

# 1995 Annual Lecture

## *The Uses of the Past*

David Malouf

Delivered at the  
Australian Academy of Science  
Becker Building  
Wednesday 8 November 1995

mood or quality of a period as it is evoked in the memory by pop songs, public events, fashions, including fashions of belief — I will want to say something more of this in just a moment. Before I do I want to deal with another emotion that is close to what we mean by nostalgia but also different. It is that feeling of existential melancholy that the eighteenth century experienced in the presence of ruins, a later, sweeter, more self-indulgent variation on an older regret for the falling away in time of all things, for mortality, mutability; and closely related, the emotion Wordsworth hears in the voice of his Solitary Reaper singing 'Of old unhappy far-off things / And battles long ago'. This too is not what we mean by nostalgia. The Solitary Reaper may sing of the sadness of past times but she has no wish to re-experience or bring them back. Our nostalgia is a wish to revive and revisit, to live through, all over again, some period of the past, most often the recent past, which now that it *is* past has revealed the essence of itself, the essence of its attractiveness. While it was happening it was, as the present always is, too close, too confusing, too transitional to be grasped, too crowded with the irrelevancies of the quotidian and of boring event to reveal what it contained of the dramatic and colourful. But at a distance, with its too-closeness withdrawn and the irrelevant detail stripped away, its essential glamour is revealed, and what was once life acquires the manageable uniqueness of an object. The retrospective view, the revival, gives us the real thing at last, which we missed the first time round. The past re-presents itself as work of art.

What I want to suggest is that the deepest quality in our feeling for the past, at least in this shape as nostalgia, is impatience with the insufferable present, a wish to get the present, as quickly as can be managed, far enough behind for us to see what it actually is; to savour it at last free of the distraction of wondering what it is leading to and where it will end.

But something more is needed here than an impatient wish to get rid of the present so that we can come at last to a true experience of it, that is, for the second time. We also need a sharp *sense* of the past, of the particular feel of a decade, of a year even, as it clings around certain songs, films, styles of furniture or dress, and this very modern capacity depends on the part that photography plays in our lives, and recorded music, and film. The past imposes itself on our senses in a unique way, and the impression sticks and can be revived at will, because the sources of it are there and available to us. We even have a word for this phenomenon, this passion for reviving, decade after decade, a style, and with it the whole

and Condorcet — who had a synoptic view of history, a comprehensive grasp of what lay behind them in the way of significant event and intellectual discovery and achievement; were familiar, that is, with what the past had produced in a detailed and personal way. But in no previous age, surely, has this sort of knowledge, this conception of the past, *our* past, as being crowded and extensive, been so general. We live now in a vast museum in which virtually every object that has survived the random destructiveness of time is there to be seen or read about; where every manuscript that has ever been written can be consulted, every musical score, even pieces that were scarcely meant to be heard once, mere background music to table talk, have been recorded and can be listened to as often as we please. This is what we think of as the past, and since we tend to think universally, as *our* past. What a scholarly passion we now have, even those of us who are by no means experts, for authenticity, for having our ancient music played on period instruments and in period style. Think what a keen sense of history one must have to see each year as it comes up in the almanac not as a space in which some new event of importance might occur but as the centenary or bicentenary of one long past, an occasion for commemorative spectacle and television spectacles — a phenomenon that achieved the extreme of folly in 1989, when the eyes of the whole world were on Jessye Norman sailing down the Champs Elysées wrapped in a hundred yards of red white and blue bunting to commemorate the outbreak of one revolution while, at the other end of Europe, the collapse of another was making its own noisy claim to be an historical event, but too quickly for us to catch up with it, and in the wrong, that is, the *present* tense.

But let us go back to a time when 'history' meant something quite different from all this, something narrower, more confined, and when the past had another sort of use.

Plutarch, writing in the first century AD, at one of the few periods other than our own when an historian could know virtually everything that had happened for the previous four or five hundred years, and with a fair degree of accuracy too since civilisation in the period had been unbroken and everything the society had produced, events, monuments, works of art, poems, letters, public records and every sort of ephemera, had been scrupulously preserved or described — the rarity of all this is clear when we consider that when Petrarch, thirteen hundred years later, found a cache of Cicero's letters he was astonished to discover that that legendary figure, the model teacher, *magister vitae*, had been a real man,

pageant from which any figure or moment of the past can be called up, but to which the user is related as to a piece of convenient furniture.

