

Beyond Language:
David Malouf's "An Imaginary Life"

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DAVID MALOUF, born in Brisbane of English and Lebanese parents, has lived much of his life outside Australia. He rejects descriptions of him as an expatriate writer, but it could be shown that exile is a major theme of all his published novels.¹ The second of these, *An Imaginary Life* (1978),² has as its protagonist a penal exile, Ovid, the Augustan poet and satirist.

In A.D. 8, Publius Ovidius Naso, author of the *Metamorphoses* and the *Ars Amatoria*, was relegated, to use the official term, to Tomis on the Black Sea at the edge of the Roman world. The true nature of his offence against the emperor has never been established with any confidence by historians; his own writings on the subject are, it seems, as inconclusive as any other evidence.³ His *Tristia*⁴ gives some account of his experiences among the "savage" Getae of the Danube delta, but the details of his later life and of his death⁵ are sufficiently obscure to leave Malouf at perfect liberty to write, as he states in an afterword, "neither historical novel nor biography, but a fiction with its roots in possible event" (153). That the text itself is an imaginary life of Ovid is, however, the least significant reading of the title, as will be seen. Malouf further states in the afterword: "My purpose was 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). But we notice that the "reality" of Ovid's own metamorphoses resides in Malouf's fiction.

An Imaginary Life can be described as an allegory, and certainly opens possibilities for allegorical reading. Its fabulous nature resists attempts to abstract the story, and certainly a plot summary conveys little of the meaning of the work. Ovid is exiled

from the metropolis to the edge of the known world and held prisoner by Ryzak, headman of the village. With the help of the Getae, Ovid captures a wild Child. In turn, the Child and the headman's son, Lullo, barely survive a fever, and Ryzak himself dies of a different disease (evidently rabies). Ryzak's family superstitiously attribute Lullo's fever and Ryzak's death to the Child, and Ovid and the Child are forced to escape across the frozen Danube, beyond the edge of the known world, into the steppes where, we are given to believe, Ovid dies.

As will be shown, on one reading Ovid is progressively reconciled to exile from Rome and to his past, to the point where his exile becomes the opportunity for him to transcend his condition. As we examine this reading we find, beyond it, that long before his enforced relegation from the metropolis to the edge, he has been exiled from nature and from harmony with the universe. This earlier exile began when, "more than other men" (83), he put childhood behind him and became the sophisticated, sceptical ironist of Augustan Rome, and it is such an exile that he transcends. Correspondingly, the text indicates a change from irony, the trope of scepticism and division, to synecdoche, the trope of belief and unity. Imagination is the force governing the metamorphosis from ironic division to synecdochic wholeness. Moreover, language has a central role both in the experience of exile and in the attainment of transcendence. We are then led to consider whether the harmony projected is to be achieved by the individual, or whether the harmonizing vision embraces a social or indeed a biological macrocosm.

The narrative takes the form of a letter by Ovid, written in five parts, to an unknown reader in the future. At the beginning of the account he is recognizably Ovid, poet of the *Tristia*, describing the desolate landscape of Tomis, "a state of mind, no place" (16), and bemoaning his exile from the culture of Rome, from the cultivated pastoral beauty of Italy and, most particularly, from the Latin language.⁸ After living for a year with Ryzak and his family, this man of letters has picked up no word of the Getic tongue, although he is pleased when someone understands his "grunts and signs" (17). Ovid alternately regrets the offence for which he has been so harshly punished and recalls with some

pleasure the subversive impieties for which, according to this account, he has been banished.

His faith and his desire to change are awoken when he sees a single scarlet poppy blowing in the wild corn. Later, riding with the Getae among the funerary mounds of their dead, and joining their shouts that are intended to "scare away evil spirits" (44), he finds that

Somewhere, in all that barbaric shouting up there on the plateau, I had let them back into my life, the brother thirty years dead, the father buried only a year before my disgrace. It was for them I was shouting . . . and I was finished with the dead. Free, at last, to prepare a death of my own. (46-47)

Thus the first step in the "changes" he undergoes is an inner reconciliation with his dead father and brother. And soon after, when they glimpse the wild Child in the birchwoods, Ovid recalls the imaginary companion of his childhood, a wild child, a wolf boy perhaps, with whom he spoke "in a tongue of our own devising" (9) until Ovid reached puberty and "the child left and did not reappear" (11).

