

**Found in Translation**  
**Ovid, David Malouf and the Werewolf**

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### Abstract

David Malouf, in his novel *An Imaginary Life* (1978), explores the nature of human identity through his narrator, the Roman poet Ovid, who himself was a noted fabulist of identity and its instabilities. It would seem that for both writers, ancient and modern, identity is found in change or translation, in becoming other. This essay explores Malouf's reimagining of Ovid's last years in Tomis by threading it with other tales of origin and destiny, change and becoming, but above all stories of the werewolf—the very figure of translation between animal, human and divine—that silently slinks, after Ovid, throughout Malouf's novel.

When Jesus was still but a boy, growing in strength and wisdom under his mother's tutelage (Luke 2.40), the Roman poet and man about town, Publius Ovidius Naso (b. 43 BC), suffered translation—relegation—from Rome to Tomis, from the centre of the world to its furthest edge; to a cold, desolate place, where 'the wolves creep close and the vultures circle.'<sup>1</sup> Tomis was on the Getic shore, at the North-eastern edge of the Roman Empire—now Romanian Constanza, on the Black Sea.<sup>2</sup> No one knows why Ovid was banished from Rome. He himself remains disconcertingly vague about the personal affront he made the emperor, Augustus, who seemingly never relented; and nor did his successor, Tiberius. By what was to become Christian reckoning, it was the eighth year of the Lord when Ovid was banished from Rome, the ninth when he arrived in Tomis, and the seventeenth when he died. Jesus matured while Ovid declined. The Bethlehem boy became a man and the man God, while the poet became a child, and the child earth, returning to the ground from whence the first human earthlings had emerged.

Everything we know about Ovid's last years in Tomis we know from Ovid, from his laments, sadnesses, *Tristia*, and from his equally artful letters from Pontus (*Epistulae ex Ponto*). We are so dependent on Ovid for Ovid's life, and Ovid's lamentations are so carefully wrought, that some have even wondered if he wasn't all the time in Rome, from where he simply imagined his stay in Tomis, writing an entirely imaginary life.<sup>3</sup> But then all written lives, whether lived or not, are imagined; and it is Ovid's written life that is metamorphosed in David Malouf's novel, *An Imaginary Life* (1978).<sup>4</sup> Malouf—an Australian writer of British and Lebanese descent—writes in his afterword, that he wanted to catch Ovid up into the poet's own writing, to make him the object of his own *Metamorphoses*, subject to the mutations

that he had visited upon so many of his characters. ‘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’ (156). Thus in Malouf’s spare style, Ovid becomes a much more reflective and surprised poet, showing ‘a capacity for belief that is nowhere to be found in his own writings’ (155).

In some ways Malouf’s Ovid follows quite closely Ovid’s self-presentation in the *Tristia*—worrying about his posthumous reputation, and critical of Augustus, more critical of Augustus than the historical Ovid, whose praises of the emperor have to be read as irony. But in other regards Malouf’s Ovid is somewhat distant from the Roman poet, a much less ancient and more modern Ovid, who does not look back to the city he has left but forward to the world he is discovering—albeit unwillingly—beyond its pale. In learning the language of the Getae, among whom he now lives in Tomis, Ovid comes to admire these ‘plain but kindly people’, and their savage and extravagant story-telling: ‘bare, cruel, terrible, comic’ (52). As Ovid learns their language, the other characters take on names: Ryzak the headman, Lullo, his grandson. The women remain unnamed. Their language presents the ‘raw life and unity of things’ (59). With a new language Ovid comes to see a new world. It is somehow ‘closer to the first principle of creation, closer to whatever force it is that makes things what they are and changes them into what they would be’ (59-60). He comes to see the headman with whom he lives as ‘nobler and more gentle than any Roman I have known. Beside him I am an hysterical old woman. Utterly without dignity’ (52).

It has been said that Malouf imagines an *Ovidius Australiensis*, a European exile who comes to embrace the antipodean shore on which he has washed up. Modern, European-settled Australia still remembers that it was once a colony of

exiles, translated from another land, that had to make—and is still making—its peace with the aboriginal world of the outback. In overcoming Ovid’s despair at leaving Rome, Malouf is perhaps overcoming his own distance from Europe, his own ‘barbarity’.<sup>5</sup>

In his afterword Malouf alludes to the fact that Ovid was declining while the Christ child was growing, that the story is set at ‘the dawn of the Christian era, in which mysterious forces were felt to be at work and thinking had not yet settled into the rational mode’ (155). Malouf’s story is about a man and a child; a poet in exile and a boy who comes into his life as a presage of change, of a kind of death, and death as a kind of birth, of arriving elsewhere. It is also in his afterword that Malouf notes Ovid’s popularity in the 12<sup>th</sup> century, when, indeed, Christian writers found the first and fifteenth books of the *Metamorphoses* to have a curious resonance with their own concerns about change, believing, as they did, that human identity is both stable and unstable; fallen, but destined for divine glory.<sup>6</sup> In this essay, the concerns of those medieval Christians with the changeableness of the body—their own and Christ’s, their own in Christ’s and Christ’s in theirs—are threaded into Malouf’s imagining of Ovid. For in these translations we may discover that human identity is not lost but found in and through its very dispersal. We become ourselves through losing ourselves, through becoming other and arriving elsewhere.

