

Crossing Borders of the Self in the Fiction of David Malouf

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The relation of self and other is at the thematic heart of two of David Malouf's novels: *An Imaginary Life* and *Remembering Babylon*.¹ Characters demarcate the terms of this relation through their experiences: they endure alienation, suffer exile, or find themselves estranged from a linguistic community; they discover a sense of centredness, return to a home, or are absorbed into a common speech and the life of the community. Both of these texts have attracted specific critical comment, not all of it positive, regarding the ways they manifest and explore the self-other relation. Some reviewers and critics have questioned whether Malouf might not have passed up opportunities to represent viewpoints other than the consciousness of the narrator and the central characters, or to explore, in depth, authentic alternatives to hegemonic cultural paradigms.² Can a reader of *An Imaginary Life* step out from Ovid's consciousness, even momentarily, to take issue with his world of exile and its inhabitants? Can a reader of *Remembering Babylon* gain an insight into the lives of indigenous characters only glimpsed at the edges of the narrative? While there are sympathetic characters in both novels who experience and embody cultural exteriority, are readers able to gain significant insight into their experiences and worldviews?

This essay will identify how the narratives of these two texts open up distinctive modes of the self-other relation: between characters in the story and also between the text and the world of the reader. The movement beyond the boundaries of fiction is an ethical gesture, enjoining the reader to take an active role in bridging the text with their world. In order to demonstrate how this process functions in each text, it will be crucial to distinguish the self-other relation into three terms: the animal and the human (drawing on recent work in ethics by Giorgio Agamben); the relation between two humans as an I and a You (drawing on the theology of Martin Buber); and the human and divinity (drawing on the ethical phenomenology of Emmanuel Levinas).³

The Self-Other Relation in *An Imaginary Life*

An Imaginary Life, first published in 1978, provides a first-person narrative of exile, namely that of the Roman poet Ovid. He is banished from Augustan Rome and sent out to the remote outpost of Tomis on the Black Sea coast, not far from the mouth of the Danube River in modern Romania. Ovid's exile soon develops from its initial conditions of physical and cultural estrangement. He realises that his entire adult life as Rome's most notorious poet has amounted to an alienation from an essential humanity last embodied in childhood. His political exile opens the way for him to return to an authentic state of being. Ovid is able to make this journey by coming to understand the people of the village - the barbarians on the fringes of empire⁴ - and by his adoption of a wolf-child, a strange visitant who recalls a lost child of the forest Ovid remembers from his own childhood.

The Animal and the Human

In the early days of his exile in Tomis, among the 'barbarians', Ovid reflects upon his new surroundings and their essential exteriority to his civilized lifeworld. He is alienated in his physical displacement, his loss of language, and his preference to 'wander in a dream' (p. 17), passive and beyond fellowship. At the same time he is open to his new surroundings and pays careful attention to the customs of the village and the physical environment beyond it, if only to comment upon the harshness of village life and the relative poverty of the land. But before this narrative scene is set in Tomis, the reader is met with Ovid's reminiscence of Sulmo, his rustic childhood home. This prefatory passage, set in italic type, signifies a different mode of consciousness from that of the main narrative. Its dreamlike, diaphanous temporal frame qualifies Ovid's later attempts to chart his surroundings, and it instigates the animal-human relation.

The past tense of the very first sentence - 'When I first saw the child I cannot say' (p. 9) - shifts to the present tense in the second - 'I see myself' - as memory transforms into bucolic immediacy. The farm scene is given depth in the description of its vegetal and animal inhabitants: bees move among the herbs and function as figures of animal society and co-operation;

a single he-goat, standing on his hind legs, eats vine-shoots, perhaps a reminder of the link between goat and human in the mythical figure of the satyr. A goatherd sleeps against an olive bole, 'with his head rolled back to show the dark line of his jaw and the sinews of his scraggy neck' (p. 9). These images of jaws and sinews suggest the faintest lupine threat encrypted within a figure charged with overseeing the safety of the herd. The goatherd too bears traces of the archaic fusion of animal and human.

