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**Fractured Certainties:
Epistemology and Ontology in
David Malouf's *Child's Play*, *The
Great World* and *Remembering
Babylon*.**

By

Chris Lyon

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements
for the Award of

Bachelor of Arts (Honours)

Abstract

This thesis is an exploration of the way in which David Malouf develops ideas of epistemology and ontology in three of his novels. The novels discussed are *Child's Play* (1982) , *The Great World* (1990) and *Remembering Babylon* (1993) .

Of particular concern here are the different ways in which figures in the text are constructed as having imperfect and sometimes contradictory systems of making sense of their world.

DECLARATION

" I certify that this thesis does not incorporate without acknowledgement any material previously submitted for a degree or diploma in any institution of higher education; and that to the best of my knowledge and belief it does not contain any material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the text."

Signed

Date.....8/6/94.....

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Table of Contents

	Page
Abstract	ii
Declaration	iii
Acknowledgements	iv
Chapter	
I Introduction	1
II <i>Child's Play</i>	3
III <i>The Great World</i>	13
IV <i>Remembering Babylon</i>	26
V Imagining Australia: The Stone	40
Bibliography	44

Introduction

All of David Malouf's novels resist the establishment of an unproblematic, singular reality. Instability, doubt and fragile balance are consistently privileged over certainty and stability. Examination of *Child's Play*, *The Great World*, and *Remembering Babylon* reveals that Malouf's work exposes the possibility of an essentialism or universality in human experience. It will also be shown that ideas of culture, history and even language as reducible constructs are never disposed of in the texts. The distinction, in these novels, between identity as an ephemeral and unreliable phenomenon, and as the site of essence and certainty, is the central concern of this paper.

Epistemological concerns emerge at a number of levels within the texts. At the level of narration, in *Child's Play*, problems of knowledge are foregrounded and made dominant over other considerations. At the level of story in *Remembering Babylon* it is the conflicting cultural epistemologies of the characters that are exposed by the novel. Epistemological regimes are often, but not always, associated with failure and disaffection for the figures in the novels. The distinctions drawn between satisfactory and unsatisfactory systems of knowing will be examined.

Alongside epistemological considerations in Malouf there are ontological ones. The paradigm employed here in distinguishing between areas of inquiry is that employed by McHale (1987) in his *Postmodernist Fiction*. In this work he defines epistemological questions as being of the order, quoting Higgins (1978), "How can I interpret this world of which I am a part? And what am I in it?" (McHale.1987:9)

McHale goes on to propose that additional epistemological questions may take the form:

What is there to be known? Who knows it? How do they know it, and with what degree of certainty?; How is knowledge transmitted from one knower to another, and with what degree of reliability?; How does the object of knowledge change as it passes from knower to knower? What are the limits of the knowable? And so on.

(McHale.1987:9)

Questions of ontology are seen, and again McHale quotes Higgins, to be of the order: "Which world is this? What is to be done in it? Which of my selves is to do it?" (McHale.1987:10) Other ontological questions which may be asked include:

What is a world? What kinds of worlds are there, how are they constituted, and how do they differ?; What happens when different worlds are placed in confrontation, or when boundaries between worlds are violated? What is the mode of existence of a text, and what is the mode of existence of the world (or worlds) it projects?;..

(McHale.1987:10)

McHale's project is to explore the nature of postmodern texts and his major thesis is that epistemological questions are foregrounded in modern texts while postmodern texts predominantly engage with ontological questions. This paper is not concerned with locating David Malouf's fiction firmly in the camp of either movement, but will be looking at the ways in which the novels ask (and can be asked) both sets of questions.

Child's Play

It has been suggested that *Child's Play* is 'Malouf's only postmodern book' (Salusinszky.1993:7). Such a statement tells us little about either the novel or postmodernism. It is impossible to gauge what criteria were being employed to isolate the signal elements of the novel or the defining qualities of postmodernism. Certainly *Child's Play* is not a realist text and does employ strategies of 'magic realism'. All of Malouf's novels fracture the conventions of realism to some extent and, in any case, realist conventions are fractured similarly by modern and postmodern authors. Pastiche is an element of the text, and so is a kind of schizophrenia, but Jameson's model of postmodernism (Jameson.1984:53-92) must be severely distorted in order to accommodate *Child's Play* (or vice versa).

According to McHale, if *Child's Play* is to be successfully regarded as a postmodern text then it desperately seeks to have ontological questions asked of it before being quizzed on its epistemological concerns. The reverse appears to be the case.

The primary question asked in, by and of *Child's Play* is that which McHale frames as his epistemological paradigm; "How can I interpret this world of which I am a part?" The interpretation of the world in this novel is not merely incidental to ontological questions, but is instead the central storehouse of tropes out of which ontology is permitted.

Both Amanda Nettelbeck (1989) and Stephen Woods (1988) draw attention to the ambiguities and contradictions present in *Child's Play*. Woods is particularly concerned with the narrative strategies employed and how they contribute to the novel's:

...'subversion' of traditional assumptions about realism, the author, and even [the novel's] own identity and authorship as a work of fiction...

(Woods.1988:322-33)

Nettelbeck's concern is more for the way in which the text:

...functions both thematically and structurally to undermine discursive assumptions and hence to undermine the hierarchizing of power through history.

(Nettelbeck.1989:31-44)

The validity of both claims is supported by the text but there is also a sense in which both claims rely on the novel's foregrounding of epistemological themes.

The questions that the terrorist poses and the 'knowledges' that he claims are initially established as being of an empiricist nature. Concrete experience and the assumption of a stable process of time inform his view of the world. This is evidenced in his appraisal of the old abandoned farmhouse: 'I had known the place as a child and always loved it.'(CP:1). In this statement we have an affirmation that material things, and knowledges, exist across time. That the link, for the terrorist, between knowledge, time and the material world is considerable is shown by this passage:

..I walked alone to an abandoned farmhouse on the other side of the stream that was up for sale at least and which I thought I might make a bid for; a way perhaps of ensuring the future would exist by setting my hand to an official document, a ninety-nine year lease.
(CP:1)

The terrorist's act of walking alone is in itself an affirmation of identity, of singularity in a world verifiable only through personal experience. His view goes beyond this, however, in that he sees time- 'the future' - as being contingent on the material, verifiable, 'official document'. Nettelbeck suggests that these passages establish history as a : ..'mystery' whose only significance is constructed from the individual's desire for a meaningful past and a predictable future' (1988:31-44). But it is more than desire *for*, it is an already established interpretation *of*. The distinction is that desire indicates a lack, while interpretation indicates an established facility.

At the beginning of the novel the terrorist is represented as having rather a clear cut epistemological system; one that accepts the possibility of some knowledges, but sets limits to others. It is the demonstrated inadequacy of this initial system, through the novel, that creates the 'undermining' effect that Nettelbeck discusses.

The apparent stability of the terrorist's system of knowing is demonstrated a number of times in the opening pages of the novel. The Etruscan inscriptions are beyond interpretation in this system of knowing, but there is still a sense in which he admits them into his material world. His childhood attempts at translating the writing are recalled and the idea that he once 'stood in a unique relationship' with the script make him smile (CP:2). Recognition of the folly of his once held view does not stop him from repeating his interpretive attempt. This emphasises his currently held view that the material world, if not known, or known only partially, is at least *knowable*.

The terrorist, at this stage, not only admits to the incompleteness of his knowledge, but relies on the propagation of only partial knowledge for his survival:

But I should introduce myself.
I am twenty-nine years old and male. You will understand if I
decline to give further particulars.
I am what the newspapers call a terrorist. (CP:4)

It is here that the terrorist raises the question of different epistemologies existing concurrently. The first 'I am' in the passage is not the Cartesian 'I am' of rationalism; it is firmly linked to empiricism, to phenomena quantifiable in years or verifiable by examination. The second 'I am' is one which admits two major possibilities; that the regimes of knowledge of the terrorist are external to language or that they are contingent on it.

