

ACCEPTING THE SHADOW:  
PERSONAL AND NATIONAL RECONCILIATION IN  
*AN IMAGINARY LIFE AND REMEMBERING BABYLON*

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Critics have usually and profitably considered both *An Imaginary Life* and *Remembering Babylon* from the viewpoint of post-colonial theory, although Philip Neilsen is quick to point out that *An Imaginary Life* 'yields a great variety of readings'.<sup>1</sup> The similarities between the two novels suggest that Malouf is examining similar preoccupations in each: both are deeply concerned with language and its construction of what, in our more unreflective moments, we may consider a separate world of nature; both end in a vision that transfigures the landscape and makes it a place of communion that transcends the limitations of language. The central figure and narrator of the earlier novel is Ovid, forced by exile to remake himself over a period of some years, and acutely aware of himself in a setting in which he is the only person of his kind. The central figures of *Remembering Babylon*, on the other hand, are children in a community that might represent members of such groups of European settlers in nineteenth-century Australia. Common to both novels, however, is the figure of the child or the child-man whose role is, at least in part, I believe, to bring individuals into touch with themselves.

In Jungian terms, the Child and Gemmy represent the shadow side of the personality, the acceptance of which is necessary to complete psychic growth. In the case of Ovid in *An Imaginary Life* such acceptance leads to increased knowledge of the self and to reconciliation with his past, with exile, with religious belief, with a new land, and with the fact of death. In the case of the main characters of *Remembering Babylon*, acceptance leads to similar self-knowledge, to the extent that each is capable of it, but also to the ability to see the new land of Australia at levels ranging from close observation and description to mystical comprehension. These levels match William Blake's notion of 'fourfold vision', which in its fullest expression in the characters of Janet McIvor and Lachlan Beattie sees the personal and national consequences of the violence 'that would end only when they were ended, and maybe not even then' (197). *Remembering Gemmy* allows for national as well as individual reconciliation — for the building of Jerusalem rather than Babylon. As Malouf said in an interview with Beate Josephi in

1992,

going away to the wars was a way of revealing not only that there was evil out there but that it was also inside us. We Australians find it very hard to learn that lesson.... [W]e have a history that begins in darkness; not in hope and light at all.... [I]t is surprising how much despair, cruelty, and suffering is really at the heart of the Australian experience .... Maybe we need fiction for that, too; to take us back again, to make us face up to the suffering and cruelty that we do not want to recognise at the centre of our experience — and to make us recognise it in its newest forms.<sup>2</sup>

The prologue to *An Imaginary Life* makes it clear that the Child is a part of Ovid: he is always the same age as the child Ovid, whose brother cannot see him. In *Remembering Babylon*, Gemmy Fairley, although an adult in years, is similarly childish, making first contact with children and following them about (37). The Child and Gemmy Fairley bring Ovid and the settlers face to face with what Jung calls the 'shadow', 'symbolising our "other side," our "dark brother," who is an invisible but inseparable part of our psychic totality'.<sup>3</sup> Acceptance of the shadow and conscious awareness of 'its reality as part of our nature' allow us to achieve 'the objective attitude towards our own personality without which no progress can be made along the path of wholeness'.<sup>4</sup> The individual shadow is not necessarily evil, for 'paradoxical as it may seem at first sight, the shadow as 'alter ego 'may... be represented by a positive figure, for example, when the individual whose 'other side 'it personifies is living 'below his level', failing to fulfil his potentialities. 'The collective shadow, however, 'stands for the universally human dark side within us, for the tendency toward the dark and inferior that is inherent in every man'.<sup>5</sup> I would argue that the individual and the collective shadow appear in each novel.

Malouf's depiction of the Child and of Gemmy, both of whom have unknown antecedents (*Babylon* 146) is quite similar (*Life* 74-5, *Babylon* 2-3, 7-8), and sits well with Jung's view of the shadow figure as 'primitive, unadapted, and awkward' but 'embodying childish or primitive qualities' that can 'vitalize and embellish human existence'.<sup>6</sup> So is the reaction of the communities into which they come. For the people of Tomis considered collectively, the Child is 'no child but a beast in disguise' (114); accepting him means accepting kinship with animals, and they construct rumours about his appearance that make him partly animal (75). Ovid cannot persuade them to see what the child looks like, since what the people imagine 'is so much more powerful than the facts' (75). For some of the people of the Queensland settlement, acceptance of Gemmy Fairley means accepting how

tenuous their culture and identity are: 'Could you lose it? Not just language, but *it*. *It*. '(40). Their actions, occurring at night, show vividly the collective darkness and inferiority of human nature that will not accept its own fear: killing pet geese, smearing a shed with ordure, coming as a group to beat and half drown Gemmy.

