

Perspective

Tightrope Walker Vision: Something of Language, Home, and History in David Malouf's *Remembering Babylon*

Lamia Tayeb

The title of David Malouf's novel, *Remembering Babylon*, suggests issues such as memory, place, and exile as well as the polarization of two spaces: Babylon as a space of exile and Jerusalem as a "lost" or Promised land. The epigraph by Blake that Malouf has chosen for his novel, however, throws into disarray such clear-cut categories as home and exile: "whether this is Jerusalem or Babylon we know not." The novel dismantles received settler perceptions of space and throws into doubt the sensory and cognitive tools by which space is ordered into either home or exile. The main character, Gemmy Farley, makes his appearance in the midst of an outback white community living on the outskirts of imperial civilization, and he does not easily fit within existing categories of race, culture and nationality. The mere sight of him and his relationship with the land call into question settler perceptions of Australia and Europe.

Malouf wants to construct "home" out of the psychological debris of exile. Chris Prentice defines this desire in the recent cultural expression of Australia and New Zealand as "the homecoming project" (168). Resembling other white settler societies like South Africa, such a project is part of "discourses of reconciliation whether from cultural or political domains" (169). In contrast to other societies, however, reconciliation in Australian cultural discourse does not so much mediate between self and other, or settler and Aborigine, as self and place. Homecoming is "effected as an organic bond sealed by colonial endeavour which could heal the fractures of geographical, historical and cultural displacement" (169). As in Malouf's earlier novels, *Remembering Babylon* (1993) gestures towards "homecoming," or what Claudia Egerer terms "the ideal state of 'homefulness'" (160) by questioning settler perceptions of place

and otherness and projecting, through the character of Gemmy, an alternative way of inhabiting the land based on the principle of communion rather than separation and opposition.

Throughout the novel, the question of white settler exile and displacement is translated into a problem of perception, which not only mediates between settler and “new world” reality but also settler and the “old world” reality of Scotland. Malouf highlights how white Australian settlers conceive of a home that is only recoverable through the intermittent act of memory. The opening chapters parody the encounter between civilization and primitiveness; the subsequent narrative focuses on the repercussions of the encounter between Gemmy (the white child/man turned Aborigine) and the white settler community within the framework of a revisionist attempt to subvert imperial historiography and culture. By thwarting reader expectations of the nature of the exploratory gaze travelling between the white civilized self and the primitive other, Malouf paves the way for a critique of colonial modes of settlement and moves in the direction of a “homecoming” based on creating a new language of perception.

Gemmy slips out of the political and racial categories that constitute the asymmetry of imperial and cross-cultural encounters. Gemmy is a British revenant, a white child turned Aboriginal man through the physical metamorphosis and cultural and linguistic loss which result from sixteen years spent among Aboriginal tribes. His racial identity contains a subversive, slippery element: by simultaneously occupying both white and black, British and Aborigine identities, Gemmy enjoys an unsettling freedom. He eludes the sense of racial inferiority that the marker of Aboriginal race delimits and signifies. Gemmy’s evident whiteness serves as a sinister reminder of the racial and cultural havoc that the land can wreak on its white occupants. Gemmy thus incarnates the community’s darkest fears and “raises the spectre of what the unknown country might do to them” (Egerer 146). Like Joseph Conrad’s Kurtz in *Heart of Darkness*, Gemmy evokes horror at the facts of racial and cultural regression. He reflects the low-lying darkness within, the possibility that settlers might “lose it, not just language but it. It” (Malouf, *Remembering* 40). While he remains largely indefinable

for the white community, he represents the possibility of a different perception of the land.

In the opening scene of the novel, Gemmy is observed by three children during a powerful moment of suspension atop a fence. Gemmy's moment of balancing between two worlds is initially prolonged as the narrative eye marvels in his extraordinary composite nature:

The stick-like legs, all knobbed at the joints, suggested a wounded waterbird, a brolga, or a human that in the manner of the tales they told one another, all spells and curses, had been changed into a bird, but only halfway, and now, neither one thing nor the other, was hopping and flapping towards them out of a world over there, beyond the no-man's land of the swamp. (2–3)

Although a child, Lachlan Beattie represents the masculine, regulatory power of colonial presence. Pointing a toy gun at Gemmy in a make-believe act, Lachlan strives to police the boundaries of both personal property and community. Lachlan shouts, "A black! . . . we are being raided by blacks" (2). As the object of imperial observation, Gemmy's re-entry into (imperial) language is suggested by the first words he utters as he faces the toy gun pointed by Lachlan: "Do not shoot, I am a B-british object" (3). Gemmy's comic mispronunciation foreshadows the difficulty the settlers will later have locating him on either side of the fence of British or Aboriginal identity.

