



The Theme of Exile and Reconciliation in David Malouf’s *An Imaginary Life*

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Abstract

Philip Neilsen sees that in Malouf’s works ‘nationality’ or ‘Australian-ness’ are the most prominent among other preoccupations and also that his writings show a consistent concern with the exploration of historical influences upon a present consciousness’. In his fictional works Malouf’s Australia takes shape as a nation composed of migrants and also that Malouf’s Australia is a nation on the move, created and then repeatedly transformed by the process of migration. It can also be said that while in his first novel *Johnno*, Malouf gives us the ‘flesh’ of Australian exile, in *An Imaginary Life* he gives us the precise ‘bones’ of exile, of psychological descent, and of a form of spiritual reconciliation is the fictionalisation of the late life of the Latin poet Ovid, who spent his final years as a political exile in Tomis (contemporary Constanta). I would like to show through this paper that apparently though *An Imaginary Life* seems to talk of Ovid and his exile, in reality, through Ovid’s experience; it also retells the Australian myth of exile. It tells of the experience of the Australian settlers, who are in a state of exile from their homeland England. It is a sense of being separated at the edge of the world, away from the centre of things. And in Ovid’s ultimate acceptance of the harsh land and exiled existence, Malouf’s novel evokes for the reader the need for the contemporary Australians to identify with and have a better sense of belonging to Australia, than just belonging to a second-hand Europe.

Keywords

Australia, exile, language, naming, adaptation

There is a passage in David Malouf's *Johnno* where the adolescent narrator muses upon the very full address which he, like Stephen Dedalus and schoolchildren all over the world, has written on the fly-leaf of his exercise books: "Arran Avenue, Hamilton, Brisbane, Queensland, Australia, the World". Queensland is 'a joke' and about Australia he asks, "Why Australia? What is Australia anyway? Australia is impossible! Hardly worth thinking about!" (Malouf 52). Martin Leer in his essay has said that "All the events in time, in our life, are there for us to discover as we go along, though by no means by a linear progression. We may discover things years before or years after we realize their meaning ... Malouf is not interested in the power of the human mind to create something new and startling, but in the sharp shock of *déjà vu*: those moments when we realize the meaning of something that was always lurking in the back of our minds, but only becomes conscious when we see it in its true place in the pattern of things ... In effect we have met a part of ourselves which we did not realize was there" (Leer 4).

Malouf himself has said that Australia "produces critical variants of Europe" (Davidson 267). He has continued to comment that the vast majority of Australians are still of European descent and they belong to European civilization. However, he believes that the old notion that Australia was merely an 'ugly' or 'clumsy' or 'second-hand' version of Europe is wrong. For him it is not merely Europe 'transported', but Europe 'translated'. Malouf writes from a background which was probably more unusual in his generation than it would be after the post-War mass immigration to Australia from Southern Europe and the Levant. His view of the world is much influenced by the geographic accident of his birth-place. There is, he claims, something 'accidental' about growing up in Australia, a constant awareness that one could have been 'somewhere else', a feeling of 'alternatives that got shut out'. Such awareness has led him to notice, more than most, the incongruities of the 'Europes' that had been 'translated' to Australia.

The Australia in which Malouf grew up consisted, as he saw it, in surreal recreations of Europe, Victorian copies of Renaissance palaces on mangrove strewn river banks. Far from being altogether a bad starting point this poses a writer with a mythic challenge: On the one hand to 'translate' European culture into a new environmental language, to escape the exile's prison He lives already in a piece of literature, which is in the process of being created, not 'invented', but 'translated'.

Critics have divergent views on Malouf. According to Don Randall "Malouf is both wilfully cosmopolitan and wilfully Australian, a writer of various worlds for whom Australian experience and identity represent an enduring but by no means exclusive concern"

(Randall 1). Yet Carolyn Bliss says that “Most central to Malouf’s work are the multivalent myths of Australian origin” (Bliss 724) and as a maker of national myths. He accepts the importance of shared lore in the production of a national consciousness. Again Amanda Nettelbeck finds a tendency in Malouf to co-ordinate with a particular transitional moment in Australia’s cultural climate when the tendency to look for a national definition was being replaced by the processes and effects of national myth making. According to her, Malouf espouses the “project of opening up the myths of our colonial past to reinterpretations” (Nettelbeck 28).