There is a maze of ambiguity and contradiction in this simple sentence. The immediate ironic meaning that springs out is that the terrorist is something more than his journalistic label; that the 'knowledges' of inscription and language are inadequate in their ability to capture any sense of what he 'is'.

The alternative meaning entails the terrorist subordinating his 'self' and 'knowledge' to that of the newspaper. In other words, he *is* what the newspapers *call* him. The possibility, at least, of his being constructed as a product of discourse, of his being unable to separate himself from the tyranny of language, is admitted at this point. Nettelbeck states that the ambiguous nature of the terrorist's introduction of himself; 'opens up the possibility of other significations, in other discourses.' (1989:33-44). It does more than that, however, in the sense that it is the moment at which the terrorist's empiricist outlook is potentially fractured for the first time. That it is ambiguous prefigures the concerns developed in the rest of the novel. These concerns are, in large part, explorations of what happens when the asking of epistemological questions starts to turn into the asking of ontological ones.

A point of considerable crossover between empiricist and rationalist outlooks is established in the terrorist's description of his lucky pebble. The narrator struggles between modes of interpretation, between stripping himself away to his rational core and clinging to a belief in the solid.

In cutting myself off from the past and relinquishing every object that might identify me I have made one exception; it is a small one, a variegated pebble I found as a child on the beach at M. and have kept ever since as a talisman. (CP:62)

The tension between the terrorists 'knowledge' of the material and his 'faith' in the arcane is highlighted at a number of points. The conflict is made evident in the form of self contradiction. Having already established quantitative, morphological and temporal classification of the pebble - 'small', 'variegated' and 'found as a child' - the terrorist proposes a less empirical appraisal:

Held on the palm of my hand I saw reflected in it the far side of the universe, invisible to us, ... still in touch (and I through it) with a million other particles elsewhere, all of them responsive still to the tide of energy from 'out there'. (CP:63)

This is hardly a hardened empiricist talking and, surely enough, the ideas are immediately dismissed as : 'Schoolboy fancies, all.' (CP:63) But the conflict continues with the statement that ' they have persisted.' (CP:63).

The reasons for their persistence are even stated as an argument between epistemological regimes. They have persisted:

Not because I believe them, or have been unable to give up a childish habit of thought, but because they invoke in me real responses that have nothing to do with the fantastic and which still nourish and sustain the spirit. (CP:63)

The terrorist's claims to 'knowledge', to access to the 'real', are again expressed in ambiguous terms. Do the fancies persist for reasons for reasons other than the fact that the terrorist *does* believe them or do they persist even though he does *not* believe them? Either way admits that the terrorist is far from being in possession of an unshakeable empiricism.

Photography is another site of fractured reality and uncertainty for the terrorist. Woods, in seeing the novel as a critique of realist fiction, sees the failure of photography in the novel as a metaphor for the failure of all mimetic art:

Realism is unachievable because it is based on objectivity, whereas the notion of 'the real' is fundamentally a matter of perception and therefore subjectivity. (Woods.1988:326)

The terrorist experiences something of a dilemma in his appraisal of the pictures of his dead colleagues:

There are pictures. They are terribly distorted, the figures already dissolving as they move quickly on out of life....
Newspaper photography.
Far from catching life it disintegrates and dissolves it... (CP:113)

The terrorist's comments take on a greater significance when we consider Roland Barthes' claims of photography in *Camera Lucida*. Barthes claims that photography is the medium in which the signifier and the referent are perceived as having the greatest proximity:

...the photograph's immobility is the result of perverse confusion between two concepts: the Real and the Live. By attesting that the object has been real, the photograph surreptitiously induces belief that it is alive..

(Barthes.1981.79)

While Barthes sees the photograph as presenting possibilities of reality and life, the terrorist sees the newspaper as offering falsehood and death. Both ascribe to the medium of photography power beyond simple representation: both also recognise the completely illusory nature of this power. Both are, however, able to be seduced by it. Barthes writes of history and his mother:

No anamnesis could ever make me glimpse this time starting from myself - whereas, contemplating a photograph in which she is hugging me, a child, against her, I can waken in myself the ruffled softness of her crepe de Chine and the perfume of her rice powder.

(Barthes.1981:65)

The terrorist also has things which a photograph can waken in himself, or nearly:

I find myself fingering the surface of the photograph and being surprised that the rocks are not jagged, that the roughness of that boy's jacket, which the light inside the photograph make so real, cannot be felt. (CP:111)

Photographs and dreams have the same epistemological framework for the terrorist. They are things which appear to be verifiable by induction, by the unproblematic play of the senses, but turn out to be closed doors to alternative realities:

[They tease] me with the deepest and most physical sense of space, light, weather, of the various texture of things, of huge and inevitable sadness, but when I try to enter its reality I cannot. (CP:111)

The terrorist is initially unable to enter the reality of the photograph because the photograph is unable to satisfy the requirements of a reality mediated only by the senses. It is here that the terrorist also proposes what is largely an ontological question: 'Is this what the dead feel?' He finds the answer to that question and, again, it is directly associated with photography.

The photographs used in the planning of the terrorist's assassination of the Great Writer provide, or are meant to provide, a: '..complete three-hundred-and-sixty degree view'. But the terrorist is alert to the gaps inherent in the photographic interpretation of the piazza at P.:

The gaps are not in the physical picture that presents itself to me...but arise, as one might predict, from the difference between knowing a place in your five senses, as a three dimensional space in which you move and breathe ...and a knowledge that has been arrived at by induction...The gaps, I mean, are in myself. (CP:28-9)

It is in one of these gaps that the terrorist finds himself after his death. He goes into the street:

..that curves away to the east of the palace, which had so fascinated me in the photographs and round whose bend in time I had been unable to see. (CP:144)

While the novel demands to be asked the question - 'Which world is this?' - the terrorist has no compulsion to ask that question. His earlier query about how the 'dead feel' is subordinated to a persistently empirical outlook. His certainty is only shaken slightly when he is: '.. a little surprised to discover that I am already at the edge of town.' (CP:145). His faith in his ability to 'know' is evidenced by his ability to name things; to make a list of tangibles and to exclude that which fractures his view of a solid world. The certainty, the 'knowledge', possessed by the terrorist is even elevated to a level above that which he has held in the past. He is now possessed of the: '..miraculous assurance of being safe at last..' (CP:145)

For a figure who has been so intently involved in analysis and in the construction of an orderly plan, the terrorist seems rather underwhelmed by the change in the circumstances of his postmortem reality. His failure to question the new nature of his being, his failure to ask the ontological questions, is part of the ultimate inability of his empirical system to reveal the 'truth' of anything.

There are many games and many players in *Child's Play*: the child terrorist experiencing the harmony of the universe through a pebble or solving an ancient mystery, the dancing terrorists, the avant garde performers with their ice and black milk, schoolboys playing soccer, children playing tag and men and women playing more ridiculous games. In many of these the terrorist is merely a spectator. He does not need to participate; he has his own game of strategy, analysis and interpretation.

Both Woods and Nettelbeck establish the terrorist as a metaphor for the literary critic. They emphasise the terrorist's role as both a reader of texts and as a writer. Woods suggests that:

Structuralist and post-structuralist theories and critiques of authorship are conveyed metaphorically through the narrative, rather than by exposition. ..the ideas which Barthes [in 'The Death of the Author'] puts forward are rendered metaphorically in the terrorist/narrator's story.

(Woods.1988:328)

Amanda Nettelbeck is more concerned with the deconstructive critical practices undertaken by the terrorist:

The terrorist's aim, then is to explode the solidity of the letter, to expose that paradox of language as a marker of both presence and absence in meaning.