Over the seasons that follow, Ovid learns the language of the Getae, joins in the defence of the village against an attack by the Dacians,⁷ drills with the company of guards, and finds that he has "stopped mooning about and regretting [his] fate" (63). More profoundly, he asserts: "I have stopped finding fault with creation and have learned to accept it," recognizing within himself "the real metamorphosis" (64).

When the Child is captured, Ovid watches over him and is moved to see him "make the discoveries that will lead him, after so many years of exile, into his inheritance, into the society of his own kind" (81). But, watching over him, Ovid vividly recalls the childhood that he himself had put very far behind him: "I have found my way back to that country I will never see again and am at home. I have admitted at last its claims upon me. I know where I was born" (89). And as he begins to teach the Child to speak, choosing, not Latin, but Getic, and as the Child tries to teach him the language of birds and insects, Ovid reaches the decision that he will not, if recalled, return to Rome:

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, the one I have spent my whole existence trying to escape. We barely recognize the announcement when it comes, declaring: Here is the life you have tried to throw away. Here is your second chance. . . . Now you will become at last the one you intended to be. (94)

Here we seem to come to the core of the text. Ovid recognizes that in the development of their relationships with the world he and the Child are moving in opposite directions, though on the same path:

He has not yet captured his individual soul out of the universe about him. His self is outside him, its energy distributed among the beasts and birds whose life he shares . . . whose existence he can be at home in. . . . He has no notion of the otherness of things. . . . I know now that this is the way. Slowly I begin the final metamorphosis. I must drive out my old self and let the universe in. The creatures will come creeping back . . . re-entering their old lives deep in our consciousness. . . . Then we shall begin to take back into ourselves the lakes, the rivers, the oceans of the earth, its plains, its forested crags. . . . The spirit of things will migrate back into us. We shall be whole. (95-96)⁸

This is followed closely in the text by the statement: "When I think of my exile now it is from the universe" (98). And logically we must conclude that Ovid's exile began, not when he was banished to Tomis, but rather when he relinquished his childhood innocence and his family ties to become the urbane ironist of the metropolis. The state of exile is from harmony and wholeness: from unity with the entire natural world.

For the "final metamorphosis" (96) he struggles to learn from the Child how to imitate a bird's cry by imagining himself into its life, by becoming, in imagination, the bird itself. This is the concrete expression of his earlier recognition:

But we are free after all. We are bound not by the laws of our nature but by the ways we can imagine ourselves breaking out of those laws without doing violence to our essential being. We are free to transcend ourselves. If we have the imagination for it. (67)

This, then, is the imaginary life. It is the process of imagining the self we are to become, and through the act of imagination

becoming free of the laws that appear to govern our being. That is, the poet's exile was his alienation from unity with the world, and his bondage was his failure to recognize his freedom, through the power of the imagination, to undo that alienation and achieve harmony. We may treat this conclusion as a point of departure for an exploration of the role of language — as subject of the text and as metaphor within it.⁹

The choice of Ovid as protagonist of this account of “changes” is already emblematic, both by virtue of the fact that he is author of the *Metamorphoses* and, even more, by the fact that the Ovid of history and the Ovid delineated at the beginning of the text is the witty, sceptical, subversive ironist of the Augustan age. Irony, we recall, beside its accepted definition as expressing meaning by language of opposite tendency, and its root meaning as pretended ignorance, can be thought of as the trope that subverts the other tropes, that recognizes the arbitrariness of the connection between signifier and signified, between word and object, and denies the intimacy of interior connection asserted by symbolism, by synecdoche.¹⁰ It is, as suggested earlier, the trope of scepticism, while synecdoche is the trope of belief. According to this account, Ovid is “expelled from the confines of [his] Latin tongue” (26) for what he calls “my irony, my little impieties” (27). These little impieties amount to the ironic declaration that “the gods are not quite dead . . . since their names are on all our lips. . . . But they too have ceased to be serious. They have entered the age of play. . . . Since there are no rules, we must make some. Let them be absurd!” (25-26). Thus he is expelled from the boundaries of his language for the ironic, sceptical deployment of that language in the subversion of piety and the “solemn, orderly, monumental, dull” (26) Augustan age.

