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Two Thousand Years of Solitude

Exile after Ovid

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The editor dedicates this volume to her friend and former Durham colleague Luke Pitcher, whose sojourn in the North is over, but who is still much missed here.

a fascinating novel. It invites the readers to return to it time and again, just like its 'source-text', Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. Each time new revelations come to light, but at the same time new questions and problems arise, asking for yet another reading. There can be different interpretations of the exile poetry and Ovid as exile is susceptible to a multitude of different interpretations as well.

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The Myth is Out There

Reality and Fiction at Tomis (David Malouf's An Imaginary Life*)*

Ioannis Ziogas

> For the point is this: not that myth refers us back to some original event which has been fancifully transcribed as it passed through the collective memory; but that it refers us forward to something that will happen, that must happen. Myth will become reality, however skeptical we might be.[1]

In the first book of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Lycaon attempts to kill Jupiter[2] and as a result of his impious act, the king is transformed into a wolf. Lycaon flees human society and runs in terror to the fields. When he tries to speak, he howls:

> territus ipse *fugit* nactusque *silentia* ruris
> *exul*ulat frustraque loqui conatur: . . .
> . . .
> in uillos abeunt uestes, in crura lacerti:
> fit lupus et ueteris seruat uestigia formae;

I would like to thank Jennifer Ingleheart for her detailed and helpful editorial suggestions, and for her wonderful hospitality and excellent organization of an enormously stimulating conference. It has been a real pleasure to participate in the conference at St John's College of Durham University from start to finish. Among the other conference participants, I would especially like to thank Philip Hardie, Stephen Hinds, Duncan Kennedy, and Charilaos Michalopoulos.

[1] Barnes (1989: 181).

[2] Provided that we trust Jupiter, who is the narrator of the story as well as the sole witness, prosecutor, and judge (see Anderson 1989).

canities eadem est, eadem uiolentia uultus,
idem oculi lucent, eadem feritatis imago est. (*Met.* 1.232–9)

Terrified, he fled and after reaching the silent fields he howled and tried to speak in vain : . . . his clothes turned into prickly hair, his arms into legs; he became a wolf but kept the vestiges of his old shape; there were the same grey hairs, the same violent countenance, the same eyes shone, the same image of fierceness.[3]

While morphing into a wolf, Lycaon first becomes an exile from human society, and as a consequence loses his ability to speak. As Frederick Ahl points out, the verb 'exululat' carries within it the word *exul*;[4] to be an exile is to be banished from human language. Ovid himself eventually shares Lycaon's fate; the emperor Augustus strikes him dumb by banning his books and by relegating him to the edges of the civilized world.[5] In Ovid's life, Augustus plays Jupiter's role; by banishing Ovid, he inflicts a punitive transformation upon the poet.

Metamorphosis often results in silencing a human being—to transform, *mutare*, is to become silent, *mutus*.[6] This aspect of Ovid's poetic world is picked up by David Malouf in his novella *An Imaginary Life* (1978): 'I am rendered dumb' (17), says Malouf's Ovid, and goes on to describe his life in Tomis as the life of an animal. Exile is also presented as death in Malouf's novel; Ovid exclaims: 'I am dead. I am relegated to the region of silence. All I can do is shout' (27). Likewise, in the *Tristia*, Ovid repeatedly refers to his exile as death.[7] For Ovid, silencing a man is tantamount to banishing him to the Underworld and we might bear in mind that, in Latin, *silentes* can mean 'dead people'.[8] Malouf's 'region of silence' recalls Lycaon's flight into the silent countryside ('silentia ruris').

[3] All translations are mine.

[4] Ahl (1985: 72), notes: 'LYCaon flees into the silent countryside- *silentia RURis* (1.232); when he tries to speak, he howls, *EXULulat* (1.233). The verb is well chosen, since it carries within it *EXUL*, "exile": he runs howling into exile, where his transformation into a wolf is completed (*Metamorphoses* 1.236–39).'

[5] On the linguistic aspect of Ovid's exile, see Hinds, Ch. 3 in this volume. For the parallels between Jupiter and Augustus in Ovid, see *Met.* 1.173–6, 200–6; 15.850–60; *Tr.* 1.1.69–72; 81–2; 2.22; 33–42; 215–18.

[6] For the punning relation between 'mutatas' and 'mutus' in the *Met.*, see Ahl (1985: 59).

[7] Cf. e.g. *Tr.* 1.2.71–2; 1.3.89–98 with Nagle (1980: 22–32). Exile as a form of death is treated in this volume in Chs. 12, 9, and 15 by Dellner, Cox, and A. Michalopoulos.

[8] For this meaning of 'silentes' in Ovid, see for instance *Met.* 5.356 ('rex . . . silentum'); 15.772 ('sedes . . . silentum'); 15.797 ('umbrasque silentum').

