

“Some Further Being”: Engaging with the Other in David Malouf’s An Imaginary Life

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Abstract

This article is most concerned with analysing the role of the other in Malouf’s fiction. It briefly considers Malouf’s relationship with history and postcoloniality before engaging in a close reading focused on Malouf’s personal grammar and figurative patterns. The argument demonstrates that Malouf’s style orients itself toward transformation: the grammar is active, movement-oriented, and the figures notably hybrid or syncretic. Text-making thus reveals itself as a principal path of approach to the other. Identification, as portrayed in psychoanalytic theory, presents itself as another path, especially in relation to imagination and dreams. The essay recognizes that a full apprehension of the other is not perhaps possible, although moments of contact and revitalizing exchange clearly are. Brief examination of the relation between otherness and the broader social world follows, giving attention to questions of gender. Extending beyond its exclusive consideration of *An Imaginary Life*, the essay concludes by acknowledging that Malouf explores his sense of the other most illuminatingly in relation to I-and-you.

Keywords

David Malouf, identity, alterity, transformation, language, imagination, dream

As David Malouf acknowledges, little is known of Ovid’s life, and still less about his exile, which was decreed by Augustus for unrecorded reasons. Interestingly, Malouf has suggested that this dearth of facts was

“useful” for his writing of “a fiction with its roots in possible event”.¹ The decision to write an imaginary life for Ovid is based on a primary recognition that history is synecdochic, that our sense of the past is necessarily partial and gapped. More compelling, however, than this recognition – which is not extraordinary, after all – is the writer’s response to it, his clear sense that the facts of history, whether meagre or plentiful, require a work of synthetic imagination.² To make history – to compose it, to write it – one must imagine it, bridge its gaps, remake its fragments as seemly wholes. This is not perhaps an understanding so much as it is a disposition with respect to history, but this disposition, in Malouf’s case, is potentially enabling. It relieves the writer from the burden of a constituted past that leaves him belated, unaccounted for, unfounded. It conceives of history – too often appearing as the record of exclusions, limitations, and constraints – as an energizing field of multiple possibilities. And in Malouf’s specific case it allows for an inaugural act, for the bringing of newness into the world. Our only integrated history of Ovid’s exile is Malouf’s fictional one, even though it is other than history in both conception and execution, even though it is history slipping into story. History may be the initial instance of the otherness Malouf pursues, by various paths, throughout *An Imaginary Life*. In relation to our lived experience of time, history signals individual incompleteness, manifests the ever-more-than-I that cannot be mastered and assimilated, but also opens a field of discovery, of new and greater possibility.³

Malouf elaborates a suggestively post-imperial conception in writing out his other-history. He understands his writing as a subversion, as a writing that inscribes itself below established, authorized meanings; a writing that aims to unsettle – and even undermine and unfound – such meanings. The Ovid of Malouf’s imagining deliberately subverts imperial structures of meaning. This poet self-consciously turns his verses against the authorized writing of the Augustan age, which he sees as “solemn, orderly, monumental, dull” (p. 26) – a writing of empire in its most stultifying form. But Ovid nonetheless makes use of the imperial monuments, turning them away from their intended purposes, striving to produce an other-than-imperial writing that others imperial writing. Quite early in the novel, Ovid metamorphoses the meaning of the monumental Portico of Marcellus: “in the shadow of a portico dedicated by [Augustus’s] sister to her faithful husband, someone tonight is being fucked; because in a poem once I made it happen, and made that particular act, in that particular place, a gesture of defiance” (p. 27). This writing evidently is not only subversive but inaugural; it succeeds in remaking the world. Yet Malouf’s Ovid does not simply oppose, or defy, imperial culture in a straightforward counter-discursive act. He reworks and supplements, thus transforming the meaning of the imperial given and

creating the possibility of new and different life for his social world. Unsurprisingly, Ovid associates his writing’s desired effects with sexual acts. In sexual acts one ventures and risks identity in encounter with an other, and finds oneself (hopefully) both energized and transformed.

The word “desolateness”, however, orders Ovid’s earliest reflections upon his place of exile, recalling innumerable colonial renderings of Australia as the most extreme form of *terra nullius*, as a land intransigently strange, empty of and even hostile to productive human intentions. Ovid understands his new location as the outermost limit of an empire, thus recalling the spatial and cultural marginality ascribed to colonial lands, and to antipodal Australia most particularly. Similarly, the cosmopolitan Roman poet feels he is in exile more from a culture than from a homeland.⁴ Thus, Ovid takes shape as a quite precise figuring of the settler-exile: although he opposes imperial forms of culture while inhabiting the empire’s centre, he experiences himself in exile as a displaced piece of empire. He must half-discover and half-forge an other version of himself. And indeed, *An Imaginary Life*’s affiliation with post-colonial topics and concerns is most compellingly evident in its intensive meditation on questions of difference and alterity, which preoccupy the poet-exile, and in its eventual organization of these questions in relation to situations of intersubjective encounter and exchange.

