concerning his family and sons. His daughter-in-law and the little granddaughter are the only survivors in Somax's family, his wife, his three sons and four daughters are all dead; their deaths still a vivid memory in Somax's mind. When he tells King Priam about them, Priam is struck by the difference between the carter's and his own feelings. Somax is full of love, tenderness and pathos, while accompanying a dead son to the world of death, while Priam is concerned mainly with the detached and outward forms and rituals dictated by his kingly role:

The realm of the royal was representational, ideal (124).

The truth was that none of his sons was in that sense particular.

Their relationship to him was formal and symbolic, part of the dreamlike play before the gods and the world's eye that is both the splendour and the ordeal of kingship (136).

Both Somax's daughter-in-law and his granddaughter are known only in their relation to him, not by any name. The first is beautiful in spite of her limp which is mentioned only by Hermes (156) but most of all she is a gifted worker. Her hands, her fingers know all the little tricks needed to prepare and bake the best pikelets or griddlecakes that bring joy to the heart (119). Priam, invited by Somax, tastes this joy, for "we're children of nature, my lord. Of the earth as well as of the gods"

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(121); that is children of the Goddess, also of the physical body, with all its joys and sorrows, as well as of Heaven and the soul. When he left in the morning, Somax's granddaughter, a little girl four years old, had a fever which worries him. He tells Priam how the girl once fell and lost blood: "we'd got a real fright I can tell you. I shook all over. I thought, 'I can't bear it, if anything happens to this little one, the last of my blood'. [...] But the truth is, we don't just lie down and die, do we, sir? We go on. For all our losses" (131). In the simplicity of these portraits lies the beauty of a life that Priam is now starting to savour, as if for the first time. Little things, the fresh cool water running over his feet (116-117, 122), the good sweet flavour of the griddlecakes (121), the stories told by Somax that arouse his curiosity and desire to know more (127-129), his own meditations and recollections (137-139):

And he looked at the old fellow who had revealed these things to him with growing respect.

He knew things. The life he had come from, and had to some extent brought along with him, was full of activities and facts that, for all that they were common and low, had an appeal (128).

Another 'feminine' presence in the novel, described and mentioned to a great extent, especially through Somax's pride in her, is his mule Beauty. Ironically enough for a work inspired by the story of how the 'beautiful' Helen provoked the Trojan war, the only real 'beauty' in the novel is this animal of burden. Often carrying their owners' weights and *soma*, and sometimes seen as stubborn and rebellious, they always symbolise hard physical work, resistance and resilience. Although this she-mule is responsible for the death of Somax's second son, he is nonetheless very fond of her because: "she had no notion of what she'd done" and "she's all I've got left of him. Her and the daughter-in-law, and the little girl" (141). "She is a sweet, warm and "charming creature, big-eyed and sleek" (219). Like her owner, Beauty too represents the little and the simple physical joys of life –

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a warm embrace, a welcoming look, a slight and able touch of the fingers, an aroma reminiscent of home.

Like the mule Beauty with her candid charm, Goddesses and women in the novel are very important with their ready cures, their physical and spiritual nurturing, their soothing comfort and the support they provide. Women's values become predominant also 'for' and 'in' men, after they abandon their superficial and stereotypical 'hard' stance and so express their humanity to the full. In doing so, they return to the childhood days of living in their mothers' world, governed by the principles of care, sustainability, love and compassion. Indeed, the novel opens with Achilles' memoirs of his sea-mother:

The sea has many voices. The voice this man is listening for is the voice of his mother. He lifts his head, turns his face to the chill air that moves in across the gulf, and tastes its sharp salt on his lip. The sea surface bellies and glistens, a lustrous silver-blue – a membrane stretched to a fine transparency where once, for *nine changes of the moon*, he had hung curled in a dream of pre-existence and was rocked and comforted (3, my italic).

This is Woman's cyclical world where life and death come naturally, according to the seasons of life; where life is not abruptly cut short by men's absurd 'unnatural' violence, but ends, when time comes, within the rhythmical pulsation of the Great Mother. Women live in 'partnership', their community governed by a 'feminine' understanding of Reality, well aware of the transitory nature of the physical world, and maintaining a constant dialogue with other world/s.