The first step in his “changes” comes, as already noted, with his seeing a scarlet poppy:

Poppy. The magic of saying the word made my skin prickle, the saying almost a greater miracle than the seeing. . . . Suddenly my head is full of flowers of all kinds. They sprout out of the earth in deep fields and roll away in my skull. I have only to name the flowers, without even knowing what they look like . . . and they burst into bud . . . opening out of the secret syllables as I place

them like seeds upon my tongue and give them breath. . . . I am Flora. I am Persephone. I have the trick of it now. All it needs is belief. (32)

This is a metamorphosis indeed: from a sceptical ironist to a poet who asserts that by belief the word can create the thing.

But the sceptical, ironic turn of phrase in "I have the trick of it now," and in the immediately following "*All it needs is belief*" (32), points to the fact that this is only an early foreshadowing of the transcendent wholeness that the poet seeks. (My emphasis.) When he learns the language of the Getae, he can admire the headman's fabulous stories: "They seem absolutely true yet they explain nothing" (58). Explanation, it seems, is no longer the point. (And the critic may take this as a comment on the text itself, warning against reading it for explanations.) Getic, we are told,

isn't at all like our Roman tongue, whose endings are designed to express difference, the smallest nuances of thought and feeling. This language is equally expressive, but what it presents is the raw life and unity of things. . . . Seeing the world through this other tongue I see it differently. It is a different world. Somehow it seems closer to the first principle of creation. (65)

Thus Latin, with its declensions and conjugations, is the language of distinctions and divisions and of explanation, while Getic, we are to imagine, is a language of unity and wholeness and of raw truth without explanation. Moving on their opposite but convergent courses, Ovid tries to teach the Child Getic, not Latin, while the Child tries to teach Ovid the language of birds and insects. And recognizing that his exile is from the universe, Ovid states:

The true language, I know now, is that speech in silence in which we first communicated, the Child and I, . . . a language my tongue almost rediscovers and which would, I believe, reveal the secrets of the universe to me . . . a language whose every syllable is a gesture of reconciliation. We knew that language once. I spoke it in my childhood. (97-98)

So his loss of innocence and oneness with nature is described as the loss of a language which he desires to recover.

Finally, as the Child leads him over the steppes, beyond the limits of all speech, their "wandering . . . together . . . is a kind

of conversation that needs no tongue, a perfect interchange . . . as thoughts melt out of one mind into another . . . with none of the structures of formal speech" (145). And at this point, where speech ceases, the words of the text describe the poet as becoming the landscape, becoming the wholeness and unity of nature, so that there is no longer a distinction between word and object, symbol and symbolized, because (the words of the text state) there are no words, and there is no distinction between the knower and the known. Recognizing the deconstructionist irony that offers itself — that Ovid's wordless state is described in words — we note the progressive changes in his language: from Latin, to Getic, to the language of birds and animals, to a wordless being-in-the-world and being the world itself. This metamorphosis symbolizes an undoing of the irony and scepticism that asserts difference, division and disconnectedness between signifier and signified, between subject and object, in favour of the synecdochic belief that asserts harmonizing unity, wholeness and the intimacy of symbolic connection itself.¹¹