Criticism that seeks to specify the novel’s postcolonial thrust has emphasized its preoccupations with language – with language as a topic of the fiction as well as its vehicle. (Language, as will become clear, is also the principal path for the pursuit of the other.) Patrick Buckridge argues that Malouf’s originality, in *An Imaginary Life* and in subsequent fictions, resides mainly in his particular “grammar”: this grammar marks Malouf’s writing as distinctly postcolonial; it is “his own in a way that nothing else in his writing is, or can be”.⁵ Suzie O’Brien finds that Malouf’s imagining of Ovid’s story rejects imperialist knowledge systems and contributes to the rich “wilderness of dialogical possibilities”, which, for O’Brien, is the space of postcolonial enunciation.⁶ Gareth Griffiths follows a similar line, asserting that the novel’s “discursive features” – its concern with “linguistic displacement”, exile, and “cross-culturality” – mark it as “characteristically post-colonial”.⁷

By taking up Buckridge’s grammatical orientation and refocusing it in relation to dialogue, displacement, and cross-culturality, one can discern in Malouf a closely ordered yet vigorous grammar that shapes his envisioning of the allure of otherness and of the role of otherness in creative self-fashioning. Particularly noteworthy are verb-phrase formulations using such constructions as “out into” or “up out of”. “Out into” suggests movement out of self, out of familiar space and into newness, spaces of venture, experiences of otherness; “up out of” lends outward

movement a sense of progress, development, “heightened” experience. Thus, Ovid observes the wild boy, the Child, as he gains confidence in the strange new world of a human household: the boy begins “to move out into the room”; Ovid also witnesses him “reaching up out of himself” (p. 79). Ovid imagines the Child’s birth as a “push out into the world” (p. 89). He observes the Child looking out a window, and surmises that the boy must be “dreaming himself out into the winter countryside” (p. 114). Following the inspiration he takes from the Child, Ovid concludes that he must “try to leap up out of myself” (p. 97), ultimately arriving at an ethos recalling that of Tennyson’s Ulysses: ageing men, and especially ageing poets, must “push up off their deathbed and adventure out into the unknown”. Indeed, this “pushing out”, this traversing of conventionally presumed “limits” emerges at last as the key to an understanding of the meaning and purpose of a human life (p. 135).

A closely related grammatical pattern orders itself around innovative uses of “forward”, “further”, “beyond”, and related word-concepts. Ovid imagines his physical frame “breaking forth” and “bursting forth”, seeking new forms for itself (p. 148). The Child also ends the story “already straining forward to whatever life it is that lies out there beyond our moment together” (p. 149). Indeed, the thrust toward “further being” effectively orders the novel’s closing passages (p. 150), which turn upon movements between “here” and “there”. As the work moves toward “I am there”, its peculiarly open closing statement, the energized oxymoron “out here” occurs twice (pp. 148, 150). (I characterize “out here” as oxymoronic, because “out there” would be a more commonplace construction: “out” is usually situated “there” at a certain distance from the locus of the speaker/observer.) Following the two instances of “out here”, one finds “The Child is there” (p. 151), occurring as a single-sentence paragraph that initiates the final passages. The Child is present, but apart from the observing self, distinct, there not here. This returns us to the narrative’s opening enunciations, where one also reads “*The child is there*” (p. 9). But in this first instance the perspective is that of a child – a child Ovid once was, a child whose sense of separate selfhood has not yet consolidated itself; whereas, the second instance enunciates the perspective of one who is near death and ready to release himself from the reign of separate selfhood. Therefore, the short sentence that quite famously closes the narrative – Ovid’s final “I am there” – needs to be read with the recognition that the location of the first person is almost invariably “here”. In the conventional grammar of everyday speech, *I*, most typically, am *here*. Ovid, however, in making his passage toward death, becomes other than himself, discovers the site of the other, transports his consciousness (in its final moment) from the “here” of self to the “there” of the other.⁸ The exiled cosmopolite becomes more meaningfully the poet of

metamorphoses, of transformations – of transmutations, transfers, transits, translations – of all the “trans” words that occur with notable frequency in Malouf’s writing, the “trans” words that delineate movements across, from here to there, from one location or state of being to another.

Malouf’s grammar evidently is spatially oriented, locational. It situates and resituates. This grammar not only foregrounds the importance of language as a focus of concern, it shows that Malouf seeks a language of situation and transit, a language fundamentally preoccupied with place and with movements within and between places. On occasion, this preoccupation with the relation of language to place finds explicit expression, as when Ovid describes the landscape of his exile as “a vast page whose tongue I am unable to decipher, whose message to me I am unable to interpret” (p. 17). Faced with this initial illegibility of his new world, Ovid’s project becomes that of discovering and learning an appropriate language of place. This project is not only grammatical; it is also very thoroughly and methodically configured. The figure, always a prominent element in Malouf’s prose, is the use of language that spatializes, giving language a shape and location that is, as it were, right there before our eyes. In the figure, language takes place.