The sea in its ever-changing and eternal motion is connected to the lunar phases of waxing, full, waning – manifesting the tripartite structure of the universe (Donna 1994). Although the mighty, trident-bearing Poseidon, or Neptune, is now the dominant image of the sea-god, the sea originally belonged to the Mother: there

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was a female Posidaeja in Minoan culture (Walker 1988, 351-352) and many 'sea-mothers' mythologies have survived till now, especially in cultures for which fishing is an important means of survival (Eason 2001, 112-117). Achilles' sea-mother, Thetis, is the tranquil womb from which life originates. The Egyptian Temu is one name for this maternal Deep, or uterine abyss, from which the universe was born but there are other names for the sea goddess: Pelagia, Tiamat, Thamte, Marina, Aphrodite, Marga, Thalassa, Amphitrite, Mara, and Mary with her blue mantle and pearl necklace. Not only Achilles' mother is a Goddess, but also his Myrmidons (meaning *ants*), are directly connected Her, for they are "an Ant clan subject to the Goddess" (Graves 1961, 128). Achilles became their legendary king "presumably by marriage with the tribal representative of the Goddess" (Graves 1961, 432).

Achilles looks for the rocking and comforting watery welcoming of his sea-mother, Goddess Thetis, but now he is a man and a fighter ("the man is a fighter", 4). He is alone now; the responsibility of victory is in his hands, the guilt for Patroclus' death heavy on his hunched shoulders. He cannot take refuge anymore in his mother's arms:

But she had warned him from the beginning that she would not always be with him. [...] One day when he put his foot down on the earth he knew at once that something was different. A gift he had taken as natural to him, the play of a dual self that had allowed him, in a moment, to slip out of his hard boyish nature and become eel-like, *fluid*, weightless, without substance in his mother's arms, had been withdrawn. From now on she would be no more than a faint far-off echo to his senses, an underwater humming. He had grieved. But silently, never permitting himself to betray to others what he felt (5, my italic).

The eel echoes the figure of the serpent, always associated with women's cults and it is sacred in matrilineal societies. In ancient Egypt it symbolises primordial manifestation emerging from the deep waters of e-motion and creation, while in a 'dominator' and patriarchal society (Eisler 1987) there is an often untold but obvious and long-established constraint forbidding men from expressing their emotions.

Malouf adroitly conveys how Achilles, after having been separated from his mother in order to enter a purely 'male' world, loses his deep connection with the 'fluidity' and weightlessness of the Mother Goddess:

He had entered the rough world of men, where a man's acts follow him wherever he goes in the form of story. A world of pain, loss, dependency, bursts of violence and elation; of fatality and fatal contradictions, breathless leaps into the unknown; at last of death – a hero's death out there in full sunlight under the gaze of gods and men, for which the hardened self, the hardened body, had daily to be exercised and prepared (6).

This 'dominator' rough world of men, with its pain, loss and violent death is the outcome of a negation, the annihilation of what a man feels and of the softness that is always present together with the hard muscles. Such a negation leads men to violence – the only possible outlet for the depths of their Self, as we see in Achilles' unending and nightmarish wrath against Hector's dead body, a wrath which is actually only an expression of grief and guilt for Patroclus' death: "The tears he brings fall inwardly, his cheeks are dry. [...] But it is never enough. That is what he feels. That is what torments him" (33).

No violence can ever appease Achilles' grief, only something "new and unimaginable" (35) or rather ancient - that deeply buried sense of maternal and 'partnership', a feeling for the other, of compassion and care, almost killed in him,

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but still present, dormant, waiting to be revived, like that persistent, silent inner murmur, that “underwater humming” (5) of his mother’s voice: “He is waiting for the break. For something that will break the spell that is on him, the self-consuming rage that drives him and wastes his spirit in despair” (35).

In part two, on the other side of the war, the ‘enemy’, Priam, the grieving old man, is dreaming that ‘break’ into existence, like a profound revelation of the meaning of humanity, that something new and unimaginable which Achilles unconsciously seeks and needs. Through his vision of the rainbow goddess Iris, the messenger between worlds like Hermes who later helps Priam in his actual journey towards the Greek camp, Priam slowly but surely finds a new birth, a metamorphosis from his old self. He is ready to abandon his kingly role and dare to move out into the unknown, when he says so in his dialogue with a stunned Hecuba:

“But you are not *any* man”.

