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FROM PILLAR OF SALT TO CHILD OF NATURE AND VICEVERSA: POSTCOLONIAL CRITICISM IN DAVID MALOUF'S *AN IMAGINARY LIFE*

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1. INTRODUCTION

The first problem that scholars have to face up to when dealing with postcolonial criticism is terminology. As is well-known, the terms “post-colonial” and “postcolonial” may have different meanings. While “post-colonial” is a chronological term that means “after the colonial period”, “postcolonial” has a wider sense, for it mainly implies anti-colonialism and thus a critical perspective. The fathers of postcolonial criticism and studies are among others Franz Fanon from Martinique, Edward Said from Palestine and the Indian Homi Bhabha. They all argue that their critiques are ex-centric because they do not belong to the center but rather to the margins, and many European writers often look at them as polemical and different. In his seminal work *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952) Fanon investigated the psychology of colonialism. Fanon affirms, among other things, that western civilization and its culture are responsible for colonial racism and that the discourse on which European Empires relied was anything but neutral. Bhabha theorized about terms such as “Third Space”, “Hybridity” and “Stereotype” in *The Location of Culture* (1994). As regards Said, in his seminal work *Orientalism* (1978) he wonders whether it is possible to study other cultures in an aseptic and neutral way given the fact that one is always conditioned by his/her own culture and cultural parameters. Another well-known cultural theorist is, without doubt, Stuart Hall, who has developed his own theory about cultural identity and diaspora. Hall defends the concept of identity as a production: “Practices of representation always implicate the positions from which we speak or write – the position of enunciation” (1990: 222). In David Malouf’s *An Imaginary Life*, Ovid looks down on people from Tomis and their culture because he believes that his culture is superior, thus obliterating the fact that the culture of Tomis is much older than western religions and cultures. This novel, in tune with postcolonial criticism, questions western ideas about cultural hegemony and alludes to

the need to open our minds up and be aware of the fact that cultures are just human constructions; accordingly, if humans constructed them, humans can also deconstruct, modify and destroy them. Another crucial factor in postcolonial texts is language, because it configures a cosmovision; if you lack the words you cannot communicate with anybody and, consequently, you are isolated. In Malouf's novel, Ovid is a good example of this isolation: "I am dead. I am relegated to the region of silence. All I can do is shout" (1999: 20). Moreover, this novel describes the process of transformation of Ovid's identity as a result of living in the diaspora because, as Hall claims, "Diaspora identities are those which are constantly producing and reproducing themselves anew, through transformation and difference" (1990: 235).

The aim of this Master Thesis is to use the aforementioned theoretical work in order to accomplish an analysis of David Malouf's *An Imaginary Life* (1978) from a postcolonial perspective. This analysis will take into account the revision that Stuart Hall makes of Michel Foucault's theories of power/knowledge and power's circulation in order to show how the text subverts the conventional binary colonizer/colonized to make Ovid play the role of the oppressed. Moreover, special attention will be paid to the way in which postcolonial Australian literature employs landscape and the sense of unbelonging to it as an important feature in the cultural identity of its white characters. Ovid's quest for the full integration of his fragmented self and the importance of the relation with the postcolonial figure of the "other" in his process of self-discovery will also be analyzed, because Ovid needs to integrate both the self and the other in order to make his life meaningful and whole. Furthermore, this novel will be seen as historiographic metafiction because of its inclusion of historical figures such as Ovid and the Caesar in what seems to be a fictional story. Ovid's sense of unbelonging will also encapsulate the feeling of otherness that the British convicts sent to Australia in the

eighteenth century and their descendants have suffered throughout history. Concepts such as “third space” and “hybridity” will also prove to be useful to understand some of the ideas that make up the novel’s agenda. The fundamental role that language and lack of speech play in the novel will also be analysed because, not only Latin and Getae, but also inner reflection and the language of Nature greatly contribute to the building up of Ovid’s identity. The acquisition of this new knowledge helps Ovid to attain a better comprehension of both his inner world and the world that surrounds him in Tomis. The last chapter of the Master Thesis will study Ovid’s metamorphosis and identity process; by coping with exile and integrating elements from other cultures, Ovid is able to understand the meaning of life and to undergo the movement from culture to nature that will allow him to become part of the universe. The ending of the novel is very ambiguous as regards the wild Child and, for this reason, a positive and a negative reading will be offered.

2. THE LANDSCAPE IN AUSTRALIAN LITERATURE

In this Master Thesis I will focus on *An Imaginary Life* as an example of Australian literature that incorporates postcolonial issues. As is well known, one of the main features of Australian literature is the description and omnipresence of the Australian landscape as a means to (dis)connect with the spirituality of the land and its native people. On the whole, many Australian novels evidence the problematic relationship with the land that many white settlers experience. In *An Imaginary Life*, Ovid projects his own state of mind onto his descriptions of the landscape in such a way that the landscape will change in the same way as Ovid's emotional state changes: from the sadness of exile to the happiness of one's integration into the universe. Ovid, like the British convicts who were expelled from Britain and transported to Australia, has to deal with a hostile landscape and suffers the crisis and the nostalgia of knowing that he is far from home. The novel subtly points to the feeling of loneliness that these convicts experienced when they arrived in these "uncivilized" regions. The land is a key concept in postcolonial criticism because the landscape of the new colonies was very different from that of the imperial motherlands. In Australian literature, landscape is often employed to highlight the distinctiveness of Australian culture. In *An Imaginary Life*, Malouf makes use of this element to build up bridges between the landscape of Tomis and the Australian landscape. Moreover, the wild Child can be seen as a metaphor for the Australian aborigines because he feels one with the natural world, as is shown when Ovid makes it clear that the child is not imitating the birds, but is the birds (88). Furthermore, as was said before, the landscape testifies to the change that Ovid undergoes throughout the story. At first, the landscape speaks an alien language that Ovid fails to understand:

> At night I discover in sleep what the simple daylight blinds me to: that the dark side of every object here, and even more, the landscape itself when night shadows flow over it, is a vast page whose tongue I am unable to decipher, whose message to me I am unable to interpret. (9-10)

The landscape, and especially the way in which Ovid experiences it, mirrors Ovid's search for integration and belonging in the last years of his life. The scene in which Ovid is walking near the river and finds a little wild poppy shows the reader how Ovid's discovery of color in this dismal landscape also colors Ovid's mood: "I was drunk with joy. I danced. I shouted" (24). Now, Ovid understands that he will only get over this feeling of unbelonging when he learns to love this threatening place.

David Malouf's own background could be the reason why he is so fond of using characters who feel that they do not belong to a new environment, as is the case of Ovid at the beginning of the novel. Malouf is the son of a Lebanese-born father and an English-born mother. He partakes of different cultures and has lived in Australia and several European countries, mainly England and Italy. The full understanding of the landscape is a crucial element in the novel because the Australian aboriginal cosmovision regards the landscape, not only as soil and rocks, but rather as a whole system that is alive and consequently has to be protected because there is a relation of reciprocity between all the natural elements: the aborigines protect the land because the land in turn feeds and protects them. As can be read on the Australian government's website: "For Indigenous Australians, the land is the core of all spirituality and this relationship and the spirit of 'country' is central to the issues that are meaningful to Indigenous people today" (para. 5). The colonizers' way of thinking was very different because they thought they owned the land, whereas the Aborigines believe they are part of the landscape. On the one hand, the cosmovision of Indigenous Australians demands that they should preserve the natural environment on which they depend because they

feel part of this natural world. On the other hand, most westerners saw the land as yet another commodity that could be bought and sold; they lacked the Aboriginal spiritual dimension and did not care about destroying the natural environment as long as they could make profits. In the novel, Ovid gradually learns that Nature is something sacred and therefore learns a new way of relating with the natural world:

> Do you think of Italy – or whatever land it is you now inhabit – as a place given you by the gods, ready-made in all its placid beauty? It is not. It is a created place. If the gods are with you there, glowing out of a tree in some pasture or shacking 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 with you, sure enough. Embrace the tree trunk and feel the spirit flow back into you, feel the warmth of the stone enter your body, lower yourself into the spring as into some liquid pace of your body's other life in sleep. But the spirits have to be recognized to become real. They are not outside us, nor even entirely within, but flow back and forth between us and the objects we have made, the landscape we have shaped and move in. We have dreamed all these things in our deepest lives and they are ourselves. It is our self we are making out there, and when the landscape is complete we shall have become the gods who are intended to fill it. (21-22)

Ovid criticizes his former view of the land as a commodity that people can own and possess at will. The teachings of the shamanic Child will eventually allow Ovid to become part of the landscape and consequently a part of a holistic cosmovision. The landscape is a living and nurturing entity which makes up the mystic cosmovision upheld by the Australian aborigines. As they see it, all the elements contained in the landscape are sacred because, as can be read on the Australian government's website:

> In most stories of the Dreaming, the Ancestor spirits came to the earth in human form and as they moved through the land, they created the animals, plants, rocks and other forms of the land

> that we know today. They also created relationships between groups and individuals to the land, the animals and other people.
>
> Once the ancestor spirits created the world, they changed into trees, the stars, rocks, watering holes and other objects. These are the sacred places of Aboriginal culture and have special properties. Because the ancestors did not disappear at the end of the Dreaming, but remained in these sacred sites, the Dreaming is never-ending, linking the past and the present, the people and the land. (para. 6-7)

The Australian aborigines understand the earth as a living being and believe that there is a holistic process that interconnects all beings. This deeply spiritual cosmovision clashed with the imperial blind and selfish attitude that only aimed to dominate other civilizations in order to control their lands and resources, so necessary for the imperial profit-making enterprise. Ovid's final moment of integration with the landscape brings to mind the cosmovision of the Australian aborigines, which understands the earth as a protective and never-ending process. They worship the land because there is life everywhere; for them it is not that "this rock represents this god" but rather "this rock is this god". They regard nature as the one and only source of knowledge.