Again Philip Neilsen sees that in Malouf’s works ‘nationality’ or ‘Australian-ness’ are the most prominent among other preoccupations and also that his writings show a consistent concern “with the exploration of historical influences upon a present consciousness” (Neilsen 6). In his fictional works Malouf’s Australia takes shape as a nation composed of migrants and also that Malouf’s Australia is a nation on the move, created and then repeatedly transformed by the process of migration. Malouf also participates in the Romantic conception of the modern nation. Even in his early novels his main characters show the anxiety of the assimilative and appropriative disposition, so typical of the Australian population.

Malouf’s second novel, *An Imaginary Life*, was published in 1978, three years after his first novel *Johnno* was published in 1975. Peter Bishop in his essay has stated that while in his first novel *Johnno*, Malouf gives us the ‘flesh’ of Australian exile (Bishop 425) with descriptions of a restless search through Europe for connections and meaning, in *An Imaginary Life* he gives us the precise ‘bones’ of exile, of psychological descent, and of a form of spiritual reconciliation is the fictionalisation of the late life of the Latin poet Ovid, who spent his final years as a political exile in Tomis (contemporary Constanta). The fascination and mystery of the final years of Ovid’s life allowed Malouf to conceive his novel as a fiction which was based on possible events. But an important question is why does he select Ovid? Is there a particular reason, or is the choice arbitrary? Again does this exile to the edge of the world, away from civilization, supposed to relate to some Australian experience?

In an interview to Lee Spinks, David Malouf talked about the writing of *An Imaginary Life*. He has said that

... it struck me that Ovid was a perfect example of all those things and that he offered a really, really interesting thing, which was the idea that what his real exile was, was not from Rome but from the Latin language. What happens to the poet who is made of language when you take his language away from him?

... And without my knowing it all kinds of questions about Australia fed into that... I think I was writing what ought to have been my last book and that it is really a valedictory book in some ways. It also represents the furthest possible move away from the autobiographical material set in your home town which was my first book. The rest of my writing has been filling in the space between these two books. I would think of my work as not being necessarily chronological but spatial and that saves you from the terrible question of whether you are developing or declining! (Malouf, *An Imaginative Life*)

The most important thing that stand out in this interview is his reflection of what happens when a poet is removed from his language and made to live at the edge of the world, and all kinds of questions about Australia feeding into it raises certain questions in the reader's minds. It makes the readers wonder, very relevantly too, what happens to a group of civilized people (settlers in Australia) when they are placed in a place which is not only at the end of the world and where there is no established civilization?

An Imaginary Life presents further preoccupations linked with language and the taking possession of a territory through the act of naming. In its investigation of Ovid's exposure to a foreign language in a foreign landscape, it echoes Australia's first settlers' shortcomings in describing the new landscape. There is no doubt that though *An Imaginary Life* seems to talk of Ovid and his exile, in reality, through Ovid's experience; it also retells the Australian myth of exile. It tells of the experience of the Australian settlers, who are in a state of exile from their homeland England. It is a sense of being separated at the edge of the world, away from the centre of things. And in Ovid's ultimate acceptance of the harsh land and exiled existence, Malouf's novel evokes for the reader the need for the contemporary Australians to identify with and have a better sense of belonging to Australia, than just belonging to a second-hand Europe. All or most of the experiences that Ovid go through during his exile are very similar to the experiences gone through by the white settlers in Australia, be it emotional or geographical. It is in this sense that both Ovid and the immigrant Australians are the 'Others' in their homeland, and are also forced out to live with another set of 'Others' in a foreign land. Malouf's decision to set the book in a savage outpost of the Roman Empire has puzzled his readers and challenged his critics who struggled to find a plausible explanation for his choice. Many saw a parallel with Australia's early colonial years as a penal outpost. Others detected similarities between Malouf's depiction of the savage populations of Tomis and the Australian Aborigines. Malouf himself admitted some relation between Tomis and early settlements in Australia. However, *An Imaginary Life* does more

than portray a colonial society. In its setting, during one of the first and longest-lasting colonial empires, and for its philosophical reflections on the interconnection between landscape and the language used to describe it, it lays bare the foundation of colonialism.