Having found this much explanation of, and in, a text that perhaps should be taken to explain nothing, we naturally ask whether it is an allegory of an individual life only, and perhaps specifically of the poet and his or her relation to words and the world, or is it also an allegory about society? Reference to the larger society is conveyed in the narrator's repeated use of "we": for example, "we are free after all" (67). In context, Ovid is declaring that the little garden of wild flowers he has created will bring about changes in Getic society. This society is represented as solemnly utilitarian, as having no place for ornament or play. Ovid comments: "My little flowerpots are as subversive here as my poems were in Rome. They are the beginning, the first of the changes" (67). These changes are on a larger scale and over a longer term than Ovid's individual life, and correspond, if we take the meaning fairly literally, to a notion of biological and social evolution in terms of final causes:

We have some power in us that knows its own ends. It is that that drives us on to what we must finally become. . . . This is the real metamorphosis. . . . We have only to find the spring and re-

lease it. Such changes are slow beyond imagination. They take generations. (64)

And indeed the work contains an affirmative vision of humankind as shaper of itself and of the landscape. There is a gently harmonizing pastoral vision in the following:

you think of Italy . . . as a place given you by the gods, ready-made in all its placid beauty? It is not. It is a created place . . . ; if the gods are there, it is because you have . . . dreamed them into the landscape. . . . But 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 move in. 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. (28)

In a parallel, yet contrasting, statement Hegel suggests:

Man realizes himself through practical activity . . . to recognize himself in things that are at first simply presented to him as externally existent . . . impressing on them the stamp of his own inner nature, so that he rediscovers his own character in them . . . in order that he may . . . break down the stubborn indifference of the external world to himself, and may enjoy in the countenance of nature only an outward embodiment of himself.¹²

In Hegel's account, humankind imposes itself on an alien world, constructing, perhaps to the destruction of nature, to the point where we feel at home in a built environment that reflects ourselves. In the account in our text, the vision is of harmonious reciprocity, with humanity shaping nature and nature shaping humanity. And surely this is an allegory of the world not as it is, but as it might be, offering an ideal vision of the growth of the individual and the growth of society.

At this point we can raise the question whether this novel is about Australia. We have Malouf's own assent to such an assertion, together with a remark that warns us against a simple reading of Tomis as Brisbane, as the colonial edge in relation to the European centre.¹³ I have elsewhere examined exile-in-bondage, as literal occurrence and as metaphor, in a number of Australian novels.¹⁴ For *An Imaginary Life*, the main significance of the

Australian connection, if we choose to make it, would be to particularize the ideal versus the reality of humanity acting on nature, to the case of a new beginning — the European settlement in Australia. Malouf's comments elsewhere on the power human beings possess to misuse and exploit nature¹⁵ confirm a reading of this work as a serene allegory of the relationship between humanity and nature as it might be ideally, in Australia or elsewhere.

For both the individual and society, Malouf's harmonizing vision answers the existentialist account of being-in-the-world as exile into an alien universe, thus projecting a reversal of exile and alienation as the human condition. In so doing, this twentieth-century allegory, written in the persona of a first-century poet, satirist and fabulist, chooses romanticism over rational classicism, and affirmative synecdoche over questioning irony.

NOTES

- ¹ Jim Davidson, "Interview with David Malouf," *Meanjin* 39.3 (1980): 323-34.
- ² David Malouf, *An Imaginary Life* (1978; Sydney: Pan, 1980). All subsequent page references are to this edition.
- ³ John C. Thibault, in *The Mystery of Ovid's Exile* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1964), draws the scholarly conclusion that of "the numerous hypotheses on this subject . . . a detailed analysis reveals that some of them are preposterous, others are plausible at first sight, while a few show great ingenuity; yet none is completely satisfactory, since all fail on several points to satisfy the conditions imposed by Ovid's own testimony, on which, in the circumstances, we must entirely depend" (121).
Since in the *Tristia*, trans. L. R. Lind (Athens: U of Georgia P, 1975), Ovid blames the nine muses as the "principal cause of the exile" and states, specifically, "So do I suffer with justice because of my *Arts of Love*" (76), Malouf has factual justification, if any is needed, for attributing Ovid's relegation to his irony and impieties.
- ⁴ See Lind, n. 3.
- ⁵ In the afterword (154), Malouf comments on the fact that the date, cause and place of Ovid's death remain unknown.
- ⁶ The *Tristia*, pt. 11, l. 9, states: "There is no exchange of language between me and this wild people."
- ⁷ The description (on 54-56 of the text) of the attack by Dacian horsemen using poisoned arrows, closely follows pt. 10 of the *Tristia*. Also, pt. 12, ll. 57-58, state: "I seem to myself to have lost the power to speak my own language. / For I have learned how to speak Sarmatian and Getic instead."
- ⁸ Peter Pierce, in "Exploring the Territory: Some Recent Australian Novels," *Meanjin* 38.2 (1979): 225-33, suggests that "'letting the universe in' has an alternative life-style taint" (233). It may be true that at this