(Nettelbeck.1989:41)

As a critic the terrorist certainly covers a great deal of ground. There is no text which he is reluctant to tackle; from ancient glyphs to (as Nettelbeck points out) the death rattle of the Great Writer's daughter. Photographs are scrutinised as are newspapers, dreams and the writings of his intended victim. There is even an attempt to extend his critical practices to the cinema:

The girls are always naked. The football players wear their boots and a red and white striped jersey, and once one of the girls has a jersey, number 7: the passes and combinations a kind of off-the-field-game. (CP:98)

A game, but not child's play. This is the *reductio ad absurdum* of textual interpretation but is also a metaphor for all of the terrorist /critic's attempts to impose a unity of meaning on to what he sees. The implied search for significance in the number on the jersey of an actress in a pornographic film is ultimately no more futile than the search for the essence of the Great Writer in the magazine articles on: '..water as a regenerative symbol in his novels..' (CP:117). The pornographic film itself is no less a text, and no more absurd a text, than the experimental theatre to which the terrorist is introduced:

Once we gave a performance for nine hours in a warehouse, on a stage made of blocks of ice. We just kept on saying the same four sentences over and over..until the ice melted. Some Fascists threw stones at us, it was sensational. (CP:86)

With the terrorist seen as critic it becomes possible to see his epistemological regime as a metaphor for critical practice. Just as a unity of meaning is impossible for the terrorist, so is an unshakeable system of 'knowing'. As his carefully formulated masterwork of critical practice - the killing - goes astray at the critical moment, so does his carefully formulated empiricism. He is, however, unable to recognise this. Fortunately for him he blithely finds sanctuary when he is inscribed into one of the texts that he sought to interpret.

Child's Play is 'about' many things in the sense that it is around many things. The layers of metaphor, ambiguity and lack of closure compromise the periphery of a curiously shaped form with many centres. It is about terrorism; a shadowy world of murky motives, of obscured psychologies and of mediation by the media. In another sense though, the novel is no more about terrorism than *Fly Away Peter* is about bird-watching or trench warfare.

The novel is also about criticism in an undeniable way. While David Malouf appears, wittingly rather than unwittingly, to have employed Barthes' structuralist theory on the role of the author as his major thematic paradigm there is no reason why an/other theoretical model/s could not be claimed in the same way. *Foucault, Malouf and the Panoptic Realm* and *Macherey, Malouf and Materialism* are, as yet, unwritten texts. Had they been inscribed, or when they are, then *Child's Play* is/will be about them too.

David Malouf's novel is also about epistemology and ontology. Regimes of knowledge are explored and exposed as being inadequate to explain the world with any certainty. Modes of being are explored without being hierarchised - all modes of being ultimately subordinated to the links between the inscribed and the inscriber.

While the terrorist is able to kill his Great Author the text is still unable to kill off its actual author. David Malouf comments, in an interview with Richard Kelly Tipping, (1989) that in *Child's Play* he:

... hoped the reader of the book would be put into [the terrorist's] position, and by finding himself there might be led to occupy, at least momentarily, the ambiguous moral position of the terrorist in a - well - subversive way. But it was a book about writing, about reading. Like a great many of my books, ultimately I suppose, it's a book about the problems of interpretation.

(Tipping,1989:492-502)

Those problems of interpretation are never satisfactorily resolved in *Child's Play*; they prove never to be completely resolved in any of Malouf's work to date.

The Great World

.. and prizes for keen-sightedness for those best able to remember the order of sequence among the passing shadows and so best be able to divine their future appearances. Plato: *The Republic*.
(Lee.1987:319)

The Great World stands in considerable contrast to *Child's Play*. While the earlier novel was concerned with reading and writing, there is a much more substantial element of story-telling in the *The Great World*. Rather than inscription and interpretation being the central thematic concerns, it is narration and identity that are the objects of focus. If *Child's Play* problematises the literary document then *The Great World* challenges assumptions about personal testament. The realm of the immediate senses figures as an important site of meaning for both of the central characters in this novel; yet both figures experience the world on a level which incorporates less inductive modes of knowing. Both figures also undergo processes of change but still retain much of what it is that serves to individualise them.

The young Digger is concerned with the testament of the outside world. This initially takes the form of listening to his father's stories of the war; of absorbing them to the extent that he gets to: '..know the men's names as if he had known them' (GW:26). He recognises the link, the closeness, between the figures in the stories and his father. But, just as Digger comes to know and experience something of the lives of these men, his father seems to remain in a difficult relationship with his own narrative:

Billy Keen told these horror stories in a voice that scared even himself, as if no amount of telling would ever get him used to the fact that they had happened, and he had once been part of them.
(GW:26-7)

While testament, for the father, is no guarantee of reconciling past and present realities it offers a promise for Digger. He absorbs a range of narratives: '...from his father; from fellows too who talked to him at the open doors of their cars... from books; from the pictures he had been to..' (GW.28).

While his father is unable to make sense of his own story, of his experience outside the Crossing, Digger is a natural storyteller who is able to inform his sister's view of the world:

His voice, velvety in the dark of their little room, was what made the world real to her. A lot of what he told her was made up. She could not tell the difference. (GW:30)

His father's stories are distillations of a life; recollections of pure moments of life and death. The young Digger has not absorbed enough of the world to require that distillation; his facility for memory and imagination keep the narratives of the world open to him. Above all, he ignores the shrouded warning of his mother:

What she was really warning him of was the difference between what she called reality, or duty, or fate - she had different names for it on different occasions - and a hunger he had, and which his father had too, for something that began where her reality, however clear and graspable it was, left off. (GW:27)

It is a vague awareness of: '.. the sheer size of the world..' (GW:28), that marks Digger and his father from Marge Keen. The world that Digger sees, in particular, is one from which his mother is somehow excluded.

Keen's Crossing is a place which offers the twin possibilities of entrapment and sanctuary. For Digger's mother and father it is the former which informs their understanding of the location. To them, the Crossing represents a periphery, a place of exile away from the centre of things. Billy Keen must find his endless wars to keep him in touch with the visceral awareness of life that he first experience in France.

History had conspired, for a time, to set him in a world where risk, up to the very point of extinction, was a point of honour, and animal energy had scope. It was his natural element. After that, life at the Crossing seemed to him like daily punishment. (GW:13)

Marge persists with her task of civilising, colonising, the Crossing; imposing the material and tangible on to what existed otherwise only as a name:

Her vision was of a room with curtains, furniture, the smiling faces of children round a table piled high with food (including pineapples) and with good cutlery laid out and glass and plates.. (GW:20)

Her relationship with the place, and her perception of it as a part of some periphery is evidence at the end:

That wasn't what she had come to see. She hadn't even known it would be visible. In her mind it was further off than that. Halfway to England, practically. (GW:244)

Andrew Taylor has noted that the Crossing is linked to: '.. stability and permanence, rather than transition and change,..' (Taylor.1993;7). This is certainly the case, but there is also the sense in which that stability and permanence is a figure for centrality, for a fixed point around which everything else moves. The Crossing loses its functional significance as a river crossing (Taylor.1993:6) and, despite this, it retains its symbolic status as the static focus of the novel. All other locales will be shown to be ephemeral, to be contingent on the ability to look back on the Crossing. Keen's Crossing is quiet and insubstantial but the whole world will, for the figures in the novel, be found there.

For Digger, initially, his home is a place that traps him. The travelling circus is a chance for escape:

It was the chance it offered of stepping aside from what fate, or his mother, who claimed to be its agent, had set up for him. Of getting away. (GW:56)

The circus is a place of deception and illusion, a place where the knowledges of its inhabitants and its clients are never adequate. The fat lady reads cheap romance novels while the human torso studies the racing form and right wing politics. Digger's own tasks include: '[making] himself one of the crowd..to appeal to the spirit of emulation or savagery in them.' (GW:55)

The circus is also the site of world views radically different from those of Digger. The fat lady from Vienna and the anti-Semitic human torso from America are figures which represent experience as far from the Crossing, nearly, as one can get. Digger's way of looking at things is changed, however, to an even more different mode; to an approximation of that of the Aboriginal boxers: 'Living with the blacks had made him see things in another way: from the side and a bit skew..' (GW:57) This view is only held momentarily, as Digger joins up. The re-adoption of a white outlook is remarked on as the action of a "mug". Slinger laments: 'An' I thought we'd learned you something.' (GW:59). Digger learns from the circus but his education is far from complete; in fact, through the novel, he never stops learning.