The community's act of writing Gemmy's story, supervised by the Minister, Mr. Frazer, suggests a colonial act of recovery; within this narrative, Gemmy is constructed as a white man. Yet it is an exclusionary strategy in which Gemmy is constructed as an Aborigine that ultimately wins out when his lynching is incited by one of the village inhabitants, Andy McKillop. At first, Mr. Frazer's good-willed attempt to "piece together . . . the details of [Gemmy's] story" despite the barriers of linguistic inarticulateness, memory gaps and temporal disorder is part of a colonial effort "to bring him back, if it was feasible, to being a white man" (Malouf, *Remembering* 16, 39) and therefore appropriate Gemmy by inventing his story. Yet McKillop's malicious accusations aim to

construct Gemmy as “infiltrator, as spy” (38) and therefore make him inhabit, both physically and conceptually, the unknown land beyond the fence. McKillop’s strategy of ostracism is part of a colonial effort to extirpate the traces of otherness within the settler community and therefore ward off the threat of the unknown. Gemmy’s hybridity allows him to elude others’ attempts to locate and define him. He remains impregnable through his elliptic discourse. Much of the narrative gestures towards the in-between space that Gemmy intends to occupy since he “did not want to be taken back. What he wanted was to be recognized” (Malouf, *Remembering* 32).

Indeed, Gemmy hovers between his positions as an object of imperial observation and representation and the subject of a revisionist encounter between the civilized and the primitive. He falls prey to the attempts of white settlers to define him yet also provides members of the Scottish community with a new vision of themselves and their colonial surroundings. Ultimately Gemmy pushes white settlers toward a revisionist view of civilization and primitiveness.

The narrative revisits Gemmy’s moment of boundary crossing. In the second version of the moment, re-narrated over the following two chapters, Lachlan Beattie’s masculine regulatory presence is marginalized, while Gemmy’s eye and the airy space above the fence provide perspective and meaning. Gemmy does not perceive the land in terms of the division between known and unknown, security and danger; for him, what is at stake is not the urgency of protecting self and community but rather the possibility of inhabiting the shaky space above the fence and maintaining a precarious position between cultures. As Andrew Taylor argues, Gemmy’s action is not a simple impingement upon “boundaries and divisions,” but a radical challenge of “the logic of difference and division upon which white settlement is based” (11). The narrative shifts to Janet McIvor and the intense moment of mutual observation binding her to Gemmy. As Gemmy struggles for balance over the fence, he remains suspended in her eye, “never to fall, so intense was the power of her gaze” (Malouf, *Remembering* 36). In contrast to Lachlan Beattie, Janet McIvor represents the benign (feminine) force of (cultural) reconciliation: “If he had given himself over to that rather than to the heavi-

ness of his own body, he might have stayed up there forever. That was what her look meant" (36). The problem of colonial settlement boils down to a problem of perception: by allowing Gemmy to remain suspended between spaces and cultures, Janet refuses to subjugate him to "the terrible repression and violence" of colonial historiography (Spinks 172). She represents the burgeoning settler consciousness that is able to transcend the parochial boundaries of colonial meaning and embody a different perception of land and Aborigine.

Part of the empowerment of otherness contained in *Remembering Babylon* is Gemmy's inarticulateness. Through the gaps of Gemmy's speech, as well as the ironic way in which his life story is written by the white settlers on the basis of "mere guesswork" (Malouf, *Remembering* 19), Malouf foregrounds the question of colonial language and the way it functions as a barrier to understanding the otherness of landscape and Aborigine. The narrative demonstrates the way language constitutes the conceptual universe through which the Scottish community makes sense of its physical reality and is, therefore, the basis of its cultural identity. For example, out of the invisible thread of words, Lachlan Beattie is able to conjure and momentarily inhabit a Northern Russian landscape of snow, chilling cold, and wolves. Similarly, Gemmy is unable to return to the Scottish community until he connects image and word. Hovering around the settlement, the objects of his past world are presented to his senses without the spirit of language and are thus devoid of meaning. Only when "meaning cling[s] to the image" does language "strike home in him"; the word "flew into his head as fast and clear as the flash and whistle of its breath. *Axe. Axe.* Circles of meaning rippled away from the mark it blazed in the dark of his skull" (*Remembering* 30).

