

**A REASON TO BELIEVE:
READING DAVID MALOUF'S *AN IMAGINARY LIFE* AS OVID'S
*DE PROFUNDIS***

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*What poets imagine is much more powerful than the facts.
(Malouf, *An Imaginary Life* 75)*

My paper focuses on David Malouf's novel *An Imaginary Life* (1978) as a symbolic representation of exile, both spiritual and linguistic, a moving recreation of the modern quality of Ovid's poetry and personality at the dawn of the Christian era, and a compelling meditation on our own age, one marked by loss of certainties and haunted by modernity's "others." Seizing on the sparse facts about the "most modern of the Latin poets" and drawing primarily on Ovid's exilic poems *Tristia* (*Lamentations*) and *Epistulae ex Ponto* (*Black Sea Letters*), Malouf sets out to "make this glib fabulist of 'the changes' live out in reality what had been, in his previous existence, merely the occasion for dazzling literary display" (154). More specifically, Malouf attributes to Ovid "a capacity for belief that is nowhere to be found in his writings" (154)—which are described as "gay, anarchic, ephemeral," and "fun" (26)—but that he gradually acquires in exile, particularly through his interactions with a small boy that the villagers capture from the wild. Away from the metropolis of imperial Rome and bereft of his own language, Ovid begins "to listen for another meaning" (24) and look at the world through a child's eyes (20), with a wonderment he has not felt before. What the mysterious figure, The Child, comes to "teach" Ovid is a new language and, implicitly, a new, almost mystical vision of the world, according to which the realm of the elements and of primitive energies is readily accessible in childhood, lost with age, but recoverable again through dreams, memories, myths, and the imagination—all of which are seen to make up a continuum.

The entire novel, I intend to argue, is working deliberately to cross boundaries, dissolving the human perspective in its surroundings, and opening it out to the beginning and end of all things. Thus, the letter Ovid never sent offers us, his unknown friend[s]", a reason to believe in something larger than yet at the same time buried deep within ourselves. In the process, the relationship between the imperial self and the barbarian other is also transformed, for, clearly influenced by Malouf's Australian

background, the book can also be said to reflect a non-Aborigine's perception (condescending at first, but then gradually accepting) of one of the continent's indigenous cultures.

As its very title suggests, *An Imaginary Life* takes its place alongside other fictional works—also known as “author fictions”—that resurrect historical authors as fully rounded characters that can be seen from “within,” by probing the narrative's psychological undercurrents, and scrutinized from outside, by attending to the context (personal and cultural) from which they originate. Even if we accept the critics' objections that Malouf's depiction of Ovid contradicts what is actually known about the earlier life of the Roman poet, the author's own description of the book as “neither historical novel nor biography, but a fiction with its roots in possible event” (154, 153) is appropriate given all the gaps and inconsistencies in Ovid's own version of the events surrounding his removal to Tomis and his “unacknowledged acclimatization” (Green xxxi) to this remote, desolate place beyond the edge of the civilized world. Shot through with an elegiac pathos reminiscent of Ovid's exilic poems, the book gathers fragments of Ovid's life and work into a meaningful pattern that conveys some sense of human destiny affecting and affected by figures of the Other, particularly the Getae on the Black Sea coast and The Child. Life, Ovid comes to understand, is a process of becoming, of ongoing metamorphoses into other beings, or states of being: “It is as if each creature had the power to dream itself out of one existence into a new one, a step higher on the ladder of things” (28-29).

But, Malouf's Ovid pointedly reflects, “the spirits have to be recognized to become real. They are not outside us, nor even entirely within, but flow back and forth between us and the objects we have made, the landscape we have shaped and moved in. We have dreamed all these things in our deepest lives and they are ourselves (28). If the “objects” that Publius Ovidius Naso¹ “made” and is still remembered for are his poems, by turns worldly and fabulous, accessible and excessive, the landscape in which he moved was one that stretched from his birthplace in Sulmo to Rome, where he started a career in law, only to abandon it for writing, to Greece, Asia Minor and Sicily where he traveled after divorcing his first wife, and finally to Tomis, which was to become Ovid's “home away from home” for the rest of natural life. As for the age to which Ovid belonged, this was “the dawn of the Christian era, in which mysterious forces were felt to be at work and

¹ The fictional Ovid points out that he was called Naso because of his ancestor's nose and because his got him into trouble: “I could sniff out to well what everyone wants to hear, has begun to think, and will think too, once I have said it” (25). “I have smelled my way to the edge of things where Nothing begins” (27).

