

BABYLON OR JERUSALEM?: AN INVERSION OF TERMS

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In David Malouf's novel, *Remembering Babylon*, there appears the following foreword: "Whether this is Jerusalem or Babylon we know not. William Blake: *The Four Zoas*".¹ The quote gives the reader a valuable clue to explore the novel in the light of its title. The relationship between Jerusalem and Babylon brings the biblical history of the captivity of the Jews to mind. Thousands of Jews, Jerusalem's children, were driven into exile to Babylon when their city fell to the army of King Nebuchadnezzar, as we read in the Second Book of Kings Verse 25. The suffering of these Jews, forced to live in a strange land, and their longing for Jerusalem is powerfully expressed in Psalm 137:

By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down, yea, we wept, when we remembered Zion.[...]
If I forget thee, O Jerusalem, let my right hand forget her cunning.
If I do not remember thee, let my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth:
if I prefer not Jerusalem above my chief joy ...

If Jerusalem is placed above the best of joys it is because of the sacred character of the city, the city of God, which contrasts with the character of Babylon, a city referred to in the Bible — in capital letters so as to highlight the importance of the words — as "The Mother of Harlots and Abominations of the Earth"² and, therefore, the symbol of evil.

David Malouf plays in his novel with the inversion of the concepts of the holy Jerusalem and the wanton Babylon. Following the invitation suggested by Blake's quote, the reader will delve into the symbolism of the story narrated and discover the significance of the novel's title. Two works by William Blake, other than *The Four Zoas*, may be mentioned. One is *Jerusalem, the Emanation of the Giant Albion*. In it Blake expands on the idea of Albion, both as the embodiment of all Britons and as a personification of England, as well as on her relationship with the biblical New Jerusalem, the Holy City and the bride of The Book of Revelation. The other work is *Milton* in whose preface Blake denounces the 'dark Satanic mills' built — as a product of the rationalist, erring human mind that Blake deplored — at the evil time of the Industrial Revolution. They represented the enslavement of the former England, that Blake had imagined as the Holy City of Jerusalem before the Fall. The poet also claims, in that preface, for the ultimate building of the New Jerusalem in 'England's green and pleasant land'.

To explain the strong influence of the Bible in Blake's art, Northrop Frye has pointed out that "Blake [...] was brought up on the Bible and on Milton ..." and that "what is so obviously true of most of his paintings is also true also of his poetry: it is the work of a man whose Bible was his textbook. The prophecies [of Blake] recreate the Bible in English symbolism ..." (146).

In Malouf's novel, the identification of Jerusalem and Babylon reveals a dichotomy. For the white settlers in Queensland, over a century ago, Jerusalem is equated with Britain and the new land with an obscure and remote place of exile:

The country [...] was all unknown to them. Even in full sunlight it was impenetrable dark. (8)
In all their lives till they came here, they had never ventured, most of them, out of sight or earshot of a village steeple that [...] was always there when they looked up...(9).

Added to this, the Aborigines are perceived as lurking around, potentially dangerous and essentially evil, but "most unnerving of all was the knowledge that, just three years back, the very patch of earth you were standing on had itself been on the other side of things, part of the unknown..." (9). This sense of being on the other side of things is related to the whites' prejudice against the antipodean inversion, exemplified in the McIvors' perception of the moon as being "the wrong way round" (109). Furthermore, the settlers are afraid of being morally polluted by the environment; they have a feeling "of being in a place that had not yet revealed all its influences upon them" (41).

In this context, the sudden arrival at the settlement of Gemmy Fairley — a young white man gone native who is the main character in Malouf's story — arises suspicion, revulsion, fear and hatred, that will eventually lead to serious nastiness and even attempted murder. The years that Gemmy has spent with the Aborigines become unpalatable for the white settlers. Any British immigrant in that period was familiarized with the Bible and had doubtless read of the abominations of Babylon, "the great whore, which did corrupt the earth with her fornication".³ Soon the settlers begin to ponder on Gemmy's association with Aborigines and to shudder at the thought of Gemmy's contamination:

He had been with them, quite happily it appeared, for more than half his life: living off the land, learning their lingo and all their secrets, all the *abominations* they went in for (39).