### **Earthlings and werewolves**

In the Hebrew book of beginnings, of origins—in the cosmogenic myth that Jesus would reverse—Adam is made from the dirt, and Eve from the rib of this dirt-

become-human. This primal metamorphosis is at the start of all things; man ‘formed from the dust of the ground’ (Genesis 2.7). Ovid tells a similar tale, of how Prometheus took newly made earth, ‘only recently separated from the lofty aether’, and so still potent, and mixed it with rainwater and formed it into an image of the gods. ‘So the earth, which had been rough and formless, was moulded into the shape of man, a creature till then unknown.’<sup>7</sup> Characteristically, Ovid hesitates over whether humans were first made from the ground. Perhaps the Creator instead made them from divine seed (*semina caeli*)? But Ovid seems to favour the Promethean tale, which anyway mixes divinity with soil.

It is this myth that David Malouf recalls at the beginning of *An Imaginary Life*. In his old age, Ovid recalls when he was a boy, about ‘three or four years old’, or six or eight, and met with another child—the child—who will prove to be the emblem of his fate and memory. The child is a wild, wilderness boy, who only Ovid sees, and who perhaps lives with wolves, ‘in the ravines to the East’, beyond cultivation, beyond civilization. ‘There really are wolves out there’, Ovid tells us, as also closer to home, in the villas of the well-watered valley where the poet lives, in the comfort of cultivated lives (1-2).

Later I heard, ... that 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. They close their human mind like a fist and when they open it again it is a wolf’s paw. The skull bulges, the jaw pushes out to become a snout. Hair prickles down their spine, grows rough on their belly. The body slouches and is on all fours. The voice thickens. It is the moon draws them on. I believed such things

in those days, and wondered. Was the child a wolf boy? Were those wolf men who lived secretly among us, changing themselves painfully at the moon's bidding, children who had been captured from the wilds and brought in among us, to be adapted to the ways of men (2-3)?

Today, the image of the wolf-man or werewolf, the man-animal—civilization and wilderness conjoined—is best known from cinema, which early discovered the thrill of showing transformation: the skull bulging, jaw snouting, and spine prickling. Film is the only art that can really show the *becoming* of metamorphosis. And from the first—from Lon Chaney Junior in *The Wolf Man* (US 1941) to David Thewlis in *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban* (US 2004)—film has imbued the figure of the werewolf with a melancholy sense of life's instability and transience, of identities hard won and easily lost; and of the body's unreliability.<sup>8</sup>

The werewolf as a figure for the body's pubertal and sexually aroused transformations is perhaps best known from the stories of Angela Carter, from her tales of wolf men who surprise, and are surprised by, little girls; transmuted into celluloid by Neil Jordan in *The Company of Wolves* (UK 1984).<sup>9</sup> The transformation scenes in this film might be Malouf's: the mouth opening to reveal the wolf jaws within. And Malouf's wolf-boy is also a preternatural warning of oncoming puberty, the body's betrayal. For the wolf child leaves the young Ovid when, as Ovid tells us, 'my own body began to change and I discovered the first signs of manhood upon me' (3). Thereafter, the child appears only in Ovid's dreams, for the poet has become his own wolf.

As a Roman, of course, Ovid knew that if wolves could be adapted to the ways of men, men were first adapted to the ways of wolves. For when Romulus—Rome's

founder<sup>10</sup>—and his brother Remus were abandoned as infants, it was a she-wolf who suckled them, and gave them life. ‘She halted and fawned on the tender babes with her tail, and licked into shape their two bodies with her tongue.’<sup>11</sup> She gave her name to the place—the cave and wood, the Lupercal—where Rome was first nurtured. To be Roman is to be wolf, and in this sense Ovid was always a wolf-man.

Before David Malouf, at the start of his story, and before Angela Carter, in the heart of her tales, Ovid had placed the werewolf at the beginning of all things, in the story of Lycaon, who instigates the world’s destruction and recreation. Genesis is now held to tell two stories of creation, the priestly (1:1-2.3) and the Yahwist (2:4-25), with the second read as an alternative to the first, rather than its intensification; and like Genesis, Ovid also tells two stories of the earth’s making. But while man and woman are made from dirt and dust and the breath of God in the second of the Hebrew tales (Genesis 2:7), and from clay and water and heavenly ether in the first of Ovid’s stories, we are not told from what, if anything, they are made in the first Genesis narrative. They are simply made by God’s word, in God’s image (Genesis 1:26-27). In Ovid’s second tale, however, they are made from stones, from the bones of the earth.

Arguably, Genesis has a third creation story, since the human race is reborn after the forty day flood that sweeps away all the corrupt and violent ‘flesh in which is the breath of life’ (Genesis 6:17). The earth is repopulated by the long-lived Noah and his children (Genesis 9:18-19), enjoined to be ‘fruitful and multiply’ (Genesis 9:7), as were their ancestors, the first humans (Genesis 1:28). Unnervingly, Ovid likewise tells of the earth washed clean of its violent and wicked inhabitants, and, as in Genesis, this story is preceded by one of giants who thwart the order of the universe. The giants of Genesis are the Nephilim, the offspring of the sons of God and the fair daughters of



men; divine-human half-breeds, misbegotten figures of wicked revolt against due order (Genesis 6:1-4). Their story is poorly told in Genesis,<sup>12</sup> and receives more cogent, extensive treatment in the ‘apocalyptic’ Book of Enoch (I Enoch or Ethiopic Enoch), in which the giants become cannibalistic and begin to ‘devour one another’s flesh, and drink the blood.’<sup>13</sup> As in Genesis, this and other evils—the discovery and working of metals, the making of armour and jewellery, and the wearing of eye shadow—leads to the flood, and the near complete destruction of humankind.<sup>14</sup>

Ovid’s story of the giants contains elements of the Bible’s story of Babel, since his giants revolt against due order by seeking to storm heaven, piling mountains on top of one another in order to reach the stars. However, their attempt on the celestial citadel is thwarted by Jove, who destroys their rocky ladder with a thunderbolt, crushing their bodies beneath boulders and drenching the earth with ‘torrents of blood’.<sup>15</sup> At this point, the ever mercurial Ovid inserts yet another creation story, since the earth breathes life into the giants’ ‘warm blood’, forming it into the ‘shape of men’.<sup>16</sup> But like the giants, these blood-men are ‘violent and cruel’, and are soon swept away by the waters which Jove and his brother Neptune unleash upon the earth.

