

Sathyabhama Daly

## DAVID MALOUF'S REMEMBERING BABYLON AND THE WILD MAN OF THE EUROPEAN CULTURAL CONSCIOUSNESS

David Malouf's *Remembering Babylon* engages with both the myth of the wild man of the Western literary tradition and with Judaeo-Christian concept of the wilderness. In doing so, it illustrates the way in which these myths exert a powerful influence on the European settlers' conception of the Australian landscape and its indigenous people. The myth of the wild man itself recurs throughout the history of Western literature. His presence, according to Richard Bernheimer in *Wild Men in the Middle Ages*, dates back to the pre-Christian world and to the pagan beliefs of native religions which the Church found difficult to eradicate (21). The image which has persisted in Western art and literature is that of the wild man as a degenerate being—an insane creature who, robbed of the power of speech and intellect, wanders alone in the wilderness. He is inextricably linked with the environment he inhabits, to the point where wildness and insanity almost become inseparable terms (Bernheimer 12).<sup>1</sup> These characteristics call to mind Gemmy Fairley in *Remembering Babylon*, a simple-minded, strange “white black man” (69), an outcast of white society, who is discovered by the Aborigines and raised as one of them. A hybrid figure, he is interjected into history—from nature into culture, as it were—in order to confront the white settlers with their repression of the Aboriginal presence, as well as to provoke them into a fuller understanding of themselves.

Malouf's wild man helps juxtapose two conflicting mythologies: the European perception of nature as a wilderness threatening the civilising influences of culture, and the Aboriginal mythology of nature as a spiritual communion with the ancestors of the Dreamtime. In *Wild Men in The Looking Glass*, Roger Bartra suggests that the wild man in ancient Greece symbolises the encroaching of the wilderness into civilised territory; the wild man therefore was a symbol which expressed “the antagonism between culture and nature, man and beast ...” (48). Malouf works within this tradition in creating Gemmy, the half-savage, half-civilised creature straddling the border between culture and nature. He is the wild man whose emergence from the wilderness threatens the settlers' fragile sense of identity in an alien landscape: “some bit of the land over there that was forbidden to them, had detached itself from the band of grey that made up the far side of the swamp, and in a shape more like a watery, heat-struck mirage than a thing of substance, elongated and airily indistinct was bowling, leaping, flying towards them” (RB 2). Moreover, the

emergence of Gemmy from the wilderness in many ways highlights the dialectic of "civilization and humanity" and "wildness and animality" expressed by Hayden White in his essay "The Forms of Wildness: Archaeology of an Idea" (4). According to White, the terms wild man, wildness, madness, and heresy are interchangeable; these are terms which do not merely define a state, but which are the antithesis of all that is associated with "civilization," "sanity," and "orthodoxy" (4). In *Remembering Babylon* Malouf makes this dialectic dramatically accessible by means of a second myth: the Judaeo-Christian concept of the wilderness.

The structure of the novel is partly based on a binary opposition which "relies heavily on what Judith Wright has called the "double aspect" of the Australian version of nature—its dualistic ability to simultaneously represent both the "reality of newness and freedom" and the "reality of exile" (Graeme Turner 25). The title, *Remembering Babylon*, itself recalls the Jewish history of exile, which is parallel to the settlers' ambivalent reaction to the land they inhabit: a land which is both a place of exile and the Promised Land.<sup>2</sup> The Judaeo-Christian concept of the wilderness is an ambivalent one, incorporating the moral concept of the desert as place of refuge as well as the site of Yahweh's vengeance on an immoral people, and both of these exist alongside the concept of the wilderness as a place of death and darkness (Williams 13). Furthermore, there is the distinction between the cultivated spaces—the orchards, vineyards and fields—representing God's territory, and unsown land outside this territory (Williams 12). In the Judaeo-Christian tradition, the uncultivated territory has a paradoxical relationship to the cultivated areas in that the wilderness is a place outside God's grace, but also a place where salvation can be achieved. It is this ambivalent meaning of the wilderness in Christian thought that Malouf explores through the European and Aboriginal responses to nature in nineteenth-century Australia. The concept of nature as a place of refuge and of belonging is evident in the Aborigines' spiritual union with the land. The settlers' alienation, on the other hand, stems from their belief that the unsown land represents the barbaric world of nature; the wilderness which has to be civilised through cultivation. The novel therefore revisits the cultural myths that influence the relationship between the Aborigines and the settlers.