An Imaginary Life concerns a linguistic rather than geographical displacement. In an interview, David Malouf says that he chose Ovid as a subject because he seemed to have been exiled from language itself.[9] Written in a poetic diction, the novel examines the power of language to shape and remake experience. The creative force of language constructs the landscape and blurs the boundaries between home and exile. In the end, Ovid liberates himself from time and space by moving beyond linguistic constraints. Silence is the poet's ultimate destination as his negation of human language reunites him with the natural environment. Not unlike the semantic range of 'silentes', silence and death are blended together in Ovid's exilic experience; the poet's final transformation is a spatial and temporal expansion achieved through death.[10]

Malouf's novel is a first-person narrative by Ovid himself, presented as a letter to readers in the future. The novel begins with the poet's struggle to survive and adjust in Tomis and ends with Ovid's rebirth and transformation through the mediation of the Child, a wild boy who brings the metropolitan poet back to Nature. In the beginning of *An Imaginary Life*, Malouf refers to the Lycaon episode in specific details,[11] setting his novel against the background of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. In the introduction we read:

. . . there is indeed some part of our nature that we share with wolves, and something of their nature that is in us, since there are men, at certain phases of the moon, who can transform themselves into wolves . . . . The skull bulges, the jaw pushes out to become a snout. Hair prickles down their spine, grows rough on their belly. (*IL* 10)

Later on, Ovid dreams that he is digging his own grave and finds himself in the company of wolves:

[9] See Levasseur and Rabalais (2002: 169).

[10] Interestingly, Ovid's final (implied) metamorphosis in the exile corpus (*Pont.* 4.16.52 'non habet in nobis iam noua plaga locum', 'I do not have space for a new wound anymore') implies transformation into an animal, which brings silence to the one transformed (cf. Actaeon at *Met.* 3.237 'iam loca uulneribus desunt' 'there are no spaces for wounds anymore').

[11] Colakis (1993: 232), points out that the first description of transformation in *An Imaginary Life* corresponds to Lycaon's transformation in the *Met.* Although I argue in this chapter that Malouf's novel repeatedly draws on the *Met.*, it is worth noting, as Philip Hardie pointed out at the Durham conference, that Malouf in his afterword nowhere cites the *Met.* as one of his sources.

I fall to my knees and begin digging with my long nails in the earth. Sometimes wolves come, and they claw at the earth beside me. *Howling.* (*IL* 18).

Metamorphosis, death, and exile are fused together in Ovid and Malouf, transposing the reality of the poet's exile to the fictions of his *Metamorphoses* and relocating Ovid's banishment to the fabulous world of his poetry.

Just as the beginning of Malouf's novel refers to the beginning of Ovid's *Metamorphoses,* the final metamorphosis in the novel refers to Ovid's transformation at the end of his epic.[12] Philip Hardie points out: 'In the novel Ovid develops an out-of-the-body sense of expanding to fill the whole landscape, the whole of space (142), a sense of life stretching (144) "beyond the limits of measurable time"—as, in the Epilogue to the *Metamorphoses,* Ovid, released from his physical body, expands to fill space and time' (Hardie 2002: 329). Thus, Malouf's novel is framed by the first and last human transformation in Ovid's *Metamorphoses.* Both works begin with an animal metamorphosis cast as banishment and conclude with an apotheosis which liberates the poet from spatial and temporal constraints.

In *An Imaginary Life,* Ovid's transposition into the fabulous world of his poetry is marked by references to the *Metamorphoses.* Ovid's role as a 'uates',[13] a singing prophet, acquires a new dimension since it turns out that he has predicted his own future without even realizing it. The first chapter of *An Imaginary Life* concludes with a quotation from the *Metamorphoses,* bringing together the world of Ovid's exile and the world of his epic. The fabulous tales of Greek myth are projected into Ovid's life:

I had to enter the silence to find a password that would release me from my own life.

And yet the words were already written. I wrote them years ago, and only now discover what they meant, what message they had for me: '*You will be separated from yourself and yet be alive.*'

Now I too must be transformed. (*IL* 32–3)

Malouf invites the readers to trace the intertextual dynamics of Ovid's reference to his own work. In *Metamorphoses* 10, Atalanta consults

[12] The 'sphragis' (*Met.* 15.871–9) is often believed to have been added to the poem after the sentence of exile was pronounced; see the Introduction to this volume, 5.

[13] At *Met.* 15.879, Ovid implies that he is a 'uates'. For the concept of *uates* in Augustan poetry, see Newman (1967).

an oracle which advises her to avoid marriage, but foresees that she will not escape her fate. The oracle concludes with an enigmatic phrase:

nec tamen effugies teque ipsa uiua carebis.

but you will not escape and you will be without yourself yet alive. (Ovid, *Met.* 10.566)

Atalanta eventually marries Hippomenes, but the couple morphs into lions as a result of a punitive transformation caused by Venus. The goddess of love, angered that Hippomenes did not thank her after she had helped him marry Atalanta, leads the couple to sexual excess. Vindictively, she arouses passion in Hippomenes as he is going home through the woods. The youth makes love to his wife in a shrine of Cybele and the offended goddess punishes the couple by turning them into lions. A whole tale of sexual excess lies behind this one reference in Malouf. The story of Atalanta and Hippomenes is also Ovid's since Malouf links the poet's promiscuity—via the *Ars*—to his punishment.[14] The gods do not forgive sexual excess even in a married couple and one wonders what Ovid, the didactic poet of adulteries, could have expected from the divine Augustus.[15]