As was said before, the Australian landscape wonderfully illustrates the problematic sense of unbelonging of the Australian people who descend from white settlers. Many Australians still give ambivalent psychological responses to their forefathers' expulsion from Britain. On the one hand, like Ovid, they have a superiority complex because, as they see it, they are westerners and belong to a culture higher than that of the aborigines. On the other hand, they have an inferiority complex as regards European culture, because they were expelled from Britain as if they were crap and, like Ovid, they still experience a sense of unbelonging because their ancestors were not the original inhabitants of this land. They have to learn how to come to terms with the landscape so

that they can finally belong. In Ray Willbanks' "A Conversation with David Malouf", Malouf claims that the best way to overcome this sense of unbelonging is to forget the idea that the European culture is superior and to start thinking of yours as just as valid and authentic. In Malouf's words:

> Yes. Perhaps my generation was the last to feel it as a problem, educated in what used to be called the 'new Britannia.' It was a problem of having all your sensory life very strongly in one place and your language coming from somewhere else or the literary or cultural world belonging somewhere else. It's a question of making that authentically yours rather than second hand. That has always been the great problem of Australia. (1990:14)

Binaries such as centre vs. margins, self vs. other, culture vs. nature have been systematically used by critics when attempting to account for the problematics of trying to explain what a notion such as "Australian identity" may mean. These thorny questions are brought to the fore in *An Imaginary Life*. Ovid feels that, in Tomis, he is very far from the civilization of Rome. It is when he begins to understand, first the Tomisian culture, and then the wild Child's relation with nature, that he changes his mentality. At this precise moment Ovid acquires a wider perspective which helps him to understand that what he called civilization was nothing but a Roman construction and that identity is anything but static and monolithic. As Salman Rushdie argues:

> Our identity is at once plural and partial. Sometimes, we feel that we straddle two cultures, at other times, that we fall between two stools. But however ambiguous and shifting this ground may be, it is not an infertile territory for a writer to occupy. If literature is in part the business of finding new angles at which to enter reality, then once again our distance, our long geographical perspective, may provide us with such angles. (1991:15)

It is good to belong to more than one culture because this provides people with more perspectives of reality. *An Imaginary Life* could also be seen as postmodern

historiographic metafiction, a literary genre that, according to Linda Hutcheon (1988), incorporates theoretical self-awareness of history and fiction as human constructs. In the novel, the reader is constantly addressed by Ovid: “I speak to you, reader, as one who lives in another century, since this is a letter I will never send” (10). As Susana Onega (1995: 16) claims, what provides the impulse for the writing of historiographic metafiction is indeed the discovery of the ability of literature to reveal truths that cannot be grasped from traditional history. In *An Imaginary Life*, Malouf plays with history and makes an exercise of postcolonial criticism. By using the figure of the great Roman poet Ovid as an isolated and outcast member of society, the novel invites the reader to interpret Ovid’s exile in the confines of the Roman Empire and his experience there as a recreation of the feeling of anxiety that the British convicts sent to Australia experienced when they were confronted with a hostile environment. In this way the novel showcases the trauma that lies at the core of the Australian colonization process. Hutcheon (1988: 113-114) asserts that the protagonists of historiographic metafiction are anything but “proper” types: they are ex-centrics, the marginalized, the peripheral figures of fictional history. *An Imaginary Life* narrates the fictional story of one of the canonical Roman poets par excellence, but the novel is interested in Ovid as an exiled, as an ex-centric person at a moment of crisis and self-discovery. He has been sent to Tomis, which is located in the confines of the Roman Empire, and now he is a non-entity who lives in what he thought were the margins of the world. Ovid does not want to know anything about the culture of Tomis because he considers them to be savages. What is interesting in this novel is that he is similarly seen and treated by the Tomisians; they are not interested in Roman culture and regard Ovid as a poor fool. The novel mixes up historical and fictional figures to undermine all sorts of binary

oppositions and highlights the constructed, and therefore relative nature of what is labeled as “reality”.

3. INTERTEXTUALITY AND POSTCOLONIAL CRITICAL ECHOES

As has been said before, nowadays white Australians suffer from a deep sense of unbelonging. As is well known, a great number of convicts were transported to this penal colony after having been expelled from their motherland. Furthermore, in the last few decades, the sense of unbelonging of the descendants of the Australian white settlers has increased as a consequence of events such as the Mabo case in 1992, in which the Australian High Court concluded that the lands of this continent were not *terra nullius*, that is, land belonging to no-one at the time of the European settlement. The High Court proclaimed that Native Title rights survived settlement, although subject to the sovereignty of the Crown. The judgment contained statements to the effect that it cannot perpetuate a view of the common law which is unjust, does not respect all Australians as equal before the law, is out of step with international human rights norms, and is inconsistent with historical reality. The High Court acknowledged the fact that Aboriginal people had lived in Australia for thousands of years and enjoyed rights to their land according to their own laws and customs. They had been dispossessed of their lands piece by piece as the colonial process made progress, and that very dispossession deeply hindered the development of Australia into a nation. As Paul Keating, the Australian Prime Minister declared in December 1993 during the passage of the Native Title Bill in Parliament:

> ... as a nation, we take a major step towards a new and better relationship between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians. We give the indigenous people of Australia, at last, the standing they are owed as the original occupants of this continent, the standing they are owed as seminal contributors to our national life and culture: as workers, soldiers, explorers, artists, sportsmen and women - as a defining element in the character of this nation - and the standing they are owed as victims of grave injustices, as people who have survived the loss of their land and the shattering of their culture. (para. 7)

As a result of the abolition of the *terra nullius* policy, the Australian white settlers suddenly became the illegitimate inhabitants of the land. They were the colonizers who dispossessed the aboriginal Australians of their land and imposed on them their European culture. Australia gained political independence from Britain in 1901 but this independence was only granted to white settlers because political recognition for the aboriginal occurred as late as 1967, when a referendum finally proclaimed their citizenship and the right to vote in federal elections. The sense of guilt of these white settlers can be felt in the apology finally offered to the aboriginal people by the government of Australia. On the 13th of February 2008, Kevin Rudd officially apologized to aboriginal Australians for the mistreatment they suffered in the past and, above all, for the deplorable fact of the Stolen Generations:

> That today we honour the Indigenous peoples of this land, the oldest continuing cultures in human history. We reflect on their past mistreatment. We reflect in particular on the mistreatment of those who were Stolen Generations—this blemished chapter in our nation's history. The time has now come for the nation to turn a new page in Australia's history by righting the wrongs of the past and so moving forward with confidence to the future. We apologise for the laws and policies of successive Parliaments and governments that have inflicted profound grief, suffering and loss on these our fellow Australians. We apologise especially for the removal of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their families, their communities and their country. For the pain, suffering and hurt of these Stolen Generations, their descendants and for their families left behind, we say sorry. To the mothers and the fathers, the brothers and the sisters, for the breaking up of families and communities, we say sorry. And for the indignity and degradation thus inflicted on a proud people and a proud culture, we say sorry. We the Parliament of Australia respectfully request that this apology be received in the spirit in which it is offered as part of the healing of the nation. A future where this Parliament resolves that the injustices of the past must never, never happen again. A future where we harness the determination of all Australians, Indigenous and non-Indigenous, to close the gap that lies

> between us in life expectancy, educational achievement and economic opportunity. A future where we embrace the possibility of new solutions to enduring problems where old approaches have failed. A future based on mutual respect, mutual resolve and mutual responsibility. A future where all Australians, whatever their origins, are truly equal partners, with equal opportunities and with an equal stake in shaping the next chapter in the history of this great country, Australia. (para. 3-19)

An Imaginary Life is a good example of a postcolonial space in which different cultures are confronted. However, in this case the ultimate representative of the Empire is an isolated figure who has to adapt to the culture of the savages after understanding that his Roman culture is not as universal as he believed. The novel narrates the physical and psychological journey that Ovid, a rebellious figure sent to Tomis by the Roman Emperor, undergoes in the last years of his life. This story can be given an allegorical interpretation if it is compared with the plight of the convicts who were expelled from Britain and transported to Australia. The British convicts, like Ovid, kept their citizenship but could never return to their countries. In this way, they were erased from their mother countries, like Ovid, whose books were removed from the public libraries so that Ovid should disappear from the Roman social scene. None of them chose to be in exile, but were expelled by their respective cruel and merciless Empires. To make matters worse, they had to confront an unfriendly landscape inhabited by aborigines, felt very far from their home and baffled by the "otherness" of an unknown environment. The British convicts regarded the new territory as something remote and hostile and felt the same isolation that Ovid experiences in the novel. This feeling of otherness is recurrent in postcolonial texts but, what is interesting in this case, is that it is the character belonging in the dominant culture who suffers this feeling of estrangement. Colonial literature often describes the anxiety of the colonizers in foreign environments. Malouf's novel tackles this issue while describing the evolution of this

man of the Empire, who is forced to renounce his own dominant imperial culture in order to embrace that of the original inhabitants of Tomis, very much in tune with Nature's laws.

During his exile in Tomis, Ovid constantly remembers his childhood in Sulmo and his life in Rome, which clearly chimes in with the European nostalgia that white Australians have felt for centuries. In spite of his high status in Rome, in Tomis Ovid is an isolated exiled who must learn a new culture that he considers to be inferior in order not to be an outcast there. Ovid, like the first white settlers, is not allowed to return home, and for this reason is forced to cross the first boundary, that of dealing with a new environment that is hostile to him:

> For eight months of the year the world freezes. Some polar curse is breathed upon the land. It whitens overnight. Then when the ice loosens at last, and breaks up, the whole plain turns muddy and stinks, the insects swarm and plague us, hot mists steam amongst the tussocks. I have found no tree here that rises amongst the low, grayish brown scrub. No flower. No fruit. We are at the ends of the earth. Even the higher orders of the vegetable kingdom have not yet arrived among us. We are centuries from the notion of an orchard or a garden made simply to please. […] But I am describing a state of mind, no place. I am in exile here. (7-8)

Ovid's first description of Tomis is very negative; it is a waste land. He offers a description similar to the one that a convict would have made of the Australian landscape. As Ovid claims, he is mainly describing a state of mind. At this moment of the narrative, Ovid believes that the Italian landscape is much more beautiful than that of Tomis, which automatically brings to mind the same nostalgia that the colonizers felt in the remote places that they colonized. Moreover, instead of adopting a constructive attitude he decides to isolate and see himself as a victim of the situation: "My days in this place, my nights, are terrible beyond description. All day I wander in a dream, as

isolated from the world of men as if I belonged to another species" (9). In the novel, Ovid encapsulates the colonizers' attitude, which leads him to regard himself as the civilized one, while the barbarians stand for the "Other". He relies on the colonial idea of "civilization versus wilderness" and sees the colonized as the savages who need to be civilized and kept under control so that he can feel safe and whole.