Malouf's interviews reveal an affinity of thought between his conception of language and Benjamin's philosophy of language. According to Sabina Sestigiani (Sestigiani 490), like Benjamin, Malouf too is fascinated by biblical imageries when discussing language and its mythopoeic power. Benjamin's philosophy sees the problem of the immediacy of language in mythical terms, setting the scene of his exploration in the Garden of Eden, where the relationship between object, or the signified, and name or the signifier, is not arbitrary, but fundamentally guaranteed by God. Through an interpretation of Genesis 1–4 and 11, Benjamin points out that human cognitive ability can only manifest itself in language. According to theory, language is structured in three phases. At the first stage, at the time of divine creation, there is a perfect correspondence between the physical object and the divine word that created it. In the second stage, Adam is called upon to name nature and creatures. Adam's act of giving names is not random, but it mimics God's creative utterance of objects insofar as it is the sonic mould of speechless nature. As Benjamin wrote:

Adam's action of naming things is so far removed from play or caprice that it actually confirms the state of paradise as a state in which there is as yet no need to struggle with the communicative significance of words. (Benjamin 37)

At this stage human language denotes paradisiacal connotations, which is lost in the third stage – that of the Fall. After the Fall Language loses its correspondence with the objects it names and starts to become the medium of communication. A close reading of Malouf's comments on the conception of language allows us to witness his belief in a mythic connotation to language, which is similar to that of Benjamin. Both of them look for immediacy in language, and aspire to a language that achieves perfect correspondence between name and object. In Malouf's case he perceives the problem of immediacy in language from a colonial point of view. In the Australian context, the coloniser's shortage of words (after his 'fall' from Europe) when in contact with a new environment, such as Ovid experiences in *An Imaginary Life*, provokes Malouf's thoughts on language. As Malouf states in his interview with Paul Kavanagh, that language and the act of naming are central to his literature.

One of the most interesting things about Australia and about our problem in Australia, is that the language we use has not evolved out of a long cultural history ... What we had was a highly developed language and names for

everything, and a reality in front of us that did not fit... I have been fascinated, in all the books I have written, by that business of naming, of making the thing by speaking its name. But here we spoke the name, and what appeared was something entirely unexpected. (Malouf, *With Breath* 250)

The discrepancy between language and landscape, when it comes to colonial environment, makes the colonial speakers particularly aware of their language and the use or misuse of it. Malouf points out that there is a magical component to language: that is, language can restore the lost correspondence between words and phenomena. It is the task of the creative writer to unleash the magic and foster this restoration.

Coming back to the novel, Malouf's character, Ovid, lives on the edge. Malouf has taken the idea of the edge much further than anybody else; it is perhaps not too inappropriate a paradox of language to say that the edge is at the centre of his work. But he would probably never have developed it as such a central theme if he had not been born in Australia. In an interview, to Julie Copeland, he elaborated on the suggestion that *An Imaginary Life* could only have been written by an Australian by saying that the polarity between the centre and the edge (Rome and the hinterlands, Europe and Australia) "really only exists for those who are at the edge; the people at the centre just think of the centre" (Copeland 435).

For Ovid, the exiled Augustan poet in Malouf's novel, 'the problem of being' is a haunting one. Like so many of Malouf's other protagonists he wrestles with the ready assumptions of his world, seeking instead an opening of life's "alternative fates" (*Johnno* 165). In an obvious sense then, *An Imaginary Life* weaves itself around a theme which is at least implicitly apparent in all of Malouf's texts: that of exile. Yet Ovid's physical exile makes him aware of another kind of exile which is from a sense of belonging in the world. This is the exile, in other words from the Imaginary. In this light, a sense of exile is to some extent necessary: any notion of 'self' can only be constructed from the recognition of the division between oneself and everything that is other, yet this same recognition of division generates a feeling of loss, of exile from some prior harmonious state. In its theme of exile, this story of classical Rome is closely related to the Antipodean myth which colours so much Australian literature. The commonly portrayed dilemma of living at the edge rather than at the perceived centre is played out here by the author of the *Metamorphoses* in a way which destabilizes the whole notion of centrality. Yet at the same time, as he said in another interview, the edge is for him simply the human condition: "a situation in which we always find ourselves; we are never at the centre because we never know where the centre is". (Davidson 270).

That is perhaps why Ovid makes clear in *An Imaginary Life (AIL)*, addressing his presumably Old World readers:

Do you think of Italy—or whatever land it is you now inhabit—as a place given you by the gods, readymade in all its placid beauty? It is not. It is a created place....We have dreamed all these things in our deepest lives and they are ourselves. It is our self we are making out there, and when the landscape is complete we shall have become the gods who are intended to fill it. (Malouf, *AIL* 28)

Richard White, in his book *Inventing Australia (IA)*, has tried to explain what is meant to be Australian, by tracing the different concepts of the place and its inhabitants (both the indigenous population and the White settlers) - from William Dampier's earliest descriptions of the subcontinent as early as the second half of the 17th century to the corporate projections of the place in the 1980s (White, *IA* 24). Though the book does not necessarily invoke the concept of the 'real' Australia, yet it tries to locate the discussion on Australian National identity and Australian National Culture within a framework of historical context; and Malouf's novel literarily closely corresponds to the historical development; and it is through this historical development that the formation of a national culture of the country (Australia) is brought about.