While Jove’s anger is born of his revulsion at the violence that has befallen men in the age of iron, when ‘all manner of crime broke out’ and ‘modesty, truth, and loyalty fled’,<sup>17</sup> his ire is particularly enflamed by the savagery of Lycaon, the king of Arcadia. Walking the earth as a man, Jove had entered the house of Lycaon, ‘when the last shades of twilight were heralding the night’, and revealed his divinity to the household. But Lycaon doubted his guest’s identity and planned to kill him while he slept, but not before serving him a meal of human flesh, cooking the limbs while they

are ‘still warm with life, boiling some and roasting others over the fire.’ Outraged, Jove destroys the house and Lycaon flees into the night.

There he uttered howling noises (*exululare*), and his attempts to speak were all in vain. His clothes changed into bristling hairs, his arms to legs, and he became a wolf. His own savage nature showed in his rabid jaws, and he now directed against the flocks his innate lust for killing. He had a mania, even yet, for shedding blood. But though he was a wolf, he retained some traces of his original shape. The greyness (*canities*) of his hair was the same, his face showed the same violence, his eyes gleamed as before, and he presented the same picture of ferocity.<sup>18</sup>

Thus Lycaon—the savage, wolfish man—instigates the destruction of the first humans and the emergence of the second, reborn from a cleansed earth. Only two humans survive the flood, Deucalion and his wife Pyrrha. Duly chastened and much relieved they pray to Themis for aid, and are told to depart with veiled heads and loosened clothes, and to throw the bones of their great mother behind them. Pyrrha is reluctant to disturb her mother’s bones, but Deucalion, the son of Prometheus, realises that the bones are metaphors for the stones of mother earth, and so, while still half-doubting, Deucalion and Pyrrha start to throw the stones behind them, onto their great mother, and there, in the earth, the metaphors begin to change.

The stones began to lose their hardness and rigidity, and after a little, grew soft. Then, once softened, they acquired a definite shape. When they had grown in size, and developed a tenderer nature, a certain likeness to a human

form could be seen, though it was still not clear: they were like marble images, begun but not yet properly chiselled out, or like unfinished statues. The damp earthy parts, containing some moisture, were adapted to make the body: that which was solid and inflexible became bone. What was lately a vein in the rock kept the same name, and in a brief space of time, thanks to the divine will of the gods, the stones thrown from male hands took on the appearance of men, while from those the woman threw, women were recreated. So it comes about that we are a hardy race, well accustomed to toil, giving evidence of the origin from which we sprang.<sup>19</sup>

We are earth creatures; and it is because humans and all living things are of the earth, that all living things and humans are transmutable into one another. The theme of the earth is threaded throughout Malouf's novel, as also the werewolf, the human become animal, or the animal become human, the creature that is human-animal; the fear that the human might be only animal, might become animal again. But also, as we shall see, this werewolf figures the possibility of a different change, of humanity become divine, because divinity has become human.

In the novel, the wolf is the wild, the outside of human making, that which lies beyond the limits of the known world; beyond the stones that mark out the Sulmo estate where Ovid grew up;<sup>20</sup> beyond the wooden walls of Tomis; beyond the Ister that marks the northern boundary of Rome's dominion. The wolf is the beyond of human identity; that which is the other side of human flesh, outside the domain of the human self, which is not earth, not animal, not spirit, not God. The human is not-wolf, and so the threat and fascination, the fear and hope of the werewolf, the wolf-man, and, indeed, the wolf-woman, who crosses and recrosses the distinctions that make for

human identity. The werewolf figures in his or her flesh the possibility of becoming other, of becoming animal or spirit, earth or divinity.

Indeed, these possibilities of a heavenly or earthly metamorphosis are inherent in the making of men and women from earth, from clay mixed with stars. But it is also present in Ovid's retelling of Lycaon's story, which in earlier traditions presents an overly pious king, whose fault is not inhospitality but excessive donation. In earlier versions of the story, Lycaon is so devoted to Zeus that he sacrifices an infant to the god, for which he is turned into a wolf.<sup>21</sup> On this account, Lycaon's butchery is a holy murder, a gift seemingly spurned. Moreover, Lycaon's transformation may not have lasted. Pliny relates how a priest of Zeus Lycaeus suffered lycanthropy after eating a sacrificed child, but was able to return to his human form after ten years. Pliny also tells of Arcadians who yearly chose by lot a person to swim across a lonely lake. On reaching the other side the swimmer would be turned into a wolf, in which form he would remain unless he could refrain from eating human flesh for nine years.<sup>22</sup> Eating ones fellows brings wolfishness; refraining from doing so returns humanity. Ovid's Lycaon parodies true sacrifice, since he doubts the god to whom he offers, and invites the incarnate deity—god-become-human—to eat another man. 'Once he imputes beastliness to the gods, Lycaon brings that charge upon himself.'<sup>23</sup>

### **Coming in and venturing out**

At the start of the world, at the beginning of his *Metamorphoses*, Ovid found a wolf-man, the savage Lycaon, and Ovid at the end of his life, at the end of the world, in Malouf's novel, finds the wolf returning. Malouf's Tomis is a stockaded town, a

‘muddy little fort’, which periodically has to defend itself against the ‘savages’ who come from the North, ‘howling in packs to steal our animals or fire the outlying fields’ (9). These barbarians—Scythians—come ‘yowling’ and ‘yelping like wolves’ (49). But real wolves also come, stalking the fort in the depths of winter, in the watches of the night.