For others, however, the Child and Gemmy bring individual self-knowledge and growth. Ovid knows he has been living 'below his level' before coming to Tomis: 'All my life till now has been wasted' (32). His participation in a ritual for the dead allows him to finish with his own dead, and frees him for the most important matter in life: to prepare a death of his own (47). The religious ritual itself now has meaning for the man who had earlier taken on the persona of the 'sophisticated poet of the metropolis' (83), denying his rural past and turning the gods into characters in clever stories of metamorphosis. Immediately after the ritual, Ovid sees evidence of the Child for the first time. As he seeks the Child, he changes; he becomes aware of his own weakness and that of his people compared with the strength of Ryzak, the wise old man: 'daily he seems nobler and more gentle than any Roman I have known. Beside him I am an hysterical old woman' (58).

Ovid acquires unexpected abilities: he learns to defend the village and his own skin against invaders, he learns to make nets, he gathers seeds for a garden, he makes the closest friend he has ever had (64). He comes to value the virtues of the local language (65) and to reject the possibility of a return to Rome, since he knows that the Child has given him the opportunity to shed the 'hundred false roles,' the 'hundred identities' (94) through which he has tried to avoid the difficulty of individuation. Now, he proclaims, 'I am entering into the dimensions of my self' (95). He discovers the intuitive and feeling sides of his own nature, understanding that Ryzak's stories are closer to the realities of the unconscious than his own 'civilized fables' that 'seem feeble' by comparison, and beginning to learn from the Child the kind of direct apprehension of the world that goes beyond words, and that Malouf holds up as an ideal in this novel and in *Remembering Babylon*: 'a kind of conversation that needs no tongue, a perfect interchange of perceptions, moods, questions, answers, that is as simple as the weather' (145).

At the end of the novel Ovid liberates himself from his father and from Ryzak, striking out with the Child into the unknown: 'Always to be pushing out like this, beyond what I know cannot be the limits — what else should a man's life be?' (135). He is prepared for death and for re-integration with all that exists: 'I shall settle deep into the earth, deeper than I do in

sleep, and will not be lost' (147). In the final vision set out in the closing lines of the novel, Ovid and the Child seem to merge as the Child steps into the air from a transfigured, empty landscape, and Ovid's life ends (152).

Similarly, contact with Gemmy Fairley gives some characters in *Remembering Babylon* access to an imaginative objectivity that enables them to see the land and themselves (to the degree of which they are capable) in ways that go beyond the culturally restricted vision of initial experience of Australia, and in ways that are consonant with aspects of Blake's 'fourfold vision' suggested in the source of one of the epigraphs to the novel and proclaimed in the final stanza of Blake's poem 'With Happiness Stretched Across the Hills.' For other settlers, as we have seen already, Gemmy is the target of hostility deriving from their unwillingness to accept the darkness in themselves.

For some individuals, especially for the children Lachlan Beattie and Janet McIvor, and to a lesser extent for the older characters Jock and Ellen McIvor, Charles Frazer, and George Abbot, Gemmy is a means of attaining two kinds of knowledge. The first is individual: the increasing knowledge of the self that may begin after the meeting with the 'shadow' aspect of the personality. The second, closely allied with the first, is the capacity to see the new land at levels ranging from mere observation and description to mystical comprehension — an understanding like the direct apprehension that the Child offers to Ovid, and that Malouf's Aboriginal characters possess (118). Blake's notion of fourfold vision matches these levels of knowledge closely. In Damon's words, for Blake

Single vision was pure sensation, such as the scientists (Newton in particular) cultivate; twofold vision added an intellectual appreciation of the object; threefold infused the perception with its emotional value; and fourfold crowned it with mystical insight as to its place in the universe. These four divisions correspond with the Four Zoas: Tharmas guiding single vision; Urizen twofold; Luvah threefold; and Urthona (Los) fourfold.<sup>7</sup>

Gemmy is central to the development of both kinds of knowledge in the main characters of *Remembering Babylon*.

Malouf commonly uses pairs of protagonists in his novels, as Neilsen notes,<sup>8</sup> and *Remembering Babylon* maintains and develops that technique. Previously the pairs of protagonists have been male, but Lachlan Beattie and Janet McIvor are more clearly complementary than their predecessors, and allow for the possibility of the fullest human experience. Male and female, related by blood, and linked by their common presence at the moment of

Gemmy's arrival in the settlement, they also complement one another in the Jungian terms of 'attitude' and 'function'. As Jungian theory would suggest,<sup>9</sup> contact with Gemmy brings these aspects of their personalities into their own consciousness for the first time.