thinking had not yet settled into a rational mode” (154).²

Skillfully redeploying the autobiographical mode of Ovid’s exilic poems, *An Imaginary Life* chronicles, in stark yet vivid prose, the poet’s impressions of Tomis—its harsh winters, rough terrain, and recurrent raids by barbarous nomads—as well as his painful memories, obsessive dreams, and nostalgic evocations of the lost homeland. At first, Ovid’s existence in the isolated outpost on the Black Sea is drab and monotonous, as he becomes attuned to the most elemental and rudimentary sensations—“My life here has been stripped to the simplest terms” (15)—and wonders whether he will “have to learn everything all over again like a child” (22). Time operates in a fashion much different from what he is used to; with only the most basic temporal points of reference, he finds it difficult to keep track of passing days, and only transitions in the seasons serve to remind him of the passage of years. He lives with the headman of the village and his family (mother, daughter-in-law and grandson): “They are rough, kindly people, and the old man, for all that he is a barbarian, treats me with some regard for my former position” (15). The flashbacks punctuating the narrative reveal that in Rome, Ovid gained the reputation of being the most brilliant and sophisticated poet of his generation—known for the elegance, wit, and virtuosity of his writings. His enormously popular erotic elegies (*Amores*) and letters on the art of seduction (*Art of Love*, c. 1 AD) exhibit an irrepressible, often irreverent spirit of play stirred by socially transgressive acts (like adultery) that “ran flat counter to Augustus’s moral legislation” and “ensured that their author incurred lasting resentment at the highest official level” (Green xxi).

Both this awareness of art’s subversive energies and the sensational notoriety clinging to Ovid’s name invite comparisons with Oscar Wilde, another urbane sophisticate and histrionic self-promoter who invented his own myth. Just as Wilde was to fashion a new, flamboyant style for his age, a style that would fly in the face of the rigid conventions of late Victorian society, especially on matters of sex, Ovid created a style that openly defied the rules and restrictions characterizing the “solemn, orderly, monumental, dull” Augustan age: “No more civic virtues—since we all know where they lead. No more patriotism. No more glorification of men at arms. ... My world was strictly personal, a guide, in good plain terms to such country matters as can be explored in two square meters of a bed” (26). Much like Ovid’s trials and tribulations in exile, Wilde’s conviction and incarceration took a heavy toll on him, as an artist and as a human being; in both cases,

² Malouf’s Ovid regards himself as a transition figure, born on the cusp “between two cycles of time, the millennium of the old gods, that shudders to its end, and a new era that will come to its crisis at some far point in the future I can barely conceive of, and where you, reader, sit in a lighted room whose furnishings I do not recognize, or in the late light of a garden whose blooms I do not know, translating this—with what difficulty—into your own tongue” (19).

confinement—whether to a prison cell or a desolate place—rendered games-playing meaningless. Tragic suffering led both Ovid and Wilde to re-examine their lives and write soul-searching letters that, although self-indulgent, elicit sympathy, as they are meant to “justify and explain” their authors’ past records “in the hope of winning some kind of reprieve for the future” (Green xliii). Indeed, just as Wilde’s apologia for posterity, written in prison and posthumously published as *De Profundis*, envisioned a future in which he would achieve immortality, so the elaborate confession Malouf invents for Ovid, whom he shows writing by candlelight in a windowless room, makes an emotional appeal to an imaginary future reader without whom writing feels like “dancing in the dark”³: “I speak to you, reader, as one who lives in another century, since this is the letter I will never send. It is addressed neither to my wife nor to my lawyer at Rome, nor even to the emperor; but to you, unknown friend” (18). Because his fame—his immortal place in literature—rested now with his readers, *literary* exile (the loss of creative powers) was for Ovid, as it would be for Wilde, an, if not *the* unendurable punishment.

The exact circumstances of Ovid’s severance from Rome (and subsequent removal of his *Art of Love* from public libraries) remain obscure, but Ovid himself (in *Tristia* and the *Black Sea Letters*) offers two reasons for the emperor’s still-mysterious gesture: an immoral poem, the *Art of Love*, and an “indiscretion” that had clearly drawn Augustus’s wrath, but “the details of which he declares himself forbidden to reveal” (Green xxiv). This “error,” Green submits, lay in his having witnessed something presumably compromising—one of the emperor’s daughter’s many scandalous affairs—or of a criminal nature—“some kind of pro-Julian plot directed against the Claudian succession.” “If this is true,” Green argues, “the Art of Love will have been dragged in (almost ten years after its publication!) to camouflage the real, politically sensitive charge [his Julian sympathies]” (xxiv).