Newcastle, where Vic lives in his younger life is ; '..a dirty little town scattered at the edge of the sea, all unpainted timber and rusty iron..' (GW:84). The place where his father sinks into alcoholism, despair and rage, and his mother dies, is marked by "barren dunes" and by the detritus of human habitation. The yard is all;.. 'rusty cans, chop bones and bleached pippies and crab-shells..' (GW:71) This place seems to be not just on the margin of things, but also in danger of being wiped off the map entirely as sand dunes advance on the shack in which the Currans live.

The young Vic is established as a figure who, in contrast to Digger, lacks the influence of meaningful narrative. That narrative to which he is exposed is as horrible as Billy Keen's stories of men drowning in mud, but is worse since it is real:

But there was no escaping the smell of it or the sounds she made as the last strength was torn from her. 'I'm sorry, love, I'm sorry, 'she would murmur over and over. (GW:71)

One of the narratives that Vic produces for himself directly recalls that disturbing image from the Western Front. He imagines a time when the sand dunes engulf the house and: '.. the whole hill went over them. He would be fighting to get above it' (GW:71).

In spite of this there is a sense in which some kind of essential nature sustains Vic: 'He wasn't by nature morose' (GW:72) More than this, there is a certainty in his own ability to shape his life: 'He would make his own life, not just pick up what was passed onto him. He would. He knew it.' (GW:74). Whether he does or not will prove to be a debatable point, there is no doubt that he, at least in his youth, believes he will.

While the Warrender household is materially and emotionally more sustaining for Vic, there is still a sense in which he lacks both a geographical centre and a clearly defined identity. He is displaced from his roots, both at Marlin Street and at the shack. He feels something of an interloper, and something of an imposter, in the Warrender household:

Another boy, with his sour miseries and deep anger hidden, had come along with him, and would push his feet each morning into the new shoes.... He felt the despair of that boy flow into his heart and sicken him. (GW:87)

This feeling of duality will form part of Vic's outlook for the remainder of the novel. The depression years, in particular, increase Vic's feelings of alienation and of unreality. He is dismayed at the lines of itinerant labourers and feels extreme discomfort at finding them in Meggsies's kitchen eating a hand-out of soup. The lines of unemployed men still hold a strange fascination:

He didn't really want to know, but felt there was something wrong. He had got off too easily. He was in the wrong dream. (GW:104)

He starts, here, to actively formulate a world view, one in which epistemology is closely related to moral codes and behaviours. He rationalises that part of himself which he had considered coarse and his view takes on board some general principles:

For one thing you had to see things the way they were. No good giving people credit for virtues they did not have. Most people were selfish. They had low motives rather than noble ones. (GW:105)

The concrete and tangible has meaning for Vic. Andrew Taylor (1993:8) points out that he is also open to the poetic and imaginative. Professor Taylor draws attention to the reaction of Vic to the soap vats with the following quote:

[Vic].. might have called them poetic. He was not without idealism, or imagination either. But this did not prevent him from seeing these processes, in their real physical form, as what they were: natural occurrences...(GW:105-6)

It is not the mystical, poetic, or imaginative side of Vic that immediately appears to sustain him during his wartime imprisonment. What may initially be thought of Vic is that he is the pragmatist; the figure to whom Digger awakes and sees wolfing down food which is not his own. This view, ignoring the conflicts within Vic, will turn out to be inadequate.

The figure of Jenny illustrates some of the thematic concerns of the novel. While she has a fractured sense of temporality and an incomplete grasp of what is going on around her, she also has an almost continuous link with the Crossing. Given that history is important in the novel and that history is, at some level, associated with time then Jenny shows some of the ways in which the making of history is made problematic.

Jenny, in spite of her simplicity or more probably, because of it, is the figure who is most sure of what she 'knows'. At every level her certainty, the orderliness of her system of making sense of the world is consistent and unencumbered with either Digger's fantastic memory or Vic's duality. That much of what she believes is apocryphal is of little consequence - her 'truth' is ultimately of the same value as any other.

Much of Jenny's significance is established on the first page of the novel. She not only has a temporal continuity that is required by history, but also has both ends of that continuum tied up into a loop.

She is both an adult and a child and, consequently, is a distillation of what is generally referred to as history:

Real children looked at Jenny Keen and she was neither a nice old lady nor a stranded fish, neither a grown-up nor another bigger kid. So what was simple about her? (GW:3)

Her fractured sense of time finds expression on a number of occasions. When one of Digger's sudden narratives alerts her to the past existence of a sibling:

She could have turned her head then and seen him, but she had to protect herself; she didn't want him to become too real. If he did she would only miss him when he was gone again or he'd start growing up and become a nuisance. (GW:9)

Constructing narratives is not something that comes easily to Jenny. For her it is a tortured step-by-step process of making the connections and assembling them into some sort of order. Her articulation of these narratives is even more difficult, often having an inappropriateness that emphasises her temporal disjunction. Her inability to reconcile the passing of time with respect to Vic's son Greg is an example of this. (GW:68)

Jenny, like Digger, temporarily breaks away from Keen's Crossing. Incarceration and misery are found in Brisbane as they are in the Malayan Peninsula and Thailand but this parallel is less surprising than Jenny's assessment of it. It is an assessment which places personal experience as the only basis for knowledge and the only basis for history. She considers of Digger that:

He knew a lot, he knew heaps, he could do things. But he didn't know about the world, and she did. She knew how cruel it was. (GW:65)

It is tempting at first to see this belief as misguidance on the part of Jenny, that Digger has experienced a tremendous amount of cruelty. He has suffered horrific degradation but he has, however, never been far from some nobility of spirit or kindness - such as the self sacrifice of Mac or the mutual support of Vic and himself.

Jenny's experience, to her, is one of unrelenting hardship:

But [the blows] kept coming down just the same, all suds, over your left ear or across your face, with all the weight of a six foot Irish virgin behind them, her temper got up by the fact that you had fallen, and been picked up again, and were still no good. The weight of the whole Catholic Church as well - and she wasn't even a Mick! (GW:66)

She is able to articulate, at least to herself, the difference between Digger's experience and her own. It is her own that is seen as, relatively, the more terrible.

The terror of what was possible out there, the cruelty of some people and how helpless you were once they got stuck into you. You don't need all that much experience. Two seconds flat and she'd got to the end of her own power to bear it, that was the point. There's nothing more.

The difference between her and Digger was that Digger had not. He'd never come up against whatever it was, out there, that could utterly flatten him. (GW:67-8)

The prisoner of war experiences which fail to flatten Digger and Vic are developed in the novel at a number of levels. At one level they can be seen as a retelling of what is a distinctively Australian historical narrative. At another level they can be seen as a metaphorical construction of decentredness or of the relation of the spatial to the historical. Amanda Nettelbeck (1992) draws attention to the figure of the Burma railway line as a device which serves to draw together the different subjectivities of the men working on it. More than this, she sees the line as bridging gaps between different worlds.

The laying of the line by the men adds to the body of communal linear history; they make a history that will become not only a part of Australian national consciousness but also a reminder of international guilt. Yet the laying of the line also contributes to "that other history"; it gives the men a line to walk on in a place that does not otherwise reflect their presence there. (1992:50)

While the representation of the camp is one in which space, history and narrative are conflated, it is also one in which questions of ontology and epistemology are foregrounded. In this sense it is possible to see the prisoners as trapped in a reality which is outside the parameters of their metaphysics, but also, necessarily, subject to interpretation within such boundaries. The parable of Plato's cave serves as a useful paradigm for examination of the questions involved.

While Plato's cave is primarily concerned with hierarchies of knowledge and of being, it is also concerned with changes in the ways that individuals metaphysically deal with their circumstances. It is the ascent of the individual from the position of slave to philosopher that is privileged in Plato's analogy but there is also discussion of the ways in which the methodologies employed in interpreting the cave are necessarily different from those employed in the sunlight.