Whatever abominations the whites' mind might be dwelling on, the reader knows of the simple, pure life Gemmy has led with the blacks. To emphasize its ascetic character, Malouf tells us that "no woman [...] would have to do with him" (28), the reason being that for the Aborigines Gemmy is an 'in-between creature'. On the other hand, the author applies the word 'abomination' to the whites when he describes a nasty deed directed against Gemmy and his protector Jock McIvor. One day Jock discovers that one of his neighbours has plastered with shit the wall of a shed Gemmy has been mending. "The flies [...] were feeding on it, as if the abomination was in them" (115). Jock goes mad at the sight of the flies but then reflects, "what had they to do with it? Some man had done this. That was the real abomination" (115).

As we have seen Aboriginality is, for the majority of whites in Malouf's story, synonymous to 'abomination', while the new land represents, at best, exile.

This sense of exile is even seen in Ellen McIvor, a sympathetic, positive character yet one acutely aware of her loneliness; of the absence in this antipodean land of the ghosts of her ancestors, as well as the links that tie any living generation to its past:

She had not understood, till she came to a place where it was so 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 ...(110).

It is ironical that, while Ellen misses her ghosts, Gemmy's black friends are concerned about Gemmy living "among [...] ghostly white creatures", worried that he "might have slipped back into the thinner world of wraiths and demons that he had escaped, though never completely, in his days with them" (118). As for the empty land evoked in Ellen's mind, the reader finds that for Gemmy, as an adopted Aborigine, it is "alive [...] and dazzling" (67); it is an attractive territory, full of "creatures, all alive in their names and the stories that contained their spirit ..." (117). It is, moreover, "his mother, the only one he had ever known. It belonged to him as he did to it [...] so long as he was one with it" (118).

There is, therefore, a dual vision of the land, as perceived either by the blacks or by the whites. The latter vision is further exemplified in the novel. There is an attempt, on the part of the colonizers, to build the New Jerusalem in the distant, Babylonian Terra Australis. Thus, we find ordinary settlers persuaded that they have "good reason [...] for stripping [the land] of every vestige of the native [...], reducing it to what would make it, at last, just a bit like home" (9). There is also a Governor in Brisbane busily erecting classical monuments in a hardly born city; engaged in naming new places; seeing himself "as a kind of imperial demiurge" (168), while Mr Herbert, the Premier, has been successful in making a replica in his property, Herston, of "fifty acres of Cambridgeshire" (173). Only Mr Frazer, with his clearer insight about Australia and the errors of settlement, points out that if the settlers' intention is "to make this place too part of the world's garden", they should change themselves instead of trying to change the land (132).

For Gemmy, the terms Babylon and Jerusalem are inverted, as becomes patent by his story. Shortly after his arrival at the settlement his past life is elicited by the minister Mr Frazer and taken in writing by George Abbot, the schoolmaster. For the benefit of those two men, but not of the reader yet, Gemmy's story emerges bit by bit, somewhat distorted. Not only has Gemmy to struggle with a language largely forgotten and never really mastered, but he is so eager to please Mr Frazer that he lets him hear what he wants to hear. Moreover, Gemmy's memory has mercifully obliterated or clouded certain painful events, while he has willed some people out of his narrative, simply because "he wouldn't want them in it" (21). Gemmy's story is further misrepresented by the intervention of the schoolmaster who adds phrases or changes facts so as to satisfy his ego or alleviate his boredom. In the end the tale that materializes has become "the minister's Colonial fairytale" (19). Significantly, however, the story has needed

seven pages for its completion; seven pages which Gemmy is allowed to handle and smell for a moment, while he wonders about their magic:

It did not surprise him — it was the nature of magic — that all that had happened to him, all his fortune good and bad, and so much sweat and pain [...] should be reduced now to what a man could hold in his hand ... (21).