The ambiguity of the Judaeo-Christian concept of the wilderness as a place of hope and as an accursed place is made evident through the contradictory attitudes expressed towards Australia by the characters Ellen and Jock McIvor. In Scotland, Ellen McIvor imagines Australia as a land of Paradise, characterised by vast spaces, sunlight and fresh air (RB 74). This image of Australia as a New Jerusalem is however, replaced by the underworld imagery of Brisbane, an established space threatened by the omnipresence of the

wilderness without. A "steamy torpor" permeates this Hades of the European imagination: "where everything the flesh touched was damp and the flesh itself damper, and the air had a sweetish smell just this side of putrescence" (RB 74). The heat, the drunkenness and the desperation of the settlers alluded to by Ellen imply that the wilderness penetrates the fragile space of civilisation created by the settlers. This is a place of exile steeped in the forces of darkness, and contained within the novel is the imperative that Ellen and Jock have to leave the corruption and decay of the city to discover the spiritual purity offered by the wilderness.

Ellen's vision of Australia is now that of the Babylonian exile since the very openness of the Australian continent emphasises that she has no history in this environment: "Even the openness she had longed for was a frightening thing. There had been a comfort in crowdedness and old age grime and clutter that she only appreciated when it was gone" (RB 110). This echoes the Babylonian exile of loneliness and torment created by the absence of ancestors, and of stories that human beings need to establish their identity:

She had not understood, till she came to a place where it was lacking, the extent to which her sense of the world had to do with the presence of those who had been there before, leaving signs of their passing and spaces still warm with breath—a threshold worn with the coming and going of feet, hedges between fields that went back a thousand years, and the names even further; most of all, the names on headstones, which were *their* names, under which lay the bones that had made their bones and given them breath. (RB 110-111)

Ellen's thoughts about the absence of history in this place reflect the European denial of the Aborigines who had shaped and humanised this landscape and demonstrate how the alienated European psyche interprets the wilderness: "They would be the first dead here. It made death that much lonelier and life lonelier too" (RB 111).<sup>3</sup> In the novel this negative perception of the landscape is offset by Mr Frazer's understanding of the Aborigines and the landscape: "*We have been wrong to see this continent as hostile and infelicitous, so that only by the fiercest stoicism, a supreme resolution and force of will, and by felling; clearing, sowing with the seeds we have brought with us, and by importing sheep, cattle, rabbits, even the very birds of the air, can it be shaped and made habitable. It is habitable already*" (RB 129). This enlightened perception is not shared by most of the European settlers in the novel. It is the absence of cultivated landscapes which reflect back their own humanity that is so alienating for the European psyche: "It was a landscape that was in their terms meaningless and would remain so till they had changed and shaped and humanised it" (Malouf, "Identity" 151).

Initially, for Jock and Ellen McIvor, it is the malignancy of the uncultivated and unchanging landscape, its ability to thwart the efforts of the settlers, that is most disheartening. Jock's homesickness stems from a desire for continuity and regeneration which he associates with the changing seasons of his birthplace, Scotland: "The land here never slept. If only he could wake one day and find it, just for a day, under a blanket of snow! What he missed were the marks of change" (RB 76). Ellen's view of the land is that it represents the unsown territory which has claimed the life of two of her babies: "the two small graves she knew she would never see again, under the black soil in the grove of bunyas" (RB 75). The theme of innocent lives lost to a hostile landscape, common among Australian narratives, is one which has itself been influenced by the Judaeo-Christian concepts of the wilderness as being outside civilised space, and hence outside God's territory.<sup>4</sup> The "black soil in the grove of bunyas" (RB 75) represents the primordial chaos which has claimed the lives of Ellen's babies, but their deaths also ineluctably represent the humanising of the alien landscape since it embeds the history of European settlement into the Australian environment.