Malouf's treatment of the prisoner's railway camp is one which is more concerned with the effects of a descent from the metaphysical 'light' into the 'dark'. There is constant reference to the inadequacy or inappropriateness of the men's established systems of making sense of their present situation; their modes of knowing and being must become more concerned with the empirical, with the elemental, with the physical but also with the shadow images of memory and imagination.

The alertness to their own bodies and to the recognition that what they are and their continued existence, is contingent so much on the physical, forms a large part of their change in world view:

They had never given them much thought, these rough and ready bodies of theirs. You got that drummed into you early; not to look at it, not to touch. (GW:140)

As their bodies waste away, their past inattention to, their lack of knowledge of, their physical forms is brought home to them:

They hadn't known (and might have expected, in the normal way of things, never to have brought home to them), how much of what they were was dependent only on the meat. (GW:141)

Where the mind had guided the body, it is now the body, and its fickleness, that guides the mind:

You got to be an expert at last on the tricks it could play, this body that was so crude and filthy a thing but was also precious and had to be handled now with so much delicacy. (GW: 141)

In Plato's terms, this certainly represents a descent. It is not a descent from the lofty heights of philosophical dialogue for it is from "a half dozen schooners", a "run at football on Saturday arvo" and "a bit of love-making" (GW:140) that the men have been displaced. It is, however, no less of a descent for that:

Their bodies had gone berserk and were dragging them back to a time before they had organised themselves into human form and come in from chaos. (GW:142)

This idea of descent is also developed in terms of mythological and spiritual imagery. The camp certainly has a hellish quality and the clearing in the jungle where the bodies of the cholera victims are cremated, particularly so:

You were in the antechamber here of the next world - that's what the perpetual blue-grey gloom and the eternal dampness of the place told you;..(GW:156)

The cremation process is itself shown to be horrifyingly apocalyptic:

...the dead, who after twenty-four hours were no more than the driest sticks, should suddenly, when the teak logs under them roared into flame, sigh and sit upright, start bolt upright in the midst of the flames. (GW:157)

While there is without doubt, a sense of hellishness, of darkness and of incomprehensible deprivation, there are also elements of the light; systems which sustain the sense of the individual identity and the value of the individual.

The recollection of past knowledges is one strategy which keeps a link between the light and the dark: 'Memory was a gift, when they really set themselves to it.' (GW:148) It is not simply memory which offers some sort of promise for the prisoners, it is a re-writing of that memory:

Got into the right order, like the combination of a safe, they were a key that would unlock the universe. Only you had to get the order right, and it wasn't all that easy since the right order had nothing to do with the one in which these numbers had first come into your life. (GW:148)

Digger, in addition to his remarkable memory, has an ability to transpose his imagination beyond the constraints of his circumstances. In the delerium of his fever he mentally returns to the Crossing and receives sustenance of a sort from that. Imagining himself into his dog's kennel:

Some animal part of him, which he loved as he had loved Ralphie, and which was Ralphie, wolfed it down...took the strength from it and was enlightened. (GW:137)

This re-inventing of personal history privileges the power of the imagination over immediate experience. In Plato's model, it is as if the prisoners were each projecting their own images on to the walls. But it is not for everyone; Vic has 'no time for memories' (GW:150) and clings to the material - in the form of his piece of cotton.

This little object serves to draw one of the major distinctions between Digger and Vic. For Digger, the way of survival, of maintaining a link with life and not being utterly flattened is to cling to the belief that there is some universal, or at least verifiable, principle at work:

It was hard to keep your head in all this. It was a kind of madness, but there was a thread of sanity in it, there had to be; in all the twists and turns, a clear straight line into life. (GW:154)

But for Vic there is no clear straight line. The thing in which he places his faith is, significantly, 'tied in a loop.' (GW:151) That, in some ways, turns out to be a very good description of Vic himself; tied into a circle from which only at the very end is he able to escape, and only then by returning to his beginning.

Keen's Crossing does not represent some 'higher' metaphysical state. It is not place of great enlightenment for any of the figures who pass through it, with the possible exception of Vic, but it is a place which provides a fixed point of reference. It provides this stability in terms of time and of space; the Crossing does not substantially change - things around it do. Other places exist in contrast to it. This can be seen in relation to the prisoner's camp, for example, which exists in order to bring a railway line into existence - the Crossing is associated with a railway line already dead. The contrast between the place of cremation in the camp and Digger's first task on returning home, is clear. Clearing blackberry bushes, Digger finds numerous articles from the past that have been preserved and:

..shone out of the over-arching growth with an unnatural luminescence, as if they had managed somehow to preserve the last ray of sunlight they had been touched by, or the last moonlight, before a new shoot launched itself, knitted into the thicket and shut them in. (GW:227)

After burning the foliage, the Crossing begins to resemble 'the Keen's Crossing he had left' (GW:228). Of his return to his mother, sister and home, Digger, considers that he is:

Back, Digger thought, despite the seven years and all that had happened, in a life that was barely different in its essentials from the one he had left. (GW:229)

This is a stability, and it is one that is not found to the same degree in any other place in the novel.

King's Cross, despite the similarity in names, is a place of flux and transition. It is the figure that reflects most clearly the process of change and instability that exists separately from events of great, mythologised, significance. The Cross plays an important part in the lives of both Digger and Vic. It is not a place of pleasant revelations for either of them.

For Digger it is where he faces the reality that, as large as his memory and his capacity to experience are, there are things that will be lost:

What he would have wanted, given the power, was to take it all back again, down to the last razor blade and button off a baby's bootee, and see it restored. Impossible, of course.

He wanted nothing to be forgotten and cast into the flames. Not a soul. Not a pin. (GW:179)

For Vic the Cross is the place where he finally loses his son, or rather, realises the extent to which he and his son are completely apart. His essentialist argument, that Greg is 'attached' (308) to him can no longer stand up. The place he goes to in an attempt to put some sort of meaning back into his life is Keen's Crossing.

Keen's Crossing is also the place of Vic's death. The timeless place of the Crossing is an appropriate location for Vic's demise, since his end is also a return to his beginning.

The Great World asks ontological questions before it asks epistemological ones. The ideas with which it is concerned are certainly impacted on by epistemological dilemmas but there is still a sense in which the figures in the novel ask of themselves, 'Which world is this? What can be done in it? Which of my selves is to do it? For Vic, the answers are to be found in the way that he exists in a state of duality, of being never certain that where he is metaphysically is where he is supposed to be. For Digger, resolutions and reconciliations seem to some much easier, and it is hard to see that this is not because of his association with the Crossing. While Vic must pass through the great world, Digger can let the great world move around him.

Remembering Babylon

Remembering Babylon is concerned with the blurring of what have often been seen as 'natural' distinctions. In particular, the novel deals with the interfaces between different cultures; between nature and civilisation and between inscription and imagination. There are strong elements of difference established at various points, but these differences are often subordinated to the point at which they meet and become similarities, or are at least recognised for what they are. The effect of this is to expose cultural, racial, national and geographical divisions as arbitrary and completely unnatural.

While the novel blurs boundaries and classifications, it also resists the location of a stable centre. Keen's Crossing at least offered the possibility of a stable centre for the characters of *The Great World*. In *Remembering Babylon* there are no identifiable centres. The settlement into which Gemmy arrives is at the limit of white occupation. All of the figures are displaced from their 'centre' in some way, with Gemmy the only one originally from the hub of British colonial expansion, London. If the novel resists the idea of an unproblematic centre, it does not dismiss entirely the possibility of many shifting centres.

Geography is one site of blurring and collision. As in *The Great World*, lines and divisions figure strongly. In this novel, however, the lines exist to be crossed rather than followed. The meeting of Gemmy and the settler children occurs in relation to two such geographic partitions. It is a natural barrier that is first traversed. Gemmy is seen:

...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, ...superstitions and all that belonged to Absolute Dark. (RB:3)

The second barrier or division is one emplaced by the settler community:

The creature..came to a halt, gave a kind of squawk, and leaping up onto the top rail of the fence, hung there, its arms outflung as if preparing for flight. (RB:3)

This fence turns out to be a point of transition for Gemmy, in a number of ways. The point marks the time when he ceases to become an 'it' and becomes a 'he'. The Lacanian implications of this transition will be explored, but there are other important boundaries that must be examined.