It is particularly interesting that Malouf alludes to an oracle from the *Metamorphoses* in order to highlight the prophetic faculty of Ovid's poetry. The prophecy about the future of a mythical heroine suddenly acquires a personal dimension for the poet. What he wrote about Atalanta was actually written about himself. Thus, Malouf has the exiled Ovid enter the world of his own poetry as the poet shares a fate similar to that of one of his characters. When Atalanta hears the

[14] Malouf subscribes to this view: 'But in the shadow of a portico dedicated by his sister to her faithful husband, someone tonight is being fucked; because in a poem once I made it happen . . . Each night now Augustus thinks of it and bites his thumb' (*IL,* 27).

[15] In *Met.* 6 Arachne weaves a tapestry rife with sexual perversion and thus causes Minerva's wrath, who first strikes her with her shuttle and then transforms her into a spider. The use of the rare epithet 'augustus' (*Met.* 6.73) in this episode is suggestive of Caesar Augustus. Arachne, an artist who creates an artefact similar to Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and is punished by a god, recalls Ovid's fate. For the recurring motif of art and punishment in the *Metamorphoses* and its relation to Ovid's exile, see Johnson (2008). Malouf's Ovid compares himself with spiders (*IL* 19–21) and thinks of writing *The New Metamorphoses of the poet Ovid in exile, in the spiders' tongue* (*IL* 21).

oracle, its meaning is unclear.[16] She will realize what the oracle meant after her transformation. Likewise, Ovid understands that the oracle was actually about himself after his relegation. Its words are initially obscure not only to Atalanta but also to Ovid; eventually, both the mythical heroine and the poet discover their meaning; to be alive yet without oneself is to be transformed. And to be transformed is to be exiled from human society.

Malouf's intertextual allusion transfers the exiled poet into the world of his *Metamorphoses* and transforms him into a mythical character of his poetry, an essential aspect to Ovid's *Tristia* and *Ex Ponto*.[17] Malouf took the idea of Ovid turning into a character of the *Metamorphoses* from Ovid himself. In the first poem of the *Tristia*, the banished poet reckons his fate as belonging to the world of his epic poem:

> sunt quoque mutatae, ter quinque uolumina, formae
> nuper ab exequiis carmina rapta meis.
> his mando dicas, inter mutata referri
> fortunae uultum corpora posse meae.

There are also the Changed Forms, three times five rolls, songs lately snatched from my funeral. I order you to say to these [i.e. the books of the *Met.*] that the aspect of my fate can be reckoned among the changed bodies. (Ovid, *Tr.* 1.1.117–20)

Stephen Hinds argues that, with his *Tristia*, Ovid attempts to 'rewrite' the *Metamorphoses* in order to make statements about his own exile (Hinds 2006). But why does Ovid present his life as a myth from his poetic fictions? By creating the myth of his own exile, Ovid turns the bare truth of his life into a legend. The poet's autobiography becomes a universal and eternal myth as we are invited to read the *Metamorphoses* through the lens of Ovid's exile and also read Ovid's exile back into the *Metamorphoses*. Myth and reality are fused together into an

[16] It is worth noting Atalanta's reaction to the oracle—not unlike Lycaon, she lives scared in the woods (*Met.* 10.567–8). Ovid and Malouf portray a retreat to nature as an attempt of seeking safety, while nature turns out to be a matrix of metamorphoses.

[17] Tomis is a place inhabited by mythical characters from the *Met.* in Christoph Ransmayr's *Die letzte Welt* (1988): cf. A. Michalopoulos, Ch. 15 in this volume. In Ransmayr's novel we do not encounter Ovid, but the absent presence of the exiled poet haunts the setting of the narrative. C. Michalopoulos in this volume argues that in Jane Alison's *The Love-Artist*, Tomis has become a place which offers shelter to the metaliterary realization of the *Met.* C. Michalopoulos suggests that Alison may be influenced by Ransmayr.

indistinguishable entity. Like Lycaon, Atalanta, and many other characters, Ovid is punished and metamorphosed by a ruthless and unjust god. He is relegated to the world of silence, a banishment that eloquently brings the world of the *Metamorphoses* into life, Ovid's own life.