Yet language is also represented as a fabric that blocks reality as much as it throws light on it and is, therefore, the basis of settler colonial exile. While Gemmy's Britishness is "the spirit of whatever it was, that lived in the dark of him, and came up briefly to torment or tease" (33) and is only half awakened by the power of words, it is, indeed, his loss of language that makes him so much at home in the Australian landscape. Like the Child in *An Imaginary Life*, Gemmy's consciousness of things exists outside language. He inhabits, in that sense, a world before

(imperial) language, a freedom from the deforming power of discourse and the state of oneness with (colonial) space. Bill Ashcroft notes the importance of language as a postcolonial issue in *Remembering Babylon* and reads Gemmy's first utterance in Lacanian terms as a "leap into a discourse from which he has been long excluded" (*Postcolonial Futures* 54). The words Gemmy blurts out are a sign of his re-entry into the symbolic order of (imperial) language and his subjection to the splitting power of discourse. Yet under Gemmy's influence, other characters also momentarily experience a direct correspondence with the elements of nature or some kind of non-linguistic consciousness of things. When George Abbot first awakens to the beauty of the landscape, words are curiously disconnected from things, and meaning is, for the first time, found outside language:

[h]e was filled with a sense of his own lightness. Some heavier self had been laid asleep in him, and another woken that was all open to the westering glow in which the drab bush trees along his way found a kind of beauty, all their leaves glancing and the earth under them alight along its ridges, and the sky above a show, a carnival, of cloud shapes transforming themselves from forms he could name to others, equally pleasing, that he had no name for, but did not for that reason feel estranged from; he might, he thought, have a name for those later. (Malouf, *Remembering* 92)

Imperial language is thus represented as an unfit medium for naming the land. In the process of botanizing Australia, Mr. Frazer believes in the necessity of using Aboriginal language, since perceiving the land through English eyes is at the source of the "ecological blindness which language has produced in settler societies" (Ashcroft, *Postcolonial Transformation* 203).

However, while imperial language acts as a barrier to understanding the settler landscape, a simple exchange of one linguistic universe (English) for another (Aborigine) is not suggested in the novel; rather, in the prospective process of cultural and linguistic mixture, a new hybrid language waits to be forged: "it is . . . clear that the 'true' way of

seeing place is not some kind of fixed pre-existing Aboriginal conception but a hybrid encompassed by the different kind of language, a language towards which postcolonial writing works" (Ashcroft, *Postcolonial Transformation* 204). In the context of the novel's valorization of in-between spaces and hybrid identities, Gemmy's inarticulateness teaches the rudiments of a new hybrid language bringing self and other, Europe and Australia into the ideal state of symbiosis that is necessary for home-making.

Various characters in the novel evolve from a state of exile to moments of epiphany and awakening that, in turn, lead to a communion of settler with landscape. There is a recurrent image of balancing between worlds and the "horizontal" perspective such balancing grants (Ashcroft, *Postcolonial Transformation* 201). As mentioned previously, the twice-told narrative of Gemmy's journey between spaces and cultures dwells on the intense moment of balance above the fence with "arms out-flung as if preparing for flight" (Malouf, *Remembering* 3). During this moment, Gemmy acquires a mythic dimension and an almost prophetic view of the landscape. The capacity to balance between worlds and acquire the "horizontal" perspective is thus associated with the capacity to abolish boundaries; as Ashcroft argues, "horizontality represents one of the most transformative principles of post-colonial discourse, because it disrupts, blurs, and dismantles spatial and conceptual boundaries of all kinds" (*Postcolonial Transformation* 203). Further in the narrative, Ellen McIvor paints a similar image of a tightrope walker, and to give it life, she "held her arms out and took three steps, very slowly, raising one foot then the other, over the rough earth with its sticks and dried leaves, as if she were walking thirty feet up in the air" (Malouf, *Remembering* 112). Although it belongs to Ellen McIvor's childhood in Scotland, the vision of the tightrope walker suggests the desirable yet precarious settler position between geographical, cultural and conceptual universes. Mrs. Hutchence's house is yet another image of balance: perched like a bird's nest atop tree branches, and "floating six feet above ground on its stumps" (84), it evokes a sense of domestic order and peace associated with its female occupants. Its positioning in the landscape suggests a complete harmony with Australian nature and an idyllic

state of “homefulness” (Egerer 161). The novel suggests that the (white) self must transcend colonial boundaries in order to acquire “horizontal consciousness,” which is not based on the transgression of boundaries or the simple act of crossing over from one world to another but on the ability “to look beyond colonial boundaries” (Ashcroft, *Postcolonial Transformation* 201). Like Ovid in *An Imaginary Life*, various characters reach a transcendent view of the land based on the loss of language and the re-positioning of the self within rather than against nature.

In the context of his search for modes of reconciliation between (European) self and settler space, Malouf “foregrounds the relationship between human subjectivity and the natural sublime” (Nettlebeck 74). To enhance such a Romantic, transcendent vision, Malouf builds up the duality of sight and blindness in the novel and links it to language and perception. In his notebook, Mr. Frazer alludes to a Romantic aesthetics, calling for the strategic defamiliarization of things in order to enjoy a fresh relationship with nature:

I think of our early settlers, starving on these shores in the midst of plenty they did not recognize, in a blessed nature of flesh, fowl, fruit that was all around them and which they could not, with their English eyes, perceive, since the very habit and faculty that makes apprehensible to us what is known and expected dulls our sensitivity to other forms, even the most obvious. (Malouf, *Remembering* 129–130)