*Remembering Babylon*, by presenting Australia as both a place of exile and a New Jerusalem, uses the symbolism of myth to show how the European consciousness, estranged from the environment in which it finds itself, needs stories that will connect the past with the present. It is Gemmy who will provide this contact and catalyst. The encounter between the civilized and the primitive is made evident when Gemmy decides to leave the wilderness and re-enter the world of the settlers. In the novel, the children's reaction to this apparition from the swamp is a subliminal echo of their parents' fears, their neuroses about the wilderness and of being raided by "blacks":

But it wasn't a raid, there was just one of them; and the thing, as far as he could make it out through the sweat in his eyes and its flamelike flickering, was not even, maybe, human. 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, that was the abode of everything savage and fearsome, and since it lay so far beyond experience, not just their own but their parents' too, of nightmare rumours, superstitions and all that belonged to Absolute Dark. (RB 2-3)

The image of Gemmy "flapping towards them out of a world over there" calls to mind the emergence of a demon from the desert; he has come from beyond God's territory, from the wilderness as the abode of savages, wild beasts and demons. In describing Gemmy through the metaphor of the "black" savage,

and the "wounded brolga," Malouf utilises both Greek and Aboriginal motifs to expose the fears and prejudices of the European imagination. He also shows the way in which indigenous myths are slowly being assimilated as part of the Anglo-Australian consciousness along with the Greco-Roman and Judaeo-Christian myths of their European cultural heritage. Gemmy's emergence forces the settlers to remember and bring out into the open the primal fear of the "other." This fear of the "other" is articulated by the character George Abbot: "Even the natives were of a dingy greyness. Thin-shanked, dusty, undignified, the life they lived was merely degenerate, so squalid and flea-ridden that it inspired nothing but a kind of horror at what human nature might in its beginnings spring from, and in such a place so easily sink back to" (RB 51).

The wilderness that confronts the European settlers in *Remembering Babylon* is projected on to the Aborigines, who represent all that the Europeans associate with the barbaric world. The settlers are in a new and strange environment, they have yet to develop a strong sense of community, and they are only able to define themselves by distancing themselves from the Aborigines and by projecting onto them all that is antithetical to their beliefs about civilisation and culture; a process Hayden White calls self-definition by negation, which often occurs in times of socio-cultural stress (4).<sup>5</sup> *Remembering Babylon* thus articulates the tension of the history of European settlement in Australia, primarily the fear in the white psyche that their European cultural heritage will be undermined by the alien environment.

Although the Aboriginal presence has been repressed in the discourses of the settler society, the fear that is imprinted in the psyche of the European settlers is that they themselves will revert back to the savagery of nature:

It brought you slap up against a terror you thought you had learned, years back, to treat as childish: the Bogey, the Coal Man, Absolute Night...

What you fix your gaze on is the little hard-backed flies that are crawling about in the corner of its bloodshot eyes and hopping down at intervals to drink the sweat of its lip. And the horror it carries to you is not just the smell, in your own sweat, of a half-forgotten swamp-world going back deep in both of you, but that for him, as you meet here face to face in the sun, you and all you stand for have not yet appeared over the horizon of the world, so that after a moment all the wealth of it goes dim in you, then is cancelled altogether, and you meet at last in a terrifying equality that strips the last rags from your soul and leaves you so far out on the edge of yourself that your fear now is that you may never get back. (RB 42-43)

The fear of reverting back to primitivism is also linked to the Judaeo-Christian idea that man has been created by God in his own image. The wild man therefore is an aberration, a civilised being who has descended into savagery