point the work comes close to cliché. See also Peter Pierce, "David Malouf's Fiction," *Meanjin* 41.4 (1982): 526-34, for the view that in his fiction Malouf has expounded "his intuition of the poignant fallacy of any belief that independence from time, place or other people is possible, together with his yearning that this might not be so." Peter Bishop, "David Malouf and the Language of Exile," *Australian Literary Studies* 10.4 (1982): 419-28, tests the work against a formula for the Jungian hero journey, and reads it as a failed quest.

- 9 This observation is consistent with the reading of the work given by Laurie Hergenhan, in "Discoveries and Transformations: Aspects of David Malouf's Work," *Australian Literary Studies* 11.3 (1984): 328-41, and with his conclusion that the novel is "basically a symbolic fable of the inherent power to transcend ourselves, if we have the imagination for it" (335).
- 10 Hans Kellner, "The Inflatable Trope as Narrative Theory: Structure or Allegory?" *Diacritics* 11.2 (1981): 14-28.
- 11 Following Sartre, and contrary to Coleridge and Heidegger, Paul de Man rejects the attempt to recover through poetic discourse a union between word and thing and between subject and object. See Paul de Man, "Intentional Structure of the Romantic Image," in *Romanticism and Consciousness*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Norton, 1970) 67-70; see also his argument in "The Rhetoric of Temporality," in *Interpretation: Theory and Practice*, ed. C. S. Singleton (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1969) 174-81, against the valorization of symbol over allegory.
- 12 Ross Gibson, in *The Diminishing Paradise: Changing Literary Perceptions of Australia* (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1984) ix, xv, chooses part of the above quotation from Malouf as well as this quotation from Hegel as an account of the relation between the Anglo-Saxon writer and the new landscape of Australia. He does not comment, perhaps regarding it as obvious, on the contrast between the two visions of man in nature.
- 13 In Julie Copeland, "Interview with David Malouf," *Australian Literary Studies* 10.4 (1982), Malouf says of his novels that "except this terrorist novella [*Child's Play*] the others in fact are all about Australia" (435). In Davidson (above), Malouf states that people have read *An Imaginary Life* as relevant to Australia because it is "about the edge of a culture in relation to the centre," but warns that "we are never at the centre, because we never know where the centre is" (334). Philip Martin, in "Australia in Disguise?" *Overland* 74 (1979): 59-60, argues as the title of his review suggests. See also Martin Leer, "At the Edge: Geography and the Imagination in the Work of David Malouf," *Australian Literary Studies* 12.1 (1985): 3-21, for a close examination of the metaphorical significance of the geographic "edge" in Malouf's work.
- 14 Avis G. McDonald, "Patterns of Exile and Bondage in Selected Australian and West Indian Fiction," diss., Macquarie U, 1986.
- 15 See "Three Talks: David Malouf, Les Murray and David Rowbotham," *Australian Literary Studies* 11.3 (1984): 316-25. In answer to a question Malouf succinctly describes our misuse of nature and the necessity for us to "put ourselves back in there — inside nature with the rest of the creatures" (322). See also Michel Fabré, "Roots and Imagination: an Interview with David Malouf," *Commonwealth* 4 (1979-80): 56-67, and Candida Baker, *Yacker: Australian Writers Talk about their Work* (Sydney: Picador, 1986) 235-63.