Whatever the cause of his banishment, we know that Ovid sent epistles in verse to the Emperor, pleading for a reprieve or a transfer to a less inclement place of exile, but that his supplications fell on deaf ears. Equally desperate are his efforts to make himself understood to people for whom Latin is virtually unknown. Thus the narrator sees himself as “a crazy, comic old man, grotesque, tearful, who understands nothing, can say nothing, and whose ways, so it must seem to these sour people, are absurdly out of keeping with the facts of our daily existence” (17). Since no one in Tomis speaks his tongue, he is “rendered dumb,” communicating “like a child with grunts and signs.” Hence the interconnectedness of language and landscape,

³ “Writing a poem you can read to no one/ is like dancing in the dark” (EP IV. 2.33-4).

emphasized throughout the book⁴ and bearing directly on Ovid's physical and mental condition:

All day I wander in a dream, as isolated from the world of men as if I belonged to another species. At night I discover in sleep what the simple daylight blinds me to: that the dark side of every object here, and even more, the landscape itself when night shadows flow over it, is a vast page whose tongue I am unable to decipher, whose message to me I am unable to interpret. (17)

By the same token, the other's language appears at once strange and familiar to the classical poet: "But they are, even so, of our species, these Getae. I listen to them talk. The sounds are barbarous, and my soul aches for the refinements of our Latin tongue, that perfect tongue in which all things can be spoken, even pronouncements of exile. I listen, and what moves me most is that I *recognize* the tunes" (21; italics mine). Seen through "this other tongue," he later muses, "the world seems closer to the first principle of creation" (65). Furthermore, he finds companionship in those creatures which, like him, "cannot speak," and wonders if spiders have a language of their own. If so, he might try to learn it and then write again in the spiders' language: "The New Metamorphoses of the poet Ovid in his Exile, in the spiders' tongue" (20, 21).

It is this gradually acquired sense of recognition—an acknowledgment of the mystic bond among people in different states (primitive and civilized) as well as between different orders of being (human and non-human, natural and supernatural)—that distinguishes Malouf's account of Ovid's exile in Tomis from the poet's own depiction of this place and its people in *Tristia*. Indeed, critics have called attention to how misleading these poems are about things such as the climate of Tomis (not as unpleasant as he claims), the barrenness of the land (in fact, rather famous for its wheat-harvests), and the barbarism of the local population; according to Peter Green, Ovid must have been aware of the "fine distinctions" between the "semi-Hellenized native settlers, mostly fishermen or farmers,"

⁴ The twin themes of exile and language are explored in one of Malouf's later novels, *Remembering Babylon*. Gemmy Fairley, its protagonist, is a white man who, after spending 16 years among native Aussalians, can hardly remember to speak English and thus identify with the English culture he grew up in. In *An Imaginary Life*, Ovid fears he might forget his Latin and lose his powers as an artist. And just as one part of Gemmy's belongs to the tribal life, one part of Ovid's belongs to the wilderness. In the loneliness they both share, they carry inside them a secret story, "which had another shape and might need, for its telling, the words he had had in his mouth, when they first found him, and had lost; though not, he thought, forever" (*Remembering Babylon* 28).

and “the wild nomads of the steppe; but for his own literary purposes he constantly confuses them” (xxx).⁵ Ovid’s main purpose was to return home, to Rome, to which his soul was still bound, but as his exile progresses, so does his understanding of his new world and his place in it: “let me be a poet among the Getae,” he muses in Book I of the *Black Sea Letters*, “let Tomis be my Rome” (qtd. in Green xxxiv). While Rome remains, in both *Tristia* and *An Imaginary Life*, a backdrop of nostalgic dreams and poignant memories, the very notion of “home” is redefined by Malouf as a demystified way of seeing the world—a condition in which man’s natural, aesthetic, and moral states are harmoniously integrated—rather than an actual, known/remembered place. For instance, one of Ovid’s constant lamentations is the absence of spring—“We are already into spring ... but there is no blossom to be seen” (53). His wistful longing is fulfilled once Ovid starts looking for spring in himself and perceives the “raw life and unity of things” around him (65).

Realizing the impossibility of release,⁶ Ovid comes to regard his life in exile with something more than resignation: “In all the known world, where the emperor rules, I have no official existence. And beyond this last outpost is the unknown. Even supposing I had the energy for it in my present condition, where could I go?” (16). Ovid’s sense of reality, nursed by adversity, is stern throughout this decade of acute distress, deteriorating health, and emotional turmoil—indeed, of a death-in-life existence: “Wherever I look,” he wrote in *Tristia*, “there’s nothing but death’s image” (I 11.23). However, this does not stop him—both the real and the fictional Ovid—from “mythicizing” himself in terms that stress the redemptive power of suffering and sovereign magic of the imagination: “We are free to transcend ourselves if we have the imagination for it” (67).