As children Lachlan and Janet struggle for dominance, but Lachlan's will and his advantages as a male assure him of the opportunity to 'fill out the lines of what had been laid up for him' (58) as he deliberately assumes a tough male persona and eventually enters the public world. Janet resents his freedom, but has women's knowledge to offset it, 'deeply rooted' in the earth like her mother's body (124), difficult to articulate (127), but undoubtedly real and closed to Lachlan (164), just as her very private life as a nun is closed to him until age and circumstances prompt her to admit him to it. Malouf values Janet's female knowledge above that of Lachlan and his fellow legislators; she attains Blake's fourfold vision more completely than any other character, and as Veronica Brady notes (100), Janet's vision ending the novel is lit by the rising moon, the female symbol.

Lachlan is extraverted; his thinking function leads him to seek an understanding of the world through perception and will, and his sensate function inclines him to notice external details. As soon as he sees Gemmy, Lachlan steps in front of the two girls (2) and confronts him intentionally, even though he is conscious that his stick is not a believable weapon (3). Having brought Gemmy into the settlement, Lachlan also does his best to 'keep hold of the bit of glory he [has] won', aware of how adults may see him (6), 'darting this way and that like an actor on a stage' (7) in a way that he has never done before, and using his special relationship to Gemmy to raise his own status in the community. As Veronica Brady points out, Lachlan's relationship with Gemmy is founded at first on 'the form of power that insists on difference, on the gap between the self and other'.<sup>10</sup> Nevertheless, although Lachlan does not learn as much as Janet from contact with Gemmy, since he rejects the person others call his 'shadow' (159) and with him the affectionate nature that he suppresses until he is much older, he remains closely tied to Gemmy unconsciously, in dreams that move him to tears (165).

By contrast with Lachlan, Janet is introverted; her feeling function leads her to react to the world in a less differentiated manner, but her intuition perceives things with a directness that cuts to the essence of situations. She is 'full of affection' and can be 'overwhelmed' by a simple song (57), but she is inclined to keep things to herself (60). She says nothing

about Gemmy's arrival until exasperation at people's acceptance of Lachlan's story prompts her to a comment that nobody heeds (7), just as she has made no sound at first seeing Gemmy poised on the fence (33). Gemmy, however, feels later 'that she [is] trying to see right into him, to catch his spirit, aware, as the others were not, that he was not entirely what he allowed them to see' (35). For all that, as Veronica Brady notes, there 'is no threat in the gaze she turns on him'; as a woman she is 'less concerned with difference and confrontation than with community and continuity' (98).

Janet is mystically aware of her own potentiality and that of the landscape (59-60) and its creatures (141), and understands the importance of feelings while keeping them to herself (60). Her 'true moment of growing up' is one of unconscious knowledge (127); her love of handling bees a submission, at first to 'a life independent of [the] ... human one' (140), then to a mystery of which the bees are only angels or agents (143). Janet has been led to the bees by Mrs Hutchence, who may be seen as the Magna Mater, the archetypal figure who is central to female individuation as the Wise Old Man is central to that of males, and 'who represents the cold, impersonal truth of nature'.<sup>11</sup> Mrs Hutchence puts Janet into the position that allows her access to a spiritual power beyond herself but also to Blake's single vision, the science that enables her to see the bees as both a machine-like embodiment of nature and a mysteriously multiple yet single mind. Significantly, Janet's knowledge of her changed nature after the incident with the bee swarm comes through Gemmy's perception of her old self as having been burned away and renewed by fire (144).

In older people, too, Gemmy's life in the settlement develops new knowledge. Gemmy's experience at the hands of his neighbours opens Jock's eyes to the shadow in others in a way that changes him for ever (161-2), because he is learning to take the 'mercilessly critical attitude toward one's own nature'<sup>12</sup> and that of others that moves him 'away into a distance in himself' (162). Jock's new knowledge, however, takes away while it gives: while he is made aware of the existence of the self, he is also made aware of his use of a persona to make his way in society, 'a sociable self, wrapped always in communal warmth that protected it from dark matters and all the blinding light of things, 'at the same time as that persona hid from him 'the knowledge that there was a place out there where the self might stand alone' (106-7). Once he has seen that dual truth, Jock is open to the kind of direct apprehension of the land and its creatures that his daughter knows, a knowledge 'outside words' (107-8), and that in turn allows him to explore

the inner life of his wife Ellen, and for her to explore his in a way that also opens the formerly unseen beauty of the landscape to her (110). Further, Gemmy's suffering at the hands of the neighbours moves Jock to offer human comfort to Gemmy with almost feminine tenderness, in a way that he could never previously have done (126). In the longer term, Gemmy's ill-treatment moves both the McIvors to greater understanding of others (161-62), but further along the path to self-knowledge that also leads to withdrawal into their individual selves.