Culture or convention is a blinding force that shackles the mind. Jock McIvor’s estrangement from his community stems from his gradual divergence from conventional perception:

It was as if he had seen the world till now, not through his own eyes, out of some singular self, but through the eyes of a fellow who was always in company, even when he was alone; a sociable self, wrapped always in a communal warmth that protected it from dark matters and all the blinding light of things, but also from the knowledge that there was a place out there where the self might stand alone. (106–7)

As Peter Pierce argues, McIvor's plight is not that he is "estranged from familiar male company, but from the secure unquestioned reckoning of things that this encouraged" (188). Malouf's appeal to a Romantic aesthetic in a colonial context finds parallels between settler estrangement from the colonial landscape and a western "conception of landscape as mysterious antagonist to Man" (Nettlebeck 74). In other words, the deep rift in Western thought between nature and culture is at the root of the white settlers' estrangement from Australian nature.

The novel includes repeated references to the botanic specialness of Australia and the failure of (European) language to name it. It is in this context that Mr. Frazer and George Abbot are contrasted. George Abbot is a reminder of Ovid's extreme exile from place; the sheer arbitrariness of his settlement in Australia and the sense of racist resentment with which he perceives both land and Aborigine make him blind to the landscape in which he lives. However, George Abbot differs from Ovid since "he lacks the capacity for renewal of his perceptions" and largely remains "visually hampered [and] metaphorically barren" (Pierce 192). Frazer, however, is not only able to see the botanic wealth of Australia but is also able to adopt a new language within which the landscape of settlement is appraised. He believes that "no continent lies outside God's bounty . . . He is a gardener and everything he makes is a garden" (Malouf, *Remembering* 130). Malouf also alludes to another geographical metaphor associated with Australia, that of "a natural hell and prison" (Leer, "Imagined Counterpart" 6). Unlike American ideality, Leer argues, Australia evokes the two images of paradise and hell (6). Such maddening doubleness explains white settler forms of estrangement and alienation. The paradisiacal re-invention of Australia in Mr. Frazer's literary geography is a way to counter the blinding force of imperial language.

The duality of sight and blindness is closely linked to the duality of lightness and heaviness, and such duality interweaves two main issues in the novel: language and perception, and modes of habitation or settlement. Physical heaviness connotes the severe sense of exile from the landscape of settlement and blindness to the landscape's meaning. Lightness is, conversely, associated with the self's surrender to the elements of the natural landscape or the powerful epiphanic moments in

which “home” is revealed to characters. In spite of his extreme alienation, George Abbot undergoes a powerful moment of epiphany as “a heavier self had been laid asleep in him, and another woken that was all open to the westerling glow in which the drab bush trees along his way found a kind of beauty” (Malouf, *Remembering* 92). Janet McIvor later undergoes a similar moment of dissolution under the veil of bees in a manner reminiscent of Ovid’s death at the end of *An Imaginary Life*. Submerged by the swarm of bees, she “lost all sense of where her feet might be, or her dreamy wrists, or whether she was still standing, as she had been a moment before, in the shadowy grove, or had been lifted from the face of the earth” (142). The epiphany suggests rebirth: “the cloud began to lift . . . and the bees, one by one, in fistfulls, roll[ed] off her, peeling away like a crust, till she stood in her own skin again, which was fresh where the air touched it” (142–43) and her skin “seemed new to her” (143). Janet’s formative experience is similar to Ovid’s discoveries through the agency of the Child, “that gaining identity actually means loss of selfhood and an unconditional acceptance of the continual flow and process of metamorphosis governing all living forms” (Hansson 164). In particular, the reconciliation between settler and landscape and the rediscovery of home are based on the forging of a new perception outside/beyond imperial language.

The process of white settler awakening and rediscovery of home leads to a new perception and understanding of Gemmy. Various characters move away from a Eurocentric perception of Gemmy’s transformation as identity loss; in their eyes, he is no longer the white man gone irredeemably native but instead embodies an ideal state of oneness with the landscape. Gemmy thus represents an alternative perception of the land based on communion rather than opposition. Gemmy is the Child of Malouf’s previous novel, *An Imaginary Life*, returned in a new guise: taken from the realm of fantasy and timelessness to the realm of reality and history, Gemmy embodies an ideal state of communion with the landscape and a unique state of at-homeness for which white settlers have to work. There is a sense in which Gemmy leads characters into identity and fullness. Issues of perception and habitation, language and space are also linked through Gemmy’s character: Gemmy’s non-

linguistic consciousness of the landscape enables him to be at-home in it. Other characters, such as Jock McIvor, are able, under his influence, to develop a non-linguistic perception whereby “things ... lay ... outside words” (108) and the landscape is embraced as home. Malouf’s reconciliatory vision transcends the boundaries of language in an attempt to perceive Australia as home.

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