(Bernheimer 8). The reason for the settlers' rejection of Gemmy is that he represents the liminal figure between two extremes of culture. They are puzzled as to how Gemmy, a white man, could physically develop the features of a savage: "He had started out white ... But had he remained white? ... For the fact was, when you looked at him sometimes he was not white. His skin might be but not his features" (RB 40). The crypto-eugenic and phrenological theories which dominated racial discourse of the nineteenth-century echo in Mr Frazer's explanation for Gemmy's "native" physiognomy: "Mr Frazer had the answer: because his teeth had been worn down almost to the gums from eating the native food. The white man's facial structure came from the different and finer diet. It was the grinding down of his teeth, and the consequent broadening of the jaw that gave him what they called a native look" (RB 40). Gemmy's presence brings to the fore the atavistic fears of the community, the fear of the descent into the barbaric and godless state of the wilderness: "he had kept the smell he came with, which was the smell of the myall, half-meat, half-mud, a reminder, a depressing one, of what there might be in him that could not be reclaimed" (RB 41).<sup>6</sup> The settlers' views about Gemmy and the Aborigines exemplify the Victorian notion of the "arrested humanity" of the savage; defined as "that part of the species which had failed to raise itself above dependency upon nature, as atavism, as that from which civilized man, thanks to science, industry, Christianity, and racial excellence, had finally (and definitively) raised himself" (White 34).

It is Gemmy's strong identity with the Aboriginal world that disrupts the cohesion of the white community. He represents the divide between the European perception of the wilderness and the Aboriginal perception of nature. One may interpret Gemmy's hybrid status as the marker of the transition stage between primitivism and civilisation, whereby Gemmy's role is that of Azazel, in Hebrew tradition, the scapegoat who takes on the sins of the children of Israel. In *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*, Victor Turner suggests that it is the ambiguity of the liminal state itself that threatens a community's cohesion (95). As a scapegoat Gemmy represents this liminal figure. The concept of liminality may also be applied to the settlers, whose fears are the expression of their fragile sense of self, and who are in the process of establishing a new identity through the rites of passage defined by Arnold Van Gennep: "rites which accompany every change of place, state, social position and age" (cited in Turner, *Ritual Process*, 94). According to Van Gennep, there are three identifiable phases in all rites of passage: separation, marginalization and aggregation (Turner 94). Turner maintains that the separation phase "comprises symbolic behavior signifying the detachment of the individual or group either from an earlier fixed point in the social structure, from a set of cultural conditions (a 'state'), or from both" (94). In *Remembering Babylon* the settlers' position represents the separation phase of the transitional stage, since

they have left the values and beliefs of their established society and are in the process of building a new society: "What they looked forward to was a settled space in which they could get on with the hard task of founding a home ..." (RB 62). Gemmy therefore is the outsider who challenges their beliefs and the structure of their fragile new society. In other words he disrupts the "communitas"<sup>7</sup> of the society, the social relationships that hold a community together.

Gemmy's friendship with and knowledge of the Aborigines create fear within the community. This fear is manifested through the extreme reactions of the settlers, one example being the character Ned Corcoran's attitude to the Aborigines: "We ought to go out," he insisted, controlling the spit that flooded his mouth, "and get rid of 'em, once and for all. If I catch one of the buggers round my place, I'll fuckin' pot 'im" (RB 62). This view is endorsed by another character Andy McKillop who refers to the Aborigines as "Blacks ... Fucken myalls" (RB 100). These attitudes capture the conflict between the settlers and the indigenous people, which in turn articulates the suppressed history of settlement. The White community lives in a "state of permanent anxiety" (RB 63) and the settlers bribe Gemmy with tobacco and with friendship, because they wish to find out as much as they can about the Aboriginal inhabitants in order to protect their own interests. They need to make an "ally of him" (RB 63) in the war between the races:

They fished about, first one, then another, in a casual way, for what they wanted to know: whether the tribes out there, up there, were in the habit of gathering at any one particular spot, and in what numbers, and if it was just the men or the whole mob of them, women and children as well. They chewed their tobacco and shot out the juice, or quietly smoked, with no urgency in them; but he felt the purpose in their hands, saw in their eyes the volleys of grey smoke spreading, then hanging like rain. They chuckled to themselves and thought he could not hear. (RB 63)

In concerning itself with such themes, *Remembering Babylon* draws on the actual history of white settlement in Australia, and on the entire polarity between culture and primitivism which was to result in the shooting, poisoning and massacre of the Aborigines.