Plutarch has another passage that is a help here. 'It is not at all astonishing', he writes, 'that Fortune, in the variety of her motions through a course of numberless ages, should happen often to hit upon the same point and produce events perfectly similar; for if the number of events be infinite, Fortune may easily furnish herself with parallels in such abundance of matter; and if their number is limited, there must necessarily be a return to the same occurrence when the whole is run through'.

What Plutarch is telling us is that history, as he knows it, is already closed, complete; there is no possible human type or temperament, no vice or virtue or deed, that has not occurred before and will not therefore have its example in the history he has to tell. That, and his earlier phrase 'the sublime images of the best and greatest', explains why the classical age remained for so long the reference point for all moral and political judgment, why it offered such endless examples for imitation, first for the making of men, later for the making of books and buildings and works of art, since as well as perfecting and closing the book of human types it had also produced, and handed on to be imitated, the perfected repertoire of epic, pastoral, lyric and satirical verse and every form of architecture and plastic art.

I do not mean here to go into the whole history of imitation, though it accounts for a vast proportion of what we most value of the past; only to dive in quickly, then out again, with one or two observations.

The first I will put in the form of a question. Considering the closed repertoire of examples and the conservatism, the subservience even, that is implied by 'imitation', how do we account for the extraordinary variety of works that imitation produced, their liveliness, passion, wit, their bravura extravagance, and yes, their originality? The truth is it was not a tame business, not at all; it was bold and risky in that its intention, in entering into the spirit of the original, the classic model, was to apprehend that spirit and steal it, then give it a contemporary form, one that would contain the original and, by adding what the new master brought to it and what the new age now understood, surpass it. In the event, the attempt to recreate the classical resulted, generation after generation, in styles of painting and sculpture quite different from one another, so different that art historians have had to find distinctive names for them, early Renaissance, High Renaissance, Mannerist, Baroque, Neo-classical, and to read them, not quite accurately I think, as reactions, violent in some cases, one

the field of Mars, all managed, after classic models, by Jacques Louis David. Even the names the later republic chose for its officials were Roman, First, Second and Third Consul; and so, ironically, was the course the revolution took, from austere and virtuous republic to triumvirate to dictatorship to empire. The Revolution in some ways is the last and largest example of *imitatio*, and if the model was aesthetic as well as moral or political, this ought not to surprise us. Where *imitatio* is concerned these categories are always difficult to distinguish. David's great paintings, 'The Oath of the Horatii' and 'The Return of the Sons of Brutus', not only predicted the nature of the coming revolution but also something of its style, and as official artist of the Revolution he created in 'The Death of Marat' the last great embodiment of the Plutarchian model hero — though a pretty unlikely one. Such, as late as 1795, was the power of the classical to fix in people's minds the perfect image of a man.

But we have got ahead of ourselves. I want to step back now and try to pin-point where it was that the closed view of the past began to break down before the emergence of a new and more dynamic one. Let me light on just two such occasions, for there were many of course; both from Italy in the second half of the fifteenth century.

The Latin philologist, Lorenzo Valla, in trying to define the precise meaning of Latin words, noted that meaning depends on usage, that usage changes according to context, and that one of these contexts is time; meaning, that is, was relative, and a language over time changed, developed, evolved. He used this observation, and his great knowledge of the whole range of the Latin language, to prove, in a very practical way, that the Donation of Constantine, the document on which the Church based its authority over the Italian States, was not authentic and did not belong to the time of Constantine but was an eighth-century forgery. But more importantly in the long run he came up with the notion that a language changes according to rules, and consistently with regard to the whole; and if a language, surely the society of which it is a product. History, that is, is not a closed store of examples, but, hidden away in the language we speak, and in documents, laws and many other places, is the record of change.