White has discussed that the initial ideological formation about Australia was not very favourable to anyone, like the early Greeks, Arabs, Chinese and the Indians. Even as late as in 1817 this new land was to Reverend Sydney Smith "this remote part of the Earth" (White, *IA*. 9). Similarly Ovid's idea, in *An Imaginary Life* about his place of exile was again not very encouraging, when referring to it he says that "We are at the end of the earth" (Malouf, *AIL* 15).

White had said that it was the common 18th century world view of the Europeans that there were gaps in the great chain of beings that stretched from the highest life form to the lowest and the natural scientists believed that these gaps needed to be filled up by looking at new botanical and zoological discoveries. The European civilisation, in their arrogant belief that theirs was the highest possible form of human life, thought of looking at Australia for the missing links. Australia was chosen as the destination for this purpose as it was the farthest from the European civilization and by the then prevalent logic of the English rulers therefore must necessarily be in the least evolved state in terms of both flora and fauna.

This belief was further augmented by the reports of the earlier expeditions to the island, which finds its echoes in the reaction of Ovid to his place of exile in Malouf's novel.

Dampier after his two voyages to the new land in 1688 and 1699 was not very pleased with what he had seen and had had said “The inhabitants of this country are the miserablest people in the world... who have no Houses and Skin Garments, Sheep, Poultry or Fruits of the Earth” (White, *IA* 2). So too, Ovid’s first impression of the place of his exile was equally bleak. At the outset of his narrative, Ovid sees the world from the limited, regulated and systematic perspective, leading to a feeling of utterly inescapable oppression:

The river flats, the wormwood scrubs, the grasslands beyond, all lead to a sky that hangs close above us, heavy with snow, or is empty as far as the eye can see or the mind can imagine, cloudless, without wings.

But I am describing a state of mind, no place.

I am in exile here. (Malouf, *AIL* 15-16)

About the people, too, Ovid’s view is also not very different from Dampier as he says “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” (Malouf, *AIL* 16). But the common feeling that Ovid shares with the English colonizers is that Australian and its inhabitants are not only underdeveloped, but actually are a lesser breed of creatures as he goes on to say “I have...been cast out into what is indeed another order beings, those who have not yet climbed up through a hole in their head and become fully human, who have not yet entered what we call society and become Romans under the law” (Malouf, *AIL* 20).

He was not very different from Dr. Banks’ description of the Australian Aborigines as being “but one degree removed from the Brutes” (White, *IA* 8) and placing them just one step above the animal kingdom the chain of beings. In fact not only Dr. Banks, but also later visitors to New South Wales, even as late as in 1840s, reinforced his views. People like Augustus Earle, the artist, believed that the Australian aborigines were the last link in the chain of existence which united the man with the monkeys, and Peter Cunningham suggested that these aborigines should be placed right at the beginning of civilization, to act as the connecting link between the monkey tribe and man. Yet this place had its other uses too. Most prominent among them was as a dumping ground for the unwanted elements of the British society. Also according to the then British logic that the human race had reached its evolutionary best, it also needed to be seen from a scientific point of view if this race of people could survive in a place which was supposedly the worst in the world. If the transported people could not survive it could be blamed on the absurdities of the land and would serve as just punishment for the criminal types. On the other hand if these people did survive then it would add another feather to the cap of the glorified English Hat, that men

bred on their land was so strong that they could survive anywhere on the Earth. Therefore the transportation of the convicts was a win-win situation for the English and Australia became both a place for dumping the wanted and at the same time working an experiment. As it can be imagined things were really very difficult for the settlers to the new land. For them it was like, in the words of White, 'hell on earth'.

After convict transportation became a reality in England, a new image of Australia was created in the mind of the British working class which was summed up by the image of the Botany Bay. The image of Botany Bay was used along with Hell and the gallows to frighten little children into being good citizens. Botany Bay always stressed on the severity of the punishment without an inkling of even an attempt to reform. In fact George Loveless and Joseph Holt, (White, *IA* 17) declared that it was more merciful to have the convicts put to death in England rather than expose him to the penal settlement. The English also saw an aptness about the decision of dumping of the people who had gone against the established social order was a place of contrarities on the advice of Dr. Banks. Very similarly Ovid too is a 'convict' who has been 'transported' by "the working of the highest known authority" (Malouf, *AIL* 20) to a place which is not only not Rome, but was always under the fear of the attack of the savages. So Ovid's Rome is, to the settlers of the new land, England and Ovid's Tomis, their Australia.