“That’s true. In one way I’m not. But in another, deeper way, I am. I feel a kind of freedom in that. It’s a feeling I like, it appeals to me. And perhaps, because it is unexpected, it may appeal to [Achilles] too: *the chance to break free* of the obligation of being always the hero, as I am expected always to be the king. To *take on the lighter bond of being simply a man*. Perhaps that is *the real gift I have to bring him*. Perhaps that is *the ransom*” (59-60, italics mine).

This humanity, the acceptance of being simply a man, a human being, is a meditation on the Goddess’s compassion, on the tranquil acceptance of equality beyond roles. The real gift, the real “ransom” which Achilles seeks is this human act of connection and empathy. Priam, the “ransomed” one (74), had already been tested by life. He had already experienced a kind of death and inner metamorphosis, at a very early age, when his royal family was destroyed by Heracles in another absurd, meaningless war. He has been saved from his destiny

as a war-slave, and given as a prize to his sister Hesione, after being picked up from a mob of dirty little terrified brats (63-75). Because of this experience, Priam, “the price paid. The substitute and pretender” (74), has always known, even if in the back of his conscious mind, that being King was simply an outward mask, a duty he must perform. Inside, he was something else: a spiritual being who could be visited by visions and prophecies, an old man who would venture out with Somax, a simple carter with his two mules, and give his wealth in exchange for his son’s body as well as for a new freedom – that of being something new and unimaginable, a ‘new’ being who accepts the possibility that he can ‘change’ things:

Chance?

[Hecuba] looks up quickly. Surely she has misheard.

“It seems to me”, he says, almost dreamily, “that there might be another way of naming what we call fortune and attribute to the will, or the whim, of the gods. Which offers a kind of opening. The opportunity to act for ourselves. To try something that *might force events* into a different course”.

She wishes she has misheard. *Words are powerful*. They too can be the *agents of what is new*, of what is conceivable and can be thought and let loose upon the world (61, my italic).

The creative and transformative power of words is a theme Malouf has cherished since *An Imaginary Life*, where Ovid talks to readers as if they were the gods humanity was on the verge of becoming: as if each was to become “the god who has begun to stir in our depths, to gather its being out of us, and will, at the other end of the great cycle that has already rocked our world with its quakings, have evolved at last and come into being” (Malouf 1980, 18). The greatest act of liberation is an act of ‘imagination’, revealed in words, and from which action

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follows. Priam, through the help of the Goddess Iris, opens himself to the new, accepts her invitation to let 'chance' and 'free will' enter his world, thus signalling to humanity the possibility of choosing and transforming what may seem 'given' and 'decreed' by the patriarchal Gods:

Seated close by him on the couch is the goddess Iris. She is smiling. Indulgently, he thinks. The soft light she appears in has a calming effect, and his heart opens to what she whispers in his ear. "Not a mockery, my friend, but the way things are. Not the way they must be, but the way they have turned out. In a world that is also subject to chance" (46).

As the world of the Goddess is one of cyclical motion and continual mutation, Iris reminds humanity about the possibility of transforming our destiny, welcoming again the world of renovation and fluidity. This is Achilles' inner state after meeting Priam: "some cleansing emotion has flooded through him [...] has cleared his heart of the smoky poison" (190) of revenge and rage. Achilles is tranquil now, his wrath eased and spent, the hard stance in him fallen away, he can now watch Hector's body in its "imperturbable calm" (189) and see in it a projection of himself, of his own (near) future: "Till he too, like Hector, is in here. Naked as he began" (194). He, too, will pass again into the hands of women, into that sacred room where they sponge and anoint the bodies of the newborn and of the dead, welcome them on earth or prepare them for their rebirth into the spiritual world. It is a place he "half-recalls and recognises" (192) from his childhood:

Suddenly he is there again – that smell of dried herbs cut with lye; they had come to fetch a bedsheet for his afternoon nap (192).

This is the first world we come into, he thinks now, this world of hot-water pitchers and oil jars and freshly laundered linen or wool.

And the last place we pass through before our body is done with it all. Unheroic thoughts.

[...] Achilles is unwilling to break away.

But the *women's presence is stronger than his own. This is their world* (193, my italic).