Responding critically to European folk-tale traditions, Malouf first uses the figure of the wolf to represent alterity as a locus of misrecognition, a manifestation of othering that deforms. The wolf is the othered other created by the social world, the other estranged and remade as a site of fear and disavowal. This psychosocial dynamic that creates the wolf as the wild, threatening other is clearly portrayed right at the start of the novel, in an alarmingly concrete imaging. As a child of perhaps five or six, Ovid confronts a wolf’s head hacked off by hunters, a head “*with ropes of dark blood hanging from it*” (p. 10). This horrifying, and horrifyingly partial, presentation of the wolf emphasizes not lupine violence but human violence motivated by fear and undesired recognition – human violence that is done to the wolf. Intuiting perhaps that the wolf’s message of terror is in fact a human message, the child Ovid is moved to envision the wolf as “*kindly*”, as mysteriously yet deeply connected with humankind. This thinking leads, in short order, to a transformative rendering of the wolf figure; the wolf figure gives rise to wolf-men or lycanthropes:

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. (p. 10, emphasis in original)

The passage is almost alarmingly concrete and physical. It emphatically stages transformation as a bodily event, insisting on the strain of

transformative force against the resistance of pre-established form and structure. It is not easy for the human being to find the kindness of the wolf, and yet this finding is clearly necessary, irresistible.

Even as lupine imagery moves toward hybrid or syncretic imagings, so do Malouf's other engagements with folkloric or mythic figures – most notably, with respect to his handling of horses and centaurs. However, the narrative is figuratively ordered at all levels, and Malouf also makes ample use of figures that have a more restricted rhetorical and symbolic register – such as the figure of the circle. Malouf is clearly aware of this figure's association with completeness, closure, symmetry, with that which eternally returns. But the textual will to circularity, so clearly inscribed through the reiteration of the novel's beginning in its moments of resolution, is also repeatedly challenged. Thus, even while working within the circle figure's more limited signifying range, Malouf still is able to multiply and transform the meanings of his figure.

In Malouf's view, the closed circles of selfhood and community must be broken, opened, and then creatively reconstituted. The circle figure is introduced quite early: Ovid's magnificent dream-centaurs, harbingers of greater, fuller life-in-transformation, are seen to “wheel in great circles” around the dream-persona (p. 24). A little later in the text, Ovid's first hunting mission is strongly marked by the circle figure. A ritual that gathers the hunters in a circle marks their departure. The first phase of the hunt orders itself upon a visit, on horseback, to “a huge natural circle”(p. 43), the burial site of the horsemen-hunters of the Getae people. Here, the hunters undertake new ritual enactments involving circular movements on horseback, and in this narrative sequence the purpose of the circle figure is first clearly portrayed. The element of horsemanship is suggestive because Ovid, though he has never previously given any importance to the fact, is by birth a member of Roman society's equestrian order. The exploration of his own horsemanship, once combined with the circle figure, leads Ovid back to his past; his mind returns, comes around, comes full circle, to that beginning point of his adult life which is marked by the death of his elder brother and a consequent alienation from his father. Through circular movement the mind renews experience, discovering new meanings, new clarity of self-understanding. It is a rediscovery that frees Ovid from the burden of the past; he breaks, it seems, the circle of time by first retracing it.

The circle figure, however, functions differently when the narrative addresses the approach to the other rather than the consolidation of selfhood. It is significant, in this respect, that circular movements fail when these are first used to search for the wild boy, the Child; the horsemen “circle round the same few hundred yards of forest as in a dream” (p. 49) – indeed, as in Ovid's dream of centaurs – but the Child,

the organizing centre, proves to be elusive, unlocatable. This new sense of the circle is clarified a little later in a deer-hunting episode. The village shaman draws a magic circle to enable a psychic journey beyond the bounds of self. By first configuring the sphere of the self, the shaman can then pass outside it, into the immense and potentially threatening realm of the not-I. The hunters witness this ritual while seated "outside" the circle, "in the growing dark" (p. 51), thus emphasizing that the self's others are to be situated, necessarily, outside the bounds of self, never within. Interestingly, the hunters are seated in a circle for the second sighting of the wild boy. The circle in this case is clearly a figure of community, which the approach of the outsider disrupts. Yet one should note that the men look at each other and at the wild child "over the rim" of the drinking cups held up to their lips (p. 59); they peer over the containing, circular rim of self – an imaging that again stresses the insularity of self, even of the self in community, and the intransigent exteriority of the other. Evidently, Ovid begins, at this point, to appreciate the meaning of the circle as boundary between self and other, between community and outsider: he subsequently places his Child-seeking lure, a bowl of gruel, "just at the edge of the fire's circle, where the dark begins" (p. 60). The sense is that one must pass beyond, break out of, the containing circle of selfhood to contact the other. Indeed, given that what is offered is a bowl, a hemispherical vessel, a figure of contained selfhood, it seems that one must effectively exteriorize the self, risk the self beyond the border of its security. These meanings are still clearer when Ovid dreams himself as a pool of rainwater that "break[s] in circles" upon the contact of a deer who drinks from him. The circles of self are broken, the self breaks in circles, upon contact with the other. This evocatively erotic experience is exhilarating but also "fearful" (p. 62).⁹