The narrator greets the Child in a changing and diaphanous time: 'I am three or four years old. It is late summer. It is spring. I am six. I am eight' (p. 9). They share the human facility for language, albeit one of their own devising. The Child is a 'wild boy' who lives among wolves, primary embodiments of the animal-human relation in the Roman world.⁵ The narrative voice asks: 'wolves must have something in their nature which is kindly, and which connects with our kind, or how else could the child live among them?' (p. 10). Ovid describes the customary Roman belief in the lycanthrope, the hybrid being that lives among people in Ovid's world and integrates the wolf-kind into the human population. The intimacy binding human and animal in the wolf-man is counterbalanced by the alien nature of wolves at Sulmo. The narrator tells us that they are from the ravines of the east and are not of the Roman world. The east is the locus of the archaic: the Greek world, Phoenecia, Babylon, Persia, and the Asian steppes. It is the source of the Roman and Latin tribes and thus the ancestry of civilization for Ovid. The east is a figure of the exotic and the intimate, a primal source of the Roman world and a threat to it. It is the internal division that defines Ovid's journey and his coming into understanding, just as the prefatory episode in Sulmo slips between the actual and the imaginary, between memory and the dream state.

The wolf is a continuous and varied presence in Ovid's world among the Getae in Tomis. Wolf-packs circle the village in winter, looking for stray flock or other sources of food, and they provide a continuing source of fear for the villagers. The horsemen, marauders from the steppes, are readily associated with the scavenging canines: 'All night they swirled round and round the stockade, yowling, yelping like wolves, and the arrows fell' (p. 56). At one point the women of Tomis sacrifice a wild puppy to Hecate: their

matriarchal religious power is utterly alien to the male villagers and is more archaic (and therefore, ancestrally, more familiar) than that of the shaman (pp. 126-8). The wolf-dog, fed on scraps from the village parapets, is linked to the village but is not of it, just as the women's rites are held beyond the village gates, out of view.

Ovid's own identity is troubled with dream images of wolves scratching for his grave: 'Sometimes wolves come, and they claw the earth beside me [...] I know that whatever it is they are scratching after, I must discover it before them, or I am lost' (p. 18). The lupine threat takes hold in Ovid's imagination just when he articulates the vision of his own death: both images signal the emergence of self-consciousness and the anxieties it articulates. The ancestral threat to human identity emerges in language from a reservoir of symbols in the dream state. It evokes the moment of human separation from the animal by means of a paradox: at no point are humans more aware of their proximity to animality than at the moment such awareness distinguishes them from the animal world. This awareness is revisited in dreams and the irrational.

The animal-human relation reaches a crisis point in the narrative when the Child is discovered (or rediscovered) in the forests beyond Tomis. The symbolic threat of animality in human form is reinforced from this point: Ovid detects the human footprints among the tracks of bears, deer, and wolves (p. 47), and he experiences great anxiety at the animal fear and the whimperings issuing from the Child upon his capture. These actions expose the internal division in the human, the separation of human and animal that Giorgio Agamben sees as definitive: the human '*is the animal that must recognise itself as human to be human* [...] *Homo sapiens*, then, is neither a clearly defined species nor a substance; it is, rather, a machine or device for producing the recognition of the human.'⁶ This self-consciousness is carried within the species name of *Homo Sapiens*:⁷ the reference to knowledge or wisdom echoes the imperative to 'Know Thyself', inscribed above the entrance to the Delphic Oracle in classical mythology.⁸

The wolf-child in his captivity presents a threat to this fragile identity-in-separation, and throws Ovid back onto the question of his own humanity.

As he reacts to his exile from Rome and a corresponding sense of captivity in Tomis, Ovid too uncovers the proximity of the animal to the human. Humans bear a capacity for 'world-forming' (*Weltbildend*), but the boredom that arises in captivity echoes the animal's 'poverty in world' (*Weltarmut*) while simultaneously awakening the human 'from its own captivation to its own captivation'.⁹ This openness to and awareness of captivity manifests itself in Ovid's mind, arousing his lupine dreams and memories of the Child. Whether the reader decides that the Child is real, a figment of Ovid's imagination, or a product of his dreams, the recurrence of the wolf-child returns Ovid to the same question of human identity that he suppressed in his migration from the pagan world of childhood in Sulmo to the imperial sophistication of Augustan Rome. In this sense Ovid meets the same Child at Sulmo and outside of Tomis: both real and imaginary, the Child embodies the mystery and paradox of human being.

