

SINGING THE LAND, KISSING THE EARTH:
LANGUAGE AND ILLUMINATION, *POIESIS* AND
RECONCILIATION IN SOME AUSTRALIAN WRITING

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You covered me with a big swag. Government covered me up. Covered me over. That's
the way they pinched it away that land.

Hobbles Danayarri

In *Hidden Histories: Black Stories from Victoria River Downs, Humbert River and Wave Hill Stations*, Deborah Bird Rose puts together accounts of the colonisation of this region of the Northern Territory: transcribed oral histories supported by written records of the times. I begin with her quote from Hobbles Danayarri's extensive account recorded at Yarralin in 1981.

In the telling of this history Rose helps us to understand the way in which thousands of indigenous people in the Northern Territory, as elsewhere in the continent, were dispossessed of their land and, if not killed, forced to work upon it for no wages; how, being classified as wards of the state and inmates of cattle station "institutions" right up until the 1967 referendum allowed them to be considered citizens in their own country, "their voices were never heard". Rose does this by highlighting the operation of "strategies of denial" through *discourse*, at the same time problematising the notion of "national interest." As she explains:

In the debates of the 1930s about whether Aborigines should be paid wages, the pastoral industry was identified as one of the mainstays of the Northern Territory economy. It could not thrive, so its representatives claimed, if Aborigines were to be paid wages. Nor could it thrive by hiring "white" labour. The "national interest" was said to coincide with the ability of large multinational companies to make profits.³

Although its depictions of the process of colonisation are at times shocking and profoundly disturbing, *Hidden Histories* is a book that ultimately radiates optimism. In its telling of these brutal aspects of Australia's colonial past, along with visions for the future from some of

those most harmed, the book takes part in the opening up of dialogue exploring the nation's potential in strong terms that test and transcend the dominant paradigms that have been shaping the country. While Rose's account well illustrates the operation of discourse in the colonising process, the way in which the land and people's lives were "pinched away" 'legitimately', it also illustrates how a fresh appraisal of our being here both materially and existentially is enabled through opening to Other voices speaking other language, "covered up voices", voices from the margins, and to silences.

In this paper I will try to suggest how the perpetual problematisation of language and discourse that has been the healthy legacy of post-structuralist thinking might allow us to more clearly realise their enormous potential in driving our culture and in exploring, like Frank Harland in David Malouf's *Harland's Half-Acre*, "new places" we might "go".

As a point of departure, I have taken Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin's discussion in *The Empire Writes Back*, of the discursive practice of "construction of "place"", highlighted as it is in post-colonial literatures, deriving as it may from the sense of cultural or geographical dislocation experienced in settler colonies. They explain: "The gap which opens between the experience of place and the language available to describe it forms a classic and all-pervasive feature of post-colonial texts."²

In this light it appears that as diligently as the colonising settlers set about mapping and naming the "new" country and clothing it in narratives, journal entries and other discourses from their European ensembles, they would not manage to adequately or convincingly cover the immense, mysterious corporality of the land that lay before them in discourses that regarded it as marginal or inferior in some ways to an imperial centre. I would like to suggest that in exploring and constructing their new place in vast and ancient country, post-colonial poets, novelists and artists would come to highlight the overwhelming *presence* of the land, writing a humility before it and its indigenous people and in the process appear to

make some progress towards poetically reconciling an otherwise alienated post-colonial culture with its *topos*.

In exploring the idea of margins of discourse and the "outer-limits" of language, I will extrapolate from Paul Carter's discussion of the making of "space" into *place*,³ to employ, as a metaphor for the process of colonisation, an image of the land as being *covered up/covered over* by an imperial discourse that would seek to "explain away" and subdue all aspects of experience in the "new place". I will try to depict this "cover" as in places "flimsy" or stretched beyond its capacity, permitting breaches or even gaps. What is thus enabled at these "sites" are glimpses of what lies "beneath" the discursive cover, an alternate vision of the world and of being which language, through familiar discourse, finds renewed difficulty in representing. At the same time, from another aspect of this metaphor, the discursive landscape rolls out towards a horizon that it constantly approaches but might never reach: mapping, naming and claiming as it nonetheless proceeds.

In a Barthian sense we might say it is in those places where the imperial garment has *gaped*, that exquisite glimpses of the land have been permitted.⁴In some of the writing we will be looking at here these glimpses seem to give way to a sense of disorientation that might be linked with *extasis* or more simply with the experience of *ostranenie*, the defamiliarisation, the "making strange" identified by the Russian Formalists as the essential function of art, the task of the poet being to dehabituate the everyday, making it "strange" through use of language, and opening up the possibility of a freshness of vision and experience for the reader.