The wild child is eventually captured, however, by horsemen "weaving in circles" (p. 68). Horsemen riding in circles had previously failed, but one must note that the riders are now "weaving". This new usage connects the circle figure with another, perhaps equally important, figurative pattern: the woven structure, the web or net. Malouf is clearly aware of the derivation of the English word "text" from the Latin *texere* (to weave); indeed, when Ovid suddenly recognizes "a kind of poetry" in the net-weaving of village fishermen, he also notes that he is thinking in terms of the "old analogies" (p. 64). By linking the successful quest for the Child with weaving action and thus with textuality, Malouf proposes text-making as a potential path to the apprehension of otherness. Certainly, this path associates itself with a certain violence, even violation: the terrified Child, captured by a weaving search, soon finds himself "trussed like a pig" (p. 69). However, the shaman's ritual singing, in an "other, polar, voice" (p. 69), calms the captive, thus suggesting that

contact, without violation, may be enabled by the creation and use of an other voice, a new and distinct shared creation in the realm of language. In the quest for the other, it seems one must reach out into language in new ways. The other can be approached in the self-exteriorizing yet potentially shared realm of the symbolic, by means of text-making. Access to the other, as to the linguistic symbol, entails uttering, outerring, and the creation, through this outward venture, of new modes of being and of communication. It is a matter of discovering the “spiders’ language”, the language of web-spinners, which Ovid fantastically imagines himself learning (p. 21).

Ovid’s first recognition of his own capacity to apprehend and, to a degree, master the strange world of Tomis is sparked by the sight of fishermen on the seaside cliffs hauling up nets filled with “glittering surprises, their nameless catch” (p. 27). The catch is not nameless, the poet implicitly understands, for those equipped with the right words, with adequate and appropriate language-nets. Very shortly after recording the sight of the fishermen at work, Ovid joyfully discovers and lays claim to a wild poppy, another glittering surprise within his world of desolation. His new impulse to assimilate and appropriate his world entails the exercise of linguistic, text-making powers. Starting from the words “scarlet” and “poppy”, Ovid finds himself engaged in “making” and “work[ing] the spring” (pp. 31–2). In this way the poet is released out of his former life and into a new one. Even as the desolate world of Tomis had been, for Ovid, “a state of mind, no place” (p. 16), it now becomes a rich and engaging place by stimulating, through linguistic connections, a change of mind. This new working of the world, this poesis of spring, necessarily spurs re-creation and transformation of self – which Ovid at this very point of the narrative first acknowledges as needful.

Net-making soon returns to make more explicit its connection with textual practice. The village headman, the exile’s host, tells his grandson “a story as he works away at a net” (p. 38). His voice “weaves” even as the hands work the net; the old man is “deeply absorbed” in both activities at once (p. 39). Like the storyteller himself, all listeners, even the uncomprehending poet, are entirely caught up in the story, as in a net. These passages deftly prepare for the consolidation of the text/net analogy when Ovid learns to make nets himself and recognizes the “poetry” residing in this new work (p. 64). Not surprisingly, with the capture of the Child, which occurs very shortly after the net-making apprenticeship, Ovid embarks on a bilateral project of language teaching and language learning: the poet teaches human speech – significantly not Latin, but the newly acquired, other-language of the Getae; the Child teaches the languages of nature. Both are fishers, both are fish – mutually netted.

Clearly then, language, the realm of symbolic exchange, presents one path of approach to the other, particularly when language use is applied to the construction of complex, autotelic patterns – as in text-making or poesis. However, Malouf’s narrative will make the turn toward its resolution by affirming that the “true language” is the “speech of silence” (p. 97), a speech “whose every syllable is a gesture of reconciliation” (p. 98). The tone of these affirmations is so tinged with quiet joy that one may take them as guarantees of the success of the language-oriented quest. However, closer consideration of this paradoxical “speech of silence” must lead to at least a suspicion of language’s ultimate incapacity, its falling short. One does not, finally, apprehend the other in language. Full reconciliation, communion, atonement, at-one-ment, with the other, in the site of the other – this experience is clearly beyond language, beyond language as we know and understand it, beyond the differential system of shared and conventionalized signs. This experience of communion or full reconciliation with the other happens in an other-than-linguistic place, in a realm of experience beyond the scope of the symbol. Language, once again, is only a path of approach. The silent speech of reconciliation is beyond speech, and can be called a “speech” only insofar as it is approached through language practice, through an extension beyond, a pushing out from, that practice.¹⁰