This early episode stirs Gemmy's memory and the process of remembering all that had been forgotten or shrouded in mist will not stop from then on. The undiluted misery and suffering of Gemmy's past will emerge gradually and be displayed in front of the reader's eyes. The final revelation of Gemmy's past, what his unconscious mind must have tried to suppress from his memory, takes place while Gemmy is staying at Mrs Hutchence's. The smell of wood from a chest of drawers brings back Gemmy's recollections of the abominations endured, in days long gone, in England; period: Industrial Revolution:

Back, far back [...], when he was still at the maggot stage, he had been one of an army of little shitty creatures, mere bundles of rag and breath but with hands that could grasp a broom and strength enough to push it, whose job it was, for all the hours of daylight, to crawl about in the low place under the machines in a timber mill, sweeping sawdust into wooden pans. Fine wood-dust poured incessantly from the teeth of the saws — that was the smell — and there was another, heavier smell, which was that of the oily grime round the base of the machines and the bolt-heads that fixed them to the floor, which they picked out with their nails, mixed with sawdust, and ate (146).

Some time later Gemmy, by then five or six, leaves this 'satanic mill', attains the title of 'Willett's Boy' and becomes the subject of even worse treatment and degradation than when he was 'at the maggot stage'. Through Gemmy's recollections the reader catches a glimpse of London; the squalor that was part of it; the sordidness of the lives of so many of its people. In this environment Gemmy is exploited by Willett, used as a rat-catcher. "He has scars all over his hands — one thumb is bitten through — and on his ears as well ..." (150). Willett further degrades young Gemmy when he encourages his moll to take him in her lap, make him suck her breast and even frig "him under his shirt till he is squealing" (151). Until one day, when he is eleven or twelve years old, and for reasons he himself cannot understand, Gemmy deserts Willett and his dungeon, leaving a funeral pyre behind, only to find a darker fate, to be "often bullied and worse by the others. Mosey. The Irish" (154), in an endless chain of abomination and degradation that will not cease until he is abandoned as a castaway in the Australian shores and rescued from certain death by a band of Aborigines.

Once Gemmy has fully recovered the memory of his former existence in the harlot city, he decides he must also recuperate "those sheets, seven in all, he had not forgotten the number" (154), where his life had been set down, as the only way to find salvation. Weak and tired but determined, he sets on his way from Mrs Hutchence's to the settlement. As if embodying the psalmist that many centuries ago had wailed, "If I do not remember thee, let my tongue cleave to the roof of my

mouth; if I prefer not Jerusalem above my chief joy"⁴, Gemmy's "tongue felt brittle in his mouth as an insect's wing. He was going to claim back his life ..." (176). Only then he would be free to return to Nature, the true Heavenly City for him, his Zion.

Gemmy starts his pilgrimage on "a day of bushfires, brassy sky; the air stilled, smelling of char. Fine ash falling, as if the sun at last had burnt itself out and the last flakes of it were descending to cover the earth" (176). A busy schoolmaster engaged in marking papers, is taken aback by Gemmy's unexpected apparition at his window and by his asking for people, until the name Willett brings recollections of a story told and written down in seven pages almost a year earlier. As those seven pages are in Mr Frazer's possession, George Abbot appeases Gemmy by giving him seven sheets of paper covered with his pupil's exercises. It is meaningful that the pages handed to Gemmy are not the genuine ones. After all, the original pages had only contained a distorted story; its only importance being the human life concealed in them. Leaving the schoolmaster shortly afterwards, seven sheets of paper in his possession symbolising his past, Gemmy reassumes his pilgrimage:

To the north, beyond the swamp and its band of ti-tree forest, the sky was a smoky glow, cloudless because what filled it was a single cloud, blooming with a light that might have been that of the fallen sun, its ashes shaken out now and even the deep core falling. The forests up there had all day been climbing into the sky and drifting down again to cover all this side of the range with ash; a breath out of the heart of the country (180).

The connotations of the passages describing Gemmy's pilgrimage of return, from a world of haunting demons to Nature, are unmistakably apocalyptic, echoing the prophetic vision of the last days that we read in the New Testament:

But in those days, after that tribulation, the sun shall be darkened, and the moon shall not give her light. And the stars of heaven shall fall, and the powers that are in heaven shall be shaken.⁵

This takes us again to the foreword of the novel, since it explains why David Malouf, immediately below the quote from William Blake, has quoted from John Clare:

Strange shapes and void afflict the soul
And shadow to the eye
A world on fire while smoke seas roll
And lightnings rend the sky