In A.D. 8, Ovid was summoned to leave Rome and settle on the edge of the empire, in the wilderness. He was aged fifty and had enjoyed more than thirty years of acclaimed fame as poet and writer. Augustus himself is said to have ordered Ovid's exile, which was never discussed in the Senate or a court. The reasons why the historical Ovid was banished and why the emperor decided to take action in person are not clear. In fact Malouf himself acknowledges that little is known about Ovid's life and even lesser is known about the reason for his exile. But interestingly Malouf says that this dearth of facts was useful for his writing the fiction. His primary decision for writing the novel on the imaginary life for Ovid is based on the understanding that history is synecdoche and that our sense of the past is partial and full of gaps. It is as Russel West said "More compelling, however, than this recognition- which is not extraordinary, after all- is the writer's response to it, his clear sense that the facts of history, whether meagre or plentiful, require a work of synthetic imagination." (West 80)

This is in keeping with Don Randall's views (Randall 42) that to make history one must imagine it, bridge its gaps and remake as whole all its fragments, and in Malouf's case it is potentially enabling. It relieves him from the burden of a constituted past. Therefore our only integrated history of Ovid's exile is Malouf's fictional one, even if it is not truly

historical in either conception or execution, and even though it is more of a story than history. Malouf understands his writings as a subversion which locates itself below the authorised meanings. Similarly Malouf's Ovid too deliberately subverts established and structured orders. Therefore even the reason and logic for the casting off of people like the fictional Ovid from the Roman Emperor and the convicts from the British Government were not too different. It is to be remembered here that just at the time of such expulsions, both these nations viz. Rome and England had reached the zenith of human civilization which, as they thought, was impossible to surpass. White comments:

The educated English gentleman was quite certain that mankind has reached its highest peak in the educated English gentleman...The arrival of the railway age has confirmed his belief that England and progress was inseparable. (White *IA*. 66)

Ovid also ironically describes the state of Rome that existed before his exile as something unusually similar:

After a century of war in which whole families had destroyed each other in the name of patriotism, we were at peace... an age of soft indulgent muddle, of sophisticated impudence. (Malouf, *AIL* 25)

It then became a necessity for the rulers to cast off the people, these people, who posed a threat to the well established culture of the civilization of their respective countries. Both Ovid and the convicts were posing a threat to it, by inverting the established 'social and cultural practices'. The Roman Emperor has created an age, as Ovid says: "The Emperor has created his age. It is called Augustan" (Malouf, *AIL* 26). Ovid has gone against the established order of Rome when he confesses "I too have created an age. It is coterminous with his, and has its existence in the love of his subjects. It is gay, anarchic, ephemeral and it is fun" (Malouf, *AIL* 26). Therefore even if Ovid was not a political threat to the Emperor or his rule, he was challenging the Emperor's rule by subverting the national cultural of the kingdom. Ovid definitely was trying to "discovering for my generation a new national style" (Malouf, *AIL* 26). He was able to effectively challenge his Emperor and gave him sleepless nights with his writings.

Therefore the Roman Emperor had to exile Ovid to preserve the sanctity of his established national culture. The preservation of the sanctity of the national culture was also one of the primary reasons to exile the convicts from England; otherwise they would contaminate and could possibly even invert the established social practices. Ovid too, deserved to be exiled, for though he had not politically challenged Emperor Augustus' rule,

he has definitely tried to subvert it culturally. His writing was not only subversive but also an attempt to remake the world. So he needed to be thrown out before causing more damage. But for Ovid being exiled was not the only punishment; it was only the beginning. In his case, his punishment becomes a little more psychologically demanding. As Don Randall says “The word ‘desolateness’, however, orders Ovid’s earliest reflections upon his place of exile, recalling innumerable colonial renderings of Australia as the most extreme form of *terra nullius*, as a land intransigently strange, empty of and even hostile to productive human intentions. But crucially the cosmopolitan Roman poet feels he is in exile more from a culture than from a homeland” (Randall 57).