Gemmy kindles the settlers' atavistic fears, because he (a white man) has become, in looks and in behaviour, a "savage." The fear that is reinforced when he is visited by Aborigines is that the settlers' established territory will be invaded: "two blacks had walked in, just like that, as if they owned the place, then walked out again" (RB 100). Malouf's use of irony here encapsulates the concepts of civilization and primitivism dominant within the novel, where ownership is based on European laws, and the Aboriginal ownership is

negated. In the early period of settlement, the need to establish boundaries becomes paramount among the settlers because they establish ownership; the presence of the Aborigines threatens those in the community who see themselves as an alien presence in a country that continually questions their European identity and heritage. The settlers' urgent desire is to create boundaries, establish territories and impose a cultural grid on to this alien space, which overrides and fragments the organic sense of space-time of Aboriginal culture. The European cultural emphasis is on rational, absolute truths founded on Enlightenment ideals, and their interpretation of the world is in terms of what can be named, possessed and controlled. This rational, controlling and subjugating world view is opposed to the Aborigines' concept of the sacredness of nature, of sharing it with others, and of the spirits as the guardians of the land.

The Aborigines visit Gemmy not to create hostilities or establish boundaries, but in order to restore his spirit and reconnect him with the land: "They had come to reclaim him; but lightly, bringing what would feed his spirit" (RB 118). In this passage, Malouf captures the essence of the Aboriginal spiritual connection with the land:

The blacks had brought Gemmy something, though it wasn't a stone ... the silence between them as they sat, all three, and faced one another, became a conversation of another kind; and the space between them, three feet of baked earth where ants in their other life scurried about carrying bits of bark and other broken stuff in the excited scent of a new and foreign presence, expanded and became the tract of land up there under the flight of air and the stars of the night sky, that was the tribe's home territory, with its pools and creeks and underground sources of water, its rock ridges and scrub, its edible fruits and berries and flocks of birds and other creatures, all alive in their names and the stories that contained their spirit, for a man to walk into and print with the spirit of his feet and the invisible impact of his breath. (RB 117)

The language here is Biblical in its intonation, the metaphors subtly reinforcing the message that the settlers need to acknowledge this prior ownership of the land, and also emphasising that the Aborigines were more than willing to share this land with the "new and foreign presence"—a sentiment that was not reciprocated (RB 117). Contained within the narrative is Malouf's belief that Anglo-Australians need to abandon the concept of the land as a wilderness to be brought under control. They need to learn from the Aborigines the spiritual connection with the land. This process of adopting the Aboriginal attitude to the land is not to be interpreted as a narrative of dispossession. It is an understanding of the history of settlement, that Australians, white and black, cannot revert to a past before that settlement;

and that all Australians need to understand this past in order to go forward, to reconcile the two opposing views and live in harmony with one another.

In *Remembering Babylon*, Malouf shows this reconciliation between the Aboriginal and the European concepts of nature through Gemmy. His leaving of the settler community has symbolic references both to the Judaeo-Christian concept of the wilderness as a place of redemption, of the death of old life and a phoenix-like rebirth; and to the Aboriginal concept of spiritual harmony with nature: "One life was burned up, hollowed out with flame; to crack the seeds from which new life would come" (RB 181).

The language deployed in Gemmy's return to the wilderness alludes to the leaving of the Babylonian exile and the acceptance by Yahweh into the Jerusalem that awaits. Language and the world become one:

A drop of moisture sizzled on his tongue: the word—he had found it. Water. Slow dribbles of rain began to fall. He was entering rain country. . . he was walking now in a known landscape; all the names of things, as he met them, even in their ashen form, shone on his breath, sprang up in their real lives about him, succulent green, soft paw and eyeball, muscle tense under fur. (RB181)

"He was entering rain country ... walking now in a known landscape" suggesting a return to the paradisiacal Garden, but the ending of the novel remains ambivalent. His life in many ways becomes a metaphor for the estrangement between the European and Aboriginal consciousness, as is evident in this description of Gemmy's death:

It involved a "dispersal" six years before by a group of cattleman and two native troopers, too slight an affair to be called a massacre, and no newspaper had got hold of it. The blacks had been ridden down and brought to earth by blows from a stirrup iron at the end of a stirrup leather—an effective weapon, when used at a gallop, for smashing skulls. The remnants of the clan, including the young woman who gave him his facts, had scattered and been absorbed into a larger group. (RB 196)