But language, moreover, is not the only path of approach. In the course of his novel’s multifaceted quest for otherness, Malouf also extensively explores the path of identification, in relation to both imagination and dream. Identification, in psychoanalytic theory, is a self-constitutive initiative that first arises *before* a human subject’s accession to language (the symbolic order), and in which the pre-verbal child adopts a self-image located in an exterior mirroring of his or her body.¹¹ Thus, Malouf’s close concern with identification gives some support to critical arguments affirming that *An Imaginary Life*’s deeper commitment is to pre-symbolic or, in Lacanian terms, imaginary modes of experience.¹²

Ovid, the aged exile, clearly identifies with the wild boy. He recognizes, most significantly, that the wild boy is like him in “having no other creature to share his mind” (p. 52), in suffering extreme forms of personal isolation and exile. Yet identification does not entirely account for Ovid’s response to the discovery of the wild boy, nor does the movement of identification specify the Child’s eventual role within Ovid’s self-transforming experience. Ovid, one must recall, has already been learning to identify, in various ways, with the Getae people of Tomis – a people he had initially considered unsettlingly unfamiliar and, from his metropolitan Roman perspective, irremediably barbarous. The wild boy, however, is more radically other, as Ovid quickly realizes. He is not differently socialized; he is pre-social, uncultivated by human contact.

The Child, although his importance is not exclusively a matter of identification, offers the most challenging focal point for identification and quite quickly takes prominent place in the poet's identification-oriented dreams and imaginings.

An Imaginary Life presents noteworthy instances of dream-mediated encounter with the other. Ovid has dreams of centaurs, which, like the wolf-men inhabiting the folkloric imaginings of Ovid's childhood, are key figures of radical otherness – the radical otherness of which the wild boy becomes the most important textual representative. In the first of the dreams, centaurs call out to the dreamer, staging what is quite clearly a version of the appeal (in the French sense of *l'appel*¹³) of the other: “*Let us into your world. [. . .] Let us cross the river into your empire. Let us into your lives. Believe in us. Believe*” (p. 24). Then, as one dream-centaur approaches the dreamer, some buried self rises up “like a reflection rising to the surface of a mirror”. Ovid recounts, “It was there, outside me, a stranger. And something in me that was its reflection had come up to meet it” (pp. 24–5). The mention of a mirror immediately alerts us to the theme of identification, the mirror being recognized, after Lacan, as identification's key figure. Malouf's scene stages, in dream form, an encounter with the other characterized by mutual recognition and mutual identification. And it includes the suggestion that the self already contains within it a version of the other, a reflection, a point of quite exact correspondence.

The first sighting of the wild boy provokes new dreams, which recall the earlier centaur dream and also submit it to a re-evaluative comparison: “As in that earlier dream I am face to face with something that is not myself or of my own imagining, something that belongs to another order of being, and which I come out of the depths of myself to meet as at the surface of a glass” (p. 52). The encounter with the wild boy is like the encounter with the dream-centaur, yet a significantly distinct experience, and one that modifies the interpretation of the earlier dream experience. Again, Ovid tries to maintain his sense that he contains in the depths of himself some corresponding version of the other. Yet he is equally clear in his recognition that the Child is indisputably other than anything the poet's self contains and is also more than anything he could imagine. Ovid finds it difficult to maintain his idea of reflective correspondence. Of his first brief face-to-face encounter with the wild boy, Ovid avers, “it exceeds my imagining, that sharp little face with its black stare” (p. 50). One catches here a suggestion that dream may go deeper into being than the faculty of imagination. Yet even dream experience, being self-generated, does not fully prepare or account for the confrontation with actual otherness, which cannot be thoroughly comprehended even by the deepest delved analogies of the self. Something in the depths

of self answers sympathetically to the other, as to an appeal, but no element of self can correspond exactly to the enigmatic newness the other presents. Both imagination and dream are paths for approach to the other, but only for approach. The other, as a real and distinct presence in the world, is both unignorable and ungraspable; ultimately, the full apprehension of the other eludes both imagination and the dreamwork. Ovid resolves his thinking about the wild child of the Tomis woods affirming, "He is the wild boy of my childhood"; "He is the Child" (p. 54). However, informing this conclusion, founding it, is the recognition that the wild boy of Tomis, as the Child returned, is not merely a figure of imagination or dream, not a projection from out of the depths of self. The Child formerly and the Child now both manifest what one may call the category of the other; this precisely is what recreates the wild child as the Child. The Child is surely the Child because he surely manifests otherness, because he presents a reality that is not and can never be contained within the self.