Water for Malouf has often featured, as it did for the Great Writer in *Child's Play*, as a 'regenerative symbol'. In *The Great World*, Digger is restored to health in the river, at the conclusion of *Fly Away Peter* the figure in the surf is an affirmation of new life. In *Remembering Babylon* the river provides moments of great illumination for Jock McIvor. He marvels at a bird drinking at the creek:

..and how long the threads of water must be to run so easily from where they had come to wherever it was, imaginably out of sight, that they were going - tangling, untangling, running free. (RB:108)

This creek is not unproblematically regenerative, however. It also raises the possibility of knowledges and forms of expression beyond what McIvor considers to be in the 'natural' order of things:

The things he had begun to be aware of, however fresh and innocent, lay outside what was common, or so he thought; certainly, since he could have found no form in which to communicate them, outside words. (RB:108)

In a sense, it is a word that disrupts Jock's rapport with the river. At the vandalised shed, Jock imagines:

..the hand with its load of filth moving across the wall and understood now that what it was setting there was a word...He got to his feet and went swiftly to the creek.. and scrubbed his hands but he discovered that he had no belief any longer in the water's power to cleanse. (RB:116)

The creek also becomes the site of Gemmy's physical rejection by the settlers (121-2). He has his head thrust into a sack and is half-drowned by the McIvor's neighbours. At the same time, however, it becomes the site of a closeness between Jock and Gemmy (126) that has been absent up until that point.

The novel closes with another aquatic geographical boundary, that of the shoreline. This division is developed as one which is indefinable, as it is subject to the constant movement of the tides. While the coastline is a perimeter, a point of arrival (for Gemmy) and containment, it is dynamic and unstable. The central figures in the novel are characterised by a similar resistance to quantification or qualification, by a similar ebb and flow.

Gemmy is a figure who experiences marginalisation and rejection at a number of levels and for a variety of reasons. His earliest state is described as being that of an insect pupae, 'the maggot stage' (RB:146). It is at this level that he is associated closely with machines; in fact he is sustained by their waste:

...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. (RB:146)

These machines, unlike the soap vats which so impress Vic, have no duality, no redeeming poetry other than that they provide a place for the communal nestling: 'curled up in close heaps' of Gemmy and the other 'maggots' (RB:147).

The first individual that Gemmy has memory of is Willett. His memories of his circumstances as a subject of this ferreter are those which produce demons which 'live in rooms' (RB:147). Like his time under the machines, the striking images that recur to Gemmy are those associated with the floor, with comparisons in scale and with himself as an insignificant figure:

It is a fearful thing to be faced in the dark by a pair of cracked
leather boots, all their eyeholes torn, their laces trailing, the loose
tongues charred and smelling of flame. (RB:147)

Everything is twisted around in the London of Willett and Gemmy. All animals are domesticated for purposes other than food; the horses, whose fresh dung provides warmth to Gemmy's feet (150), the ferrets which clear the rats from Regent's Park (149) and the rats themselves - which become the players in a blood-sport. Gemmy himself is little more than a domestic animal whose only protection is the patronage of Willett: '..he has a place, he is 'Someone's Boy' (149).

Gemmy's post-arson escape finds him, somehow, on a ship. Whether in his panic he climbed the rat-lines and awoke in the merchant navy, or whether he was discovered somewhere and pressed into maritime service is unclear. This is in keeping with all of the other changes in Gemmy's life - with , perhaps, the exception of that tumble from the fence between white and black worlds - it is the transition that is blurred, not the reality of arriving.

The years that Gemmy spends before the mast could be two, or they could be three; his own internal narrative is unclear on the point. Certainly he recalls a carpenter who had a daughter who could turn herself into a seal. Given the circumstances under which Gemmy calls these figures of his past to mind, this is not a particularly extraordinary phenomenon - he himself has been a transmogrified sea creature.

The Aboriginal people who find Gemmy seem to be used to the possibility of transformation between human and animal; between earthly and spiritual. Finding the cast away white boy they consider:

What was it? A sea creature of a kind they had never seen before from the depths beyond the reef? A spirit, a feeble one, come back from the dead and only half reborn?(RB:22)

Gemmy's response to his benefactors is that he is: 'more lost than ever' and that it is '..not what I expected' (RB:23) It is not what the Aboriginal people expected either. He does not face subjugation or rejection but neither does he inherit unconditional acceptance:

He was accepted by the tribe but guardedly; in the droll half-apprehensive way that was proper to an in-between creature.
(RB:28)

The novel, particularly with respect to Gemmy, establishes a frightful series of Lacanian problems. The most difficult of these, and the one to which other problems appear to lead, is perhaps that which is stated at the fence interface between the 'Absolute Dark' and the white symbolic realm:

Then the ragged mouth gapped. 'Do not shoot,' it shouted.
'I am a B-b-british object!' (RB:3)

This statement is doubly problematic since it occurs at the beginning of the novel. While a temporally continuous Lacanian appraisal of Gemmy may be useful, it must be observed that in terms of the narrative there is a great deal of temporal discontinuity. The figure of Gemmy, however, informs, fractures (and is informed and fractured by) Lacanian theory so much, that to neglect this approach would seem to ignore a major theme of the novel.

That it is machines that are most closely associated with the very early years of Gemmy is something which resists an appraisal in terms of Lacanian human development. This is considerably emphasised in the way that 'maggot' images are developed. It seems to be a denial of the mother figure, but, the mother and the breast are still there as the machines and the oily material which the 'maggots' eat. Gemmy passes unproblematically, in the way the novel is constructed, from imaginary to symbolic realms:

The first being he has memory of. Before Willett there is only darkness, his life as a maggot, the giant legs of the machines.
(RB:147)

There is, here, a short-circuiting of the Oedipal crisis which would normally precipitate such a transition. In this way Gemmy cannot be said to have fully entered the symbolic realm. In fact, the whole Lacanian progression is further disordered with the appearance of Mag.

..[When Mag is with them] sometimes, on Willetts suggestion, when they've all been drinking together, takes him on her lap like an overgrown baby, and gives him her breast to suck, and, to Willett's vast amusement, frigs him under his shirt till he is squealing.
(RB:151)

His act of arson takes place after this, when he is 'eleven or twelve years old' and 'has resentments'. This could be seen as an attempt to resolve something of an Oedipal conflict, but it is destined to remain an incomplete act. We are told that 'he had not meant to set himself loose in the world' and the he is lost and 'would remain so till Willett..turned up again to curse and wallop him' (RB:153).

Gemmy's rebirth on the shore of Australia, as 'half-child, half-seacalf' (27) is one which necessitates an abandoning of much of that part of the symbolic realm that he had arrived at:

Young enough to learn and to be shaped as if for the first time, he was also young enough also to forget. He lost his old language in the new one that came to his lips. (RB:26)

The realm of his past is never quite disposed of; the figure of Willett remains strong and there is a sense in which he is separated but not entirely separate from his earlier existence. Of the fleeting recollections of his time with Willett he:

..could only believe.. that they belonged to the life of some other creature whose memory he shared, and which rose up at moments to shake him, then let him go. (RB:27)

When Gemmy stands on that fence and makes that plea to Lachlan, he is at a point where he is imperfectly subject to two different symbolic orders. When he calls himself a 'B-b-british object' he is saying a great deal more than he realises.

The 'object(a)' for Lacan is that residue of what is incorporated into the symbolic order, it is a substitute for the absent post-Oedipal mother. Terry Eagleton puts in the following terms:

To enter language is to be severed from what Lacan calls the 'real', that inaccessible realm which is always beyond the reach of signification, always outside the symbolic order. ..[After being separated from the mother's body] we will spend all our lives hunting for it. We have to make do instead with substitute objects, what Lacan calls the 'object little a', with which we try vainly to plug the gap at the very centre of our being.