The euphemism, "dispersal," to describe the killing of the Aborigines, and the ironic statement, "too slight an affair to be called a massacre," reveal how the polarity between the Europeans and the Aborigines led to conflict and to the violent dispersal and subjugation of the Aborigines in the history of settlement. So, although *Remembering Babylon* ends on a spiritual note: "As we approach prayer. As we approach knowledge. As we approach one another" (200), the silence that echoes is one of despair. There is no reconciliation between the Aboriginal inhabitants and the settlers, of their opposing views of nature and the wilderness, and all one is left with is the resonating despair of Blake's line

from *The Four Zoas*, the prologue of *Remembering Babylon*: "Whether this is Jerusalem or Babylon we know not."

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## Endnotes

1. Bernheimer succinctly articulates the term "wildness" and the connotations it conjures up in the Western mind: "The wild man's wildness is not a simple concept; it has sociological, biological, psychological, and even metaphysical connotations... The word [wildness] implied everything that eluded Christian norms and the established framework of Christian society, referring to what was uncanny, unruly, raw, unpredictable, foreign, uncultured and uncultivated" (19-20).
2. These ideas about the wilderness are partly drawn from George Williams *Wilderness and Paradise in Christian Thought*. Williams maintains that the concept of the wilderness, which has established itself firmly within the Christian tradition, has evolved from the history and mythology of the Hebrews: "It is one of the most useful

- images supplied by the Scriptures to designate the recurrent fact that even in the life of the redeemed there are periods or phases of partial failure, depression, uncertainty, and even defection. The children of Israel had been saved from bondage to this world, slavery in Egypt, by their miraculous passage through the Red Sea; they wandered in the wilderness for forty years before reaching the Promised Land; and many of them died murmuring against God and Moses and the new commandments (5).
3. See Nikos Papastergiadis' article "David Malouf and Languages for Landscape: An Interview," *Ariel* 25.3, July 1994. 83-94. Malouf comments: "When the early European settlers came to confront the Australian landscape, it wasn't the hostility of extreme drought and rain that was most frightening to them, rather it was the sense that the landscape reflected nothing back of their own humanity. They would look at it and it would remain something quite separate. It had not been shaped by them and so they could not see their humanity in it. That in itself is a very frightening thing, to be faced with entirely unmade landscape when the very notion we have of landscape is of something made" (84-85).
  4. According to Williams, the concept of the wilderness as a malignant force outside the jurisdiction of God was a result of the intermingling of Hebrew myths with those of other races, living in close proximity. For example, in Egypt, the dead were not buried in land that was for cultivation, but outside the cultivated territory, in wild and remote places, and these areas became associated with death and darkness: "Hence gloomy Sheol, the collective term for all the graves, came in the later stages of the Old Testament to be linked with primordial disorder and the withered wilderness" (13). The theme of lost children in Australian literature, films and society has been extensively researched by Peter Pierce in his book *The Country of Lost Children: An Australian Anxiety*.
  5. Hayden White specifically uses the phrase "self-definition by negation" to define this process: "In the past, when men were uncertain as to the precise quality of their sensed humanity, they appealed to a concept of wildness to designate an area of subhumanity that was characterized by everything they hoped they were not" (5).
  6. See Peter Pierce's erudite essay "Problematic History, Problems of Form: David Malouf's *Remembering Babylon*": "Nascent Australian fear of the Aborigines, or worse, of becoming like them (as Gemmy is presumed to have done), is depicted as the expression of a 'horror' at the instability of the self in this alien place" (191).
  7. Victor Turner prefers the Latin term *communitas* to community because it distinguishes "this modality of social relationship from an area of 'common living'" (*Ritual Process* 96). Turner sees society operating within two models of human interrelatedness: "The first is of society as a structured, differentiated, and often hierarchical system of politico-legal-economic positions... The second, which emerges recognizably in the liminal period, is of society as an unstructured or rudimentarily structured and relatively undifferentiated *comitatus*, community, or even communion of equal individuals who submit together to the general authority of the ritual elders" (Turner 96).