A full apprehension of the other does not seem to be a possibility Malouf entertains – at least not as a living possibility. Right at the end of the novel, Ovid finally does correspond quite precisely with the site, the place, of other experience, of the experience of the other. One moves from the assertion, "The Child is there" (exterior, not here, not me) to the final recognition "I am there" (I am at last exterior to myself, other than myself, out there; I correspond finally with the not-I). But of course, the final "I am there" marks the moment of death, the passage out of life and the lived experience of personal identity, the collapse of the border between self and alterity. And yet Malouf's text does strongly suggest that contact and exchange, communication and communion, can and do occur, in life, in some mysterious way – through face-to-face encounter and the previously mentioned speech of silence: "Something, as we face one another in the darkness, has passed between us. We have spoken. I know it. In a language beyond tongues" (p. 63). Ovid becomes convinced of desire on the part of the other; he comes to believe that the wild boy is inclined to seek the company of men. The belief in that desire combines with his conviction that contact and exchange have occurred and will occur again, and the effect on Ovid is profoundly regenerative. He is saved from the stultifying effects of exile, not by gaining a clear sense of who or what he is, but by focusing his attention and his desire on an embodiment of what he is not. His salvation does not arise from self-consolidation, but from a new sense of the self's radical contingency.

The energizing of outward, other-directed vision transfigures Ovid's understanding of his world and himself. No longer a place of desolation, the Tomis world is now insistently full: "full of tiny animals and insects, all of them worth observing . . . full of strange fish, all beautiful in their

way” (p. 63). No longer a despairing exile, Ovid turns his thoughts to “further selves . . . contained within us, as the leaves and blossoms are in the tree” (p. 64). Having encountered, recognized, acknowledged the other, Ovid is able to offer a resounding “yes” to his world and to his own “further” possibility for life. But “further selves” and “further being” are not to be understood as appropriations of the other; the other in Malouf is, and must remain, distinct and inviolable. “Further being” is not taken from the other but called forth; it is self-generated enrichment awakening and arising in response to the other’s appeal, even as the slumbering chrysalis yields new being to the call of spring:

A membrane strains and strains, growing transparent, till the creature who is stirring and waking in there is visible in all its parts, forcing its own envelope of being towards the breaking point till with its folded wings already secure in the knowledge of flight, and of all the motions of the air, it flutters free. (p. 147)

Self-regenerating, self-transfiguring benefits come only through effective contact and exchange between self and other. The other is not, is never, mastered, assimilated or appropriated. Some time after his Child-inspired transfiguration, Ovid still senses the Child as “a separate center of energy” (p. 79) – not as an addition to, or extension of, his own being. Still later in the narrative, when the relationship between poet and Child is much more developed, Ovid suffers, during a crisis moment, a terrifying “vision of [the Child’s] utter separateness” (p. 106) – his utter separateness, his *outer* separateness. And very near the end of the novel, Ovid first affirms, “He seems closer now than I ever thought possible”, then continues, “And yet for all his closeness, he seems more and more to belong to a world that lies utterly beyond me, and beyond my human imagining” (p. 149).

An account of Malouf’s engagement with alterity requires, however, a push beyond the realm of I-and-you, of individual instances of interpersonal contact and exchange. Encounter with the other occurs very differently in relation to larger social collectives. For the village community of Tomis, the Child is a wood-spirit or demon-possessed changeling. He is submitted to the same economy of fear and disavowal that gives its shape to the figure of the wolf. And not surprisingly, the crisis moment in the Child’s relationship with the community does not follow upon a strong assertion of the Child’s difference but upon a manifestation of unmistakable resemblance. When, in a delirium of fever, the Child utters his first human word, a word belonging to the collective, this action sets him apart rather than including him. Resemblance in the stranger proves more threatening, more insidious than his difference. Within the social body, individuals live contingently with their fellows,

inflecting, deflecting, transmitting, transferring a great variety of social contents. However, the wild child, the outsider, the extreme form of the other, is not allowed to participate in this social economy. His potential contribution, once reshaped by paranoia, is understood as contamination – or more precisely demon-possession. It is only for Ovid, the individual in isolation, the exile, that the Child presents a force of revitalization and regeneration. Running through much of Malouf’s subsequent work is this sense that only the individual set apart, or standing apart, only the individual unbound from the demands of the collective, can appreciate the enlivening, creative power that encounter with the other may bestow.¹⁴