On such watches you can see the wolves moving in packs on the snow, and if it is still enough, hear them howling. Sometimes a lone wolf will come right up to the wall, and once or twice a whole pack will appear, showing their fangs in the moonlight and filling the air with their terrible yowling, as they smell the beasts in their stalls, and the oxen, the asses, hearing their howls, make their own uneasy bellowing and braying in return (108).

Within the walls of the palisade, Ovid lives with the family of the headman, with the headman’s old mother, his daughter-in-law and her son, the headman’s indulged grandson, the third child in the story (the young Ovid and the wolf-boy being the others). The old man tells his grandson stories of demons, bears and wolves (30). These people live with wolves without and demons within, the household spirits who abide in the ‘cracks and corners’ of their homes, resting in ‘empty bowls’ and the ashes from the fire (33).<sup>24</sup> But the wolves are also within, entering the fort through the dreams of its inhabitants, who can also, in their sleep, venture out, like the shaman in his trance, to ‘distant polar regions’ (45), like Ovid in his sleeping, ‘into the grasslands beyond the edge of our world’ (10). He digs in the earth, and the wolves come and join him; digging in his dreams.

Outside, the horsemen of Tomis go hunting for deer, and find the den of a wolf. ‘The bitch stands at the entrance with her fangs bared, and her cubs, caught in the open, stop tumbling about on the earth, nipping at one another, little soft things, all fur, and as we come up start back and stand on all fours behind her, staring’ (40). Later, the huntsmen find the tracks of a bear, and of deer, and among the tracks, the footprints of a child, a wild boy, who, as all the men know, lives and runs with the deer. And then Ovid sees the child and sees that he is the wolf-boy from his own childhood, strangely returned (41-2). That night Ovid dreams that the boy has come into the circle of sleeping huntsmen. Some ‘animal has come up out of the dark and is staring at me. A wolf? Is it a wolf’s snout I can feel, a wolf’s breath? A deer’s? Or is it the Child’ (46)?

Ovid becomes convinced that the wild boy who lives with the deer is the wolf child of Sulmo, and that he must be caught and brought within the village (48, 50). But it is another two years before he sees the child again, and a further year before he can persuade the men of the village to hunt down the boy and so bring him into their lives. They fear—or so Ovid thinks—that to bring the boy within will be to bring with him the spirits who have protected him in the wild. They ‘may be the wolves that prowl around the stockade in winter, howling above the wind, gray packs that are themselves like spirits in the winter plains, shaggy, iron-fanged, famished with cold.’ Indeed, the boy might be able to turn himself into a wolf. He might ‘be able to creep out at night and open the gates to his brothers’ (60). And when the huntsmen corner the child, he opens his mouth and lets out a ‘terrible howling’ that is like nothing ‘ever heard from a human throat’ (63).

But a werewolf has already entered the village. Lycaon-become-wolf started to howl, losing the power of speech, and so also Ovid, in Tomis, has begun to forget his

native tongue. Without books, and without anyone to whom he can read his poetry, without someone who can supply a missing word, Ovid is lost for words. ‘I have unlearned my power of speech,’ he laments in the *Tristia*.<sup>25</sup> In Malouf’s novel he becomes an animal or an infant, unable to speak (12). ‘I communicate like a child with grunts and signs, I point, I raise my eyebrows, questioning, I burst into tears of joy if someone—a child even—understands what I am trying to say. ... All day I wander in a dream, as isolated from the world of men as if I belonged to another species’ (9). ‘I am relegated to the region of silence. All I can do is shout’ (20). All he can do is howl; an echo of chaos.

But then, with time, with the passing of years, Ovid is changed, domesticated. He learns the language of the Getae, their ways and stories, their fears and hopes. Thus this story of man become wolf—Ovid exiled from his own kind—becomes a story of wolf becoming human. Ovid finds himself anew, in a newfound land, newly spoken into being. And then, by bringing the wolf child within and teaching him the ways of human habitation, and, above all, human speech—and to speak Getae rather than Latin (90)—Ovid is slowly transformed, and becomes newly made. The story repeatedly plays with alterations and the undecidability of their direction, of there being any initial or perduring stabilities. In teaching the child, Ovid becomes the taught (89, 91). Is this child who runs with the deer really a wolf who only seems human, who may or may not be turning human; or was he first a human who became a wolf?

In the fourth and most terrifying part of Malouf’s tale, all the central characters are constrained to live closely with one another, seeing out the winter’s cold in the warmth of a shared room. Ovid and the wild-boy, the strange wolf-creature, along with the headman and his family: the sullen grandson, his mother and the

grandmother—the old woman who suspects, fears and hates the wolf-boy and his demon. When the wild child falls prey to a fever he shows the nature of his possession. When he recovers and the grandson succumbs to the fever, she knows that the wolf-demon has not left but migrated. It has slipped across the room while they slept and entered the boy through the touching of dreams (113). And when the boy recovers there is still suspicion, waiting to be confirmed; and confirmed when illness befalls the headman, Ryzak, the old man who becomes wolf in his death throes (127). Though the descriptions in this part of the novel are metamorphic, the metaphysics is that of metempsychosis, the migration of souls between bodies, the slippage of dreams between sleepers.