The *journey* is a basic theme underlying much of Western literature from *The Odyssey* and *The Aeneid* to *An Imaginary Life*. The genre of the journey is especially closely linked to the literatures of the spiritual traditions, the pilgrimage being both a way of leaving behind the limitations of worldly concerns and of opening oneself to Providence. As St John of the Cross explains in *The Dark Night*:

To reach a new and unknown land and journey along unknown roads, travellers cannot be guided by their own knowledge: instead they have doubts about their knowledge and

seek the guidance of others. Obviously they cannot reach new territory or attain this added knowledge if they do not take these unknown roads and abandon those familiar ones... The soul, too, when it advances, walks in darkness and unknowing.⁵

In "Eyre All Alone"⁶ Francis Webb portrays the travels of the explorer as a "pilgrimage" (180). As Webb outlines in his notes, according to Eyre's journals (250), after an initial expedition north from Adelaide in 1840 towards the centre, thwarted by the salty marshes around the lake that carries his name, he turned away from this initial goal to head west. This appears in the poem in the section *From the Centre* to have been a humbling experience for the explorer. We are told of how in his setting off:

Desert, big stick, or inland sea
Were all the Promised Land to me.
Horses with a gross family tree
Carried my pride (177)

However, on his way to the Centre as if it were a prize to be won, instead he finds as he explains:

No water, never a scrap of fodder
To feed my pride (177)

And moreover, he reflects

The Centre has rolled me as a dice
Into hot air above tableland, face. (177)

Here, rather than "loss of face", what is implied is a transcendence of "face" as an issue. Eyre is perhaps on his way to humility, a first step towards openness, his pride "narrowed." On a pilgrimage, like the Irish monks, the *peregrinato* needs to remain open, even as to destination. Eyre in his pride had set off as if to "conquer" the Centre. But it was not to be. Instead, in his new found humility, he sheds much of his baggage, to travel more lightly along the Southern margin of the continent. Eyre is travelling towards the Sound and the sense of the landform, King George Sound, readily gives way to an image of a resonance, if not an articulated word, that draws him on. Eyre's eventual reaching of the Sound coincides with his glimpse there on

the road of "Someone," perhaps the Word: Christ as often portrayed by Webb, and also the Other.⁷

In *An Imaginary Life* David Malouf's Ovid character finds himself exiled from Rome, removed from the imperial centre, taken out beyond the margins of "civilisation" and the inherent margins of imperial language, "to the very edge of things where nothing begins" (27). Here the poet finds himself on the threshold of the gap, the flaw. The poet, humbled and poised "at the limits of the known world" (26), is almost ready to transcend those limits. The final break will come through an embrace of the Other, the Child. In *An Imaginary Life*, Malouf presents the sustained metaphor of a journey from the limitations of vision at the centre of imperial language and discourse towards glimpses at the margins – where this discourse falls silent – of other illuminating possibilities.

Between discourse and silence we might try to focus now upon that "in-between" threshold area of semi-comprehensibility. This semi-comprehensibility of language may arise as a stage towards finding a new way of speaking about new, or as yet unarticulated aspects of experience. It may involve expression sufficient in itself to communicate aspects of being that might not be readily comprehended through familiar discursive language. It can be a marginal place of fluid metaphors. Francis Webb in his work of *poiesis* appears to operate in this region as he enunciates most clearly in "Images in Winter":

I pin my faith on slipping images
Twisting like smoke or a fish caught in the hand (15)

In these lines Webb also points to the vital element involved in walking this edge and in glimpsing over it or at times pushing through it: the element of faith. He also expresses his presentiment that the task of *poiesis* may at times be enabled through direct engagement with the Word:

That tattered swagman, Death on a Friday night
May pop in with the appropriate metaphor,
And then our talk is of momentous things (15)

We stumble over the images/language as we are drawn along in the rush of alliterative and assonant patterns, grappling for meaning. "The momentous things" appear in terms of images that deliver an extraordinary clarity, of a kind, there at the edge of comprehensibility:

A broken harp smouldering from the brush of wings;
A ship's brown wooden wheel that brings the spar,
The gull in a green storm clear as the maker's name (15)

Near the end of the poem Webb refers to his images, his metaphors, as if suspiciously, as "huge conceits". The poet's faith, after all, lies in "the slipping images." For against this, it seems, "The desert edges out its blunt grey sands". (16)

And we are reminded of the deadening of consciousness that might, as the Russian Formalist, Viktor Shklovskij indicated, result from the habituated and unreflective use of language, when signifier and signified appear to get stuck together, jammed. To further meditate on the old dichotomy of form and content we might say that form articulates content, summons it up, calls it forth. New poetry, new ways of saying, may well enable new ways of seeing and new ways of being.