In *An Imaginary Life*, Malouf deliberately blurs the distinction between Ovid's dreams and the facts of his existence: the actual threat from Dacian attacks is intertwined with Ovid's dream of the Centaurs. The Centaurs—the fabulous creatures of Greek myth—and the cavalry of the Dacians enter Ovid's new world by crossing the river Ister, which is, as Philip Hardie points out, the symbolic boundary between myth and reality (Hardie 2002: 328). Immediately after Ovid says that he has dreamt of the Dacians, he goes on to recount his dream of the Centaurs. The interchangeability between dream and reality is marked by the transition from the historical horsemen to the fictional equine creatures:

> The river now is our protection. But two months from now it will become a bridge of ice and the *hordes* from the north will come pouring across it, plundering, raping, burning. My people here are only relatively savage. The real barbarians I have yet to see. *I have only dreamt of them.*
>
> *I dreamt,* one night lately that I walked out *in the moonlight,* . . . Suddenly, not out of the dust of the plain but *out of the swirling sky, a horde* of forms came *thundering* towards me—men, yes, horses, yes, and I thought of what I do not believe in and know belongs only to our world of fables, which is where I found myself: the centaurs. (*IL* 23–4)

The dream effects a transition from the raid of the Dacians to the Centaurs, who try to cross the river and enter Ovid's world (24), just as the Dacians cross the river and attack Tomis.[18] When the Dacians actually cross the frozen Ister, Malouf's description of the attack evokes Ovid's dream in specific details:

> . . . the Dacian horsemen, hundreds of them, poured down from the northern plain and were *thundering* across it . . .
>
> As it happened, on the night the raiders came I was in bed, and had to be shaken awake by one of the women. I heard it too then. *The thunder of their*

[18] Malouf draws on Ovid's exilic claims about barbarians attacking by coming over the frozen Ister at *Tr.* 3.10.9–18; 53–6. Ovid dreams of an enemy attack at *Pont.* 1.2.43–6 and comments on how his dreams imitate reality (cf. 'somnia me terrent ueros imitantia casus', 'dreams imitating real misfortunes terrify me', *Pont.* 1.2.43).

hooves on the ice... Ghostly figures out of the north, *out of my dream*, galloping in across *the wide arc of moonlight that was water* only a few weeks ago. (*IL* 55)

The Centaurs often symbolize the fabulous creatures of myth in which no one believes. Ovid calls them *nubigenae* ('cloud-born', *Met.* 12.211; 541)[19] and in Malouf they come from the sky to visit Ovid (*IL* 23), and ask him to believe in them. By contrast, the real attack of the Dacians is presented as a dreamlike fantasy, a visitation of incredible creatures. The facts of Ovid's life are coloured by the world of Greek myth, as reality and fiction converge upon the river Ister.

At the end of the novel, Ovid, accompanied by the Child, crosses the Ister, and passes from the world of dreams into reality ('No more dreams. We have passed beyond them into the last reality', *IL* 141). It is at this final stage that Ovid doubts the existence of the Dacian attack:

...and all those stories of the grasslands, and their giant horsemen, the merest figments of our imagination, even when they came thundering over the ice bridge and we held our snowbound fort against them. (*IL* 138)

Ovid's reality sinks back to his dreams, while his dreams become real. The image of the savage horsemen is similar to that of the wild Centaurs, and Malouf's Ovid experiences his exile as a peculiar hybrid of semi-real and semi-fictional events.

Ovid's relationship with the wild Child, which is the novel's central theme, also plays with the distinction between reality and fiction. In the introduction, Ovid mentions that in his childhood he used to converse with an imaginary wild child, who was visible only to him. The boys used a language of their own devising. Ovid identifies the wild boy of his childhood with the werewolves of whom the goatherds spoke. In Tomis, Ovid meets a boy like the one of his childish imagination and this encounter changes his life. Given the fictional nature of the first child, the readers are left to wonder to what extent the second child is another figment of Ovid's imagination, and whether the title *An Imaginary Life* refers to Malouf's narrative or to a life his character imagines in exile. The novel closes with a reference to the introduction, in which Ovid speaks about the child

[19] The Centaurs were the sons of Ixion and a cloud in the shape of Hera.

of his imagination. This ring composition fuses Ovid's fantasy into what he describes as the last reality:

The child is there. I am three or four years old. It is late summer. It is spring. I am six. I am eight. (*IL* 9)

It is summer. It is spring. I am immeasurably, unbearably happy. I am three years old. I am sixty. I am six.

I am there. (*IL* 152)

Malouf adheres to Hermann Fränkel's view of Ovid as a poet between two worlds,[20] and scholars have noticed that the Child, on one level, can be interpreted as the Christ-child.[21] Be that as it may, Ovid's encounter with a powerful Child further recalls Cupid, a boy who features prominently in Ovid's poetry. Malouf's Ovid talks about a Child on the first page of the novel, while in the first poem of the *Amores*, Ovid's encounter with Cupid transforms him into an elegiac lover. The wild Child of Tomis, who causes Ovid's metamorphosis, is described as 'some foundling of the Gods' (*IL* 150)—a godlike Child can refer to Venus' son. Thus, Ovid's tale of the Child in *An Imaginary Life* recalls a boy from Greek mythology, a god who features as an invincible power of poetic transformation in the Ovidian corpus.