The beast cannot be contained, the force of transformation that leads to death and birth (134). With Ryzak dead, his guard and protector gone, Ovid knows that the anguish of the family and the villagers will turn to anger against him and the child, and so, during the headman's wake, he and the wolf boy depart, starting the journey that until then they have only dreamt. Travelling North they come to the great river, the Ister (now the Danube), the frozen waters of which they must cross in order to find a final transformation, in the fifth part of the book.

### **Hybrid bodies**

Malouf's novel is concerned with change, with the metamorphoses that befall all earthlings, and in taking Ovid, the great poet of transformations, from Rome to Tomis, from being a cultivated citizen to a wild, wolfish villager, and then onwards again, from a shouting rage to a new kind of humanity, from Tomis to an entirely



imaginary land, beyond the Ister, Malouf addresses the fundamental *aporia* of metamorphosis. Can there be real change without destruction, and so no real change at all, no true becoming, but merely different moments of being, a series of little deaths.<sup>26</sup>

This question beset earlier readers of Ovid, who, as spiritual inheritors of the other child who was growing while Ovid was declining, found in the Roman poet's stories of earthlings and werewolves a place for their own belief that they could become other than they were, and not be destroyed in the process. But for this they needed a story to catch and hold the moments of change, turning them from arbitrary events into meaningful continuities.

Gerald of Wales (Giraldus Cambrensis), wandering through Ireland in the twelfth century (c.1187), came upon the story of a priest who was once 'benighted in a certain wood on the borders of Meath.'<sup>27</sup> He was travelling with a 'young lad', and together they made a fire and settled down for the night, when suddenly a wolf appeared to them and spoke. 'Rest secure, and be not afraid, for there is no reason you should fear, where no fear is.' Though much afraid, the priest and the boy hold converse with the wolf and learn his story. He was once a man, a native of Ossory, who, with a woman, was cursed by St Natalis, and both were turned to wolves for seven years. If they survive they will return to their human shape. But the woman-wolf is now very ill, and being a good Catholic, her wolf-companion has come to plead with the priest for the consolations of his 'priestly office'. The trembling priest is led to the she-wolf and performs the offices of the church, but hesitates upon giving her communion, for fear that he would be feeding Christ to an animal. Thus the he-wolf, 'to remove all doubt', and 'using his claw for a hand, ... tore off the skin of the she-wolf, from the head down to the navel, folding it back. Thus she immediately

presented the form of an old woman.’ And thus convinced that the wolf is really human, the priest gives her the ‘gift of God’, and the he-wolf rolls back her skin, fitting it to its ‘original form.’

Gerald is not perturbed by the claim that there are wolf-men and -women. He lives in a world which seems to be every bit as miraculous as that in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*. Indeed, the werewolves of Meath assume wolfish nature at God’s bidding, through the curse of the saint. But, as Caroline Walker Bynum notes, Gerald is concerned that a man, or a woman, might really become a wolf. ‘[I]s such an animal to be called a brute or a man?’ And if one were to kill such an animal, would it be murder? He has some difficulty in answering the question, but finally, with the help of Augustine, concludes that no man can really become wolf.

[B]ut those whom God has created can, to outward appearance, by his permission, become transformed, so that they appear to be what they are not; the senses of men being deceived and laid asleep by a strange illusion, so that things are not seen as they actually exist, but are strangely drawn by the power of some phantom or magical incantation to rest their eyes on unreal and fictitious forms.<sup>28</sup>

And this Augustinian answer to his dilemma is written into Gerald’s account of the Meath werewolves, who are really humans in wolf’s clothing, as the macabre unzipping of the she-wolf makes clear. There is human skin beneath the fur, and so no alteration of human identity. This is change without inner alteration, and so, perhaps, no real metamorphosis.

But the story of the Meath werewolves presents another problem or perturbation for Gerald, which he never quite articulates, but which explains the importance and attraction of the werewolves' story. We know that God can bid human nature assume that of the wolf, for we know that 'divine nature assumed human nature for the salvation of the world.' Thus the werewolf figures Christ himself, the God-man who has divinity beneath his skin, just as the consecrated host has Christ's flesh beneath its bread-like appearance.<sup>29</sup> These figures follow one another in Gerald's text, God becoming human, human becoming wolf, and body becoming bread, or, as it actually follows, bread becoming body, human flesh. Gerald's chapter on the werewolves of Meath ends with mention of the eucharistic change, but which he decides not to discuss, 'its comprehension being far beyond the powers of the human intellect.' And indeed, he is already a little confused, having first written of the 'apparent change of the bread into the body of Christ', and then correcting himself by noting that the change is real—transubstantial—and not apparent. But Gerald's slip bespeaks the piety of the twelfth century, for which the eucharistic change was nothing if not apparent, the werewolvis reverse of the scholastic distinction between form and substance.

Elsewhere, in his *Gemma Ecclesiastica* (*The Jewel of the Church*), Gerald recounts some typically twelfth century tales of consecrated hosts which unzip their breadly skin in order to display the fleshy substance beneath. In one particular story, a woman in the city of Arras takes home a consecrated host. It is meant for the sick, but she forgets it, and it is only with the repeated glowing of the locket in which it has been put, disturbing the sleep of herself and her husband, that she remembers it. She finds the wimple in which the locket was secured covered in blood, and in alarm takes it to the church. By this time a crowd of people has gathered, and all are witness to the

priest's opening of the locket and finding within the host that now 'appeared like bleeding flesh on one half and bread on the other.'<sup>30</sup> This hybrid host, half bread, half flesh, mimics the hypostatic union of God and man in Christ, and of man and animal in the werewolf.