In his essay "Post-colonial Critical Theories", Stephen Slemon (2001:107) quotes Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin's essential work *The Empire Writes Back* when he asserts that language is an instrument at the service of power. Consequently, postcolonial language has to "seize the language of the (imperial) centre and (re-place) it in a discourse fully adapted to the colonized place". This, they go on to argue, can be done, first by accomplishing an "abrogation" or refusal of the normative standards of the imperial culture – the standards of "correct" grammar, syntax, and pronunciation, for example – and then by attempting an "appropriation" of the colonizer's language, which will subsequently be adapted to the cultural and political ends of the colonized. In *An Imaginary* Life, the language of the Empire is useless and isolates the only figure that represents the (imperial) center. Although the people of Tomis are in a colonial place and live under the Roman rule, they are so far from the ruling centre that they do not even attempt to learn Latin. On the contrary, they end up imposing Getae upon Ovid, the ultimate embodiment of the Empire. Nobody speaks Latin in this peripheral space, so the only chance that Ovid has is to become a member of the Tomisian community, to get rid of Latin and replace it by the language of the barbarians.

Ovid represents the notions and values that the colonizers imposed, not only on the colonized, but also on the natural world. At that time Rome was the center of

civilization and, accordingly, the Roman emperor decided who the uncivilized "others" were, just as Ovid did as he arrived in Tomis:

> I have, by the working of the highest known authority, been cast out into what is indeed another order of beings, those who have not yet climbed up through a hole in their head and become fully human, who have not yet entered what we call society and become Romans under the law. (13)

Once again, the parallelism between Ovid and Britain and Tomis and Australia is self-evident. As is well known, at the time of the European colonization, imperial countries such as Spain, England, France and Portugal imposed a colonial discourse that described the colonized populations as barbarians who needed to be imbued with European values and embrace the Christian faith. As Homi Bhabha asserts:

> The objective of colonial discourse is to construe the colonized as a population of degenerate types on the basis of racial origin, in order to justify conquest and to establish system of administration and instruction. (1994:70)

These beliefs legitimized the whole colonization process. The colonizers had the right, and the moral duty, to civilize the barbarians, who thus became the "other" in their own lands. Those in power used their allegedly superior knowledge as a tool to colonize places that were interesting for them in economic terms, although their main argument was that the aboriginal people should be civilized because they were savages with an inferior culture. As Ovid words corroborate:

> But they are, even so, of our species, these Getae. I listen to them talk. The sounds are barbarous, and my soul aches for the refinements of our Latin tongue, that perfect tongue in which all things can be spoken, even pronouncements of exile. (13)

As is well-known, the meaning of a text does not reside exclusively in the text, but is produced by the reader in relation, not only to the text in question, but also to the complex network of texts, both creative and critical, invoked in the readings process.

Bearing this in mind, it is easy to notice the echoes of William Shakespeare's *The Tempest* in Malouf's novel. The similarities between Ovid and Prospero are clear: both of them have been exiled by powerful figures of Rome and Milan respectively, and they both play the role of the colonizer in their stories. The other term in this binary system would be that occupied by the wild Child and Caliban, because both of them represent the figure of the wild savage connected with Nature and the landscape. Caliban, who is described as a monster by Prospero, shows that he is more sensitive than the rest of the characters when giving this poetic description of the natural world, in this case, his island:

> Be not afeard. The isle is full of noises,
> Sounds, and sweet airs that give delight and hurt not.
> Sometimes a thousand twangling instruments
> Will hum about mine ears, and sometime voices
> That, if I then had waked after long sleep,
> Will make me sleep again. And then, in dreaming,
> The clouds methought would open and show riches
> Ready to drop upon me, that when I waked
> I cried to dream again. (3.2. 127-135)

In *An Imaginary Life*, Ovid needs the natural wisdom of the wild Child to carry out his quest because it implies the crossing of several borders before reaching his mystic communion with the land. The colonizers' first way of imposing their culture is by introducing their language in the culture of the colonized. Both Prospero and Ovid want these savage creatures to cross the boundary that detaches wilderness (the natural world) from civilization (the world of culture). Ovid and Prospero respectively try to imbue the wild Child and Caliban with their values because they want to civilize these noble savages. However, throughout the process, their colonial perspective will be put to the

test. Prospero teaches his language to Caliban, but the savage employs it to rebel against the people who have colonized his island: “You taught me language, and my profit on’t/Is, I know how to curse. The red plague rid you/For learning me your language!” (I.2. 363-365). Ovid also wants to introduce the wild Child into human society: “How much more moving then to see my Child make the discoveries that will lead him, after so many years of exile, into his inheritance, into the society of his own kind” (76). Caliban and the wild Child represent the uncivilized because both of them are wild characters who live in Nature and are feared and mistreated as the dangerous “other”. They are hybrid figures, half human and half animal, which have to be civilized. The colonial Empire’s discourse takes it that those who are different from us are dangerous and abnormal, so it defines the colonized as something negative, and projects upon the “other” the negative elements that they repress and fail to see in themselves. Ovid and Prospero, however, understand that these savages are also part of themselves. Prospero acknowledges Caliban as a dark part of himself: “Two of these fellows you/Must know and own; this thing of darkness, I/Acknowledge mine” (5. I. 272-274). Ovid wonders if it was he who discovered the Child or, on the contrary, it was the Child who discovered or rediscovered him. They can communicate without words and their thoughts flow from one mind to another, as if they were talking to themselves (145-46). At the end of both stories, Ovid and Prospero, the colonial figures par excellence, are subject to the gaze of the colonized and, as Bhabha argues (1994: 88), this situation rearticulates the whole notion of the colonial identity: the double vision generated by the colonized mimicry discloses the ambivalence of the colonial discourse while disrupting its authority.

Malouf’s novel also teems with echoes from well-known critical texts, such as Stuart Hall’s *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*. In this work,

Hall wants to find an explanation for the fascination that nowadays exists with "otherness"; within many different disciplines this question of "difference" and "otherness" has come to play an increasingly significant role. In order to do that, he puts forward some theoretical arguments. Among other things, he relies on "linguistics" and Saussure's use of language as a model of how culture works. The main argument here is that "difference" matters because it is essential to meaning; without it, meaning could not exist (1997: 234). According to Saussure, meaning is relational; therefore, it is the difference between "civilized" and "barbarians" that carries meaning. Hall goes on to affirm that people often reduce meaning to the difference between opposites, and that through these binary oppositions people can only understand difference and the diversity of the world within the context of either/or extremes. According to Hall, "Things don't mean: we construct meaning, using representational systems—concepts and signs" (1997: 25). Hall revises and rearticulates Michel Foucault's theory of the production of knowledge through what he calls "discourse". As is well known, Foucault introduces power in his equation to explain how institutional apparatuses use discourse and knowledge in order to coerce people. In Foucault's words: "There is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time, power relations" (1977: 27). Hall also relies on Derrida and his idea that there is always a relation of power between the poles of a binary opposition (1997: 235). In the novel, Ovid regards Tomisians as barbarians because he compares them with the Roman citizens and their more civilized culture. Ovid emphasizes his difference from the "others" because, as he sees it, to be Roman means to be civilized and this carries a meaning. Consequently, Ovid relies on a racist discourse structured by opposites that articulate the postcolonial difference that is being discussed in this analysis: Roman/colonizer/civilization/Ovid versus

Tomis/colonized/savagery/the wild Child. Ovid connects the people from Tomis with lack of civilization, which also shows in their basic language. Ovid clings to what Hall calls a racialized regime of representation, because he naturalizes his "difference" with the Tomisians and the wild Child by reducing their Culture to Nature. Naturalization was a practice used by the colonizers as a strategy to fix "difference" because, if differences between the colonizers and the colonized were "cultural", then they could be subject to modification and change (1997: 245). As Ovid sees it, these barbarians are connected with Nature instead of Culture because they lack civil institutions and their customs are based on rituals. Once again he relies on binary oppositions: Culture/Reason versus Nature/Instinct. At the beginning of the novel, Ovid uses stereotyping as a representational practice; he reduces Tomisians to a few characteristics such as savagery and inferiority. Ovid's stereotyping also brings to mind Edward Said's *Orientalism,* his seminal study of how Europe constructed a stereotypical image of the Orient. Using Antonio Gramsci's concept of 'cultural hegemony', Said (1985: 7) explains that the Europeans built up the idea of the European identity as superior to all the other non-European peoples and cultures. This is Ovid's mentality during his first months in Tomis, and this is also one of the ideological pillars of the European colonization; European culture is superior and the Europeans have to civilize the poor savages. Said's discussion of the European hegemony closely parallels Foucault's power/knowledge argument. In the same way, the notion of race is introduced in the discourse of these Empires as something which determines their superiority and the inferiority of the colonized. This imperialist articulation of power determined a racialized knowledge of the "other", which very negatively affects the colonized, because they regard themselves as inferior by reason of being non-white. *An Imaginary Life* makes it clear that Ovid, as the representative of Roman hegemony, elaborates a

discourse of superiority, not only over the Tomisians, but also over the child. He naturalizes the savages who live far away from the centre of the Empire because he already believes that, as a Roman citizen, he can impose his authority on these people. In the novel, one of the most interesting facts from a postcolonial perspective is how this narrative subverts conventional power relations, thus corroborating Hall and Foucault's idea (1997:49) that power is not only held by the institutions since we are all, to some degree, carriers of power and can consequently become oppressors and oppressed. When Ovid arrives in Tomis, he believes in the discourse/knowledge encapsulated by the Roman Empire, which basically upholds the superior ideology of the whites who are intellectually developed because they belong in a civilized system and culture ruled by a formal government, institutions and laws. As the story progresses Ovid changes his colonizer mentality; being an exiled, he is forced to accept and learn the culture of the "others". What is interesting in the nature of the concept of the "Other" is that, like identity, it is a production and it always depends on the perspective of the observer. Ovid becomes the "other" in this hybrid space, and is accordingly forced to adapt to the Tomisian culture, which now becomes the dominant one. Ovid crosses the threshold and undergoes a radical transformation. He then realizes that Tomisians have a culture which is more connected with the environment, and somehow more realistic and less pretentious than his Roman background. Ovid crosses, not only physical borders until reaching his final metamorphosis, but also blurs the barriers of culture and race by making friends, first with Ryzak, a member of the Tomisian tribe, and later on with the wild Child of nature.

Another argument that Hall puts forward in his work is of a psychoanalytical nature, and tackles the role of "difference" in our psychic life. The argument goes that the "Other" is fundamental for the constitution of the self, of us as subjects. In the novel,

the Tomisians and the wild Child will be crucial in the development of Ovid's self, because they will help Ovid to integrate so far unknown parts of his self and to rediscover old parts that had been forgotten and lost. This psychoanalytical approach affirms that human subjectivity depends on our unconscious relation with the "other". Moreover, it is argued that humans are never fully unified as subjects. Subjectivities are constantly built through this troubled, never-completed, unconscious dialogue with the non-internalized "Other", which can alone complete the self but which, lying outside, is always constituted as lack (1997: 238). In the text, Ovid cannot become whole until he is able to internalize the natural wisdom of the "Other" at the moment of his death, which proves that Ovid's life is a constant search for fulfillment in which the relation with the others is quintessential.

These ideas also bring to mind Freud's essay "The Uncanny". As Freud (1919: 13) claims, this can be explained as some emotional affect that is transformed by repression into an anxiety that comes from something repressed which recurs. If this is, indeed, the secret nature of the uncanny, it is easy to understand why the uncanny is, in fact, nothing new or foreign, but something familiar and old that has been estranged through the process of repression. It could be affirmed that the uncanny element in *An Imaginary Life* is the wild Child, because Ovid repressed this figure when he grew up, but now the boy has come again as a familiar element that keeps on haunting him. Ovid's fascination with otherness can be seen in his obsession with the wild Child, which represents the unknown, the uncanny, the "other". The recurrent figure of the wild Child implies not only curiosity, but also fear of something that is beyond our powers. Ovid encourages the people from Tomis to capture the wild boy, and then they carry him to the village by force. There is some connection between the wild boy of Ovid's childhood and this wild Child, who has the natural wisdom that Ovid lacks. The

Tomisians in turn feel threatened by the Wild Child and construct him as the other, as a figure that must be confronted and annihilated because the Child, as Gareth Griffiths (1993:66) claims, once allowed in, will possess and transform their already fragile identification with the centre, to which they constantly look up and which they never quite possess. The wild Child is like a Trojan horse in Tomis, he is the enemy inside because the child confronts them with their own reality, since he is like a mirror held up to them. Ryzak's mother believes that the boy's fever is part of a devilish metamorphosis. By identifying/objectifying evil in the figure of the child his annihilation can be fully justified. In the novel, the Child is identified as the demon by Ryzak's mother:

> The old woman immediately begins wailing over him, cursing the younger woman who has deserted her own child to care for an interloper, and in nursing him up to the crisis has made it possible for the demon to steal, if only for a moment, her son's spirit. (1999: 115)

Hall defines "difference" as an ambivalent element because it can be both positive and negative. On the one hand, difference is both necessary for the production of meaning, the formation of language and culture and social identities. On the other hand, difference is also threatening, a site of danger, of negative feelings, of splitting, of hostility and aggression towards the 'Other' (1997: 238). The Tomisians identify the wild Child with the devil and Ovid with the Romans because of their difference; for the Tomisians they are interlopers, the "others".

Just as *An Imaginary Life* deals with binarisms such as self versus other, civilization versus wilderness, center versus ex-centric places, it also brings to mind what Homi Bhabha in his work *The Location of Culture* labelled as "Third Space", a notion mainly based on the inscription and articulation of cultural hybridity. Bhabha claims that, by exploring this third space, we may elude the politics of polarity and emerge as the

others of ourselves (1994: 38-39). In the first part of the narrative, Ovid is worried about the fact that he, a citizen of the capital of the Empire, has been sent to a strange place and is surrounded by people less civilized than him. Thus, Ovid rejects Tomis, its people and their culture because they are very different from his Roman world. With the passing of time, Ovid realizes that he is a peripheral figure and stands for the "other" side of the postcolonial coin, because the people from Tomis, although living under the Roman rule, are not interested in learning the culture of the Empire. Bhabha's "third space" is a territory in which different cultures collide to produce cultural negotiations. This is the liminal territory that Ovid and the Australian convicts inhabited because they straddled two different cultures and felt that they belonged to both and neither of them. The novel also highlights hybridity when dealing with the cultural negotiations that Ovid must undergo in order to cross the boundary that separates his culture from that of the people from Tomis. The only option for Ovid is to leave all the prejudices of a Roman education behind, to open himself up to the "Others" and change his perception of the reality that surrounds him because, from now onwards, he will inhabit "in-between-ness". The reason why Ovid completely changes his opinion about his former culture and, above all, the culture of the Tomisians, is that he finally realizes that the understanding of their culture is the key to interpret this bewildering landscape. In this third space, Ovid fulfills a process of negotiation that will lead him to the construction of a hybrid identity resulting from the integration of the Roman and Tomisian cultures, which will help him to stop being a marginal figure:

> And yet the words were already written. I wrote them years ago, and only now discover what they meant, what message they had for me: 'You will be separated from yourself and yet be alive.'
>
> Now I too must be transformed. (26)

Ovid is a good example of how the integration of different cultures brings about a hybrid individual who better knows how to deal with the world that surrounds him. His comprehension of this new culture will allow Ovid to better understand himself and the new society in which he now lives. He gradually realizes that the Tomisians are not so savage, and that the landscape is not so distressing and barren. Once Ovid gets involved in the culture of Tomis by participating in their local daily activities, he begins to understand it and to learn its language, to the point that he finally decides never to return to Rome. It could be said that Ovid's new hybrid identity encapsulates the diaspora identity that Stuart Hall describes as follows:

> The diaspora experience as I intend it here is defined, not by essence or purity, but by the recognition of a necessary heterogeneity and diversity; by a conception of 'identity' which lives with and through, not despite, difference; by hybridity. Diaspora identities are those which are constantly producing and reproducing themselves anew, through transformation and difference. (1990:235)

Ovid's acquisition of a diasporic identity marks the consolidation of his liberating hybridity.

4. THE IMPORTANCE OF LANGUAGE IN THE NOVEL

Frantz Fanon (2008: 9) claims that the colonized people bear an inferiority complex because of their cultural loss and the imposition of the culture and the language of the civilizing nation upon their communities. Ovid's first problem in the novel is related to language; he cannot use Latin in order to give meaning to the new world that surrounds him. The novel uses language to isolate the character that represents the Empire. Language is tremendously important because it imbues people with ideological values and a particular cosmovision. Ovid is a poet, and the worst that can happen to a poet is his loss of speech, because the lack of words denies him the possibility to describe what he is experiencing. Ovid can speak many languages but, if he does not speak Getae, he cannot communicate with anybody in Tomis. If he is isolated he will vanish. In the first part of the narrative, Ovid praises Latin and despises Getae: "I listen to them talk. The sounds are barbarous, and my soul aches for the refinements of our Latin tongue, that perfect tongue in which all things can be spoken, even pronouncements of exile" (13). Being in exile, Ovid is forced to learn a different culture that will help him to recall his childhood and see everything from a child's perspective again. In this unfavorable situation, Ovid, like the colonized, has to face the dilemma of learning the "other" culture or else disappearing. So, at this moment of crisis, he dreams of centaurs, mythical figures that, in my opinion, represent otherness itself:

> *Let us into your world,* they seem to be saying. *Let us cross the river into your empire. Let us into your lives. Believe in us. Believe*. […] And something came out of the depths of my sleep towards the point where we stood facing one another, like a reflection rising to the surface of a mirror. It was there, outside me, a stranger. And something in me that was its reflection had come up to meet it.
>
> I woke, cried out. And the word I uttered was not in my own tongue. (17)

In this dream, Ovid retrieves that part of his self that allows him to accept the Tomisian culture and language. Now, Ovid describes Latin, the language of the Empire, as a language that is designed to express difference and the smallest nuances of thought and feeling. On the other hand, against Latin is Getae, a language which is equally expressive, but which, unlike Latin, can represent the unity of things (59). Ovid sees the world from a different perspective now, because Getae is not so constrained and lets him use his senses. In other words, it is a language of reconciliation that allows him to explore his own self: "Now that spring is no longer to be recognized in blossoms or in new leaves on the trees, I must look for it in myself" (60). By removing himself from the language of difference, Ovid loses his sense of otherness and can therefore interact with the people from Tomis: "I belong to this place now. I have made it mine. I am entering the dimension of my self" (91).

Nonetheless, Ovid behaves again as the colonizer in his relationship with the Child. In the first place he persuades the men from Tomis to capture the wild Child as if he were a beast. Then, Ovid plays the role of the paternalist colonizer who tries to introduce the wild Child into the world of culture by teaching him the civilized language of human beings. As Fanon would put it, he tries to teach Getae to the boy in order to elevate him above his jungle so that the boy can become whiter as he renounces his blackness (2008: 9). The only option for the wild Child in this white world is to adjust to civilization, which implies the acquisition of language. This moment of crisis for the boy is shown in the scene in which he is fighting against his fever and, suddenly, utters a Getae word. He knows this is the only way to survive in this violent and ruthless world of men. In this learning process, Bhabha's concept of mimicry acquires special significance, because Ovid wants the Child to mimic the sounds of human language. Bhabha claims that "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"* (1994: 86, emphasis in the original). Initially, Ovid embodies the colonial paternalism of the colonizers because, by teaching the wild Child Getae, he longs to recognize the boy as something human, but always having in mind his inferiority as a savage: "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). However, the situation gets reversed as it is Ovid who mimics the sounds reproduced by the wild Child, "But he, in fact, is the more patient teacher. He shows me the bird whose cry I am trying to imitate" (93). Ovid realizes that it is the Child who possesses more wisdom, because he does not imitate the birds but "He is being the bird" (88). Ovid has reached a point of no return; he realizes that he is immersed in an identity quest: "I belong to this place now. I have made it mine. I am entering the dimensions of my self" (91). As Andrew Taylor claims, "the predominant in Malouf's fiction is the urge to explore and challenge difference and boundaries or, more precisely, to explore and challenge the concepts of difference and boundary themselves" (1999:5). Furthermore, Ovid has to learn the "language of Nature", which is the system of communication used by the wild Child. This means of communication is very important because it is also a mode of understanding the world. This learning process could be seen as a way to discard human language, a system that uses symbols to explain and differentiate everything, to favour the language of Nature as the only one that does not separate natural elements or concepts. This will be Ovid's medium to reach his final communion with the universe. Ovid's colonial mentality eventually changes because he gradually understands that the real teacher is the uncivilized savage. In the end, it is the wild Child who teaches Ovid how to reconcile and integrate his past, present and future in order to fuse with nature and become part of the universe:

> A whole hidden life comes flooding back to consciousness. So it is that my childhood has begun to return to me. Not as I had previously remembered it, but in some clearer form, as it really was; which is why my past, as I recall it now, continually astonishes me. It is as if it had happened to someone else, and I were being handed a new past that leads, as I follow it out, to a present in which I appear out of my old body as a new and other self. (91)

Now Ovid's childhood returns to him and his subjective memories reinstall him in a present in which he appears to be out of his old body and embodying a new and other self. The Child has introduced Ovid into a language that is part of a natural system: "His self is outside him, its energy distributed among the beasts and birds whose life he shares, among leaves, water, grasses, clouds, thunder" (91-92). Ovid clearly understands that the boy possesses a wisdom which is directly connected with the natural order that operates within the universe and, consequently, the relationship between teacher and pupil is inverted. As Amanda Nettelbeck claims in her essay "Imagining the Imaginary in *An Imaginary Life*" (1993: 31), the Child is completely unfamiliar with any kind of human society and untrained in the language of distinctions, because the Child has grown up assuming an imaginary unity between himself and the world. The reader notices how the boy tries to share with Ovid his natural consciousness of the world but, at this point, Ovid's mind is not prepared to take this step because he is still attached to his Roman education, full of prejudices. This natural language is therefore a kind of hieroglyph for Ovid because he cannot interpret and read it. However, with the help of the shaman/boy, Ovid will eventually be able to acquire this language of Nature that will allow him to understand that all beings are interconnected. The wild Child is Ovid's only opportunity to transcend the world of culture and be one with the universe, because the boy does not communicate through language, but through a natural discourse shared by all the living beings. The wild Child uses the language of

Nature, a primal language which gets Ovid closer to the language of his childhood, and which ultimately becomes the key to understand the secrets of the natural world:

> Once, in the early days of my desolation, I thought I might learn to write in the language of the spiders. Now, led by the Child, I am on my way to it. The true language, I know now, is that speech in silence in which we first communicated, the Child and I, in the forest, when I was asleep. It is the language I used with him in my childhood, and some memory, intangibly there but not quite audible, of our marvelous conversations, comes to me again at the very edge of sleep, a language my tongue almost rediscovers and which would, I believe, reveal the secrets of the universe to me. (94)

The Child teaches him how to make the sounds of the birds and beasts, and Ovid connects with nature by learning these sounds like a child, by imitation. Latin and Getae clearly illustrate the power of language, because language is the first thing that the colonizers impose upon the colonized in order to accomplish their conquest. On the contrary, this "language of Nature" expresses, not difference, but integration; it helps Ovid to be one with the natural world because it is free from mandatory structures. According to Ovid, it is the language that he used in his childhood and revealed the secrets of the universe to him (94). It is through the regression to his childhood that Ovid finds the way, not only to achieve reconciliation with the "other", but also with his own self. At the end of the story, Ovid and the wild Child use the language of nature in order to communicate, and Ovid becomes more and more integrated with nature as the moment of his physical death approaches. Finally, the reader is offered a mysterious ending in which Ovid fuses with nature, mainly because he has rejected human language and the world of culture. At this very final moment, Ovid can communicate with the universe as a child, without prejudices and being more receptive to the world around him.

In literature, the loss of speech usually stands for the loss of identity, because it is mainly when the characters utter words that they can speak themselves into existence. As Kathleen Doty and Risto Hiltunen affirm, "Malouf displays a deep interest in the role of both verbal and non-verbal language in constructions of human identity" (1996: 99). The loss of the possibility of communication is vital in *An Imaginary Life*, because exile gives Ovid the possibility to rediscover parts of his self that had been forgotten. Being the only person who speaks Latin, he feels isolated, and this isolation allows him to listen to his own gaps and silences. When Ovid arrives in Tomis he connects with the insects around him more than with the people from Tomis because, like him, animals cannot speak and, in any case, Ovid feels that, for him, learning the language of the spiders would be easier than learning that of the barbarous: "Even the spiders, poor creatures. Do they have a language of their own, I wonder? If so, I might try to learn it. As easy do that as master the barbarous guttural tongue my neighbors speak" (12). There are constant references to the loss of speech in the novel, and this is also a recurrent topic in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*; when some of the characters cannot communicate with other people, this means that they are doomed to death. For instance, Pallas turns Arachne into a spider because she does not respect the Gods: "Yes, live but hang, you wicked girl, and know you'll rue the future too: that penalty your skin shall pay to all posterity!" (1986: 125). She will suffer a literal metamorphosis by being transformed into a spider, and her punishment is mainly the loss of speech because, although she can continue spinning webs, she has lost human language. Arachne and Ovid have an artistic reputation, but both of them are too proud and, for this reason, they are punished by the established power. At the beginning of *An Imaginary Life*, Ovid is very proud of being one of the most significant Roman poets but, after his exile, he is relegated to isolation with the insects as his only companions. "I might begin to

write again in the spiders' language. The New Metamorphoses of the poet Ovid in his Exile, in the spiders' tongue" (13-14). If he does not change his attitude, he might end up like Arachne and completely lose his identity. Nevertheless, Ovid will understand that he must change his mentality about Tomis and its people. In order to do that, he undergoes some metaphorical metamorphosis and learns other forms of communication. Ovid's *Metamorphoses* makes it clear that communication is the only way to survive, and Malouf's *An Imaginary Life* somehow corroborates this idea because, as a consequence of his inability to communicate with the Tomisians, Ovid realizes that, like the characters of his *Metamorphoses*, he is doomed to death. Firstly, Malouf's novel signals the acquisition of the Tomisian language as a quintessential part of Ovid's identity quest but, in the final part of the novel, it is shown that, only by means of renouncing human language, first Latin and then Getae, can Ovid acquire the mythical language of Nature that will enable him to become part of the universe at the moment of his death. This fusion is possible because the power of human language has become totally neutralized when Ovid crosses that final boundary.

5. OVID'S IDENTITY PROCESS

A fundamental aspect of *An Imaginary Life* is the description of Ovid's physical and psychological journey in order to achieve the integration of his fragmented self/identity. The configuration of this identity process is based firstly on the interaction between Ovid's Roman culture and the culture of Tomis, and secondly on the natural world of the wild Child. Ovid enters a liminal space, in which he has to cross different boundaries in order to reach his final metamorphosis and fusion with the natural world, thus corroborating Stuart Hall's assertion that cultural identity is a matter of 'becoming' as well as of 'being':

> 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. (1990:22)

I agree to Hall's vision of identity as a production which is always in process because, by means of cultural negotiations, people are able to integrate and assimilate parts of their selves that they had forgotten or failed to recognize before. In the novel, Ovid's identity process is fully accomplished when he manages to integrate parts of his former fragmented self and finally fuses with the landscape. According to the mystical cosmovision of the novel, one can only enter a superior stage when this integration has taken place. However, according to this idea, this process does not guarantee a happy ending, because people may not be able to integrate all the parts of their fragmented selves before dying, which would deprive them of reaching this holistic stage that the novel highlights. Ovid's exile will set off this quest, which can alone allow Ovid to enter the final liberating third space. If Ovid wants to remember and retrieve his past, he

will have to learn, first the culture of Tomis, and then the natural wisdom of the wild Child so that he can become once again the child of nature he once was.

At the beginning of the novel, Ovid confesses that he was the only one who could, not only see, but also speak to a wild boy who lived in the valley near Sulmo, Ovid's village. This could imply that Ovid was the only one who possessed a poet's mind and, for this reason, was able to articulate a language which enabled him to communicate with this wild child in his childhood: "We speak to one another, but in a tongue of our devising" (1). When Ovid was a child he wondered if this child of nature was a wolf boy, a child captured from the wilderness and brought in among them to be taught to adapt to the ways of men (2-3). This could also be a reference to Romulus and Remus, the abandoned twin brothers who, according to Rome's foundation myth, were raised by a wolf and able to found the city that would become the center of civilization. This wild Child could also be seen as part of Ovid's personality, that which safeguards the more instinctual and pure elements of Ovid's mind, which he would lose when becoming an adolescent: "Sometime 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 it often enough in those early years, and have done so since" (3). This is the first metamorphosis that Ovid undergoes in the novel; it is physical and psychological because he loses the child's innocence and purity that he will strive to retrieve later. It is ironic that Ovid should have to be expelled from Rome, the center of civilization, in order to become whole and find another kind of civilization in a remote place that the Romans defined as the confines of the known world. Ovid will contribute to enriching this civilization by accepting the new environment and community. When Ovid arrives in Tomis, he rejects it because it is a hostile and barbaric place. Moreover, he sees himself as a victim of that situation because he has been rejected twice: first, by his

biological father after the death of his brother, and then by his political father, Emperor Augustus, as punishment for having written something nasty about Augustus' sister. The Emperor also orders that Ovid's books should be removed from public libraries as a way to make Ovid disappear from the Roman social scene: "In all the known world, where the emperor rules, I have no official existence. And beyond this last outpost is the unknown" (8). Besides, Ovid is obsessed with death; he has been haunted by a recurrent dream in which, while he is digging up the earth, wolves come and, while howling, look for his own grave: "I know what it is we are looking for. It is the grave of the poet Ovid – Publius Ovidius Naso, Roman of the equestrian order, poet. In all this desolation, no one knows where he lies" (10). The poet knows that his memory will be lost if he does not find his grave before the wolves. Through this dream, Ovid's unconscious is warning him that, if he fails to find out the meaning and purpose of life and death before passing away, his life would have been wasted and pointless. In fact, one of Ovid's main concerns is his historical and literary survival: "Have you heard my name? Ovid? Am I still known? Have I survived?" (11-12).

At some point of Ovid's stay in Tomis he wonders if he should change his attitude and start to learn Getae and approach the landscape like a child: "Will I have to learn everything all over again like a child? Discovering the world like a small child does, through the senses, but with all things deprived of the special magic of their names in my own tongue?" (14-15). Ovid is attracted by this new exotic culture and this shows in his dreams, which are very significant in the novel because they give the reader access to Ovid's unconscious. Ovid's attraction towards the people of Tomis is clearly seen in Ovid's dream about the centaurs, who want Ovid to forget his Roman prejudices and believe in them: "Let us into your world, they seem to be saying. Let us cross the river into your empire. Let us into your lives. Believe in us. Believe" (17). This dream will

enhance Ovid's next metamorphosis: from being the representative of the Roman culture of the Empire to his upholding of the new and more emotional and perceptive Getae culture. *An Imaginary Life* highlights the importance of the connection between the individual and his/her surrounding environment. Just as Bhabha (1990:216) asserts that hybridity lies in the power/potential to face up to a new situation, to establish new alliances, to translate and rethink your principles, to enter a process of transformation where different languages coexist and artificial boundaries dissolve, Ovid has to reconsider all his previous beliefs and culture when he understands that in this in-between space he is not the famous Roman poet anymore, but rather an outcast expelled from Rome. Nonetheless, it is in this situation of isolation that Ovid can explore his own self and discover parts of it that he did not know before. In this third space he is not constrained by the restrictions of Rome. Now, far from the so-called civilized center of the Empire, he is free to reconcile himself with his past and bring together all the fragmented parts of his self.

The more the human being knows about other cultures, the more he or she learns about his or her own self. Ovid begins to assimilate the culture of the people from Tomis and becomes a hybrid because, from that moment onwards, he will belong to both and neither of them. As Salman Rushdie (1991:10) affirms, exiled writers like him can be haunted by some sense of loss, some urge to reclaim, to look back, even at the risk of being turned into pillars of salt. In the story, Ovid is similarly running this risk because he is constantly looking back to Rome and Latin, which reveals profound uncertainties. Ovid's physical and psychological alienation makes him create in his mind his own version of Rome and the landscape of his childhood, that is, an imaginary homeland. At the initial moments of his exile, Ovid suffers a personal crisis based mainly on his feeling of unbelonging to this new place but, once he enters the realm of

silence he finds the gate through which he can release his former prejudices. He will leave his initial nostalgia behind and will instead open his eyes to the new culture of Tomis. In this way, he realizes that Getae is more connected with reality and nature than Latin, and his perception of the world changes. The symbol of this transformation in the novel is the scarlet wild poppy that connects past, present and future in a timeless space:

> Poppy, you have saved me, you have recovered the earth for me. I know how to work the spring. It is about to begin. All my life till now has been wasted. I had to enter the silence to find a password that would release me from my own life.
>
> Now I too must be transformed. (26)

As a consequence of this transformation, Ovid begins to value and respect Tomis people and their culture. Ovid undergoes a process of assimilation of the Tomisian culture that transforms his former cultural identity. At this point of the narrative, there is a process of hybridization in Ovid's mind; he is in between the Roman and Tomisian cultures, and he seems to have got over the initial feeling of otherness that is concomitant with postcolonial spaces.

Once that Ovid has become a member of Ryzak's household, he is allowed to take part in a hunting party. He then attends the ritual performed in the circle of funerary mounds to scare away evil spirits. Mimicking the sounds of the Tomis horsemen, Ovid rides off into the glittering circle and, when scattering his handful of grain, he feels an intense span that he describes as a moment of exhilaration. He shouts again, letting the cold air fill in his lungs, then expels it in a long cry, and feels free of something. As he explains, "It is as if some fear went out on my breath and left my spirit clear. I am a Roman and a poet. But that breath and the sound it carries still moves out from my body into the world, and I feel freer for it" (38). This passage could be regarded as a crucial

moment in Ovid's quest because, after this ceremony, he thinks again about the brother who died when he was young. He remembers this traumatic moment of his life, and he can finally work through this trauma because he is living it again in the Tomis ritual:

> Thirty years ago. Riding just like this after his funeral, with my father at my side, suddenly urge ahead and put a horse's length between us. He is angry with me, and I feel hurt, slighted, because I know what he is thinking: that of the two of us it is my brother who should have survived. (1999:38)

It is now that Ovid admits that he started his exile the day of his brother's burial, thirty years before. He remembers that his father thought that it was his brother who should have survived, which led Ovid to leave his father at that difficult moment and go to Rome. He finally confesses that this has been a great burden during his whole life because of the guilt he feels. However, after the ritual, Ovid realizes that he has got rid of this heavy burden and, suddenly, the sunlight upon his back feels warm again because it was for them that he shouted on the horsemen's burial ground: "I had let them back into my life, the brother thirty years dead, the father buried only a year before my disgrace" (39). Then, free at last, he claims that he is ready to confront his own death. No wonder this passage precedes the appearance of the wild Child: Ovid has worked through his traumatic past and now needs the figure of the wild child, the guiding spirit that will lead Ovid's soul to its final communion with nature at the moment of his death.

Later, they find the footprints of the wild child and Ryzak explains to Ovid that these are from a wild boy who lives with the deer. This is the first time that Ovid sees the wild boy in the woods. He will connect him, not only with the Roman twins, Romulus and Remus, the wolf brothers and the founding fathers of Rome, but also with the wild Child who was his companion at Sulmo. Two years later, Ovid communicates with the

wild Child in a language beyond tongues, just as he used to do with his wild companion at Sulmo. In a dream-like state he recovers the broken bond with a lost part of his fragmented self. Now, in a dream, the poet undergoes another metamorphosis. Ovid dreams that he and his companions have all become part of the woods and he has become a pool of water. He enters a liquid state and can feel the warmth of the sun and the blue of the sky. He even feels the clouds and wings passing through him but, suddenly, he begins to be afraid when the night comes and the temperature drops because this might imply his freezing. Then, a deer comes and drinks of him, and part of him enters the deer, but he does not feel at all diminished. The poet starts wondering what might happen if a wolf came and drank him down, thus leaving him dry, but he suddenly realizes that he is ready to accept it (56). The poet is now prepared to undergo a deeper metamorphosis which will transform him into another form of life. In this dream, we are aware of the novel's holistic vision of the universe. The dissolution of Ovid's individuality into the natural world also occurs in his unconscious, but it is the wild Child that ultimately helps him to cross the boundary that detaches the real world of men from a natural system that functions like an all-embracing whole. This dream could be said to act like a prolepsis in the novel, because it anticipates Ovid's final fusion with the land. It seems that Ovid does not recognize himself as the great Roman poet any more, and now he feels that he is yet another element of a natural process which connects all the living things:

> I have stopped finding fault with creation and have learned to accept it. We have some power in us that knows its own ends. It is that that drives us on to what we must finally become. We have only to conceive of the possibility and somehow the spirits work in us to make it actual. This is the true meaning of transformation. This is the real metamorphosis. Our further selves are contained within us, as the leaves and blossoms are in the tree. (58)

In this stage of Ovid's quest, his perception of the world is gradually changing and he decides never to go back to Rome. This is significant because he realizes that this is his last chance to transcend the realm of culture and the physical world. He finally realizes that the wild Child is the shamanic figure who will lead him in his quest until he reaches his mystical death:

> Here is the life you have tried to throw away. Here is your second chance. Here is the destiny you have tried to shake off by inventing a hundred false roles, a hundred false identities for yourself. It will look at first like disaster, but is really good fortune in disguise, since fate too knows how to follow your evasions through a hundred forms of its own. Now you will become at last the one you intended to be. (90-91)