As a poet he is exiled to a place where “no one speaks my [Ovid’s] tongue, and for nearly a year now I have heard no word of my own language; I am rendered dumb” (Malouf, *AIL* 17). Ovid was feeling just like the immigrants to Australia, who were settled amongst people who they thought of as “pests, sometimes comic, sometimes vicious, but always standing in the way of a civilized Australian community” (White *IA* 15). Ovid here takes the shape of the settler-exile although he himself opposed imperial forms of culture while he was living in the heart of the Roman Empire. Here in his exile he finds himself as a displaced piece of empire. He understands that to survive meaningfully he must half discover and half create a different version of his self. It is here in Tomis, during his exile, that Ovid’s reflections on language start to take shape. Ovid’s considerations are split into two different moments of awareness: his appreciation of the barbaric Gaelic language after his initial rejection, and his apprenticeship of the silent language shared with the boy or child in the steppes beyond the River Ister. Thrust into a time where civilization was just slowly emerging in Tomis, Ovid feels the pangs of a nonsensical restart. One of the most cultured and refined Romans is now compelled to view the dirty and degrading phase of the dawn of civilization. Ovid’s exile is “a place of utter desolation” (Malouf, *AIL* 30), where one is forced to see “the unmade earth” (Malouf, *AIL*.30). Ovid’s early incapacity to adapt to the new environment and his scornful refusal of Tomis ties in with his deprivation of language. The landscape lying before Ovid’s eyes represents “a vast page whose tongue” he is “unable to decipher” and “whose message” he is “unable to interpret” (Malouf, *AIL* 17). He is in the presence of a language he does not understand: “I listened 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 [...] I listen, and what moves me most is that I recognize the tunes” (Malouf, *AIL* 21). Ovid is moved by the sound of the barbaric language because he

perceives that it has a meaning, even though it is unknown to him. He intuits the sense and is moved by the original human instinct for language.

Life in the Roman colony compels Ovid to reflect on the modality of naming and the fissure between name and object. The episode of the unknown seed tasted in Tomis epitomises Ovid's painful realisation of the separation between name and object. Malouf's Ovid moves from a state of puzzlement (when first in contact with the new landscape and language of Tomis) to a feeling of renovation and final acceptance. Ovid's change takes place when he abandons the masterful but ironically detached attitude towards life and language that he had acquired in Rome. In Tomis, the poet is challenged and forced to question his life and poetry. Recognising the pain of the separateness of name and thing, he is struck by the 'amorous experience' of the will to knowledge. Ovid is becoming acquainted with the Gaelic language and is, at the same time, fascinated by it: "I now understand these people's speech almost as well as my own, and find it oddly moving" (Malouf, *AIL* 65). Ovid believes he could even compose poetry in Gaelic. He certainly did, as he stated in his *Epistulae ex Ponto*. But here, Malouf's fiction departs from Ovid's biographical notes in *Tristia* and *Epistulae ex Ponto*. Having broken the period of mourning for the loss of Latin, Ovid is ready to embrace his new linguistic awareness.

Just as between 1830 and 1850, there came a gradual shift in the view about Australia from a convict country to a more complimentary one, Ovid comes to a similar conclusion in regards to the language of Tomis. In Tomis Ovid has changed his perception about language, but only to become aware of yet another dimension: a language spoken in silence. The sudden discovery of colour by Ovid during his exile in the otherwise blanched landscape makes him change his concept of his own state of existence. Slowly as Australia started to shed its image of convicts and kangaroos, and was starting to be depicted as the land of the emigrants and hope, the discovery of the 'little tuft of scarlet' coupled with the recalling of the name of the poppy seed gave hope of a future to Ovid. He says "Poppy, you have saved me, you have rediscovered the earth for me. I know how to work the spring" (Malouf, *AIL* 32).

He starts to believe and understand if the world has to change around him, he must himself change first: "Now I too must be transformed" (Malouf, *AIL* 33). Then Ovid chooses to enter into a relation with these people. He tries to comprehend these other people. He learns their language (he utters his first word upon waking from a dream) and enters into a range of social activities – going as far as to visit the funerary grounds with the village men on horseback, and issuing their ritual cry. Ovid's protector Ryzak also warms to him and the

relationship changes from one of apparent duty to one of reciprocity. Ovid's own sense of humanity comes into new focus as a result of this relation with the 'Others'. However, his world still remains defined by profound externality: his sense of isolation is, initially, "as if belonged to another species" (Malouf, *AIL* 17).

The introduction of the wild child (another outsider) into these human relations brings about a fundamental change and challenge. The animal like child, whom they capture in one of their hunting expeditions, embodies and performs the paradox of humanity and animality. Here begins the real metamorphosis of Ovid, who is countered against the child, representative of the Imaginary state of unity with the world. As the Child under Ovid's tutelage progresses towards the ordered life of the human society, he displays increasingly more "restlessness of mind, of body, that is the stirring in him of renewed life" (Malouf, *AIL* 80) and necessary for this transformation is Ovid's decision to teach him language. Ovid decides so because he realizes that "Speech is essential...that will reveal to him of what kind he is" (Malouf, *AIL* 92). But Ovid does not teach him Latin, but the speech of the Gaelic. The Gaelic tongue has sharpened Ovid's sensibility to language. After having mastered the barbaric idiom, Ovid learns to communicate in a mute language with the Child. This communication represents a step further towards Ovid's new linguistic awareness. The Child's language is a silent speech that allows an uninterrupted flow of communication connecting the subject with the object of his/her speech, and each name with its corresponding item. Ovid first projects himself onto the Child: he teaches the Child to use language and to develop self-consciousness in language. He is receptive to the growing consciousness in the Child and takes pride in his small victories. Amongst the manual skills that the Child begins to exhibit, the most surprising even to Ovid is his new capacity to smile, "Strangest of all, he has learned to smile" (Malouf, *AIL* 93). Ovid distinguishes this action from 'mere' laughter: it displays an ability to communicate with one's self. The Child has become an 'I' and knows what it is to be an interlocutor or an 'Other'. But this 'I-Other' relation reaches a point where Ovid knows he is required to alter it if he is to understand the Child, who has "somehow tumbled into being" (Malouf, *AIL* 50). For the Child to become an 'Other' in his own right, the relation needs to become a truly reciprocal one. The Child teaches Ovid how to become immersed in the world around Tomis and teaches him how to interpret natural phenomena. Ovid becomes receptive to this world by changing his relation to the Child, conceiving of him as a true subjectivity rather than as an object. In fact, the Child is the thing he speaks of. His communication, which is mainly mute or a replica of nature sounds, translates thought and voice, intention and actuality. The Child's

consciousness is completely outside him and unites him with nature and animals. For example, in imitating a bird, “he is being the bird. He is allowing it to speak out of him” (Malouf, *AIL* 92). Ovid reflects that the Child must think, and, in relating to atmospheric events, “I am raining, I am thundering” (Malouf, *AIL*. 96). However, the process of learning the silent language of the Child, and thus unlearning the sophistication of his culture, does not come easily to Ovid: “Knowing that it is the sky, that the stars have names and a history, prevents my being the sky. It rains and I say, it rains. It thunders and I say, it thunders” (Malouf, *AIL* 96). He understands the relation to the “Other” as the primary responsibility and as a basic condition for his own humanity: Ovid begins to understand the relational “language of the spiders” (Malouf, *AIL* 97) that has eluded him in the early days of his exile. The legacy – that is knowledge – left by his previous life acts as a barrier against the phenomenon. The fissure between name and thing is maintained in knowledge. Only with great effort is Ovid putting it aside to learn his new consciousness in harmony with the practice of the savage Child: “Slowly I begin the final metamorphosis. I must drive out my old self and let the universe in. The creatures will come creeping back [...] Beaked, furred, fanged, tusked, clawed, hooved, snouted, they will settle in us” (Malouf, *AIL* 96). Ovid will train to place his consciousness outside him and become part of the natural surroundings. His process of identification with nature consolidates his new sense of unity with the universe. So Ovid comments: “We shall begin to take back into ourselves the lakes, the rivers, the oceans of the earth, its plains, its forested crags with their leaps of snow. Then little by little the firmament. The spirit of things will migrate back into us. We shall be whole” (96). In *An Imaginary Life*, Ovid eventually becomes aware that what at first seemed to be the source of desperation in Tomis in fact turns out to be a source of riches and consolation. At the outset, Ovid’s solitude and sense of estrangement from the human lot had enabled him to regard the animal kingdom and its mysterious form of silent communication as a fanciful and final desperate resource to share his thoughts and ideas with someone or something. This plunges him into the bleakest dismay. In the light of his new understanding, Ovid cherishes this perspective and comes to realise that this form of communication is the only possible and worthwhile means of speech.