The moon shall be as blood the sun
Black as a thunder cloud
The stars shall turn to blue and dun
And heaven by darkness bowed
Shall make sun dark and give no day
When stars like skys shall be
When heaven and earth shall pass away

Wilt thou Remember me⁶

Clare's apocalyptic passage is in line with the description of the last days in the New Testament, mentioned above, as well as with Peter's letter to the faithful where he confirms the anguish of the last days while, at the same time, expresses his hope in the new heavens and earth⁷, a hope further confirmed by John's cosmic vision in the Book of Revelation, where he describes the new Jerusalem descending from heaven as a bride.⁸

Blake, for his part, had held the same belief. For him, as Frye has pointed out:

The ordinary world is 'fallen', the manifestation of man's own sin and ignorance; the true world is the apocalypse presented at the end of the Bible and the paradise presented at the beginning of it; the true city and garden that is man's home, and which all existing cities and gardens struggle to make manifest in the lower world (143).

On his way back to the bush, we find Gemmy reflecting on the never ending cycle of life, on the way seasons follow one another and life is regenerated. He wants to be part of that cycle again. In a context of fire, the rain that begins to fall will allow a regenerated Gemmy to enter into communion with Nature again. This is the context in which Gemmy disappears physically from the reader's eyes, but not from Lachlan and Janet's memories. Both of them, but more particularly Janet, will always remember him. It is precisely in connection with her remembrance of Gemmy and her awareness of the force that pushed Gemmy to the trio of children who first met him, the same force that made them pull him to them — namely the force of love — that the novel is closed, with Janet's visionary perception of Australia, somehow suggestive of a bride, a new redeemed Jerusalem, luminous, and no longer merely terrestrial:

Out beyond the flatlands the line of light pulses and swells [...]. Quickly now it is rising towards us, it approaches.

As we approach prayer. As we approach knowledge. As we approach one another.

It glows in fullness [...] and the light, running in fast now, reaches the edge of the shore [...], and all the muddy margin of the bay is alive, and in a line of running fire all the outline of the vast continent appears, in touch now with its other life (200).

Works Cited

- Frye, Northrop, *Fables of Identity: Studies in Poetic Mythology*, New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1963.
Malouf, David, *Remembering Babylon*, London: Vintage, 1994.

Endnotes

1. This reference comes from *Vala, or the Four Zoas*, "Night the Fourth", line 102.
2. See Revelations 17:5.
3. Revelations 19:2.
4. Psalm 137.
5. Mark 25,25. Cfr. Matthew 24,29, Luke 21,25.
6. Quote from John Clare: It comes from the fourth and last stanza of a poem entitled "Song Last Day". But this stanza begins with "The moon shall be as ..." The first lines are missing. This is not strange since it was written while he was in the asylum and published after his death, so there are probably several versions. No possible editing by the author himself. Found in *John Clare: The Oxford Authors*, O.U.P. ed. by Eric Robinson & Geoffrey Summerfield, 1984. The same editors are responsible for a volume of *Clare: Selected Poems and Prose*, 1966, O.U.P., 1972. In the "Introduction" of this volume we read:

Though most of his poems written in his closing years are love songs or ballads, and though most of them, at least superficially, speak of enjoyment in nature, felt in the past or even in the present, a sombre note is occasionally struck. The consequence of free will in Adams' Paradise was the Fall and the introduction of sin into the world. Thus the time would come where there would be a terrible Day of Judgement. [...] In Clare's poetry, the theme of Judgement, which had always been there, grew stronger and gained fuller expression in his later years. In 1841 he wrote the apocalyptic poem: "There is a dreadful day/ Still following the past/ When sun and moon are past away/ And mingle with the blast// There is a vision in my eye / A vacuum oer my mind / Sometimes as on the sea / Iye/ Mid roaring waves and wind". Imitations of the psalms often follow a similar trend, and thunder and shipwrech are frequent subjects (p. 37,38).

7. Pet. 3, 12-13: "Looking for and hasting unto the coming of the day of God, wherein the heavens being on fire shall be dissolved, and the elements shall melt with fervent heat? Nevertheless, we according to his promise, look for new heavaens and a new earth, wherein dwelleth righteousness".
8. Rev. 21, 1,2 : "And I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth were passed away; and there was no more sea. And I John saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down from heaven, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband".