The Ideology of Exile in an Imaginary Life

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Exiles are cut off from their roots, their land, and their past. They generally do not have armies or states, although they are often in search of them. Edward Said claims that exiles feel "an urgent need to reconstitute their broken lives" (177) and that "much of the exile's life is taken up with compensating for disorienting loss by creating a new world to rule" (181). According to Said, exile is a condition of terminal loss, "an unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place, between the self and its true home," which involves "the crippling sorrow of estrangement" (173). He declares that exiles choose "to see themselves as part of a triumphant ideology or a restored people" (177). By "triumphant ideology," he means nationalism in the sense that the exiled persons relegate complete truth and superiority to themselves and deceit and inferiority to outsiders. The only way out of exile is a retreat into the nostalgic notion of a formerly reassuring sense of heredity, place, culture, and identity. Said also argues that "the crucial thing is that a state of exile free from this triumphant ideology—designed to reassemble an exile's broken history into a new whole—is virtually unbearable, and virtually impossible in today's world" (177).

On the surface, Said's theory of triumphant ideology seems to apply to David Malouf's ideology of exile reflected through Ovid in An Imaginary Life (1993). The narrative of An Imaginary Life, written in five parts, takes the form of a letter by Ovid, the Roman poet of the Tristia, to an unidentified reader in the future. In the novel, Ovid is banished from his own culture and language beyond the limits of the known world. Metaphors of stuntedness, barrenness, and emptiness indicate Ovid's melancholy at being in exile from Roman society without feeling any communion with nature. His exile causes him not only material loss but also a negative frame of mind, raising questions of dislocation and unsettlement in him. Initially, in his attempt to overcome his exile, Ovid denies the privileges of other villagers and their culture because he considers his culture as being superior. However, Malouf has a very different view from Said of what the relations between colonizer and colonized are like, as demonstrated in an interview in which he suggests that white Australians and Aborigines both have an equal and valid claim to the land: "What we did when we came here was lay new forms of knowledge and a new culture, a new consciousness, over so much that already existed . . . . A land can bear any

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number of cultures laid one above the other or set side by side. It can be inscribed and written upon many times" (51).

This essay argues that Malouf does not let Ovid's underlying conceptions recede into dogma, and it is not so much a triumphant ideology but rather what we might term a Romantic ideology, developed through language and imagination, that underpins Malouf's construction of Ovid's metamorphosis.

While there was no simple or singular Romantic movement, nor even a uniform Romantic ideology, certain aspects of Romanticism are especially pertinent to the question of exile that underpins An Imaginary Life. In particular, the state of exile can represent the self-consciousness of the Romantic artist, which is "the product of a division in the self" and which the artist seeks to overturn through a return to the "Unity of Being" associated with childhood and the imagination and through "recovering deeply buried experience" (Hartman 303). This, of course, is typically—though not always—achieved in a purportedly "natural" setting, one that is often "presocial" in composition. That aspect of Romanticism encapsulates Ovid's turn to imagination and language in attempting to convert his disempowering experience of exile into a narrative of significant necessity and consistency. Indeed, Malouf signifies a state of fundamental liminality between an alienated past and an imposed displaced present through the in-between situation of being in exile, and through "an enabling fiction" (Seidel xii), he allows Ovid to maintain that there is a home he can inhabit in his imagination. Malouf explains why individuals in Australia have a sense of dislocation: "we have our sensory life in one world, whose light and weather and topography shapes all that belongs to our physical being, while our culture, the larger part of what comes to us through language for example and knowledge, and training, derives from another" (35). He states that to heal this sense of dislocation, Australians must "possess the world [they] inhabit imaginatively as well as in fact" (35) and acknowledge their own ethnic and racial identity rather than deny it. In this light, Malouf seems to be interrogating his white privilege and seeking a sense of belonging and cultural unity with others. This explains why Ovid's whiteness and origin create a sense of cultural and spiritual emptiness, rather than privilege or belonging.

An Imaginary Life is, in part, about an individual journey from a state of being dislocated from a known urban culture to a state of cultural isolation, where Ovid now exists in close contact with untamed nature as a part of a Romantic dimension: a journey of attempting to cultivate and exploit the natural world. This experience may be renegotiated as the hybrid cultural affiliation of the writer, Ovid. The exilic imaginary brings up a question in Ovid's mind: whether and how he can accomplish the indispensable ability to feel at one with the environment rather than continue in a state of dislocation.