Moreover, as Gerald might have known, the beastly transformation of man into wolf can result from cannibalism; the practice of all Christians who consume the consecrated bread. In his discussion of the Meath werewolves, Gerald repeats from Augustine the story of the Arcadians who swim the lake and become werewolves. There they live with the 'wild beasts of the same species in the deserts of that country', only returning to their human form after nine years if they have not consumed human flesh, and swim back across the lake. Even if Gerald had not heard of those wolfish priests who sacrificed and ate children, the story of the Arcadian werewolves suggests that one risks turning wolf when eating ones own kind, since refraining from such fare turns one human. But then it is human flesh which the priest gives the Meath wolf-woman to eat. But her cannibalism—her eating of Christ's divine-human flesh—brings health; a direct reversal of the effects of the Arcadian sacrificial meal. For a Christian reader, the crossing of the lake might figure the metamorphosis of the fall, itself the effect of eating forbidden food; while the return crossing undoes the change and more, returning one to a future self, to a more intensely human life.

### World making

Ovid and the child crossing the Ister are like the Arcadians who swim to the far shore and become wolves. Except that Ovid has thought the child already a werewolf, who has come from the North, perhaps from beyond the Ister. Certainly Ovid has treated him as a wolf wanting to turn human; but his wolfishness has proved too strong, and it is he who leads Ovid to the wolfish shore—Ovid who has been turning wolf from the moment he arrived in Tomis and found that he could no longer speak to other humans. Perhaps Ovid was forced to swim the lake to Tomis, and become wolf, because, like Lycaon, he had offended Augustus-become-Jove with a gift that spoke too truly of its recipient's wolfishness? Yet Malouf refuses the stability of even this figuration, since in becoming wolf Ovid has also been turning more human, discovering kindnesses and empathies in his new neighbours that he had not found amongst his fellows in Rome, who (perhaps) were already wolves.

But in crossing the Ister, Ovid is becoming something more than wolf, something older and more primordial. He is becoming earth. These werewolves, Ovid and the boy, do not eat flesh of any kind, but consume the shoots and fruits of the grasslands, and the grubs of the insects that toil there. Earlier in the novel Ovid has imagined a different kind of metamorphosis, not that of human becoming animal, but of human turning vegetable—plant, grass, tree—as when Daphne, in the *Metamorphoses*, turns laurel. Malouf's Ovid imagines turning water, and, as a pool in the forest, being drunk by a deer, and, more fearfully, a wolf, who might drink him all up (55-6). And could he truly become water? Would that water be Ovid? And would the wolf have eaten human flesh in drinking the pool, and so delayed the time when

she might become human? Elsewhere again, Malouf's Ovid imagines evolution as metamorphosis.

Recalling the story in the *Metamorphoses* where the throwing of earth's bones remakes humanity, Ovid imagines a 'stone sleeping in the sun', which so dreams 'that the veins of ore in its nature might become liquid' and move, that one day, 'through long centuries of aching for such a condition', the transformation is begun, 'the veins loosen and flow, the clay relaxes', and the stone 'discovers eyes, a mouth, legs to leap with, and is toad.' And then, in time, the toad 'dreams itself aloft on wings' (22).

Our bodies are not final. We are moving, all of us, in our common humankind, through the forms we love so deeply in one another, to what our hands have already touched in lovemaking and our bodies strain towards in each other's darkness. Slowly, and with pain, over centuries, we each move an infinitesimal space towards it. We are creating the lineaments of some final man, for whose delight we have prepared a landscape, and who can only be god (22-23; and similarly 58).

But there is some trickery here of which we should be aware. When, in his dream, Ovid becomes water, we are incessantly reminded that he, Ovid, in the first person, has become water: '*I am a pool of water. I feel myself warm in the sunlight, liquid, filled with the blue of the sky; but I am the merest broken fragment of it and I feel, softly, the clouds passing through me, their reflections, and once the suddenness of wings*' (55). Ovid may be but a pool of water, the merest fragment of the sky, but he is still Ovid. Ovid, as we know him in the novel, never disappears. There are no discordances, no discontinuities, in the narrating voice. There is nothing that really

changes, for this is a genuinely Ovidian Ovid, an omniscient narrator, whose uncertainties and hesitations are but affects, dissimulations. The entire novel, it would seem, is written from the perspective of its final words: ‘I am there.’

The world is made through the spoken word. Finding a ‘little wild poppy’ growing in the waste, Ovid names its colour scarlet, and exults in the childhood memories that the named flower recalls. ‘I have raised you out of my earliest memories, out of my blood, to set you blowing in the wind.’ From naming one colour he is able to recall all others, and so begin to colour in the heathen wastes of his new home. ‘I am making the spring. With yellow of the ox-eyed daisy of our weedy olive groves, with blue of cornflower, orange of marigold, purple of foxglove, even the pinks and cyclamens of my mother’s garden that I have forgotten all these years’ (25).

Malouf’s Ovid knows that everything of which he writes has been brought into being—into his readers’ imaginations—through his writing of it. He has conjured the gods with his words. They are but human fancies, though perhaps born of deep needs and kept in existence through complex relationships between their devotees.