The Human Self and Other

Ovid's exile installs social and psychological facts of otherness. The barbarian Getae are defined by virtue of their spoken language as other-than-civilized and this status is reinforced in their social customs and daily activities. But Ovid chooses to enter into a relation with these people: 'they are, even so, of our species' (p. 21). He learns their language (he utters his first word upon waking from a dream) and enters into certain social activities - going as far as to visit the funerary grounds with the village men on horseback, and issuing their ritual cry (pp. 44-5). Ovid's protector Ryzak warms to him, and the relationship changes from one of apparent duty to one of reciprocity. Ovid's own sense of humanity comes into new focus as a result of this relation with the other. However his world remains defined by profound externality: his sense of isolation is, initially, 'as if I belonged to another species' (p. 17); the women of the village, Ryzak's mother primary among them, represent the threat of archaic matriarchal power; the tough physical world beyond the village is not yet open to Ovid; and that world encompasses the realm of the marauders, part of humanity but at the most extreme remove.

The introduction of the Child into this economy of positive and negative human relations brings about a fundamental challenge. The Child embodies

and performs the paradox of humanity and animality. His potential to flourish into a full humanity is countered by his actual inarticulacy. Ovid first projects himself onto the Child: he teaches the Child to use language (the language of Rome) and to develop self-consciousness in language. He is receptive to the growing consciousness in the Child and takes pride in his small victories. The Child's 'ancestral experience' wells up and has him take up the stylus (pp. 80-1), and among the manual skills he begins to exhibit, the most surprising to Ovid is his new capacity to smile (p. 93). Ovid distinguishes this action from 'mere' laughter: it displays an ability to communicate with one's self. The Child has become an 'I' and knows what it is to be an interlocutor or a 'You'.

But this 'I-You' relation reaches a point where Ovid knows he is required to alter it if he is to understand the Child, who has 'somehow tumbled into being' (p. 50). For the Child to become an Other in his own right, or a 'You', the relation needs to become a truly reciprocal one. The Child teaches Ovid how to become immersed in the world around Tomis and the Ister, and teaches him how to interpret natural phenomena. Ovid becomes receptive to this world by changing his relation to the Child, conceiving of him as a true subjectivity rather than as an object. He understands the relation to the Other as the primary responsibility and as a basic condition for his own humanity: Ovid begins to understand the relational 'language of the spiders' that had eluded him in the early days of his exile (pp. 21, 97). It is this awareness that has Ovid take care of and take responsibility for the Child during the illness of Part IV. This is despite the growing hostility of the old woman when the fever is transmitted to Ryzak's grandson and eventually causes the death of Ryzak himself. Significantly, the only other figure to care for the Child during his illness is the mother of Ryzak's grandson, an exogamous outsider, who hails from another village.

The relation of self and other here is not based on the priority of being, on the self as the existential basis from which to encounter an other. Instead the foundational human act is in taking responsibility for an Other. For the philosopher Emmanuel Levinas, this taking responsibility is an ethical act that establishes the possibility of human being itself: it is prior to, and provides the conditions for, ontology and metaphysics. Yet the structures of language

are intimately tied up in the notion of being and in the verb 'to be'. Once Ovid schools the Child in the ways of language, he will be tied to being and its articulation. They communicate at first with gestures and touch (p. 79), responding to the proximity of each to the other. This 'pre-original saying'¹⁰ is not a negation of being but an exploration of reciprocity (it takes Ovid time to realise that he is as much the student of the Child as he is the teacher), the 'otherwise-than-being' from which the human may emerge.

The ethical basis of the I-You relation carries theological resonances for Ovid. His encounter with and ethical relation to the Child is, from the beginning, framed by his understanding of the gods, whether the pagan gods of Sulmo, the Roman pantheon, or the strange gods of the Getae and the steppes. The theologian Martin Buber explores this ethical theology, where taking responsibility transforms an 'It' into a 'You' and alters a world of objects 'at hand' - there simply to be exploited - into a world of reciprocity.¹¹ The Child becomes a human agent for Ovid, whereas the villagers can see only an uncanny figure straddling the human-animal divide, threatening their sense of human identity. Yet reciprocity is the primary act that gives rise to the possibility of being and underwrites it. It brings the Child into humanity but invests him with the potential for divinity. Ovid's aptitude for divinity can be found in the way his responsibility for the Child emerges fully in Part V of the novel, allowing him access to transcendence and to the gods.

The Human and the Gods

From the beginning various manifestations of religious sensibility put pressure on Ovid's horizon of being, whether they be archaic, native, exotic, or pagan spirits, or the Imperial Roman pantheon. They challenge the limits of his world and offer him ways to understand how religious sensibility is rooted in society and ecology. He learns how the spiritual beliefs of the Getae are tied to their sparse world, how the ancestral gods he associates with the women of Sulmo have their own history and value, and how the Roman pantheon can be emptied of meaning when put to decadent literary use. Ovid's memory of the *Parilia* festival of his youth contains a painful contradiction: by taking the place of his brother in the festival and allowing a moment of belief to enter into his consciousness, he feels responsibility for

his brother's death (p. 88). Guilt and regret colour Ovid's relation to matters of spirit, and come into conflict with his avowed belief in the metamorphosis into higher states of being.