But one should recognize, also, that Malouf does not represent the human community as fluid and harmonious in its workings – and exclusionary or conflictual only in relation to the outsider. In Malouf’s rendering of the social world, competition, conflict, division are already there, and the ostracism of the stranger is in fact energized not by a defensive reaction of social unity and harmony, but by division and discord refocused on the figure of the outsider. In this light, it is possible to understand more clearly and more fully the potentially problematic role of the “woman’s world” within the novel (p. 84). In a dark and dangerous way, the Child confronts, for the first time, what Ovid rediscovers – the power of women, and particularly the power of women over men. Gender competition within the novel turns around the character Rysak, the village headman and the exiled Ovid’s host and protector. Rysak’s headmanship and his more general masculine privilege are ultimately overmastered by “the darker power of women” (p. 100). Rysak’s mother, a witchy old crone, gives a particularly unattractive, vindictive shape to this counter-world of women’s power. And it may be that Malouf’s portrayals of femininity and gender politics – marked by a close adherence to old-established, conventionalized mythopoeia – are inescapably problematic. Yet one still must note that even the most problematic figure, Rysak’s mother, can be accounted for in relation to gender competition, gendered conflict – and not in relation to women’s inherent wickedness. This old woman, who once, as mother of an infant child, was power absolute, wishes to reinstate herself. Although her son (himself an old man) is now in many respects her “master”, he “was once a suckling, utterly in her power” (p. 126). It is in her quest to renew her power and authority (in relation to one man, her son, and by extension, in relation to men in general) that the old woman turns against the outsiders, Ovid and the Child. Her action confirms that the forced exclusion of the outsider from the social body does not take shape, most compellingly, in defence of a pre-existing social harmony. Exclusion is spurred by the society’s preceding dividedness, which manifests itself, in *An Imaginary*

Life, most prominently as gender conflict. The outsider, in this way, is brought into focus as a threat by a displacement of pre-existing conflictual divisions within the social order.

Malouf's short novel thus manifests not misogyny but a thoughtful and specifically focused misanthropy, which one may describe as an abiding distrust of the human collective. A similar distrust marks the narration of Gemmy Fairley's experience in *Remembering Babylon* – to provide just one comparative example. However, in *An Imaginary Life* Malouf manifests his greatest optimism with respect to individual salvation – and perhaps his greatest pessimism with respect to the broader possibilities of social regeneration. (*Remembering Babylon* seems to hold out the possibility of the Australian nation's future regeneration-through-reconciliation; the novel concludes with a vision of the island continent luminously “in touch now with its other life”.¹⁵) The achievement of Ovid's imaginary history is in its strong affirmation of the redemptive effects of creative engagement with manifestations of alterity, and in its contingent presentation of exile as a potentially regenerative condition.

Although in *An Imaginary Life* Malouf most energetically and elaborately explores the question of self and other in relation to I-and-you, one-to-one relationships, his writing does not necessarily represent an individualistic and essentially anti-social Romanticism. Malouf manifests noteworthy interest in social formations, and if he shows these formations in an unfavourable light, as he very typically does, one should still maintain an awareness of continuity and integrity in his critique. Malouf represents anxious society, society that is uncertain and anxious about its own definition and constitution, and he takes it upon himself to portray the violence and rupture that follow upon intensifications of sociogenetic anxiety. It may be that many or perhaps all human collectives are anxious to some appreciable degree, but the settler society more acutely, more inescapably so. The settler society, and all the problems that attend the settling and self-definition of a society, are arguably among Malouf's concerns, although this more thoroughly social orientation becomes more apparent as his career develops. Already in *An Imaginary Life* but more clearly in *Remembering Babylon*, the other and the outsider offer a creative (if too often misapprehended) challenge to social order as well as to individuality. Yet, one must still recall that Malouf's primary focus is, enduringly, on individualized, life-transforming experiences of encounter. Such experiences may be extraordinary, even wondrous – as when one confronts a birdlike, fence-hovering Gemmy framed by a molten Queensland sky, or a wild child, suddenly glimpsed, upon a forest's luminous margins. But even when the presentation is much less startling, when Jim meets Ashley in *Fly Away Peter* or when Digger meets

Mac in *The Great World*, one senses that the author’s main imaginative investment is in the articulation of I-and-you.