A significant emblematic element in the account of the story is the choice of Ovid, the author of the *Metamorphoses.* Malouf refers to the *Metamorphoses* in two ways: the movement of "Ovid" as the well-known, complicated author away from the prestigious Roman life into "the last reality" of a spiritual unity with the infinite nature of the Danube, and the Child's opposite drive into humanity through his linguistic acquisition (141). In attempting to teach the Child the language of imperial Rome, Ovid employs the same imperial notion that has banished him. Initially, Ovid nostalgically thinks that Latin is "that perfect tongue in which all things can be spoken, even pronouncements of exile" (21). He considers the Child as inferior and exemplifies the authoritarianism of the colonizers by forcing the Child to learn about the Getae and to mimic their language. Ovid says, "He is not at all beautiful, as I had imagined the Child must be. But I am filled with a tenderness, an immense pity for him, a need to free him into some clearer body, that is like a pain in my own" (71).

According to Homi Bhabha, "colonial mimicry is, among other things, the desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, as a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite" (86). Ovid considers this as a useful way to help the Child "discover what he is" (Malouf 77). However, Malouf criticizes colonial mimicry in showing Ovid's initial response to the Child. That is why in the end Ovid's transformation is dependent on his openness toward others as a celebration of his departure from a colonial self-enclosed identity. Ovid states of the Child, "But he, in fact, is the more patient teacher. He shows me the bird whose cry I am trying to imitate" (93). Indeed, it is the Child who leads Ovid toward a state of belonging. As Ovid narrates, "The beings we are in process of becoming will be drawn out of us. We have only to find the name and let its illumination fill us . . . . Now I too must be transformed" (26). Therefore, Ovid needs to integrate himself with the other to experience a meaningful life and sense of belonging.

Ovid's desire for a fullness of identity, which reflects Malouf's own sense of exile and the feeling of physical and cultural marginality in Australia, indicates an account of Romantic ideology. Amanda Nettelbeck addresses the symbolic function of Romanticism in Malouf's work, through which Ovid suffers "a nostalgic desire for a fullness of identity" (103–4). Malouf's heritage, as a second-generation Lebanese Australian, can be traced through the means of representing Australian culture in his work. Don Randall declares that Malouf's belonging in Australia has been debated in his own lifetime "not only because he has resided in England and in Italy. He has been susceptible to construction as an other in the society of his birth. His attraction to otherness, and the high value he places on it, may well come out of his own historically ambiguous relationship with Australian identity" (11).

Ovid's journey of self-discovery as a symbol of a colonizer in a colonized place takes him from the sophistication and excitement of Rome to a world where, fully aware of the restrictions imposed on human beings, he tries to fit into the natural environment through the power of his imagination. In other words, exilic displacement allows Ovid to conceive a delayed desire of unity and protection through his imagination. Writing on this novel, Ivor Indyk argues that "the imagination, in its creative aspiration, has lost contact with nature. Human beings have become separated from the natural world and must find their way back again, presumably through imaginative apprehension, directed downward towards the source" (29).

An Imaginary Life represents the overcoming of a frustrating gap between words and reality. The exiled dislocation of the writer is often refigured as a reflective world of a poetic language, thus a viable cause of re-creating the past. Significantly, it is exactly in the move toward poetic imagination and language that the displaced Ovid experiences a place of habitation and belonging. Inevitably connected to loss, An Imaginary Life, partly as a narrative of exile, implies the imagination of the past. It attempts to represent what was lost prior to the moment of Ovid's exilic rupture. The imagination of a home, irrespective of its particular figuration, is necessary for Ovid in order to live in a certain psychic stability and identity. Having reconciled with his dead brother and father, and therefore the childhood he has left behind, with whom he spoke "in a tongue of our own devising" (9), Ovid experiences a "moment of exhilaration" (45). This happens when he engages in the horseman's burial ceremony, in which he shouts out "a horseman's death cry" (45) as he scatters a handful of grains on the ground. In this significant step toward freeing his soul, Ovid joyfully exclaims, "I am Roman and a poet. But that breath and the sound it carries moves out from my body into the world and I feel freer for it" (45). As time passes, Ovid completes his journey of self-discovery and perceives the same place as the beginning of a new life, after which he becomes more receptive to nature: "it was as if some fear went out of my breath and left my spirit clear" (38)

Initially, Ovid's existential experience does not correspond with Romantic experience associated with sense of belonging and unity with nature. Completely dissociated from his native Latin and Augustan culture, Ovid struggles to cope with quotidian life, the everydayness of things, to expose the myths underlying a familiar structure. However, as a procreative force, imagination offers Ovid the assurance of completeness and human reciprocity, moving him from his initial sense of disconnectedness and alienation from humanity beyond the borders of life and death, where Ovid and the Child enter each other's existence, and "the desolateness" (31) of the place turns into fertility, as an emblematic representation of Romantic ideology. Malouf seems to be signifying the importance of breaking the ignorant and restrictive circles of individual, society, home, and language, while at the same time imaginatively and artistically restructuring them. This is imaginatively demonstrated when Ovid dreams of himself as a pool of rainwater. Without any sense of hurt or fear, he is "filled with tenderness" for the deer that drinks from him. He feels part of him moving away as he "breaks in circles" (56).

This poetic and inventive scene might be motivated by the Narcissus story from Greek mythology, which Ovid retells in *Metamorphoses*. In this configuration, Malouf is attempting to construct a new perception of the Narcissus mythology through Ovid. In discussing the definitions of narcissism and its relations to psychoanalysis, Freud utilizes the term "narcissism" to describe human beings' initial relationship to their body and the experience of their withdrawal from the outer world. Ovid's Narcissus does not succeed in transcending his self-image because he is fascinated with his own reflection. Ovid's Narcissus says, "Whenever I move to kiss the clear bright surface, his upturned face strains closer to mine. We all but touch! The paltriest barrier thwarts our pleasure. Come out to me here, whoever you are! . . . You nod when I show my approval. When I read those exquisite lips, I can watch them gently repeating my word" (Ovid 451–62). Being obsessed with his love and its inaccessibility, Narcissus is oblivious to his surroundings and any others. Individuals need to develop a valued self-image as well as the ability not to be consumed by it. However, even after Narcissus moves from unconscious to conscious engagement with his reflection and recognizes his own reflection in the water, his vanity and love do not let him pass the borders of self and break the circles of self-image: "I know you now and I know myself. Yes, I am the cause of the fire inside me, the fuel that burns and the flame that lights it. What can I do? Must I woo or be wooed? What else can I plead for? All I desire I have" (463–66). In contrast, Malouf leads Ovid to the resolution of deception through a new vision, which seems not necessarily to be accompanied by a loss of self-esteem but rather by a lower sense of narcissism. Charles Rycroft suggests that "the discovery that one is not the only pebble on the beach and that the world was not constructed solely for one's own benefit involves a loss of narcissism" (116). This idea is reflected in Ovid's movement from his earlier selfish state of mind and narcissistic pride about his culture, language, and history to an acceptance of the Otherness of his new surroundings. Ovid moves backward toward the revival of a self before he can proceed. Malouf's Ovid, thus, develops a spirit of harmony and wholeness with others that Ovid's Narcissus lacks.

The first step in Ovid's process of metamorphoses is his imaginary reconciliation with his past. As Barbara Straumann declares, "The family serves as a core trope of the home, whether it is configured as a site of happiness or discontent. In the context of exilic loss and displacement, family and home narratives are so resilient because they may displace as well as stand in for other (related) issues" (21). After glimpsing the wild Child in the birch woods, Ovid recalls his childhood imaginary companion, "a wolf boy perhaps," with whom he spoke "in a tongue of [their] own devising" (9). This might refer to the language of childhood, when imagination is a place of harmony. Malouf's position here is clear: in the process of acquiring the language of the people of Tomis and deconstructing the "high culture–low culture" and "animal–human" dichotomy (Kerren 9), Ovid questions the imperial structures of meaning and longs for a form of writing distinct from the Roman language.

The figure of the horseman reminds Ovid, in a circular imaginary movement, of his past—his brother's death and his alienation from his father—helping with his experience of inner metamorphosis. He writes, "when my own body began to change and I discovered the first signs of manhood upon me, the child left and did not reappear, though I dreamt of him often" (Malouf 10). The Child is the child who left, never to reappear (11), after Ovid reached puberty. This rediscovery frees Ovid from the burden of the past; it seems that he breaks the circle of time by retracing it.

In creating this fictional treatment of Ovid's exile, Malouf provides a symbolic reference to Greek myths to signify spiritual solace, reconciliation, and transcendence. Malouf's Ovid observes nature and its elements in terms of self-reflection, rather than of society, and perceives forces superior to cultural boundaries and social convention. This notion may be seen as an expression of the Romantic idealization of unconstrained nature. Ovid accepts Tomis as his own country and no longer complains about unfamiliar details of his environment; rather, he begins to create his own garden.

According to Robert Massey and Khawla Abu-Baker, "The I of each person actively coordinates the me into a self-image based on past and present experiences and future anticipations of self with others" (14). In Ovid's ongoing interrelation with others—the Child, the natural world, and the villagers—he also communicates to himself and experiences a new perception of life that takes him beyond the limits of his former self-identity. During this identity-forging process, Ovid experiences an imaginary salvation in which he no longer considers a distinction between himself and the Child, nature and culture, man and woman, body and soul, Roman and Getic language. The Child acts as Ovid's lost childhood companion, and Ovid meets his death when nature/culture and the other / the self are bound together. The relationship between Ovid and the Child toward wholeness and fulfillment appears as a fundamental movement to experience unity with nature, even beyond the limits of sensuality. Ovid and the Child continue a "series of beginnings, of painful settings out into the unknown, pushing off from the edges of consciousness into the mystery of what we have not yet become" (Malouf 134). This provides further evidence that Malouf's reliance on Romantic tropes and themes in this story suggests an ideological position in relation to the exiled imperial subject that is different from Said's triumphant ideology, which argues that exiles sustain a superior notion toward their hereditary culture and identity.

In Malouf's fiction, language acts as an important medium of creative expression and of enabling the expansion of imaginative scope for Ovid as a writer, opening up his frame of reference through understanding and empathy. The initial dramatic moment of Ovid developing a realization of his exilic surroundings is a visual knowledge that is instantly expressed through words: the "little puff of scarlet" of a poppy (Malouf 31). Malouf attempts to signify the importance of names through the "magic" of repeating the word over and over. Ovid keeps repeating the word "poppy" over and over to himself. He says, "It is as if the word, like the colour, had escaped me till now, and just saying it would keep the little windblown flower in sight. Poppy. The magic of saying the word made my skin prickle . . . . I am Flora. I am Persephone" (31). Ovid's reaction to the sight of the poppy reminds the reader of the recurrent force that Venus experiences on the death of the youthful Adonis. Philip Hardie points out that "the description of the poppy as a 'wind-blown flower' reminds us of the evanescent magic of Venus' anemone, which is both given the name that fixes its essence and repeatedly scattered into non-existence by the winds (*Met.* 10.739)" (330).

Ovid and the Child experience a fundamental linguistic transformation in which Ovid becomes less dependent on communicative skills and the Child learns to smile, which, to Ovid, is distinct from laughter. Ovid also instructs the Child in human language and unity—"The spirit of things will migrate back into us. We shall be whole" (96)—while the Child introduces him to the pure state and language of nature of Romanticism. Cultivated Rome, as the place of Ovid's native culture, no longer stands in opposition to Tomis, which in the beginning of Ovid's exile derived its meaning only or at least primarily from its resistance and inferiority to Rome. Malouf explores the relationship of individuals with their environment once they are placed out of the usual structures of their language. As he explains, "What interested me first in the Ovid figure was that problem of the poet who's exiled not just to a wild place, but beyond the bounds of the language he can use . . . . The peculiar punishment was of language: that was the whole problem" (Davidson 331). Although Ovid's exile signifies the imperial power of language generating a sense of belonging, he realizes the restrictions of his own language at the "edge of nothing" to convey a meaning to others. This idea seems to be corroborated by Ovid's happiness upon discovering a poppy and feeling a sense of belonging to the new surroundings. Ovid recognizes the poetry residing in his work of net making (Malouf 64). As the narrative proceeds, Ovid realizes that to experience reconciliation and unity with the other, he does not necessarily need to speak the language; Malouf considers silent speech as "true language" (97) applied to the creation of intricate poetic language, a speech "whose every syllable is a gesture of reconciliation" (98).