Ovid alludes to a dim sense of a genetic disposition to transcendence in the human. He describes a notion of the god within, awaiting the chance to flower into being: 'We are creating the lineaments of some final man, for whose delight we have prepared a landscape, and who can only be god' (p. 29). It is difficult to judge whether the author of these statements is speaking literally or in metaphorical terms. Certainly the Ovid who speaks of matters of the spirit in earlier passages tries to puzzle through the nature of his belief. He is open to new modes of spirituality even upon the seemingly pre-ordained discovery of the Child, and expends much energy attempting to understand his life of religious experiences: the Priapic oblations of the Sulmo women and the archaic wood spirits of which they spoke; the *Parilia* and its filial obligations; and the shamanistic rituals of the Getae men and the sacrificial rites to Hecate of the Getae women. Even the appointed hour with the Child is mediated through expectation and personal belief.

The difference occurs when Ovid, author of *The Metamorphoses*, understands the potential for change in the Child not in terms of a literary superstition exerted from without, but tied intimately to the relation he develops with the Child. After they flee the village, he depends on the Child to take him across the frozen Ister, to feed him from a sparse and foreign land, and to take responsibility for his physical welfare. Ovid opens himself to the Child, and participates in a true reciprocity. His new awareness as a self and as an other, as an I and a You, allows him to witness (and, in a sense, to produce) the transcendence of the Child at the end of the narrative. As the Child seems to take flight, Ovid utters his final words: not 'I am' or 'I am here', but 'I am there'. He is no longer tied to self-identity and the constraints of Being (or of physical location). He is able to emerge 'there' as the Child's interlocutor and his participant in opening the way to divinity. The mystery of theology for Ovid is that it is bound to and produced by earthly being. In a sense Ovid himself is the god whom he foretold in Part I. Neither he nor the Child can accomplish spiritual transcendence without the other, and it is in their relation where spirit finally emerges.

The profound reach of the self-other relation draws in the animal, human and divine realms in *An Imaginary Life*. Ovid puzzles through his own sense of self and its incarnation in these relations. Ovid's understanding of the true significance of reciprocity shows how memory, dream, language, ecology, and society all bind together in an integrated lifeworld, making it possible for him to face death. The specifications of setting and theme in the novel can be translated across to the Australian experience: far from the centre of (in this case, British) empire, a land of ecological extremes, possessed of strange fauna and of wary human inhabitants (indigenous and newly settled), the bare, 'new' country offers the exile an experience of unremitting displacement unless an authentic relation with the land and its custodians is achieved. The paradox of language - at once shaping one's perception of the world and confining one's expression to the orders of knowledge and reason - also must be reconciled if a true relation is to emerge. By retaining the distance of time and space in his narrative, Malouf avoids reducing it to a simple allegory of Australian colonial and postcolonial experience. It is the open nature of the narrative and its ambiguous final episode that enjoins the reader to explore the ethics of relations to the other and to meditate upon the creation of being in those relations. The novel's very essence is that of the open question, or, to adapt Agamben, the question of the open: the human.

***Remembering Babylon* and the Relation of Self and Other**

Remembering Babylon offers further opportunities to think about the animal-human-divine triad. At first glance instances of animals fulfil relatively straightforward metaphorical or allegorical functions, rather than stimulate meditation on the essence and paradox of the human. Janet's bees, for example, offer metaphors of social co-operation in the animal world.¹² The bees also resonate with Janet's decision to enter a spiritual life. She undergoes an epiphany 'just at the edge of thought, that she could not catch hold of' (p. 139) while observing Mrs Hutchence's bees. The choice of image is appropriate: bees play an important iconographic role in the Christian tradition.¹³ A striking feature of this epiphany is Janet's 'union' with the 'single mind' of the swarm of bees (p. 142): her mystical union evaporates the self-other relation into a transcendental moment, and does so using a 'vehicle' of the animal kingdom rather than an I-You human relation. Alternatively, the

brutal and anonymous killing of the geese functions as a warning to the McIvor family for harbouring Gemmy. It indicates a sense of scale: the killing of animals warns of potential violence between humans.