NOTES

- 1 David Malouf, “Afterword: A Note on Sources”, *An Imaginary Life*, New York: Vintage, 1996 [1978], p. 153. Subsequent references to *An Imaginary Life* are to this edition and will be cited in the text as parenthetical page references.
- 2 Avis G. McDonald, one of several critics to assert the centrality of language in Malouf’s Ovid tale, affirms that synecdoche provides the governing logic of the work’s overall composition. See McDonald, “Beyond Language: David Malouf’s *An Imaginary Life*”, *ARIEL* 19, 1 (1988), 53.
- 3 Andrew Taylor discusses “other history” as the ordering focus of Malouf’s *The Great World* of 1990. However, the charge that this later novel’s text is “History’s Other” and indeed “the denial of History” cannot really be brought to bear, in any continuous way, upon *An Imaginary Life*. See Taylor, “*The Great World*, History, and Two or One Other Things”, *Provisional Maps: Critical Essays on David Malouf*, Nedlands: CSAL, University of Western Australia, 1994, p. 49.
- 4 The novel’s Australian content and perspective have been variously discussed, perhaps most notably by Gareth Griffiths in “*An Imaginary Life: The Post Colonial Text as Transformative Representation*”, *Commonwealth Essays and Studies*, 16, 2, (1993), 62, 68.
- 5 Patrick Buckridge, “Colonial Strategies in the Writing of David Malouf”, *Kunapipi*, 8, 3 (1986), 57.
- 6 Suzie O’Brien, “Raising Silent Voices: The Role of the Silent Child in *An Imaginary Life* and *The Bone People*”, *SPAN*, 30 (1990), 91.
- 7 Gareth Griffiths, “*Being There, Being There: Kosinski and Malouf*”, *Past the Last Post: Theorizing Post-Colonialism and Post-Modernism*, ed. Ian Adam and Helen Tiffin, Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 1990, p. 154.
- 8 Ovid’s final “I am there” has been variously interpreted, most engagingly, however, in relation to Heideggerian philosophy. Carmen Concilio suggests that “I am there” alludes to Heidegger’s “*da-sein*” (“The Magic of Language in the Novels of Patrick White and David Malouf”, *Coterminous Worlds: Magical Realism and Contemporary Post-Colonial Literature in English*, ed. Elsa Linguanti, Francesco Casotti, and Carmen Concilio, Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1999, p. 42). Philip Neilsen also works from Heidegger, placing Ovid’s final enunciation “beyond time and place” and interpreting it as an affirmation of “the completeness of life in death” (*Imagined Lives: A Study of David Malouf*, St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1990, p. 64).
- 9 Ivor Indyk strongly – perhaps too strongly – asserts the erotic content of the pool dream, finding in it a vivid “account of sexual climax”. The desire here fulfilled is explicitly “homosexual desire”, which finds its completion with the Child’s arrival as a drinker (*David Malouf*, Melbourne: OUP, 1993, p. 15).
- 10 Malouf, it should be noted, remains committed to his notion of a “speech of

- silence". In interview, in 1994 (by which date sixteen years and several Malouf books had followed upon *An Imaginary Life*), the author reaffirms his belief in the special value of a "language of gesture" or "of silence" that arrives at understanding without the mediation of words (Nikos Papastergiadis, "David Malouf and Languages for Landscapes: An Interview", *ARIEL* 25,3 [1994], 91).
- 11 A more fully detailed account of identification, the imaginary, and the relation of the imaginary to the later-arising symbolic order of language can be found in Jacques Lacan, *Ecrits: A Selection*, trans. Alan Sheridan, New York: W. W. Norton, 1977.
 - 12 Amanda Nettelbeck's Lacanian reading discerns "a Romantic affirmation of the pre-symbolic", but also an exploration of subject construction in and by the symbolic ("Imagining the Imaginary in *An Imaginary Life*", *Southern Review*, 26, 1 [1993], 37–8). Andrew Taylor argues that Ovid in exile suffers a symbolic castration (a loss of "tongue"), and then saves himself by learning "the language of the pre-Oedipal imaginary" ("Postmodern Romantic: The Imaginary in David Malouf's *An Imaginary Life*", *Imagining Romanticism: Essays on English and Australian Romanticisms*, ed. Deirdre Coleman and Peter Otto, West Cornwall, CT: Locust Hill, 1992, p. 288). In my view, this notion of pre-Oedipal language is conceptually as paradoxical as Malouf's own "speech of silence".
 - 13 Emmanuel Levinas provides the most thoughtfully elaborate understanding of the other's appeal/*appel*, which is to be understood as a calling out to, a calling toward, a call for approach – ultimately a calling into being for the human subject. Closely related to the appeal is Levinas's sense of the importance of face-to-face encounter, which Malouf seems also to share. In face-to-face encounter, one enacts a full recognition of the other as other and an openness to the other's appeal. Face-to-face is the originary ethical stance, the self-constituting acceptance of responsibility for the other. See notably Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, trans. Alphonso Lingus, Dordrecht, Boston and London: Kluwer Academic, 1991.
 - 14 In Malouf's 1982 *Fly Away Peter*, Jim Saddler and Imogen Harcourt are both loners, set apart by a personal passion (birds for him, photography for her) and both are exceptionally receptive to instances of newness and difference they chance to encounter. Jock McIvor, in his 1993 *Remembering Babylon*, learns to see north Queensland's strange beauty and to feel sympathy for the stranger Gemmy Fairley, but only through the sacrifice of his comfortable (and yet constraining) bonds with the settler society he inhabits.
 - 15 David Malouf, *Remembering Babylon*, Toronto and New York: Vintage, 1994 [1993], p. 200.