The poet decides to teach the wild Child the language of the Getae, but he soon realizes that his pupil can teach him how to drive his old self out and let the universe in by moving beyond the boundaries of

[20] Fränkel (1945). Malouf's Ovid says that he was born '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...', *IL* 19. Interestingly, Ovid foresees the end of his readers' era (the end of our era?) as he casts his letter upon the centuries. Thus, Malouf, not unlike his Ovid, presents himself as an author between two worlds. Kennedy (2002: 321) notes that there is a *fin-de-siècle* feel to some of the most recent Ovidian receptions. Fränkel's view and the medieval tradition of an *Ouidius Christianus* also influenced another Ovidian novel, Vintila Horia's *Dieu est né en exil*. The interplay between reality and fiction is central to Horia's novel. *Dieu est né en exil* is Ovid's secret journal in the eight years of his exile, a confession of his true experiences and feelings, and a revelation of the real Ovid. Of course, the reader is fully aware that the narrative is Horia's invention and the very first sentence of the novel ('Je ferme les yeux pour vivre', 'I close the eyes to live', 1) implies that Ovid's life is the reality of his imagination. Horia and Malouf dismiss Ovid's exile poetry as full of conceits and unreliable, while inviting the readers to accept their fictional narratives as Ovid's sincere voice. For a parallel reading of Malouf's and Horia's re-narrations of Ovidian exile, see Matzner, Ch. 17, in this volume.

[21] Cf. Hardie (2002: 329).

language. 'There are times', says Ovid, 'when it comes strongly upon me that *he* is the teacher, and that whatever comes new to the occasion is being led slowly, painfully, out of *me*' (*IL* 95). A Child under Ovid's tutelage strongly recalls the opening of the *Ars amatoria*, in which Ovid casts himself as 'Cupid's tutor' ('praeceptor Amoris', 1.17). Adrian Hollis points out that Ovid here draws on the bucolic poet Bion (Hollis 1977: 32–3, 152). While in Ovid Venus entrusts the poet with Cupid's education (*Ars* 1.7: 'me Venus artificem tenero praefecit Amori', 'Venus appointed me as tutor to tender Cupid'), in Bion, Aphrodite approaches the sleeping poet and asks him to teach her son music (Bion, fr. 10 Gow). The boy, however, does not heed his teacher's words (*οὐκ ἐμπάζετο μύθων*, fr. 10.9 Gow) and the roles are reversed; the master is finally taught by the pupil:

> *κἠγὼν ἐκλαθόμαν μὲν ὅσων τὸν Ἔρωτα δίδασκον,*
> *ὅσσα δ' Ἔρως με δίδαξεν ἐρωτύλα πάντα διδάχθην.*

And I forgot the lessons I taught Eros, and I was taught all the love-lessons which Eros taught me. (Bion, fr. 10.12–13)

A similar inversion of roles occurs in *An Imaginary Life* as the Child's teacher realizes that he has a lot to learn from his pupil.

The juxtaposition of a feral boy and a cultured teacher is at play both in *An Imaginary Life* and the *Ars*. Cupid is introduced as a wild and recalcitrant boy (*Ars* 1.9: 'ille quidem ferus est et qui mihi semper repugnet', 'he is indeed wild and one who always fights against me'),[22] who needs to be tamed by Ovid.[23] Interestingly, Ovid returns to the image of Cupid as his pupil in *Ex Ponto* 3.3, in which the boy visits the exiled poet in his sleep. Ovid draws attention to Cupid's uncouth appearance; his locks are unkempt as they fall over his cheeks and his plumage is bedraggled (*Pont.* 3.3.17–20). Malouf's wild Child cannot but recall Ovid's encounter with his pupil in Tomis as well as the uncultivated appearance of the boy. Cupid's visitation occurs while Ovid is sleeping,[24] and the poem leaves open the possibility that Ovid

[22] Duncan Kennedy observed at the conference that Cupid is actually 'ferus' at *Ars* 1.9.

[23] Note also that the Child in *An Imaginary Life* is naked (152) and so, traditionally, is Cupid (cf. *Am.* 1.10.15: 'et puer est et nudus Amor', 'Amor is a boy and a nude one').

[24] Cf. Bion, fr. 10.1–2 Gow: *Ἀμεγάλα μοι Κύπρις ἔθ' ὑπνώοντι παρέστα/ νηπίαχον τὸν Ἔρωτα καλᾶς ἐκ χειρὸς ἄγοισα*, 'Great Aphrodite appeared to me while I was still sleeping, leading the child Eros from her beautiful hand.'

dreamed of Cupid's epiphany (*Pont.* 3.3.93–4: 'dixit et aut ille est tenues dilapsus in auras, | coeperunt sensus aut uigilare mei,' 'He said and either he slid into thin air or I began to wake up'). Ovid's encounter with Cupid in Tomis may take place in the imaginary world of dreams and the parallels between the wild Child and the mythical boy stress the overarching juxtaposition of imagination and reality in Malouf's novel. Ovid discovers his real self through the mediation of the Child whose character strongly recalls a famous child of Graeco-Roman mythology.