In Malouf's *Remembering Babylon*,⁸ we find the matter of the threshold into a new way of seeing highlighted in the very powerful image of Gemmy, "the black whiteman," on the threshold, on the fence, about to fall from the world of Aboriginal culture into the completely alien white settler culture that awaits him there, or from the point of view of the children who receive him, he crosses over in a "long moment" (33) from "all that is unknown to them," "the impenetrable dark," the region of "illimitable night" (8). The recollection of this moment of Gemmy upon that threshold when they were able to see "All that he was. All." (194) will remain with the two older children throughout their lives.

What they glimpse there in that moment of perfect clarity will help shape their lives in the direction of a greater than usual openness, Janet in terms of mysticism, as depicted in her experience of communion with the bees and perhaps her entry into religious life as Sister Monica, and Lachlan

in his compassionate openness in public affairs as a Minister in the Queensland government, as in his defence of the German immigrant amid wartime hatreds. What they had glimpsed through Gemmy was on the one hand the threshold itself, a way through into that vast space of the unknown, at the same time as they saw Gemmy, himself, clearly, a whole and Other being. And through him it is indicated, they also learn to cross the threshold from fear into *love*.

The effect of Gemmy extends beyond the children to Janet's father, Jock, who takes him in and defends him. As a result, we are told, he begins to have "strange thoughts":

Some were bitter. They had to do with what he now saw when he looked into the hearts of men – quite ordinary fellows like himself; he wondered that he had not seen it before. (106)

Malouf explains:

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... (106-107)

This is the way in which hegemonic and habituated discourse operates, providing a sense of security and legitimacy which might come as Paul Carter points out "at the expense of a world of experience,"⁹ habituating us to lives of a limited range of perception and consciousness, lives lived perhaps unconsciously, "as if they had never been."¹⁰

Gemmy's presence, his being the same but Other, has the unsettling effect of *ostranenie*: enabling new perception, demanding a fresh appraisal, of what it is to be a "whiteman", what it is to be a man, what it is to be in this land, indeed what it is to be in the world. As Malouf explains of Jock:

Wading through waist-high grass, he was surprised to see all the tips beaded with green, as if some new growth had come into the world that till now he had never seen or heard of.

When he looked closer it was hundreds of wee bright insects, each the size of his little fingernail, metallic iridescent, and the discovery of them, the new light they brought to the scene, was a lightness in him – that was what surprised him – like a form

of knowledge he had broken through to. It was unnamable, which disturbed him, but was also exhilarating; for a moment he was entirely happy....(107-108)

Like Patrick White's *Riders in the Chariot*, *Remembering Babylon* is also a story of the persecution of, and human cruelty towards, an Other/Others, legitimised by mainstream society through its tenuous self-reinforcement and its pathetic and brutal insecurity: individually, like that shown towards Gemmy and Mordecai Himmelfarb, the Jewish immigrant in *Riders in the Chariot*; racially and culturally as in treatment of the Jewish and the Aboriginal peoples. But more importantly – and again as in White's novel – Malouf's *Remembering Babylon* is at the same time a story of the possibility of the transcendence of cruelty, fear, insecurity and other human limitations through *love*.

In *Remembering Babylon*, in this highlighted mode, *love* is always associated with Gemmy. At the conclusion of the novel, the narrator takes on Sister Monica's meditation, which has stemmed from her recollection with her cousin of Gemmy, thereby bringing the story to a close which is really more of an opening. The scene expands to encompass the world and "all the waters of the earth" with a particular vision of the continent in which the story is set:

[The sea] 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)

We are perhaps beginning to listen to indigenous understandings about the *land* – its Providential presence – and *country* – the place where you were born, the place you are connected to and have a responsibility to look after. The words *land* and *country* as they are used here (however it is that they relate to the concepts of indigenous people) are already current in Australian English, and might not readily find an equivalent common usage with the same subtleties of meaning among speakers of standard English in Europe. The land here is really something Other; unlike anything Europeans had seen, written or read about before the process of their

exploration and colonisation of it began. As in the case of the indigenous cultures, the non-indigenous cultures that have been exploring and settling here have been written by the land as they have attempted to write it.