These may well be considered "unheroic" thoughts in a 'dominator' patriarchal culture, but if considered in terms of a 'partnership' paradigm, where the feminine freely and 'fluidly' dances the world into existence, what Achilles feels is his final reunion with his mother's water-world of acceptance and sensitivity and also with the very same feelings inside his soul. Achilles, once purged of his negative emotions and reconnected to his inner Goddess Thetis, can finally be reconciled to his own humanity and that of Hector, in the perfect "amity" (191) he now feels for him, after their role-playing on the stage of life is over: "What he feels in himself as a *perfect order* of body, heart, occasion, is the enactment, under the stars, in the very breath of the gods, of the true Achilles, the one he has come all this way to find" (190, my italic).

Achilles feels truly 'whole' not after accomplishing his great feats as warrior, but only after reconciling his body and heart and accepting warm and tender compassion as part of his humanity. He is fulfilled and complete as a human being in front of the gods and himself; which is Priam's (and Malouf's) true 'ransom' and gift of 'atonement'.

At the end, the novel, briefly and incisively describes the closing of the classical story, but anticipating Priam's death acted out by Achilles' son Neoptolemus, who – unaware of the compassionate and fruitful meeting of Priam and his father – unconsciously perpetuates the absurd chain of death, vengeance and death (212-215). The concluding focus is, however, on Somax, the physical man, fully incarnated in his body (*soma*), realistic enough to know his way across many worlds, poetic enough to appreciate the small pleasures of life, adjusting to

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unforeseen circumstances, becoming Priam's most valuable Idaeus, and an authentic guide in the journey of existence.

In the *Veda sōma* is also a magic plant, originally sacred to the Goddess (Sjoo, Mor 1987, 171-175), from which her priestesses distilled the ecstatic drink of the 'immortals'. Somax also shares a drink with a good listener – anyone who desires can participate in his ecstatic gift of storytelling. Having fully tasted all aspects of life, Somax remains steady and strong in his simple, unassuming and deep understanding of things. Somax, the corporeal man, the main 'body' of Malouf's narration itself, lives on for a long long time, long after Troy has almost been forgotten.

Somax survives to tell the 'tale'. His stories of how he accompanied King Priam, functioning as his Idaeus, survive. They are all 'lies' of course, inventions, fantasies; the "stuff of legend, half folktale, half an old man's empty bragging" (216). Similarly, Malouf, the 'storyteller', "is a stealer of another man's tales, of other men's lives" (218). The most remarkable thing about Malouf's divine 'stealing', inspired by Hermes, protector of thieves and poets, is that it brings 'fluid', feminine, intimate and poetic 'Beauty' (and Truth) into our world "and very appropriately too, it seems, which is not always the case" (219).

NOTES

1. For a description of the partnership model see: Eisler 1987, where she traces the cultural evolution of Western societies from prehistory to the present, in terms of the underlying tension between "equalitarian" and "dominator" modes of living. Eisler prefers the term "equalitarian" instead of "egalitarian" because the former indicates social relations within a mutual society, where both men and women have "equal" importance, while the latter was traditionally used to indicate equality only among men (see note 10 to her Introduction). The 'lost age' belonging to the Goddess is an important legacy that we must recuperate in order to face and peacefully overcome the challenges of our

times. See on the same themes: Eisler 1995, which focuses on the biological rewards for loving and caring behaviours, representing “a more evolved way of living on this earth”; and Eisler 2002. She explains, giving full scientific evidence and relevant bibliography to prove her thesis, that the ‘war of the sexes’ and violent behaviours on the ‘other’ are not genetically, biologically or divinely, ordained; they are indeed a social and cultural means used by a certain type of power through the ages to divide et impera. The ‘partnership’ model shows how a better system of governing in cooperation can be fruitfully used for the ultimate good of all: “Scientists are today finding that our bodies are equipped with the capacity to release powerful chemicals when we engage in caring and care-taking behaviours — chemicals that reward these activities by making us feel good” (Eisler 2000: 71).