Ovid tries to understand the Child's consciousness in order to share his perception of the world but is afraid of dissolving, of getting definitely lost in the multiplicity of things that never come back. Ovid's mind is not ready yet, because he still relies on his Roman cultural parameters to know and understand the culture of the "Others". His Roman education still prevents him from opening his mind up to a holistic world in which the natural elements are not isolated entities but parts of a whole system. On the contrary, the wild Child has no notion of otherness because he regards the universe and the multiplicity of its elements as a whole structure. In this natural scheme, all the creatures are interconnected, and that is the reason why the boy does not mimic the birds but is the birds. Latin classifies the natural phenomena as inanimate events, it rains and it thunders, whereas the wild Child employs the language of Nature to internalize these phenomena and be part of them: "I am raining" and "I am thundering" (92). Ovid's relation with the world is transformed by his friendship with the wild Child, because he can feel the strong connection that the Child has with the natural world that surrounds them:

> His self is outside him, its energy distributed among the beasts and birds whose life he shares, among leaves, water, grasses, clouds, thunder – whose existence he can be at home in because they hold, each of them, some particle of his spirit. He has no notion of the otherness of things. (91-92)

An Imaginary Life uses the figure of the wild Child and the language that he uses to connect with every natural thing in order to subtly highlight the Australian aborigines' cosmovision of the universe. This cosmovision and the beliefs it entails are the elements that Ovid has to apprehend because they will help him to rediscover the hidden sensitive and natural part of his own self that disappeared when he became a teenager. This knowledge gets Ovid closer to the understanding of the natural world as a process that connects everything, and this is a moment of intense anxiety in Ovid's identity quest because he realizes that the final metamorphosis begins now: "I must drive out my old self and let the universe in" (92). Therefore, Ovid crosses the boundaries of his own consciousness to establish a connection with the environment around him, and penetrates another in-between space that is beyond language, beyond culture and the boundaries they generate. In this natural territory, Ovid, guided by the Child who is free from all the prejudices imposed by a human education, tries to recover again that innocent and pure part of his self by connecting to his former beliefs. In this physical and psychological journey, Ovid establishes a link with the Child's consciousness in order to emerge as the other of himself in this communion with the universe:

> Now, led by the Child, I am on my way to it. The true language, I know, is that speech in silence in which we first communicated, the Child and I, in the forest, when I was sleep. It is the language I used with him in my childhood, and some memory, intangible there but not quite audible, of our marvelous conversations, comes to me again at the very edge of sleep, a language my tongue almost rediscovers and which would, I believe, reveal the secrets of the universe to me. (94)

Ryzak's death is a turning point in the story because of two reasons. First, the only figure that protects Ovid and the Child has died, and now they are in danger because the old woman will surely seek revenge. Secondly, his death acts as a reminder of man's mortal nature and encourages Ovid to accomplish his final journey towards death. At this moment, Ovid thinks again of his previous dream and has an epiphany:

> I have become braver in my old age, ready at last for all the changes we must undergo, as painfully we allow our limbs to burst into a new form, let the crust of our flesh split and the tree break through, or the moth or bird abandon us for air. What else is death but the refusal any longer to grow and suffer change? (133)

As happened in the dream in which the poet turns into a pool of water in the woods, Ovid understands that there is no fundamental distinction between men and the natural world, and he now thinks of death, not as a separated and final event, the ending of life, but as part of a holistic never-ending process of creation and existence. When the poet decides to leave Tomis with the wild Child to go out into the unknown, he knows that he is walking towards his death, but he is also aware that death and life are not so distinct, because they are part of a natural complex process that means, not separation, but assimilation. The river Ister becomes the last boundary that the poet has to cross in order to reach his ultimate physical metamorphosis. Ovid describes the river Ister as the final boundary of his life. The river has been waiting for him all of his life and now it whispers to Ovid: "*I am the border beyond which you must go if you are to find your true life, your true death at last*" (135). Beyond this final boundary, Ovid will find a space where he will be able to recover his childhood innocence. As a matter of fact, Ovid affirms that "The land I am about to enter is not entirely unfamiliar" (136). However, this third space is also a territory of transition. After crossing the river Ister with the wild Child, Ovid will reach the final fusion with the universe: "NO MORE DREAMS. We have passed beyond them into the last reality" (141). As Ovid

approaches the moment of his death, he feels that he is "growing bodiless and turning into the landscape" (146). Ovid and the wild Child arrive now at the place in which the poet will fulfill his final dissolution, becoming one with the land. In this final mystical transition, Ovid feels the need to identify his life, existence and death with the land and the landscape. The closure of this mythical journey can be understood as Ovid's fusion with the land and the universe. Death is not the end of the story because, as Dolores Herrero asserts in her essay "I know now that this is the way…The final Metamorphosis. I must drive out my old self and let the universe in": The Ethics of Place in David Malouf's *An Imaginary Life*:

> It is only when one realizes that the land one inhabits is not a place given by the gods, but a created/imagined place, that one becomes aware of one's infinite freedom and power to transcend it, to open oneself up to the experience of alterity, to the mystery. It is only then that one can dream oneself out of one existence into a new, better, and ultimately unknown, one. It is when one tries to articulate what one knows that one suddenly stumbles on what, till that moment, one did not know. Our bodies are not final, we keep on moving and changing, since life is nothing but the impulse that makes us push out beyond the limits and into the unknown. (2007: 181)

Ovid has finally understood the real meaning of life and death because, by moving beyond space and time and putting together past, present and future, he has integrated all the fragmented parts of his self. In this timeless sphere, Ovid has recovered his lost innocence, has become again the child that he once was, and has challenged physical boundaries in order to attain unity with nature. The novel starts in Sulmo, where Ovid lived as a child and, at the end of the story, the reader realizes that the cycle of life has come full circle because Ovid, being part of a timeless and holistic universe, is again that child from Sulmo:

> They shine in my head, all those steps. I can, in my mind, follow them back, feeling myself with each step restored, diminished, till I come to the ground of my earliest memories again, and am standing in the checkered light of olives at the very edge of our farm.
>
> It is spring. It is summer. I am three years old. I am sixty.
>
> The Child is there. (152)

Last but not the least, what makes Ovid's final integration with the universe possible is the fact that he has overcome his anxiety of unbelonging, because he has understood that he belongs not only to Sulmo, but to the land as a generic concept. These are the reasons why Ovid's reconciliation with the "Other" parts of his self has been finally possible. Eventually he learns to love and adapt to the new landscape because he knows that it is also part of the universe to which he belongs. Ovid's discovery of the landscape as an element which is part of a holistic eternal process, together with the certainty that he belongs to the land wherever this land may be, could be the source of his desire to undergo a transformation that allows him to reach this communion with a timeless natural world. This desire chimes in with Stuart Hall's description of the feeling that the discovery of new places inevitably brings about:

> It is because this New World is constituted for us as place, a narrative of displacement, that it gives rise so profoundly to a certain imaginary plenitude, recreating the endless desire to return to 'lost origins', to be one again with the mother, to go back to the beginning. Who has not known, at this moment, the surge of an overwhelming nostalgia for lost origins, for 'times past'? (1990: 236)

Ovid's physical and psychological journey is circular, like the succession of seasons and the circle of life and energy in the universe. At the beginning of the novel Ovid recalls the countryside in which he lived as a child: "The child is there. I am three or four years old. It is late summer. It is spring. I am six. I am eight" (1). At the end of the novel, he

retrieves the same state of happiness he experienced then: “It is summer. It is spring. I am immeasurably, unbearably happy. I am three years old. I am sixty. I am six. I am there” (153). Genevieve Laigle (1993:78) asserts that Malouf celebrates in poetical terms the mystery of life and death which, like past and present, are ultimately one and the same thing, a straining towards perfection and eternity. In my opinion, the ending of *An Imaginary Life* relies on a transcendental Eastern perspective in which death is not the end but yet another stage of a never-ending process. When Ovid understands that he is part of the universe, he can face his death without fear and, at this precise moment, time or place are not all significant, because the land cannot be owned by any man or country, the land is everybody’s and everybody is entitled to feel one with it. The novel’s enigmatic ending is thus questioning the validity of all kinds of binarisms that give some people the power to possess the land while depriving others of their very right to exist.

The ending of *An Imaginary Life* can nonetheless be seen as ambiguous because a negative reading can also be possible. On the one hand, an optimistic interpretation could be given: Ovid integrates with the land and the universe and consequently death is not the end of the story. In this optimistic ending, the wild Child is free to go back to nature, far from the violent world of men. The wild Child has been Ovid’s guide in this journey towards his final wholeness, and now that he has fulfilled his mission he returns to nature, the place where he belongs. At the end of the novel the Child refuses to remain in this confining world of human language and prefers to go back to nature. The final scene in which the Child is playing in the water could thus be understood as some metaphorical baptism. He has been in contact with human language, which is a tool of difference and division, and now he has to clean himself of this human contamination in order to return to the world of nature.

On the other hand, a negative reading is also plausible, because Ovid can be seen as the representation of the selfish colonizer who is obsessed with civilizing the savages to turn them into colonial subjects. Ovid has an egotistic attitude because he has appropriated the wild Child's natural wisdom, and now that he knows how to enter this mythical realm he leaves the wild boy alone. In other words, Ovid has appropriated the knowledge of the colonized and now that the boy has nothing to offer, he abandons him in the wilderness. Furthermore, the wild Child has been introduced into a world of difference by Ovid, the world of men: "The Child in his delirium has discovered human speech. The first step has been taken that will lead him inevitably now into the world of men" (1999:116). The child has acquired human speech and, at this very last moment, one cannot help wondering if this knowledge will prevent him from retrieving the innocence and wholeness he once had. Once one enters the symbolic, the realm of division and difference, there is no way back. The child will never be the same.