The pointed paradox of discovering reality through dreams and imagination is central to Malouf's oeuvre. Malouf's Ovid realizes that 'What he (i.e. the Child) imagines is so much more powerful than the facts' (*IL* 75). In an interview, Malouf notes characteristically:

> Imagination doesn't mean making things up; it means being able to understand things from the inside, emotions, events, and experiences that you haven't actually been through but you will have experienced by the time you've got them onto the page. Through the imagination, you hit on things that are more real than facts—emotions that can be hidden by the facts. (Levasseur and Rabalais 2002: 169)

An Imaginary Life recounts Ovid's transition from scepticism to belief. The first part draws on Ovid's life in exile as we know it from the *Tristia* and *Ex Ponto*. The novel begins with a powerful description of Tomis, which turns out to be Ovid's mental dystopia ('But I am describing a state of mind, no place. I am in exile here', *IL* 2; cf. *Tr.* 3.8.32–3; 3.10.25–38); Malouf quite accurately reads Ovid's images of a cold and isolated landscape as the projection of a mental state.[25] *Tristia* 4.10, Ovid's autobiographical poem, is also an important model for Malouf.[26] But as the narrative goes on, Ovid's life moves beyond the image of Tomis as we have it from Ovid's own poetry. Malouf's Ovid finds his real self and his real destiny in exile, an imaginary turn that is nowhere suggested in Ovid's poetry or in any other source. Therein lies the paradox of Malouf's fiction: while Malouf's Ovid discovers the real meaning of his life in exile, the reader experiences a disruption of Ovid's exile poetry. In other

[25] Cf. Claassen (1988). Williams (2002b: 340) points out: 'Despite Ovid's insistence on the sincerity of his exilic persona (cf. *Tr.* 3.1.5–10, 5.1.5–6, *Pont.* 3.9.49–50), the Tomis he describes bears little or no relation to its historical counterpart.' See also Fitton Brown (1985); Williams (1994: 8–25); Matzner, Ch. 17 in this volume.

[26] Malouf draws on *Tr.* 4.10 in *IL* 18–19.

words, within the novel Ovid crosses a boundary and moves from his exilic experience as we know it from his own works to a fictional transition into reality. The closer he gets to his real fate, the more fictional Malouf's narrative becomes. The revelation of a new life, a life full of belief, is exactly what the reader finds hard to believe. As readers, we feel the deepest scepticism about Malouf's tale the very moment that his Ovid cries, 'we have passed beyond dreams into the last reality'. This last reality is the novel's most conspicuous fiction.

But the challenge of believing in a tall tale is essential to Ovid's poetry as well. Ovid repeatedly reminds us of his poetry's fictional status.[27] In *Metamorphoses* 8, for instance, Pirithous challenges Achelous' narrative; the hero does not believe that the gods can change shapes. Such scepticism questions the whole project of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. But, as Denis Feeney shows, this is not merely an encouragement of our scepticism through Ovid's own scepticism, but rather a suspension of disbelief and belief which constitutes fiction.[28]

This suspension of disbelief and belief is crucial to *An Imaginary Life*. The historical Ovid becomes a fiction and Malouf's fictitious narrative becomes Ovid's real life. As with Ovid's poetry, so with Malouf's imaginary story the interplay between the shattering of the narrative illusion and the challenge of believing in a fictional world lies at the heart of the artistic creation.[29] Entertaining fictions requires a knowing complicity between author and readers, a division of our beliefs into real and fictional worlds, but also a synthesis of those two worlds; a crossing of the boundaries between facts and fictions similar to the Centaurs' request to enter Ovid's world and similar to Ovid's trip to the unknown, to the last reality. Following in Ovid's footsteps, we are invited to believe in what is obviously a fantasy, and enjoy the story even as we insist on our scepticism about Ovid's final transformation. We are asked to believe in Malouf's tale, to let the myth of Ovid's exile enter our lives.

[27] Feeney (1991: 229); Wheeler (1999: 162–93). Ovid refers to the fictional nature of his *Met.* in *Tr.* 2.63–4 ('inspice maius opus . . . | in non credendos corpora uersa modos', 'Consider my greater work [i.e. the *Met.*] . . . the bodies transformed in ways not to be believed'). See also *Tr.* 2.355 ('magnaque pars mendax operum est et ficta meorum,' 'A great part of my works is fictitious and full of lies').

[28] Feeney (1991: 229). Malouf's Ovid notes about the gods that '[t]hey have abandoned the holy places and taken up residence in fables that require only our amused detachment from disbelief', *IL* 26.

[29] Cf. Feeney (1991: 230–1).

Hence, the dynamic interplay between belief and disbelief is one of the novel's most Ovidian aspects. Ovid constantly draws attention to the fictitious nature of his poetry. In the beginning of Briseis' letter to Achilles, for instance, the girl apologizes for her broken Greek:

> Quam legis, a rapta Briseide *littera* uenit,
> uix bene barbarica Graeca notata manu.
> quascumque adspicies, lacrimae fecere *lituras*;
> sed tamen et lacrimae pondera uocis habent.