(Eagleton:1983.168)

That Gemmy, who has only partially entered the symbolic order himself, and is specifically constructed as having no recollection of his mother, should describe himself as an 'object' is appropriate. Part of this stems from the fact that he has so vainly attempted to plug a very large gap at the centre of his being, but also because of his relation to the other figures in the novel.

For the Aboriginal people, Gemmy occupies a position which can be seen as neither fully in nor fully out of their collective symbolic order, described as an 'in-between creature' (28), he is subject to exclusive exclusions:

No woman, for example would have to do with him, and there were many objects in the camp he was forbidden to touch....the restrictions on him were his and his alone...(28)

The community regards his uneasy sleep, broken by incongruous images and whisperings in his half-forgotten language, as evidence he is not fully formed. His night time cries are:

...proof that although he had the look of a man, he was not one, not yet. A day would come when, fully arrived among them, he would let go of the other world. (RB:28)

He occupies a similar position with respect to the children who encounter him at the fence. Lachlan, who at the moment of Gemmy's appearance is occupying an imaginary space in snow covered Russia, is unable to satisfactorily place Gemmy within any realm of experience:

...the thing, as far as he could make it out.. was not even, maybe, human. The stick-like legs, all knobbed at the joints, suggested a wounded waterbird.. [or a human that had been] changed into a bird, but only halfway..(RB:2)

This impression is replaced by one in which he perceives Gemmy as an animated scarecrow. Whatever he is seen as, it is not initially as a subject, as a human. He is seen as an incomplete object. His shouted claim, in English, to be treated as a British object places him, again incompletely, into the symbolic order of Lachlan and the others.

Another dimension of Gemmy's appeal is that it takes the form of a slip in the language, a moment of discontinuity and fracture where the unconscious shows through - what Freud called parapraxis and what has often subsequently been termed the Freudian slip. For Lacan, all language is fraught with similar ambiguity and dispersion. Eagleton claims of Lacan that:

If all language is as slippery and ambiguous as he suggests, we can never mean precisely what we say, and never say precisely what we mean.. We can never articulate the truth in some 'pure' unmediated way.

(Eagleton.1983:169)

Lacan himself approaches this question as an epistemological problem, stating of any utterance that:

It is not a question of knowing whether I speak of myself in a way that conforms to what I am , but rather of knowing whether I am the same as that of which I speak. (Lodge.1988:96)

Gemmy is constructed as a character who is more concerned with the latter approach. His central dilemma is that he 'speaks' as a subject who partially occupies two symbolic realms. In that sense he can never have an unproblematic knowledge that he is what he 'speaks' of.

Narratively, his subjectivity will eventually turn out to be Aboriginal. He loses his status as a British object only when he is, in death, reduced to the status of a literal 'object'.

There were bones - not so many. Eight parcels of bark, two of child size, resting a little above eye-level.

He looked at one dry bundle, then another - they were not distinguishable - and felt nothing more for one than for any of them. (RB:197)

The figure of Lachlan is much less defined by his initial appearance in the novel than is Gemmy. There is a great deal less ambiguity as to who he is and what he is about. There is omission in how he came to be where he is, but this represents far less of a crisis or trauma than that which is omitted does for the figure of Gemmy. Unlike Gemmy, Lachlan's links with his past and with his home are strong. In particular, it is language and accent that operate to keep a link between his old and new centres:

He began every sentence with 'At home in Scotland' - yet at home, as she knew from her mother, they had been starving. She would harden her heart and mock him... He went red in the face and could barely hide his tears.

She had her triumph. But seeing it she felt ashamed, it was so easy. And Scotland, home, was sacred to her. (RB:55)

While Gemmy attempts to use language to claim affinity or sameness, the young Lachlan uses it to emphasise a difference between himself and the Australian born Janet McIvor, who still considers Scotland 'home'. The language, the code, that he is in possession of expands beyond merely understanding what a 'moothfu' o' mools' (56) means. The difference between Janet and Lachlan becomes based on masculine codes rather than linguistic ones:

Being in possession of so many skills, and the code that went with them and belonged to men, he had put himself beyond reach. (RB:58)

Jock McIvor has a more difficult relationship with codes of all types. He is uncomfortable, with imagination, with himself and with the community codes which serve to deny member status to Gemmy. His initial approach to the settler community, and to assure himself, is that Gemmy is 'hairless' (69). But he sees this only as a half truth, for he has already considered the way that Gemmy has the capacity to disturb him, not for what he is, but for the initial impression that he made:

From the moment he saw the fellow he had felt a kind of repulsion,
a moral one he thought, though it expressed itself physically.
(RB:70)

Jock's appraisal of Gemmy, and his articulation of it is not clear cut. Like the positions of his neighbours it is based on an irrational sense of fear at the way Gemmy is both familiar and different:

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 one face or the other. (RB:43)

While Jock claims to be infuriated at the alarm that the stone allegedly given to Gemmy provokes in his neighbour, he harbours doubts himself about his ability to cope with the different cultural forces at work. (107). The development of 'difference' is constructed as being completely arbitrary here as, evidenced by the attacks on their farm, the McIvors are ostracised - marked as different - by what was previously regarded as their own community.

The novel, in developing ideas of alienation and belonging, places considerable emphasis on the nature of inscription and encoding. the process of turning testament into manuscript is of great concern to Gemmy. For him, the written word becomes not a site of meaning but a site of his central being.

...he knew what writing was but had never himself learned the trick
of it. As he handled the sheets and turned them this way and that,
and caught the peculiar smell they gave off, his whole life was in his
throat. (RB:20)

This is initially a liberating or at least wakening experience for Gemmy. The exposure of personal history, previously neither told nor written, is something that assists in his attempts to define himself or at least locate himself within a recognisable framework:

..- and he was filled with an immense gratitude. He had shown them what he was. He was known.(RB:20)

The irony of this belief, and of his gratitude, is that what has been transcribed exists in terms of the symbolic order of Frazer and Abbot. It has little or nothing to do with Gemmy's central being:

...Gemmy, in his childish eagerness to provide Mr Frazer with whatever it was he wanted to hear, leaped at every suggestion, and once his own meagre fund gave out was only too pleased to have Mr Frazer find words for him.(RB:17)

It is not just Frazer who is mediating Gemmy's story; George Abbot adds his own pieces of invention to the story. Not merely a 'change in the phrasing' but a wilful 'alteration of fact'(19). The importance of this mediation is lost on Gemmy who, in the 'peculiar smell' of the ink, finds some sort of essential truth. He comes to regret the transfer of that essence to those seven pages.

Suffering from nightmare images of the past, and sickening with a sense of dislocation at the Hutchence house, Gemmy associates his state with the physical pages of his transcribed story:

More and more now he was haunted by those sheets, seven in all... till he was convinced that the only way to save himself from so much racking, and despair and sweat, was to get them back again. All he needed was the strength to get there... But that was just what their magic had drawn from him. (RB:154-5)

The novel establishes inscription as being the site of falsity and disempowerment. It strongly develops the idea that those with access to inscribed language have power over those who do not. This is seen in the above case, but also in the daubing of the shed with excrement.

It is a destructive action which is directed at Gemmy and Jock but where the vandalism is inscribed reveals more of its significance:

the shed Gemmy had been mending when his visitors arrived, the new planks in its wall, the new nail heads showing plainly in the weathered grey of the rest. And there, smeared across them was a stain.. (RB:115)

The scrawl occurs at the physical point of Gemmy's entrance into the realm of the white settler. His participation in the 'civilising' process of creating permanent structures is denied by what is inscribed on the shed. The excrement becomes a figurative barrier between the 'natural' non-inscriptive world from which Gemmy has just come, and the world of arbitrary assessments of difference inhabited by the likes of Andy McKillop. Jock is able to recognise how this inscription is an affront to worlds other than merely that occupied by language:

And it seemed to him now that it was the sky that had been smeared, the earth, the water. The word was on them; some old darkness out of the depth of things was scribbled there forever, and could never now be eradicated. (RB:116)

Inscription and encoding are present for Gemmy and the Aboriginal visitors that he receives, but in a radically different way. They are not associated with the constraining physical elements of pen and ink, nor with the violence present in the soiling of the shed. As the three men sit outside the shed on which Gemmy has been working, 'the silence between them' becomes a 'conversation of another kind' (117). The earth between them:

..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 all it contains], 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)

This is in complete contrast to the way in which the settlers inscribe; it is the difference between 'printing with the spirit of his feet' and writing nonsense with a pen, or obscenities with filth. Jock, in the way that he is alert to the natural world can be seen as straddling both positions.