6. CONCLUSION

The critical framework used in this Master Thesis has made it possible to carry out an analysis of Malouf's novel *An Imaginary Life* from a postcolonial perspective. In the first place, this analysis has shown the importance of the landscape and the sense of unbelonging to it in postcolonial Australia as reflected in Ovid's identity process. Landscape is fundamental in Australian literature as it is closely linked to the problematics of articulating an Australian identity. In the novel, Ovid's mood is echoed by the landscape and the reader can realize how both Ovid and the landscape undergo a metamorphosis throughout the story. Moreover, Ovid's concept of the land and nature changes because he arrives in Tomis with the Roman idea that the land is a commodity but gradually acquires a cosmovision in which the land is sacred. This cosmovision takes it that the land is the spirit of the country and should therefore be preserved. This view of the natural world evokes the dreaming stories of the Indigenous Australians, which narrate how the Ancestor spirits created the world to eventually turn into natural elements such as trees, stars, rocks and so on. These stories are part of a mystical never-ending process in which people and the land are linked in a timeless space. This cosmovision could explain Ovid's death as part of an eternal universal process which integrates him into the natural world. Furthermore, this work has compared Ovid with the British convicts sent to Australia and their descendants. On the one hand, they all suffered a sense of unbelonging (Ovid and the convicts were expelled from their respective Imperial countries like criminals) and felt that they were very far from their imaginary homelands. Also, they felt some kind of inferiority complex with regard to the European culture, because they thought this was superior by comparison with their new peripheral Australian culture. On the other hand, they felt paradoxically superior because they believed that this ex-centric culture was superior to that of the natives.

This work has also tried to demonstrate that to belong to more than one culture is not a problem, but rather an advantage, because this will provide individuals with multiple perspectives and a better understanding of the world. This novel has also been seen as historiographic metafiction because it mixes the real historical figure of the great Roman poet Ovid at the moment of his exile with other fictional characters. Ovid's exile and crisis automatically bring to mind that of the Europeans who were expelled from their home, and had to learn how to cope with and internalize a new culture and landscape that were anything but similar to theirs.

From a postcolonial perspective, *An Imaginary Life* is interesting because it questions the colonial power relations. In this narrative, the person isolated as the colonial "other" is Ovid, the member of the Roman Empire. He brings to Tomis the idea of his cultural hegemony but, since the people of the Tomisian tribe in turn see Ovid as the "other", this only shows how relative the very notion of otherness is, since it all depends on the eye of the beholder. Furthermore, the narrative also corroborates Foucault's idea that power is also relative and, in any case, can never be detached from the very notions of language and truth. The novel subverts the established power/knowledge colonial equation and Ovid is forced to place the culture of the savage "others" above his former beliefs. As to the wild boy, although Ovid tries to teach him Getae, it will be Ovid who learns the language of Nature by imitating the sounds uttered by the wild Child. Therefore, the colonial power relation is questioned because it is the representative of the Empire who mimics the colonized. It seems that Ovid has understood that he will only become whole by leaving all his cultural prejudices and complexes behind.

When Ovid arrives in Tomis he understands the world through opposites such as: "to be Roman means to be civilized" and "to be Tomisian means to be barbarian". One of

the most important issues in the novel is the undermining of binary oppositions. Throughout the narrative, Ovid's identity quest advances as he learns to integrate his former values with those embodied by the wild Child. As the novel seems to argue, life is a quest into the full integration of our fragmentary self and the recognition and acceptance of the other within ourselves. Both sides of binary oppositions such as culture versus nature, self versus other, reason versus instinct and so on, should be transcended to allow for the entrance into the ultimate liminal state that can alone enrich our lives and make death bearable and meaningful. *An Imaginary Life* sets these cultural negotiations in what Homi Bhabha calls the "third space"; a hybrid space where more than one culture collide and new and richer layers of meaning emerge. Although this liminality can have some negative connotations (people who inhabit this in-between space, like Ovid and the British convicts sent to Australia, usually feel a sense of otherness and unbelonging very difficult to overcome), these hybrid places can also enforce personal improvement because they offer new perspectives of the same reality. In Ovid's case, it is only when he is able to forget about his Roman prejudices and to confront the culture of Tomis that he acquires a hybrid knowledge that allows him to survive in this liminal space and even become an active member of the community. In a word, the Tomisian "third space" allows for cultural negotiations that produce, not only diversity, but also the ultimate possibility of unity and integration.

This Master Thesis has dedicated one chapter to language because I think it is crucial in this text. Ovid's first obstacle in the novel is that he cannot use his mother tongue to represent the new world that he now inhabits. As the story advances, he will cross different boundaries, until he learns the language of Nature, the key to his final fusion with the land. At the beginning of his exile, Ovid does not bear Tomis and its landscape because they are very different from Rome and the Italian countryside. As a poet, this

lack of communication is like vanishing because he is isolated and cannot express his anxiety and suffering. Therefore, Ovid paradoxically feels like the colonized people who have to decide whether to learn the culture of the people who control the situation or else to become invisible because, without the possibility of communication, identity is unthinkable. In Ovid's dream about the Centaurs he crosses the boundary from Latin to Getae in order to enter this new community. This dream lets the reader enter the poet's unconscious: Ovid surrenders to become part of the community and overcome his feeling of otherness. Afterwards, Ovid plays again the role of the colonizer when he tries to civilize the wild Child. However, Ovid eventually realizes that the wild Child speaks and masters a superior language, the language of Nature. This new kind of communication opens up Ovid's mind because, at this moment, he is able to better understand the natural world. He realizes that this form of communication integrates all the natural elements of the universe because it is free from mandatory structures and human prejudices. After learning this natural language, Ovid comprehends that the wild Child is not the inferior savage that his colonizer's mentality believed to be, but rather his only chance to become one with the universe, because this language of Nature allows for communication between all living beings. Ovid realizes that he has to get rid of human language and the world of culture so as to embrace the language of Nature. This is the primal language that Ovid spoke in his childhood, and the one he needs to retrieve at his moment of final fusion with the universe, because it is a pure and innocent language that reveals the secrets of the universe to him. We have also seen the significance of language in the connection between Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and Malouf's *An Imaginary Life*: language usually means being alive, and communication allows for survival and meaning. On the contrary, lack of speech usually means death.

The difference is that, in the case of Malouf's novel, death is not seen from a negative perspective, but rather as part of a holistic process.

Another quintessential issue in this novel is the development of Ovid's identity process in a hybrid space in which cultural negotiations with the "others" are always in a constant flux: by learning elements from other cultures Ovid is able to know more about himself. Therefore, this story tells about Ovid's physical and psychological journey towards fulfillment. Exile makes Ovid leave his safe life in Rome and reconsider his previous beliefs, and understand that in Tomis he is not the acclaimed Roman poet but a poor outcast. However, not only has exile negative effects upon Ovid, such as desolation, nostalgia and a sense of unbelonging, but it is also an opportunity for self-discovery because, far from the sophistication of his former life, he is no longer constrained by Roman beliefs and can now undergo a rebirth by connecting with the sensitive poet's mind that he once possessed. At the beginning of the novel, Ovid is obsessed with preserving his Roman self but, as the story advances, he ends up coming to terms with his past and overcoming his sense of unbelonging. Ovid assimilates this new culture to become a hybrid figure, half Roman, half Tomisian. The Tomisians now allow Ovid to take part in their usual activities. The rebirth that he undergoes during the ritual performed on the circle of funerary mounds is worth mentioning because here he is able to work through past traumatic events, such as the death of his brother and the feeling that his father would have preferred his death to that of his brother. The purpose of this ritual is to scare away evil spirits; now Ovid is free from this burden and is ready to face death. Ovid is ready to start his final journey but needs some help to cross this final threshold. This figure of the guide will be fulfilled by the wild Child, because he allows Ovid to be aware of the connections between all the living beings in the natural world.

Dreams are also significant in the novel because they disclose Ovid's unconscious. For example, the dream in which Ovid becomes a pool of water shows that the poet's unconscious is beginning to portray him as a mutable element within a natural universe in which all the living beings are interconnected. The acquisition of this knowledge seems to be the necessary first step to transcend the human world by fusing with nature. When Ovid seems to realize that he is facing his final metamorphosis, the wild boy becomes an essential figure in Ovid's quest because he teaches Ovid to become part of this holistic system. Ovid opens up his mind to this new cosmovision, in which all binaries seem to blur and vanish. As was said before, Ryzak's death functions as a reminder of the human mortal nature and makes Ovid remember his dream about his grave and the wolves. Ovid seems to have an epiphany at this precise moment because now he accepts that death is not the end of life but another phase in the never-ending cycle of existence. Until this moment Ovid's transformations had only been psychological but, after this epiphany, he is prepared to face death, the ultimate physical metamorphosis of his body. Ovid and the wild Child move beyond the river Ister to experience the end of Ovid's physical quest. The Roman poet feels he is arriving in a familiar place. This physical and psychological journey has become full circle and his sense of unbelonging seems to have disappeared. Ovid seems to have comprehended the real meaning of life by putting together all the fragmented parts of his self. He now understands that he does not belong to a particular place but to the universe as a whole, that he is part of a timeless universe.

This interpretation brings to mind the cosmovision of the Australian aborigines, which portrays all the natural elements as interconnected, and death as yet another phase of this never-ending process. However, the ending of the novel allows for more than one interpretation. An optimistic reading will conclude that the wild Child remains

happily in nature, after having guided Ovid to his ultimate metamorphosis. Although he has learnt what friendship is, he has suffered the violent and merciless behaviour of the human race and, consequently, does not want to remain in Tomis. On the other hand, it is also possible to see this ending from a rather more negative perspective. Ovid could in turn be seen as the colonizer who wants to civilize a noble savage but discovers in the process that the wild Child possesses an invaluable wisdom that will help him to transcend the realm of the human world and be one with the universe. In this pessimistic reading, once that Ovid has appropriated the wild Child's natural knowledge and he no longer needs the child, he abandons the boy in the wilderness. Moreover, Ovid has introduced the child into the realm of human language, into the symbolic, and this will forever prevent him from returning to his pristine imaginary paradise. In short, *An Imaginary Life* tells the story of two reversed processes. In the first process, Ovid moves from culture to Nature and achieves the full integration of his self. He undergoes the metamorphosis from pillar of salt to child of Nature. In the second process, the wild Child has been introduced into human civilization by Ovid. He consequently loses his original innocence and wholeness and runs the risk of turning from child of Nature into a pillar of salt.

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