A rough correspondence is drawn between the human and animal realms at specific points in the narrative. At the point where a group of indigenous women discover Gemmy, the narrative voice performs an inverse blazon:

when they found him he had still been half-child, half-seacalf, his hair swarming with spirits in the shape of tiny phosphorescent crabs, his mouth stopped with coral; how, ash-pale and ghostly in his little white shirt, that long ago had rotted like a caul, he had risen up in the firelight and danced, and changed before their eyes into a skinny human child (p. 27).

The correspondence between human child and marine creature is counter-balanced by gestures toward the spirit world: the crabs and Gemmy's 'ghostly' visage. The narrator mingles the women's perceptions with a literate sensibility, witnessed in the vocabulary (phosphorescent, caul) and in the allusion to Ariel's song in *The Tempest*:

Full fathom five thy father lies.
Of his bones are coral made;
Those are pearls that were his eyes;
Nothing of him that doth fade
But doth suffer a sea-change
Into something rich and strange. (I.2.400-6)¹⁴

Ariel sums up Gemmy's situation with consummate precision: he is washed up in a place as unlikely to the English imagination as Prospero's island. As Philip Neilsen writes, Malouf draws on the long narrative tradition of the 'lost child' to draw attention to Gemmy's radically ambiguous status (pp. 202-4): in the context of the passage quoted above, he is a foundling. According to the conventions of the foundling narrative, Gemmy threatens the stability of the animal-human-spirit hierarchy, either as a visitant from one sphere to another, or as a paradox that threatens the collapse of distinction *per se*.

Any exploration of the I-You relation in *Remembering Babylon* must begin by reconciling Gemmy's radical displacement from stable cultural relations. Gemmy Fairley points to his ambiguous predicament in his famous opening words - 'Do not shoot ... I am a b-b-British object' (p. 3). He is from Britain, but has become something else in his seventeen years living with an aboriginal group in Queensland.¹⁵ His discovery by the three McIvor children at the edge of the family property initiates an ambiguous 'return' to his cultural roots and the measurement of his existential isolation. Malouf explores the predicament of Gemmy's essential hybridity in a world unable to assimilate him. Both his protectors and the hostile settlers turn Gemmy into a fetish on account of his wild speech. It is partly recognisable as fractured English, but a lack of grammar combined with gesticulations and facial contortions mark him out as a threat at the limits, and even a threat to the limits, of the knowable.¹⁶ He is the 'black white man' (p. 10) capable of introducing something alien into the frontier community that will threaten its already precarious identity. The minister Mr Frazer understands Gemmy as a split subject, a multiplicity rather than an essence: he calls him a 'forerunner [...] a true child of the place as it will one day be' (p. 132).

The nature of Gemmy's essential hybridity is a subject of some debate. Does he, in any realistic sense, belong to the indigenous world of Australia? Does his remnant knowledge of English form a basic component of his identity? Do his fragmented memories of his abject life in London and at sea comprise at least a minimal narrative of the self? When Gemmy 'realises' that it is the record of his life, captured on paper by Mr Frazer and the schoolmaster, that drains him of life (p. 154), does this knowledge signify a primal superstition, or does it suggest a more sophisticated conception of self? If anything is clear, it is that Gemmy's basic existential trauma resides in his inability to cross the gulf of exile and to come into a fully human inheritance. He is unable to reach a point of identity, to form an 'I', because no person is able to complete the journey with him, to conceive of him as a 'You'. Although Lachlan makes the most strenuous attempts to fully comprehend Gemmy, and although Mr Frazer and Janet come to appreciate Gemmy's singularity in retrospect, ultimately they fail. Something has been taken away from Gemmy in the course of his physical and cultural displacements: he can communicate with his indigenous counterparts, but also recognises an emptiness within

himself. He does not fully exist in their world. He reaches toward a white community that is unable to assimilate him and, in the end, to understand or tolerate him. Of course the loss is mutual, for the white inhabitants lose the chance to make authentic contact with their indigenous cousins and gain an inkling of their world, the consequences of which will continue to shadow the nation's history.