The letter you read comes from the abducted Briseis, its Greek hardly written well by a foreigner's hand. Whatever blots you will see are from tears; still even tears have the weight of voice. (Ovid, *Her.* 3.1–4)

What we actually read here is not in reality the clumsy Greek of a foreigner, but Ovid's Latin flowing effortlessly in elegiac couplets. Note for instance the pun between 'littera' and 'litura'; Briseis' letter is littered with misprints, and 'litura' is the image of a stained 'littera'. The image of the blots, which are not really in the text, is conveyed with a witty wordplay which operates only in Latin, not in Greek. Thus, Ovid draws attention to the literary conceit of his poetry and to the fact that we read a poem written by Ovid and addressed to a Latin-speaking readership, and not a letter written by Briseis to Achilles.

Briseis writes displaced in a foreign land, suffering from the cruelty of a harsh king, while Ovid, banished by a powerful emperor, complains repeatedly about his isolation in a foreign land.[30] Both Briseis in the *Heroides* and Ovid in his exile poetry apologize for writing poorly. In the *Tristia*, Ovid deliberately aligns himself with Briseis; his bitter tears stain his book:

> neue *liturarum* pudeat; qui uiderit illas,
> de *lacrimis factas* sentiet esse meis.

And don't be ashamed of blots; whoever sees them will understand that they were caused by my tears. (Ovid, *Tr.* 1.1.13–14)

Ovid blends the reality of his exile with the literary past of his mythical characters. One is left to wonder: are the blots in the text

[30] For a comparison of the *Heroides* and *Tristia*, see Rosenmeyer (1997), who discusses the 'littera'/'litura' pun at 34 . It is worth noting that Ovid draws a parallel between Achilles and Augustus in the exile poetry (cf. *Tr.* 1.1.99–100; 5.2.15–18; *Pont.* 2.2.26).

of the *Tristia* more real than the blots on Briseis' letter?[31] In the *Heroides*, Ovid makes sure that his readers keep in mind that Briseis is a character of his poetry, while in the *Tristia*, he lets the voice of the tearful girl cross over into his own reality.

Likewise, Malouf invites us to recognize the real author behind the fictional character. Ovid's exile is now the myth that is written into Malouf's reality. And just as Ovid did in the beginning of Briseis' letter, Malouf suspends the literary illusion of his novel and uses language in order to suggest that he, not Ovid, is the author. In *An Imaginary Life*, Ovid addresses a future readership, an element which Malouf found in the *Tristia* (cf. *Tr.* 4.10.1–2: 'Ille ego qui fuerim, tenerorum lusor amorum, | quem legis, ut noris, accipe posteritas,' 'Listen posterity so that you know who I was, I that player of tender loves, whom you read'; cf. *IL* 18). This readership, Malouf's Ovid suspects, might not know Latin:

> I speak to you, reader, as one who lives in another century, since this is the letter I will never send . . . I cast this letter upon the centuries, uncertain . . . with what eyes you will read it. *Is Latin still known to you?* . . . I am the poet Ovid—born . . . 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 . . . or in the late light of a garden . . . *translating this—with what difficulty?—into your own tongue.* (*IL* 18–19)

We cannot help but notice that it does not matter whether Latin is known to us—we do not have to translate Ovid's words into our own language since what we read here is Malouf's English.[32] But translation is another kind of metamorphosis, a cross-lingual transformation that has also a temporal dimension: Ovid turns the

[31] Rosenmeyer (1997: 34), notes: 'The irony of calling attention to such physical markings is that the reader, faced with an unblotched page in perfectly regular typefont, may begin to lose faith in the "accuracy" of the copy. The physical reality of the clean page challenges the poetic illusion. . . . We are reminded that we are reading fiction, and suspect the writer of histrionics.'

[32] In this volume, Hinds discusses Brian Friel's play *Translations*, a historical drama about linguistic alienation and identity crisis, in which Ovid's 'In this place I am the barbarian because I am understood by nobody' (*Tr.* 5.10.37) is cited. Hinds notes that *Translations* is self-aware of the modern-day paradox of its status as a drama about an Irish-speaking world which uses an English-language script to portray English as the unintelligible 'Other'.

Greek of his archaic heroes into Latin; similarly, Malouf updates Ovid's Latin, 'translating' it into English.

Drawing on the work of theorists of narrative such as Prince, Chatman, Rimmon-Kenan, and Bal, John Stephens argues that in *An Imaginary Life*, the author and narrator are separate and so too are the reader-of-the-text and the reader-in-the-text (the narratee). Stephens comments on the passage cited above and points out that since the actual reader does not have to translate the language of the novel, the narrator–narratee relationship is highly fictive. Since the narratee is distinguished from the reader, the reader is invited to see where the narrator's unreliability lies, and to determine the thematic implications of that unreliability.[33] Such a separation of the narratee from the reader operates not only in Ovid's *Heroides* but also in his exile poetry, and Ovid often draws attention to this very distinction.

