

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

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Abstract: 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 skepticism 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 poem of exile Tristia, 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. In so doing, 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.