If the gods are with you there, glowing out of a tree in some pasture or shaking their spirit over the pebbles of a brook in clear sunlight, in wells, in springs, in a stone that marks the edge of your legal right over a hillside; if the gods are there, it is because you have discovered them there, drawn them up out of your soul’s need for them and dreamed them into the landscape to make it shine. ... 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. ... 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 (21-22).

As the last sentence suggests, it is not just the gods, but our world and ourselves that we make through our imagining of it. Everything is to be made by us, no matter how long it takes. We will become our own gods, deifying ourselves. Just as Ovid's *Tristia* and last letters from Pontus reimagine both the Rome he has left and the town in which he lives—as much an imaginary life as Malouf's imagining of it—so too Malouf's Ovid dreams the world in which he lives, and which he first likens to the 'unmade earth' at the beginning of time, waiting to be formed into life, into the myriad lives that nature and the poet will endlessly transform. 'I have been back to the beginnings. I have seen the unmade earth. It is flat and featureless, swamp in summer, a frozen waste in winter, without a tree or a flower or a made field, and only the wildest seeds growing together in their stunted clumps or blowing about at random on the breeze. It is a place of utter desolation, the beginning' (23-4).

But the poet is always late. Ovid creates through memory, transforming the present by recalling the past. Always there is preceding matter, and no moment when matter itself is spoken into being. For all that Ovid recalls the Hebrew book of beginnings, he has no story of a pure *logogenesis*, when God utters humanity into being (Genesis 1:26-7). Nor could he imagine, as would later Christians, how to fold the first creation of humankind—by word alone—back onto the story of the chaos, so that even the most primordial matter—'flat and featureless'—is spoken into being, *ex nihilo*.<sup>31</sup> This story cannot be told without admitting the poet's own belatedness; that he speaks after the world—in which he speaks—has been spoken; and spoken by another.

But once given, the poet can—and we do—transform the world through speaking. Moreover, Malouf's Ovid discovers that in transforming his world through



language he begins to transform himself. In the second part of the book, Malouf describes how Ovid, while remaining Roman, begins to become Getae, just as the stone, while remaining stone, became human, and the human, wolf. In this way he can become water, while remaining Ovid. Metaphor is the power of metamorphosis.

Ovid imagines the boy who comes in from the wild a wolf; but in a strange way it is this wolf-boy who then reimagines Ovid, leading him into the wild to become other than the poet he made himself. At the beginning of the story, Ovid imagines that he and the wolf child of Sulmo, whom only he could see, communicated in a language of their own devising; ‘a language whose every syllable [was] a gesture of reconciliation’ (94). Now, at the end of the story, at the end of his life, Ovid and the boy can communicate without words, through simply being there, reconciled to one another. ‘Wandering along together, wading through the high grasses side by side, is a kind of conversation that needs no tongue, a perfect interchange of perceptions, moods, questions, answers, that is as simple as the weather, ... *It is like talking to oneself*’ (145-46; emphasis added). This scene is both beautiful and chilling. For it speaks of silent reciprocities, of unspoken intimacies that cross between skins; and, at the same time, of a terrifying loneliness; a shared life that is only imaginary.

The child leads Ovid into a land without wolves, into a place where he can sink down and become one with the earth. ‘I shall settle deep into the earth, deeper than I do in sleep, and will not be lost. We are continuous with earth in all the particles of our physical being, as in our breathing we are continuous with sky. Between our bodies and the world there is unity and commerce’ (147). It may not be clear how Malouf intends us to take Ovid’s final transformation, but given that it is Ovid who writes we may suspect a deep irony. For at the last, Ovid has returned to the beginning, to the ground from which humans were first made, at the beginning of

Ovid's own book of changes. It is perhaps there that Ovid has arrived when we read the last words of his book: 'I am there' (153). He has arrived at the beginning of (his) writing.

The words are beautiful and telling, for after arriving there, Ovid can tell no more. The boy, 'walking on the water's light', has stepped into the air, and is seen no more, and Ovid sees no more. He lies dead on the earth, and his words have ceased to flow. Now there is only metamorphosis but no becoming, bodily change but no substance, no 'I' that can become wolf or water, that can tell a story. The story-teller is silenced. Of course, as we must now be most aware, we have been reading a story. We know about Ovid in Tomis from the poems he wrote and sent to Rome. Likewise, Malouf's Ovid addresses us as recipients of his letters, the future readers of his thoughts. But at some point in the story, Ovid has passed beyond the moment when he could be writing to us, and writes without putting ink on vellum. He is writing a purely imaginary life.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Ovid, *Tristia*, I.vi.10-11; *Ovid's Poetry of Exile*, translated into verse by David R. Slavitt (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1990), p.17.

<sup>2</sup> Ovid, *Tristia*, translated by Arthur Leslie Wheeler, revised by G. P. Goold, The Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, [1924] 1996), II.137 (p.65). For Ovid on the naming of Tomis (which he appears to derive from the Greek *temno*, 'to cut') see *Tristia*, III.ix (pp.133-37).

<sup>3</sup> See A. D. Fitton-Brown, 'The Unreality of Ovid's Tomitan Exile', *Liverpool Classical Monthly*, 10/2 (1985): 18-22; and G. D. Williams, *Banished Voices: Readings in Ovid's Exile Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp.3-8.

<sup>4</sup> David Malouf, *An Imaginary Life* (London: Vintage, 1999 [1978]). All references are given in the main body of the text.

<sup>5</sup> See Raphael Lyne, 'Love and Exile After Ovid' in *The Cambridge Companion to Ovid*, edited by Philip Hardie (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 288-300 (p.299).