In Malouf’s novel, the immediate trigger for this mythologizing impulse is Ovid’s vision of the small boy he sees in a dream and then summons up again in his imagination (48), even before the child is hunted

⁵ Ovid did make his “final peace” with the citizens of Tomis, as suggested in the *Black Sea Letters* (EP IV. 9.89 and 97-107), where he makes reference to their “admiration for him—as well as his own reciprocal gratitude and affection” (Green xxxv).

⁶ Hope of imperial clemency, which kept Ovid going during the first years in exile, seemed to have died with the emperor on 19 August AD 14, for the poet could not expect compassion from either the latter’s son, Tiberius, or wife, Livia. As Peter Green has shown, based on his astute reading of Ovid’s exilic poems, Ovid’s attitude towards Augustus was ambivalent and thus “singularly tactless” (x1): on the one hand, promoting the imperial cult and celebrating the nobility of the Imperial house, especially “when the news of Augustus’s deification reached him,” and, on the other, scathingly attacking his tormentor’s “divine pretensions and moral revivalism.” “Groveling, Ovid still contrived to insult” (Green xxxv; xxxvi).

down by the villagers: “And something came out of the depths of my sleep towards the point where we stood facing one another, like a reflection rising to the surface of a mirror. It was there, outside me, a stranger. And something in me that was its reflection had come up to meet it” (24-25). The child emerges as the poet’s alter-ego, an embodiment of Nature whose sphere of knowledge—“library of forms”—extends far beyond that of Culture, as comprised by Ovid’s poems (93). Indeed, though Ovid identifies him as the “wild boy of his childhood” and variously refers to him as a dream figure, kindred spirit, or figment of his imagination, he is ultimately forced to admit—not without a sense of guilt for having denied the boy’s “otherness,” his essential separateness from him (106)—that the child in fact exceeds his imagining.⁷ So fascinating does he find the boy’s companionship that the poet ceases hoping for a return to Rome and becomes reconciled with his fate: “More and more in these last weeks I have come to realize that this place is the true destination I have been seeking, and that my life here, however painful, is my true fate” (94).

A clear indication of this change in Ovid’s perception of exile as a blessing rather than a curse is his belief that he himself may learn, not only from the gradual development of the boy’s speech and manual skills, but also from the latter’s closeness to the spirit world: “There are times when it comes strongly upon me that *he* is the teacher” (95). Ovid is thus confident that the Child can bring him closer to an awareness of what he “must finally become” (64) by returning him to a prelapasarian time when plants and animals, stars and stones, talked on equal terms with humans, and when gods were sacred beings and not mere figures of play. As Malouf has Ovid define them, the true gods dwell neither entirely within nor entirely outside human beings, but at the meeting point between the world within and without; that meeting point is the imagination, whose transformative power restores the original unity, what the “the final metamorphosis” boils down to: “I must drive out my old self and let the Universe in. ... The spirit of things will migrate back into us. We shall be whole” (96). Hence the new meaning exile takes on for the poet: “When I think of my exile now it is from the universe. When I think of the tongue that has been taken away from me, it is some earlier and more universal language than our Latin” (98).

Unlike Ovid, however, the villagers, who follow a form of shamanism and believe that malevolent spirits are constantly lurking about them, are not so tolerant of the boy from the wild. When it is thought that the child is responsible for a mysterious illness that afflicts the local headman, Ovid decides that he and the boy must leave the family with which they have

⁷ He thinks, for instance, that the mythological creatures of *Metamorphoses* pale by comparison with this strange creature of the wild (50).

been staying and venture off into the grasslands to the north, towards the river Ister. The river, described as frozen and flowing at the same time, symbolizes the thin line between Being and Becoming that defines the “human story” in general, and Ovid’s story in particular. More specifically, the imagery that dominates the last part of the book captures both Heraclitus’s idea that “all things flow, nothing abides” and the sense that Ovid, the poet, will live on even after the Golden Age of Roman literature comes to an end. It is therefore appropriate that Ovid’s story, as imagined by Malouf, ends in the open spaces where, far from other human habitations but without regrets, he and the child have found safety—the safety of a new beginning: for “What else should our lives be but a continuous series of beginnings?” and “What else is death but the refusal any longer to grow and suffer change” (136). Exile has changed Ovid from a fashionable poet whose “whole life has been just a daily exercise in adventuring” to *the poet*—a wanderer on earth pushing out beyond the limits of the known world and of his own consciousness. Again appropriately, Ovid’s death occurs as the earth is “breaking into the newness of spring” (147) and he reaches that point on the earth’s surface when he “ascends, or lowers himself into the hands of the gods”: “Strange to look back on the enormous landscape we have struggled across all these weeks, across the sea, across my life in Rome, across my childhood, to observe how already the footprints lead to this place and no other” (151). Thus the reluctant exile has finally returned home.

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