The attack on Gemmy affects another person already changed by contact with him: Charles Frazer, the minister. Frazer is well aware of his 'shadow' side, for it is literal. He has been a 'night wanderer' whose loneliness as a young man has been allayed by his study of the natural world in darkness; now he can enjoy such study in daylight, since he is on 'the night side of the globe' (131), and can give freer rein to a positive element in his personality that he has repressed while in Europe. More than any other character in the novel, Frazer has Newtonian 'single vision' to which Janet will add the other three forms: his meticulous, factual descriptions and drawings bring cold Linnaean abstraction into the riotous vegetation of tropical Queensland. Yet in his journals he displays an intellectual appreciation of the landscape that, while acute, is less compelling than Janet's and Jock's more direct insight. Frazer, like Lachlan, proceeds by thought and by observing, accumulating, and systematizing details, and he carries into the new landscape the ideal of the garden so beloved of Enlightenment figures such as Thomas Jefferson. Even though his racing pen leads him beyond the limits his conscious mind might set (131), he pauses on the brink of emotional understanding of the Australian landscape.

Frazer's humility, however, is vital: he knows that Europeans can only make real the ideal of the garden if they learn the secrets of the land from the Aborigines. His 'embarrassing effusions' have their effect even on George Abbot, the young schoolmaster, to the extent that he too learns to feel 'humbled' (179), to see Gemmy as a person from whom he can learn, and to respect his endurance in a land in which endurance, rather than illusions of class and wealth, 'reveal the qualities of men' (180).

When Janet and Lachlan meet in old age, they do remember Gemmy, and Janet's declaration that they loved him releases a weight of guilt in Lachlan by helping him to accept the aspect of himself that met Gemmy's arrival with deep-seated violence rather than tolerance — with the thought

'yes ... hit it' (195). Janet repeatedly recalls the liminal moment when Gemmy toppled into the European world, and reflects on the responses his coming produced. She offers Lachlan the knowledge symbolized by the apple, the threefold vision infused with emotional value: that his response to the moment of Gemmy's coming, one of intended violence, has begun a process that has not ended inside Australia or beyond it. The hubris and violence of Europe have touched Lachlan through the death of his grandson in the Great War and the community's mistreatment of the hapless German who lives in his electorate, just as the violence of the 'dispersal' that may have killed Gemmy, and their own community's mistreatment of him, have touched Lachlan earlier (197).

Of all the characters in *Remembering Babylon*, Janet alone has Blake's fourfold vision, and bends it toward understanding the power of inclusive communication that the bees demonstrate so perfectly. She knows the bees by observation and intellectual appreciation; after years of study, she has learned that they are as cruel, clean, predictable, and impersonal as the natural world itself. But Janet also fills her perception of the creatures, the people, and the landscape with emotional value: they merge in her prayer of love as she sits in the darkness letting her mind gather and commit all of them to the care of God, so that 'none be left in the dark or out of mind' (199-200). Her vision, 'threefold in soft Beulah's night'<sup>13</sup> is crowned with mystical insight in the closing words of the novel - words in which Malouf deliberately blurs the distinction between her mind and that of the reader by changing tense and by shifting to the pronoun 'we,' invoking the central value of communication which Janet has spent her life striving to understand: 'As we approach prayer. As we approach knowledge. As we approach each other' (200).

The final image of the continent brings together darkness and light, shadow and fire, the elements constantly associated with Gemmy in the novel. Remembering Gemmy and all he stands for puts the continent 'in touch with its other life' (200) in which the conscious and unconscious, the light and the shadow, combine. Acceptance of the darkness of the past and the present, acceptance of Gemmy, and of 'the power, all unconscious in [us], of ... [our] need to draw him into [our] lives' (199), and recognition of the knowledge and endurance of Aborigines, will allow Australians as a people to attain the wholeness needed to make their land Jerusalem, a place of peace and hope, rather than Babylon, a place of division and despair.



REFERENCES

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- <sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 112.
- <sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 113.
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- <sup>8</sup> Neilson, p. 3.
- <sup>9</sup> Jacobi, p. 107.
- <sup>10</sup> Brady, Veronica. 'Redefining Frontiers — Race, Colonizers and the Colonised', *Antipodes* 8.2 (Dec. 1994), p. 98.
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