<sup>6</sup> See Caroline Walker Bynum, *Metamorphosis and Identity* (New York: Zone Books, 2001).

- <sup>7</sup> Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, translated by Mary M. Innes (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1955), 1 (p.31).
- <sup>8</sup> *The Wolf Man* was directed by George Waggner and *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban* by Alfonso Cuarón. Before Lon Chaney, Warner Oland and Henry Hall had played werewolves in Stuart Walker's *Werewolf of London* (US 1935) for Universal Pictures.
- <sup>9</sup> See Angela Carter, *The Bloody Camber and Other Stories* (London: Vintage, 1995 [1979]). We should also note that other master-fabulist of metamorphoses, Sigmund Freud, who associated the werewolf with a prepubescent, indeed prenatal (fear of) transformation, an altogether primal imaginary. See Sigmund Freud, 'From the History of an Infantile Neurosis (The "Wolf Man")' (1914/18) in *The Penguin Freud Library: Vol.9 Case Histories II*, edited by James Strachey and Angela Richards (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books), pp.227-366; and especially pp.337, 363-65 for Freud's musings on the phylogenesis of the primal phantasm: wolfish copulation.
- <sup>10</sup> Ovid, *Fasti*, translated by James George Frazer, revised by G. P. Goold (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996 [1931]), IV.807-820 (p.249).
- <sup>11</sup> Ovid, *Fasti*, II.17-18 (p.87).
- <sup>12</sup> The Nephilim's gigantic stature is given Numbers 13:33; and see also Deuteronomy 2:10-11.
- <sup>13</sup> See *The Book of Enoch*, translated by R. H. Charles (London: SPCK, [1917] 1997), VII (p.35).
- <sup>14</sup> *Book of Enoch*, IX-XI (p.36). Enoch's story of the (fallen) angels—who fathered the Nephilim—and their gift of cosmetics was taken up and greatly elaborated against women's adornment by Tertullian (c.160-c.225) in his *On the Apparel of Women (De Cultu Feminarum)*, translated by S. Thelwall, in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, edited by A. Roberts, J. Donaldson and A. C. Coxe (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1994 [1885]), IV.14-25.
- <sup>15</sup> Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, I (p.33).
- <sup>16</sup> In Hesiod's *Theogony* (8<sup>th</sup> century BC), on which Ovid drew, the giants are born from the blood that poured from Ouranos, when gelded by his son, Kronos: 'eagerly he harvested his father's genitals/and threw them off behind. They did not fall/from his hands in vain, for all the bloody drops/that leaped out were received by Earth; and when/the year's time was accomplished, she gave birth/to the Furies, and the Giants'. Hesiod, *Theogony*, translated by Dorothea Wender (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1973), lines 180-86 (p.29).
- <sup>17</sup> Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, I (p.32).
- <sup>18</sup> Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, I (p.35).
- <sup>19</sup> Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, I (pp.39-40).
- <sup>20</sup> Ovid, *Tristia*, IV.x (pp.196-207).
- <sup>21</sup> See Apollodorous, *The Library*, 3.8; Pausanias, *Description of Greece*, 8.2.
- <sup>22</sup> Pliny, *Natural History*, 8.34.
- <sup>23</sup> Leonard Barkan, *The Gods Made Flesh: Metamorphosis and the Pursuit of Paganism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986), p.27.
- <sup>24</sup> But Ovid also recalls that spirits lived in his childhood home. '[T]he women tell us stories about wood spirits and demons older than our Roman gods, who live in odd corners of the house and barn and must be placated with lumps of dough (which they come for in the guise of a mouse) or with herbs that only the oldest and wisest of the women know how to gather, high up in the hills' (79).

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<sup>25</sup> Ovid, *Tristia*, III.xiv.45-6 (p.155).

<sup>26</sup> Bynum, *Metamorphosis and Identity*, p.30.

<sup>27</sup> See Gerald of Wales, *Topography of Ireland*, translated by Thomas Foretser, revised and edited with additional footnotes by Thomas Wright (Cambridge, Ontario: In Parentheses Publications Medieval Latin Series, 2000), XIX (pp.44-7). Available online at <[http://www.yorku.ca/inpar/topography\\_ireland.pdf](http://www.yorku.ca/inpar/topography_ireland.pdf)>.

<sup>28</sup> Gerald of Wales, *Topography of Ireland*, XIX (p.46).

<sup>29</sup> Needless to say, a more refined theology does not clothe divinity with human skin, but finds that skin the unclenching of divinity. That which *gives* being is *given* in the being of Christ. There is, of course, no opposition between being and becoming.

<sup>30</sup> Gerald of Wales, *The Jewel of the Church*, translated by John J. Hagen OSA, David Medieval Texts and Studies 2 (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1979), XI (p.33).

<sup>31</sup> ‘The people collectively known as “Greeks” [and “Romans”] ... did not ... have any notion of creation. That is to say they did not ask the typically Jewish (and thus Christian) question about the *esse* of things, the ultimately radical question that, for Aquinas, points us towards the unknown God.’ Herbert McCabe, *God Matters* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1987), p.41.

<sup>32</sup> Earlier versions of this essay were read to the Theology and Religion Research Seminar at the University of Durham, and to the 2005 Bristol Trialogue Conference (Psychotherapy, Literature, Spirituality), for which it was written. I would like to thank all who responded so generously on both occasions, but in particular to Phoebe Caldwell, Douglas Hedley, Jill Hopkins, Gwyneth Lewis, Stephen Prickett, Maria Rhode and Rowan Williams.