A little time after, another Italian scholar, Politan, working on the *Digest*, that is, the section of Justinian's *Corpus Juris Civilis* that has to do with the rulings of Roman jurists, began to see that a body of laws too was

as we know from Virgil's Fourth Eclogue, looked forward in hope to its restoration. That notion was now reversed. The Golden Age lay ahead, as Christianity of course had always insisted, though the source of history, in the Church's case, lay outside time in the will of God, which like everything else that has to do with God is without tense. This new version was secular. Essential to it was that the past must be superceded. We need it, we need to know it, but only, as the revolutionary in one field would put it and the *avant garde* artist in another, so that it can be destroyed. Repetition is death.

So why that form of revival, of repetition, that I began with and for which we have so recently commandeered the word 'nostalgia'? Why should this phenomenon arise so insistently as a popular force in a century so firmly, even violently committed to the future, to endless movement in a *forward* direction?

The fact is, of course, that cultures are always in two minds — if that is not a gross underestimation. The pressure on the present to hurl itself into the future in a great leap forward makes us, some of us, want to loop back, to relive with a full awareness at last of what it is (in the light of the future as it were) some bit of what we lost almost before we had time to experience it.

But is that all it is? Or does the shallow form of the thing I have so far been referring to, which looks like mere escapism, contaminated as it is by its association with advertisements and popular spectacle, exist also in a strong version, and do both perhaps represent a wish to hold the past and preserve it against its 'necessary' destruction? There is something in us, I mean, that wants not to destroy the past but to take it deep into ourselves and, by transmuting it into something necessary and personal, carry it forward; and this is not an indulgence but a need.

One reason for this is that the past over the last century and a half has become so strongly internalised in us, and in many forms. Darwin made the bodies we walk in a living history, individually realised, of an evolutionary process going back into the *primaeval* sea. Haeckl made the embryo, in its own amniotic sea, recreate this history stage by stage but with the millenia contracted now to a mere nine months. Bergson, by differentiating between lived time and time measured by clocks, made time itself a matter of mind. In the revised version of individual history, 'experience', as Freud mapped it, our past was deeply at work in the present, but in ways that were mysterious to us because it was precisely what was most significant to it, most active and dangerous, that memory

definitively provided by Proust's great novel — in the minds of all. It is no accident surely that the first recorded appearance of 'nostalgia' in its modern sense should be very nearly co-incidental with the publication of *A la Recherche du Temps Perdu*.

Proust's whole book, of course, exists in the light of that later notion of the past, that interior notion of history, that perception of psychological rather than clock time, that I have been describing; arises precisely from an anxiety about having lost the present before it has been fully grasped. His book is irradiated by the belief that if that present can only be re-experienced, now that it *is* past, in the light of what the narrator now knows, that is, fully and for the first time with full knowledge of all it contains, then it can be preserved for ever in the realm of memory and through the constant action of memory, and his book will be, for the reader in the reading as it was for the writer in the writing, at one and the same time a discovery of the process of memory and the active practice of it. Nothing could stand further from the Plutarch we began with or illustrate so completely how our world differs from his. And nothing embodies so completely as Proust's great book what that difference consists in. Let me end by reading the passage at the end of the first chapter in which Proust hits upon his key to memory and unfolds for us the magic of what it can do:

And as soon as I had recognised the taste of the piece of madeleine soaked in her decoction of lime-blossom which my aunt used to give me (although I did not yet know and must long postpone the discovery of why this memory made me so happy) immediately the old grey house upon the street, where her room was, rose up like a stage set to attach itself to the little pavilion opening on to the garden which had been built out behind it for my parents (the isolated segment which until that moment had been all that I could see); and with the house the town, from morning to night and in all weathers, the Square where I used to be sent before lunch, the streets along which I used to run errands, the country roads we took when it was fine. And as in the game wherein the Japanese amuse themselves by filling a porcelain bowl with water and steeping in it little pieces of paper which until then are without character or form, but, the moment they become wet, stretch and twist and take on colour and distinctive shape, become flowers or houses or people, solid and recognisable, so in that moment all the flowers in our garden and in M. Swann's park, and the water-lilies on the Vivonne and the good folk of the village and their little dwellings and the parish church and the whole of Combray and its surroundings, taking shape and solidity, sprang into being, town and gardens alike, from my cup of tea.