Perhaps the most contentious aspect of the self-other relation in *Remembering Babylon* concerns the relative absence of violence toward and by the indigenous population, and what some critics consider to be the invisibility of that population in the narrative as a whole. Garry Kinnane sees this diminished presence as a gloss over reality, an attempt to replace historical fact with a more positive take on indigenous-invader relations.¹⁷ Yet it is worth pointing out that several sections of the narrative attempt the impossible task of representing a sense of indigenous worldviews: chapter two narrates the mob of women who discover Gemmy washed up on the shore and his attempts to seek their protection (pp. 22-5); and chapter twelve narrates the visit of the two indigenous men indirectly from Gemmy's point of view (pp. 117-20). The narrator attempts to imagine a profoundly alien sense of time and space, and a fundamentally different worldview. The narrator enacts a paradox: to translate a worldview into another language or idiom is to diminish or to negate it, and so it must be imagined, imperfectly. The very registration of radical difference in worldview between indigenous and invader/settler groups illustrates the difficulty in bridging that difference, and brings into greater focus the way Gemmy embodies the paradox of living it. Malouf's characters, particularly Janet, Jock, and, to some extent, Mr Frazer, embody the hope for future understanding between human groups, albeit in episodes of ecstatic vision or epiphany.

Malouf attempts to articulate a historically accurate portrait of cultural and existential polarity and isolation in the early Queensland colony. When Lachlan tries to trace Gemmy, years later during his work as a labourer in the far north, the surviving remnants of an indigenous group describe to him their 'dispersal' six years before at the hands of white cattlemen. This event, 'too slight an affair to be called a massacre', goes unreported in the media of the day, but the narrator provides a clear picture of the violent deaths

inflicted upon men, women, and children (p. 196). This episode is mentioned in passing, but its sense of outrage is clear: it is difficult to ignore the underlying irony when the instruments of murder are appraised for their utility: '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' (p. 196). Malouf draws attention to the way such disgraceful episodes have been systematically submerged from white consciousness throughout the nation's European history. On its surface, the rhetorical tone of the episode performs an anxious rationalisation of frontier criminality. But if silence is complicity, then understatement is an emphatically critical tool. Furthermore, Lachlan is led to the site of the massacre where he finds several parcels of bones lodged, 'in the usual way', in the forking branches of trees. He decides 'without proof' that one of the parcels contains the remains of Gemmy, 'whose wandering at last had come to an end, and this was it' (p. 197). Gemmy had walked out of the narrative and into the burning landscape years before. His undisclosed fate and Lachlan's act of remembrance provide allusive analogues to the unknown, undisclosed, or undocumented indigenous casualties of violence on the frontier, and, by implication, the oppression and vilification of indigenous peoples generally.

Remembering Babylon does not offer any similar narrative satisfaction to that of *An Imaginary Life*. Its resolutions are dispersed among several characters and across time; varying states of grace, disgrace, and reconciliation are achieved. Janet comes into a deeper knowledge of her world, but one modulated by the patterns and harmonies of bees, themselves indicative of the transcendental mystery enthralling her world. Lachlan's rise to power in public office, and the consequences of his challenge to public bigotry during the Second World War do not compensate his essential loss of Gemmy. Indeed, Gemmy himself walks away from the schoolhouse and out of the narrative altogether (pp. 180-1). But is there resolution in the mode of his dissolution from the narrative view? He walks across a charred landscape after a bushfire, aware of the regenerative powers of the eucalypt forest. He carries the paper transcription of his story, and as the rains come, the paper disintegrates, and Gemmy's sense of his own dissolution becomes open to the land. He hits upon the word *water* and finds his identity merging with the land: his authenticity is to be part of the land, fulfilling Mr Frazer's

prophecy of his role as avatar of the new country. Beyond the self-other relation and its phases of animal, human, and spirit, Gemmy's being emerges, or submerges, as part of the fundament, the original clay.

What might the reader learn from the precarious issues of human identity and its representation in *An Imaginary Life* and *Remembering Babylon*? In terms of the philosophical discourses framing this essay, the essence of the human emerges in the relation to the Other and in a responsibility for the Other. Both texts explore this notion at the level of narrative and character. But the reader is enjoined to take up this theme in bringing the text into their sphere of experience. Malouf may have decided against a perilous attempt to speak for indigenous consciousness and a coherent indigenous worldview in *Remembering Babylon*, or to narrate a moment of metamorphosis through death in *An Imaginary Life*. But his texts place the responsibility for the other at the centre of their narratives, even when that other exists between worlds and conveys a fractured, multiple sense of consciousness. Janet may be a Scottish-Australian mystic by the end of *Remembering Babylon*, but she understands something about the way Gemmy has slipped out of their briefly shared world.