The land might be seen now as contested space, as since the Mabo decision, the concept of *terra nullius* has been overturned and Aboriginal inscription is recognised. In *Reading the Country*, Stephen Muecke observes that in Aboriginal culture the phenomenon of the Dreaming is not just a mythological depiction of events that happened in the past, "it is alive as a way of talking," and it depends in an on-going sense on "people living in the country, travelling through it and naming it, constantly making new stories and songs." He sets down and tries to understand some of the stories, songs and explanations engaging with the Dreaming or *bugarrigarra*, of co-author, Paddy Roe, a Nyigina man whose country around the Roebuck Plains in the Kimberley region of Western Australia the book covers. Muecke explains how:

Paddy Roe... constantly talks about the *bugarrigarra* as story, as song, as a power he controls and as things to do with particular places. To talk about these places is ... to talk in a special way which disrupts the uniformity of everyday language. It is a bit like the talk which we call poetry, attributing it with special qualities of transcendence.¹¹

There is the possibility that we might look to the land with hope in the reconciliation process, the reconciliation between indigenous and non-indigenous cultures that may also involve a sense of reconciliation within ourselves and our sense of place here, something that might help to slow (along with sound government legislation) the destruction of the natural environment. It may involve *loving* the land and looking after it – not difficult to imagine now. The *poiesis* of loving the land has already begun. This reconciliation will need to be written, not once and for all, but as an ongoing process. Reconciliation will require a *poiesis*, a Dreaming. This is still "new territory" for many Australians. And there may be a lot of groundwork still required from those exploratory poets in all the cultures involved: David Malouf, Bill Neidjie,¹² Bush Tucker Man... the list is hopefully long.

Meanwhile, there is the land itself stretching out there, its centre, its margins, its topography, its rocks and vegetation, its animals and birds and small creatures, its people – and perhaps all depends upon the way in which it is spoken and written about. Its future is being written now (along with its present and its past). Good poetry that “rings true” is needed to take us somewhere we haven’t been yet.

Poets in whatever medium they are working, be they writers, filmmakers, musicians, artists, web authors, rhetoricians, might be seen like the poets of the past to bear a great deal of responsibility in a culture. Any new territory they explore might well be taken up by others to become part of popular culture or even part of a common sense world view. If indeed we construct the world through language, poets might be seen as engineers in that construction assembling words and metaphors. Bridges – and forests – might stand up or come down according to the work they do.

In singing the land the explorer-poets, such as White, Malouf and Webb, like holy fools have advocated a sense of humility and radical openness towards the land and its people, perhaps towards everybody and everything: a kissing of the earth, an embrace of it through an unlimited faith, a hope, and a love that is also always in the process of being written, and discovered. (It may be that a threshold is crossed in the *bending* to kiss.) At the same time, however, a significant aspect of the settling process that writers like Malouf, White and Webb would have us keep in mind is the need to remain “unsettled,” and the need for what Carter has called “in-between” spaces,¹³ to remain *open*, enabling, in a clear, new light, access to “uncompacted,” perhaps common, ground.

REFERENCES

¹ Deborah Bird Rose, *Hidden Histories*, p. 263.

² Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin, eds., *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-colonial Literatures* (London: Routledge, 1989), p. 10.

³ See Paul Carter, *The Road to Botany Bay* (London: Faber and Faber, 1987).

⁴ See Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, trans. Richard Miller (New York: Noonday, 1975), especially p. 9.

⁵ Book II:16.8.

⁶ Michael Griffith and James A. McGlade, eds., *Cap and Bells: The Poetry of Francis Webb* (Sydney: Collins Angus & Robertson Publishers, 1991). All page numbers accompanying Francis Webb’s texts will refer to this edition of his work.

⁷ According to Christian teaching, God's presence (or Christ's presence) may be found in the stranger, or we might say, the Other, a "Someone" encountered on the road. The Benedictine way of life, for example, emphasises that the presence of God can be recognised in guests and strangers, in the sick, and in everyday things, so that objects such as utensils and tools used in everyday life might be regarded as sacred vessels. (Source: a lecture delivered by Theo Robinson, D.O.M: "The Benedictine Way of Life", Sydney, 1994.)

⁸ David Malouf, *Remembering Babylon* (London: Vintage, 1994) All page numbers accompanying quoted texts will refer to this edition.

⁹ Paul Carter, *The Road to Botany Bay*, p. xxii.

¹⁰ V. Shklovskij, "Art as Technique", in Lee T. Lemon and Marion J. Reis, *Russian Formalist Criticism: Four Essays*, p. 12.

¹¹ Krim Benterrak, Stephen Muecke and Paddy Roe, *Reading the Country*, (Western Australia: Fremantle Arts Centre, 1984) p. 14.

¹² See, for example, Bill Neidjie, *Story About Feeling* (Broome: Magabala Books, 1989).

¹³ Paul Carter, *The Lie of the Land* (London: Faber and Faber, 1996) p. 5.