At the same time, the world of the narrator–narratee is projected into the world of the reader. To that end, Ovid repeatedly employs anachronism in order to make his readers view Roman reality through the lens of Greek myth.[34] Writing from Australia, Malouf transposes the setting of Ovid's exile into the topos of postcolonial literature that views Australia as the end of the world, a no man's land ('terra nullius') on the fringes of an empire. Ovid's Tomis is Malouf's Australia.[35] Don Randall notes that *An Imaginary Life* is

[33] See Stephens (1990: 163–4).

[34] For Ovid's translation of the past into present, see Wheeler (1999: 194–205). Ransmayr's novel *Die letzte Welt* is rife with anachronisms (see A. Michalopoulos, Ch. 15 in this volume). In an interview, Malouf notes about his view of the past: 'I have no particular investment in the past. It seems interesting only in that it is inside the present; it's also going to be inside what ever future there is. I don't have any particular nostalgia for the past. I don't see the past as some people in Australia do as being more admirable because it was simpler' (see Willbanks 1990: 13). This statement strikes me as particularly Ovidian (cf. for instance *Ars* 3.113–28, especially the rejection of *simplicitas* (113), often thought of as an ancient virtue, for present-day *cultus* (127)).

[35] See, for instance, Martin (1979); Leer (1985); Lewis (1984: 68) notes: '[B]eing on the fringes of the civilised world, Ovid is also on the edge of the adjacent wilderness, which is both frightening and alluring. The parallel with the enormous empty spaces of the untamed outback is obvious, and Ovid's journey into the wilderness with the feral boy is analogous to the expeditions of the great Australian explorers setting off into the unknown, as well as being a journey into the imagination. What is so fascinating about *An Imaginary Life* is the way in which Malouf draws so effectively on his Australian background in imaginatively reconstructing part of the life of a great Roman poet without, as it were, giving Ovid an Australian accent.' Ovid describes Tomis as being on the edges of the civilized world in *Tr.* 2.191–200.

quite readily read as an Australian writer's novel if one considers it in the light of *Johnno*, Malouf's semi-autobiographical first novel. Ovid's experience of Tomis recalls Johnno's experience of Brisbane (Randall 2007: 41–6). Interestingly, critics who examine the novel's postcolonial thrust have focused on its language. Gareth Griffiths argues that Malouf's concern with 'linguistic displacement', exile, and 'cross-culturality' marks his novel as distinctly postcolonial and Patrick Buckridge reaches the same conclusion, arguing that the novel's 'grammar' gives it a distinctly postcolonial quality.[36] Building on Buckridge, Don Randall examines specific grammatical patterns, arguing that Malouf's grammar not only foregrounds the importance of language as a focus of concern, but it also shows that Malouf's language is preoccupied with place and transit.

And yet Malouf's Ovid insists that he writes Latin and goes on to talk about the features of his mother tongue. We read Malouf's English while his character describes his progressive changes in his language: from Latin to Getic,[37] to the language of birds and animals,[38] until he finally liberates himself from language.[39] Both the Roman poet and the Australian novelist choose characters who speak a language other than their own and draw attention to this linguistic displacement. They are the translators of their characters, effecting a linguistic metamorphosis which marks a transition from a mythical past to a real present. Just as Ovid retells Greek myths in order to comment on Rome's socio-political milieu, Malouf revisits the myth of Ovid's exile in order to speak about modern Australia. Not unlike Ovid, Malouf attempts to create the future through the past.

In conclusion, *An Imaginary Life* can be read as Ovid's trip into the world of his fabulous poetry and Malouf casts Ovid as a poet between two worlds: the real and the fictional. Ovid moves forward by

[36] See Buckridge (1986); Griffiths (1989).

[37] Cf. Ovid's claims to have learned Getic (*Pont.* 3.2.40; 4.13.19). See also Matzner and Hinds, Chs. 17 and 3 in this volume.

[38] Stevens (2009) argues that Ovid in the exile poetry presents himself as undergoing a second linguistic infancy ('infantia'), as being reduced to the pre-linguistic state traditionally attributed to human prehistory, and even as similar to non-linguistic animals. An Ovid who moves back to child language and then to animal languages is a strikingly Maloufian development. Stevens's reading—he is aware of Malouf's novel (see Stevens 2009: 178 n. 60)—is particularly systematic and convincing.

[39] McDonald (1998: 51) comments on the deconstructionist irony that Ovid's final wordless state is described in words as we note the progressive changes in his language.

returning to his poetic universe not as a poet but as a character. At the same time, he becomes a character in Malouf's fictitious tale. Malouf's version of Ovid's exile translates the Roman poet to the discourse and the topoi of postcolonial literature. Interestingly, both Ovid and Malouf find in the foreign fables of the past a particularly appropriate vehicle for expressing their thoughts and concerns about their own countries; they are fully aware that fictions have the power to describe and thus create reality. Or as Malouf puts it in his *Johnno*, 'Maybe, in the end, even the lies we tell define us. And better some of them than our most earnest attempts at the truth' (237).