It would seem unbecoming to criticise an author for failing to define a coherent social agenda that would encompass the themes of his fiction. Perhaps that is the kind of work that readers are being enjoined to do. The imaginative act of reading already offers the reader entry into that relation. In Malouf's fiction it does more than that: it speaks to actual self-other relations in the world of readers. Malouf does not fully elaborate the social and ethical implications of specific self-other relations in his texts (such as the primarily indigenous-settler relations in the case of *Remembering Babylon*). It is incumbent upon the reader to fulfil a relational mode of being in reading the text, and to embody that relation within their own social, cultural, historical, and personal contexts. It is clear how this project might be undertaken in an Australian context, not only in the accomplished critical reflections that respond to Malouf's work, but in an exercise of that essentially human potentiality: an openness to the worldview of others. As one voice in the national debate concerning national and cultural identity (and, it must be said, as a literary voice rather than a voice advocating policy reform or

ideological partisanship), Malouf offers his readers a way to reconfigure objective identity into relational identity. How readers choose to respond will shape the meaning of the very texts themselves.

NOTES

- 1 David Malouf, *An Imaginary Life* (1978; New York: Vintage, 1996); David Malouf, *Remembering Babylon* (1993; New York: Vintage, 1994). All subsequent quotations are taken from these editions.
- 2 See in particular Garry Kinnane's pointedly critical review of *Remembering Babylon*, 'Black, White and Red', *The Australian Review of Books*, April 2001, 7-8. On the other hand, Bill Ashcroft interprets the effect of transcendence that concludes *An Imaginary Life* as 'strangely dissatisfying' but identifies it as a purposeful invitation to the reader to meditate upon issues of postcolonial identity in language: 'The Return of the Native: *An Imaginary Life* and *Remembering Babylon*', *Commonwealth: Essays and Studies* 16.2 (Spring 1993), 51-60. Gareth Griffiths also shows how *An Imaginary Life* produces a transformative reading of culture that avoids essentialist representations of pre-colonial and colonial societies, in 'An Imaginary Life: The Post-Colonial Text as Transformative Representation', *Commonwealth Essays and Studies* 16.2 (Spring 1993), 61-9. Philip Neilsen appraises the way *Remembering Babylon* engages with postcolonial concerns, including its critique of an enduring historic silence surrounding the violent dispossession of indigenous people and their removal from ancestral land. Neilsen sees the structural and generic hybridity of the novel as reflective of this postcolonial sensibility: *Imagined Lives: A Study of David Malouf* (St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1996), especially pp. 200-19.
- 3 Reference will be made to these principal texts: Giorgio Agamben, *The Open: Man and Animal*, trans. Kevin Attell (2002; Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004); Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Scribner, 1970); Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being or Beyond Essence*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (The Hague, Boston, and London: Martinus Nijhoff, 1981) and *Entre Nous: On Thinking-of-the-Other*, trans. Michael B. Smith and Barbara Harshav (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998).
- 4 The geographical displacement of the Getae from Rome consolidates their symbolic role at the threshold of what Ovid considers to be human society: they speak a language, live in a village, perform religious rites, husband animals, and grow crops, but at the furthest possible remove from Rome. They exist on the borderlines of civilisation, too remote to bear strong affinities

to Ovid's world, but not far enough to erase those affinities altogether.

- 5 The mythical founding of Rome by Romulus, on 21 April 753 BC, is premised upon his being suckled as an infant with his twin brother Remus by a she-wolf: Roman civilisation itself is intimately tied to the violence and sociability of the animal world. The Capitoline Wolf is the most famous artistic representation of this myth, and is housed in the Palazzo dei Conservatori of the Musei Capitolini in Rome. Ironically, this bronze sculpture is not Roman at all, but Etruscan, and the figures of Romulus and Remus were only added in the sixteenth century. The founding myth of Rome is recounted in Book One of Livy, *The Early History of Rome*, trans. Aubrey de Sélincourt (1960; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1971), pp. 37-41.
- 6 Agamben, *The Open*, p. 26.
- 7 Agamben notes that Carl Linnaeus, the Swedish scientist largely responsible for modern scientific taxonomy, only appended *sapiens* to the term *Homo* in the tenth edition of his *Systema Naturae* in 1758. Earlier editions reflected the conventions of his time, in which the boundary between the human and other primates was porous and ambiguous (pp. 23-7). It is worth noting that Linnaeus identifies a variant *Homo ferus* also in the 1758 edition: the '*enfants sauvages*' or 'wolf-children' who 'appear more and more often on the edges of the villages of Europe, [and] are the messengers of man's inhumanity, the witnesses to his fragile identity and his lack of a face of his own' (Agamben, *The Open*, p. 30).
- 8 Agamben, *The Open*, p. 25.
- 9 Agamben, *The Open*, p. 70.
- 10 Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being*, p. 6. Levinas embarks upon a complex rethinking of ontology and ethics, seeking to dig beneath philosophy's basis in being - such as Heidegger's notion of Dasein - to its primordial basis in the ethical responsibility for the Other. This project quickly hits upon the paradox of language, in which the expression of the 'otherwise-than-being' can only arise within the language of being: 'Language permits us to utter, be it by betrayal, this *outside of being*, this *exception* to being, as though being's other were an event of being' (p. 6). Ovid's narrative performs this paradox by articulating the pre-linguistic reciprocity he shares with the Child.
- 11 Buber, *I and Thou*, p. 56. Like Levinas, Buber also contemplates the nature of language within the world of relation: the relation of life with nature 'vibrates in the dark and remains below language' (pp. 56-7); the relation of life with men [sic] 'enters language'; and the relation of life with spiritual