It is Janet McIvor, however, who is most concerned with reconciling the language of the natural world with that of civilisation.

Janet, or Sister Monica, becomes dedicated to decoding the 'Great Secret' (191) of bee communication. It is an enterprise which can be traced back to her complete envelopment by these insects, an envelopment which takes the form of a marriage between humanity and 'nature':

You are our bride, her new and separate mind told her as it drummed
and swayed above the earth. (RB:142)

The bees that she studies are themselves a kind of union between natural and cultural realms - crossbreeds that: 'the earth had never known till she called them' (143) . The solution to her problem, however, remains elusive:

..her mind in its human shape could not grasp it, though there had
been a moment, long ago, when she had known it, of this she was
convinced. (R:192)

The inscription of bee language becomes evidence of an 'international conspiracy' (189), linked in the newspapers with Lachlan's support of another supposed interloper - the German pastry cook. All of this serves to set up inscription as the site of ambiguity and mis-interpretation; as a process which can easily be appropriated to produce difference and alienation.

Gemmy is able, in part, to reclaim the power that he lost to the seven pages of transcription. What he claims back from Abbot is physically nothing more than the jottings of schoolchildren, what he claims back spiritually is much more important. In a wider sense, however, the wilful lies and apocrypha remain tangible in Mr Frazer's notes. Like all written texts they have the potential to persist and to again and again become the sites of alienation and disempowerment.

Doubt, error, change and refusal to change are the elements which characterise any examination of the novel in terms of epistemological regimes. Language, particularly written language, is shown, at all levels, to be inadequate in reflecting any great truth or offering any stability.

Memory is always fleeting and incomplete; fading and re-emerging to confound and disturb. The realm of the immediate senses is, in the case of Jock, the site of incomprehension, while for Gemmy it is a transcendent part of a much greater system of knowing.

David Malouf expresses hope that:

..by the end of *Remembering Babylon*, the reader, by the genuine process of looking, understanding and going deeper, will feel less confident about making easy assessments of people and categories.
(Hawley:1993)

The novel seems to fulfil this wish in the way that it exposes the fragility of any distinction between sameness and difference; between belonging and being alien.

Imagining Australia: The Stone

Personal epistemologies and ontologies are key features of the novels of David Malouf. What characterises them in the body of his work is their tendency to be incomplete, or in some way inadequate. Peter Pierce observed this sense of incompleteness in terms of the relationships within the early novels:

[Patrick White and] Malouf have been writing of the sense of incompleteness in the lives of some men who seek intense and dependent relationships with other men. That incompleteness is not simply a social or emotional matter. The fictions of Malouf and White rise to engagement with metaphysical concerns seriously...
(Pierce.1982:526-534)

This view is borne out, to some extent, in two of the three novels examined here. In *Child's Play* there is an intense dependence, on the part of the terrorist, on the Great Writer. In *The Great World* Vic and Digger establish an interdependence which is marked by incompleteness in both parties. The position becomes harder to sustain in *Remembering Babylon*, since there are no really intense or dependent relationships to be found. It could be argued that there is an interdependence between Gemmy and Lachlan but their relationship lacks the intensity of Vic and Digger, or of Ashley and Jim in *Fly Away Peter*. While *Remembering Babylon* does not have the same kind of relationships as other novels by Malouf, it still has the same attention to metaphysical concerns.

David Malouf's novels are not primarily explorations of human relationships. These relationships are present, and often strongly present, but are subordinated to the wider themes of knowledge, identity and interpretation.

There is the image of a stone or pebble in David Malouf's work that can be traced back to *An Imaginary Life*:

The fullness is in the Child's moving away from me, in his stepping so lightly, so joyfully, naked, into his own distance at last as he fades in and out of the dazzle of light off the water and stoops to gather - what? Pebbles? Is that what his eye is attracted by now, the greyest most delicately veined of them? .. the useless pebbles that where they strike the ground suddenly flare up as butterflies, whose bright wings rainbow the stream. (IL:152)

Another pebble appears in *Child's Play*, as the terrorist's last link with the world of childhood imagination and with the 'tide of energy' that is 'out there' (CP:63):

Antaeus retained his strength so long as he could touch the earth, and I suppose we are meant to understand by this fable that there is between us and nature a channel through which energy endlessly flows, and feed us and keeps us whole. (CP:62)

Yet another pebble, or stone, is seen at the time of Vic's death in *The Great World*:

She wrenched her hand loose, jabbering, and when she got it free she had hold of a smooth little stone about the size of a kidney, same colour too, which she thought for a moment he might have sicked up. She stared at it. (GW:323)

Finally, in *Remembering Babylon*, there is an imaginary stone that, for all its lack of substance, causes considerable trouble:

And the stone, once launched, had a life of its own. It flew in all directions, developed a capacity to multiply, accelerate, leave wounds; and the wounds were real even if the stone was not, and would not heal. (RB:102)

The image of the stone in the three earlier novels is a comforting conflation of the tangible, that which may be held in the hand, and the spiritual or metaphysical. In these novels it is a real stone which acquires a dimension beyond simple solidity. In *Remembering Babylon* the stone is representative of something more disturbing. It is imaginary but acquires the ability to act as if solid.

In the novels of David Malouf, the individual possesses the capacity to exist on a variety of metaphysical planes, to have shifting regimes of knowledge, and to be empowered by the potentialities of imagination. There is still a sense, however, that the works look beyond the spiritual and metaphysical concerns of individuals. National identity and the problems associated with trying to define it are also of great concern for Malouf.

Just as individuals in the texts have (imperfect, incomplete, apocryphal and contradictory) epistemological regimes, so do nations. I would argue that the national equivalent of a regime of knowing is the mythologised 'history' of that nation. For much, or perhaps even most, of white Australia there is a body of mythologised history which bears little or no relation to the world as mediated by the senses. It is a collective regime of deductive knowing; I think of Gallipoli therefore I am an Australian (or New Zealander). The process is also deductive in the sense that it requires the deduction of other mythologies and histories from the equation; it takes the Turks (the English and the New Zealanders?) out of Gallipoli.

David Malouf consistently de-stabilises what have come to be national epistemologies. In relation to Australian participation in warfare he stays away from Gallipoli and in *Fly Away Peter*, as Philip Nielson observes, he:

...makes some further adjustments to the traditional Anzac myth. Throughout his war scenes, he avoids any idealization of the Australian soldiers. They are portrayed as ordinary people demonstrating courage and persistence under grotesque circumstances (as are the Australian prisoners of war in *The Great World*). (Neilson:1990.105)

This is not to say that Malouf is concerned with figuratively putting the Turks back into Gallipoli or addressing some perceived great wrong in the way history has been inscribed. It is much more a case of translating a national epistemology into a national ontology. The epistemological questions, returning to McHale's quote of Higgins paradigm, that can be asked of a national identity are something like : How can I interpret this [Australia, for example] of which I am a part? And what am I in it? (McHale:1987.9). The 'I' and the 'Australia' are posed as unproblematic

entities. The questions asked of a national ontology are of the order: 'What is [Australia]? What kinds of [Australia] are there, how are they constituted and how do they differ; what happens when different kinds of [Australia] are placed in confrontation, or when boundaries between [Australias] are violated ?' (McHale:1987.10)

In the three novels examined here, all of the questions, both epistemological and ontological are asked. Whether they are asked of individuals or of collections of individuals, the answers are never arrived at easily.

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