Malouf suggests that language needs to be changed rather than imposed, as he applies the mutuality of language learning and teaching as a means of connecting to the world of the other.

An Imaginary Life deals with the multilevel purpose of language, allowing Ovid to reevaluate imperialist culture and its definition of self, to perceive history differently, and to question the importance of knowledge assigned by the emperors. Ovid writes, "I too have created an age. It is coterminous with his, and has its existence in the lives and loves of his subjects. It is gay, anarchic, ephemeral and it is fun" (Malouf 26). This theme of language symbolically discloses the general strategy of the politics of peripheral identity at play in Malouf's imaginary world. The lack of a shared language in exile forces Ovid to express his experience of existence in an internalized monologue through a lyrical language. Ovid helps the Child step into the world, while he himself strives to learn the reality behind his poetic language.

The mutuality of language learning and teaching in this novel connects the world of the other, "particularly when language use is applied to the construction of complex, autotelic patterns—as in text-making or poesis" (Randall 25). Malouf represents the influence of Otherness in achieving a more authentic sense of self in the passage to self-defining identity. Ovid experiences the spiritual state of "wordless being-in-the-world and being the world itself" (Malouf 51) through surrendering to the language of birds and animals, Latin, and Getic.

Ovid realizes that identity is not solid and universal in a place where cultures are confronted and that it is rather a state of mind. Stuart Hall asserts, "Identity is not as transparent or unproblematic as we think. Perhaps instead of thinking of identity as an already accomplished fact, which the new cultural practices then represent, we should think, instead, of identity as a 'production' which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation" (22). This idea seems to apply to *An Imaginary Life*, in which exile not only causes constructive cultural exchange but also ultimately leads Ovid to a joyful interface between these cultures. Exile forms a foundation of reflective imagination through which Ovid's newly learned language extends the influence of dislocation and provides a place of imaginary belonging. Malouf's Ovid becomes united with nature when the story ends with his ecstatic death in the vast emptiness of the plains. Ovid moves into a space that is boundless, timeless, and empty: "The days pass and I cease to count them"; "I no longer ask myself where we are making for. The notion of a destination no longer seems necessary to me. It has been swallowed up in the immensity of this landscape" (Malouf 144).

Malouf's work conducts experience from a isolation and fragmentation into unity and belonging. This is demonstrated through an imaginative and life-enhancing relationship with context and surroundings. To Malouf, the imaginative correspondence between things and a reconnection with the past can heal the emotional and physical sense of dislocation. Malouf emphasizes the power of imagination to transform triumphant ideology into Romantic ideology through being inspired by linguistic and geographical exile. Malouf's Ovid, during his nostalgic yearning for a fullness of identity, does not reconstruct his broken life by choosing to see himself as part of Said's specific sense of "triumphant ideology" or a "restored person." On the contrary, the ideology of exile in *An Imaginary Life* is predicated on a Romantic sense of achievement and making adjustment. Ovid desires Romantic ideology over rational classicism through an aesthetic of Romanticism, cultivates and exploits the natural world, and becomes thoroughly entwined in language and imagination. Eventually, Ovid realizes in himself the power to free himself from exile by showing unity with others and by the process of transforming rather than adhering to the fixed identity of Roman Empire.

Ovid's attempt at compensation for the disorienting loss or healing the rift of exile arises with the exilic crossing of linguistic and cultural borders rather than with the attempt to create a new world to rule. In having the character develop in this way, Malouf draws on key aspects of Romantic ideology. To Malouf, the suffering of exile can be healed when past and present homes coexist happily, without exiles attempting to relegate complete truth and superiority to themselves in relation to social and political power, and deceit and inferiority to outsiders. He pays careful attention to the creative connection between language and nature by representing the means in which landscape reflects the various phases of self-understanding. In this sense, Malouf's Romantic perspective of Australians' sense of marginality involves the reconsideration of Australia as a place where individuals can develop an experience of reconciliation with a sense of self and unity through exclusion and exile, regardless of historical and social relations.

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