- beings 'lacks but creates language' (p. 57).
- 12 The commonplace iconography of bees as social animals is subject to parodic inversion in Bernard de Mandeville's *Fable of the Bees* (1714), in which the private vices of greed and envy are mockingly praised for their stimulation of public virtues.
 - 13 In the Old Testament Samson kills a lion and returns to the scene days later to discover a swarm of bees around the carcass and a large deposit of honey inside. This phenomenon formed the basis for a riddle he told his guests at his wedding feast (Judges 14:1-20). St Ambrose of Milan (c. 340-397) became known as the 'honey-tongued Doctor' due to his oratorical skills, and was often depicted with bees and beehives. He became the patron saint of beekeepers and chandlers. Bees also came to perform a supporting role in the *Exultet*, a hymn of praise recited after the blessing of the Paschal Candle (the *Benedictio caerei*) in the Roman liturgy. This hymn was amended in the reign of Charlemagne to include a section 'In Praise of the Bees', evident in images contained in the Salerno *Exultet* Roll (now housed in the Museo Diocesano in Salerno) and the Barberini *Exultet* Roll (housed in the Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana in Rome). The Roman Barberini family adopted an icon of three bees as their patrician symbol; in the seventeenth century Maffeo Barberini (Pope Urban VIII) covered Rome with this symbol during his papacy. See David Freedberg, 'Iconography between the History of Art and the History of Science: Art, Science, and the Case of the Urban Bees', in *Picturing Science, Picturing Art*, ed. Caroline A. Jones and Peter Galison (New York and London: Routledge, 1998), pp. 272-96. In Greek mythology Diana's chastity is often represented in the form of bees (which were thought to be autogenetic); Priapus is the protector of bees; and Cupid is linked to bees in Roman mythology.
 - 14 *The Norton Shakespeare*, gen. ed. Stephen Greenblatt (New York: Norton, 1997), p. 3067.
 - 15 Alice Britten writes that transported convicts were often referred to as 'objects' by their penal overseers in the Australian colonies. In part, this signified that 'the convicts were no longer British subjects according to law but human property of the crown'. See Britten, 'B-b-british Objects: Possession, Naming, and Translation in David Malouf's *Remembering Babylon*', *PMLA* 117 (2002), 1159. Malouf's use of this word is strategically effective in calling attention to Gemmy's desperately marginal existence in England in childhood, and his evolution into a being that would defy any taxonomy.
 - 16 Writers have long explored the notion of convincing or nearly convincing imitations of human traits by false entities: vampires, goblins, automata, and

various hybrid forms. One germane example is E. T. A. Hoffmann's tale 'The Sandman' (1817). An exploration of repressed fears, false memories and the function of nemesis, this story has its central character fall in love with an automaton, mistaking it for a young woman. The narrative draws attention to the unnatural way in which the 'object' speaks, and its stiff physical contortions that dupe no one but the hapless Nathanael. In Hoffmann's tale the uncanny likeness of the automaton to the human form invokes a fear of vulnerability, of missing the precise difference between the mannequin and its human model. Compare: 'It was the mixture of monstrous strangeness and unwelcome likeness that made Gemmy Fairley so disturbing to them, since at any moment he could show either one face or the other' (*Remembering Babylon*, p. 43).

17 Kinnane, 'Black, White and Red', 7, 8.

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