The new language with which Ovid has become acquainted through the Child has painstakingly taught him a new way of experiencing the world. This language is experienced as ‘true’ as it is able to unveil the ‘secrets of the universe’. These passages of *An Imaginary Life* are reminiscent of the biblical story of the Creation, it shows that the world is created through language, and each physical thing is completely identical to its corresponding divine word of creation. Adam named things, creating the original human language, paradisiacal

insofar as it is the exact translation of the mute language of things. It is not creative like God's language, but it is certainly not arbitrary either: it is the 'true language'. The 'earlier and more universal language' that Ovid speaks about is the point from which all languages stemmed. Ovid has the intuition that the Child's language must be the greater, original language. Ovid's silent language is the attempt to reproduce this paradisiacal linguistic condition. Even though Adam's heavenly original language is sonorous, Ovid can only replicate its immediacy by not speaking, as language inherently carries within itself that fracture between thing and name. In other words, Ovid's reflection suggests that just as the original and lost language was instrumental to Creation, a pure new language inspired by it must retain some sort of interpretative key to the foundation of humanity. Ovid's speech in silence is the attempt to regain the gift of the original language, which is the immediacy of thought and action. The impossibility of such co-existence in language seems doomed to reduce the subject to silence. The utterance of each silent syllable of which the new language is made, is, Ovid says, 'a gesture of reconciliation' (Malouf, *AIL* 98); "The language I am speaking of now, that I am almost speaking, is a language whose every syllable is a gesture of reconciliation. We knew that language once. I spoke it in my childhood. We must discover it again" (Malouf, *AIL* 98). The gesture of reconciliation that Malouf mentions in the passage can be seen as a kind of integration of many tongues into one true language, the dissolution of the distance between the name and the object, the restoration of the creative word which does not mean anything because it is an expression of pure potentiality of sense.

In Ovid's intuition of the universal language, there is a hint to silence and the potency of a silent type of communication. Intrinsic to this dumb conversation is an attempt to avoid the conflict between name and phenomenon. Therefore, the gesture of reconciliation that moved Ovid so deeply is that moment preceding sonorous language that embraces thought and actuality. But far from being a disempowering silence, Ovid's communication with the Child is marked by a note of superior affirmation and perfection: it is a dialogue "further from speech even...a kind of conversation that needs no tongue, a perfect interchange of perceptions, moods, questions, answers" (Malouf, *AIL* 145). It is thus a language in which the divisions between name and thing, speaker and object, are irrelevant. For its attainment of immediacy, it evokes the perfection of the universal Adamitic language of Creation. In other words, it achieves the perfect correspondence of name and object, thought and action. Ovid articulates his final considerations thus:

Thoughts melt out of one mind into another [...] with none of the structures of formal speech. It is like talking to oneself. Like one side of the head passing

thoughts across to the other, and knowing in a kind of foreglow, before the thought arrives, what it will be, having already received the shadow of its illumination. (Malouf, *AIL* 145)

The irony of the transformation of the eloquent bard of Rome into the silent barbarian who chooses to communicate outside the structures of formal speech with the savage Child in the steppes outside Tomis is only deceptively odd. It is this awareness that makes Ovid take care of and take responsibility for the Child during the illness. Significantly, the only other figure to care for the Child during his illness is the mother of Ryzak's grandson, an exogamous outsider, who hails from another village. The relation of self and 'Other' here is not based on the priority of being, on the self as the existential basis from which to encounter an 'Other'. Instead the foundational human act is in taking responsibility for an 'Other'. It is in this relation with the 'Other' that finally Ovid is able to understand his 'I' and come out of his exile. He never returns to Rome, but in his relation to and responsibility for the 'Other' he is finally able to declare "I belong to this place now" (Malouf, *AIL* 95).

In *An Imaginary Life*, Malouf moves away from the self-indulgent sadness of Ovid in his two surviving works during his exile years, *Tristia* and *Epistulae ex Ponto*. Here Malouf offers a new Ovid, one who tackles and eventually masters a foreign landscape and a new language. Malouf's own reflection on *An Imaginary Life* has expanded and helped unpack the theoretical apparatus behind his novel, which is replete with biblical and mythical images. It is perhaps Malouf's way of showing that for the settlers living in Australia, the only way to realize their own selves in relation to this new land is not by denying contact or interaction with the Aborigines, but in relation to them. They must try to accept the land as a whole with all its oddities, including the native people of the land, no matter how threatening they might appear to their culture. Assimilation is perhaps the way that Malouf is trying to show in contrast to exclusivity that had been at the basis of the conscious building White Australian policy, where even the Chinese and other Asians were seen as outsiders. Malouf is perhaps trying to show that, like Ovid, these people too, who cannot or do not want to return to Europe, must fully belong to the new land and not stay there either as outsiders or colonisers. If they have to create a Nation it can only be through building a shared national culture, and for this to really happen there should be sharing and intermingling of all the culture available in the land and not imposing one culture over the other or others and suppressing them.

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