2. The research of the Partnership Studies Group uses the terms ‘partnership’ and ‘dominator’ in accordance with Riane Eisler’s definitions of these cultural paradigms (<http://www.partnershipway.org/>). Inspired by her seminal anthropological and socio-cultural work an active community of scholars based at the University of Udine founded the Partnership Studies Group in 1998 (http://all.uniud.it/?page_id=195), interconnected with other scholars from all over the world (Australia, Canada, India, Ireland, Poland, Scotland, U.S.A.). Initially, the research focused on the literatures of Australia, India and Canada, applied linguistics and education, and in recent years it has been expanded to include a more interdisciplinary range of intercultural studies, francophone literatures, social and educational fields. The group has been especially active with funded projects, the international online journal *Le Simplegadi* (<http://all.uniud.it/simplegadi>), the All book series (<http://www.forumeditrice.it/percorsi/lingua-e-letteratura/all/?text=all-english>) and several conferences and seminars. For further information on PSG publications, see bibliography.
3. The words feminine/masculine in the article do not have any specific implication or evaluation of ‘gender’; they rather symbolise qualities that are

stereotypically considered 'feminine', such as empathy and caring, qualities of course present in men also but that are not considered appropriate for 'real men', for 'masculinity' in cultures orienting primarily to the 'dominator' model. See also note 7 of this essay.

4. Other works by David Malouf have been analysed according to the Partnership studies research paradigm: "The Only Speaker of his Tongue": David Malouf and Endangered Languages and Id-Entities (Riem 2010b: 19-29); Tuning into the Sound of Imagination: David Malouf's "Typewriter Music" (Riem 2010a: 211-22) and Archetypes of Partnership and the Goddess: The Human Spiritual Journey in David Malouf's "The Conversations at Curlow Creek" (Riem 2007a: 57-71).
5. See for example: Neilsen 1990; Indyk 1993; special issue of *World Literature Today*, Autumn 2000 in occasion of Malouf's winning the Neustadt International Prize for Literature.
6. A focal point in Malouf's narrative quest, are some of his famous 'doubles': *Johnno* (1975) Johnno and Dante; *An Imaginary Life* (1978) Ovid and the Child; in *Child's Play* (1982) the killer and the writer; in *Fly Away Peter* (1985) Jim and Ashley; in *The Great World* (1990) Dig(ger) and Vic(tor); in *The Conversations at Curlow Creek* (1996) Carney and Adair. See on the subject: Riem 1988b: 181-195; Riem 2007b: 57-71.
7. "Though this [Goddess] archetype has many facets, one key aspect is that it symbolizes qualities that are stereotypically considered feminine, and I want to emphasize 'stereotypically' because this is not a matter of something inherent in women or men, qualities that are considered feminine such as empathy and caring, qualities of course present in men also but that are not considered appropriate for 'real men', for 'masculinity' in cultures orienting primarily to the dominator model – qualities that are so needed in our world today if we are to meet the enormous challenges we face. So the Goddess Awakened is symbolic of the movement to shift to a more equitable and peaceful way of living on this earth – a movement in which literature, education, and language

have a major part to play". (Eisler 2007a: 24).

8. In order to promote partnership values, 'BCE', 'Before Common Era', is used instead of the patronizing 'BC' in respect of all the world's spiritual and religious beliefs. The same is true for 'CE', 'Common Era', instead of 'AD'.
9. "The term Goddess has come into use because it serves as a kind of shorthand to communicate what to us today is a very different way of conceptualising what we call the divine from what we are accustomed to: a God, Father, Lord, King (in other words a male image). Clearly, however, the term Goddess should not be interpreted as just a female counterpart of the Judaeo-Christian and Muslim God. For one thing, some of the images we find in excavations have both human and animal aspects, and some have both female and male aspects. For another, we should not project our notions of the powers that govern the universe onto peoples who lived thousands of years ago. What is clear is that what we have here is a different way of representing the powers that govern the universe – reflecting a different social organisation from the male dominated and highly stratified cultures out of which mainstream contemporary religions arose" (Eisler 2000: 315, n. 30; Eisler 2007a: 24).
10. Riane Eisler coins the word 'gylany', composed by 'gy-' (prefix for woman, from the ancient Greek Gyné) and 'an-' (from the ancient Greek Anèr) united by 'l' (lyen, to tie, to put together). She uses 'gylany' to describe these ancient societies where there was no hierarchy, no sexism, no class-system or great economic disparities. Their cultural system was highly complex, using linear language, sophisticated painting and sculpting techniques, and a "modern" architecture. (See: Eisler 1987: 105-106).

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