Psychology has still to invent its own language.\textsuperscript{1}  
C. G. Jung

David Malouf’s novel, \textit{An Imaginary Life}, is a particularly useful text with which to apply an imaginal reading. Malouf is commonly regarded as placing a primacy on the imagination and the ‘inner’ world in general. In two fairly recent interviews, this psychological, almost mystical quality, has been prominent.\textsuperscript{2} In much the same way that a ‘feminist’ reading of a text which purports to be ‘feminist’, or a ‘socialist’ reading of an espoused ‘socialist’ text are powerful because they attempt a critique of the text on its own terrain, I feel that an imaginal reading of Malouf’s work is appropriate. In this reading I hope to uncover not just tensions and problems in Malouf’s psychological drama, but also to develop some concepts of imaginal discourse.

In recent years there has been a radical re-reading of C.G. Jung’s ideas, almost on a par with J. Lacan’s reading of Freud’s work. This re-reading, as with that by Lacan, stresses the primary place of language. J. Hillman can perhaps be singled out as the main, although by no means the only, focus of this movement.\textsuperscript{3} These theorists no longer refer to themselves as Jungians, nor even as depth psychologists. They prefer to be called archetypalists or as working with the imaginal.

In an attempt to distinguish between the surface layers of the imagination, and the deeper levels, the latter can be referred to as the imaginal. The former has connotations of superficiality and triviality. But the latter is considered by Jung and Hillman, for example, to have an almost autonomous mode of operation. It is beyond personalistic subjectivity.

David Malouf’s story of Ovid’s reconciliation to exile, and his subsequent attempted journey out of exile, is psychologically very sophisticated. In his first novel \textit{Johnno}, Malouf gives us the ‘flesh’ of Australian exile, with descriptions of a restless search through Europe for connections and meaning. But in \textit{An Imaginary Life} he gives us the precise ‘bones’ of exile, of psychological descent, and of a form of spiritual reconciliation.\textsuperscript{4} Malouf’s book recounts the story of Ovid, the poet exiled from Rome and banished to live among tribespeople on the fringe of the Empire. Ovid discovers a ‘wild boy’ who eventually leads him deeper into the wilderness and away from Rome, but also paradoxically out of exile. In this work the journey out of exile takes place in the form of a psychological descent. This representation of a physical exile in terms of a psychological journey is crucial, because the perspective of the depth imagination, the imaginal, consistently uses images of place to create a mythic geography. Movements through countries and across borders, are precise symbolic descriptions of psychological processes.\textsuperscript{5} Rather than invoke abstract classifications, depth imagination seems to demand images of places which are populated by all manner of personae, and which are patterned by kinship relations, loves, and wars. Such places evoke a response and a commitment.

Malouf’s novel is set in the remote past, yet it has immediate, contemporary relevance. In fact it could be seen to mark a break-through in Australian literature, precisely because it has dropped the concern with intimate details of contemporary life and instead attempts to dig beneath the quotidian, the everydayness of things, to expose the myths underlying them. The remote past, the archaic, has consistently functioned as a metaphor both for psychological depth and for a particular form of imaginative cognition. Freud and Jung have extensively used just such a metaphor in their attempts to discriminate between rational, thing-oriented discourse, and the poetic, mythic, image and pattern-oriented discourse.
In Malouf’s novel, we are confronted not just by ancient Rome, but also by successive layerings of more and more archaic cultures. These function as perspectives for increasing psychological depth. Ovid confronts the ‘primitive’ tribes on the border of the empire, and then the ‘savages’ beyond the border (pp. 16, 17). These regions lead away from the well-ordered and sophisticated paradigm of Rome, and ultimately into the non-human and unpopulated vastness of the open steppes.

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. (p. 15)

The rich psychological imagery of the garden, in Taoist and Renaissance culture, for example, is a powerful symbol. The cultivation of a garden is an image of spiritual and psychological awareness and work. Ovid’s ‘life has been stripped to the simplest terms’ by his exile (p. 16). Not only does he become aware of the psychological sophistication of Roman culture, but more importantly, he realizes that it is a ‘false’ sophistication. In Rome, Ovid is living at a level which is beyond his own psychological maturity and experience; he has been living vicariously on collective achievements, without realizing them as parts of his own being. It is not just the tribes people among whom he finds himself who are centuries from a garden, it is Ovid himself. On the inner plane, Ovid is primitive despite the outer veneer of civilization. In fact, he is even more psychologically primitive than the tribespeople with whom he lives. There is a kind of balance between their outer and inner levels of realization. Ovid has to journey even deeper before he can make a genuine psychological contact. Jung comments that for foreign invaders who have colonized countries, such as America and Australia, ‘there is a discrepancy between conscious and unconscious that is not found in the European, a tension between an extremely high conscious level of culture and an unconscious primitivity’. This is because the erstwhile invader is estranged from his psychological roots, his soil, whereas the European is ‘stepped in history’.

The original state of non-exile can be envisaged as an almost unconscious state. In this state, self-consciousness is at a minimum, and the everyday world is totally taken for granted. It is a ‘given’ situation. Psychologically it is almost incestuous. In fact some theorists have observed a close psychological connection between exile and the incest taboo. The incest taboo could be considered a creative force which insists on a wider and fuller consciousness. I am obviously using the idea of incest in a symbolic way to indicate an unconscious union with those psychological qualities usually denoted by the archetypes of the Great Mother, and the Senex or Father. Exile can therefore be viewed as a creative rupture. It involves the relinquishing of the safe, but largely unconscious world of ‘home’. It is a challenge to reach a fuller sense of belonging, not literally, but with the psychological roots.

At first, exile is experienced with feelings of desolation, homesickness, nostalgia and a yearning to go back to this original sense of belonging. There is an initial sense of being disoriented (pp. 15, 16, 18). Ovid writes, ‘my soul aches for the refinements of our Latin tongue’ (p. 21). Even the seeds are out of place (p. 30). The plants are without a familiar context. They are unrecognizable, for Ovid has no framework from which to name, classify or recognize them. Like Psyche's initiation into a deeper sense of awareness, in the classic tale of Amor and Psyche, Ovid also has to begin by sorting out seeds. As he bites into a seed, the taste is alien. ‘In isolation, and without the hundred other herbs and spices that might have gone with it in our Roman cookery, it brought no shock of recognition to my palate and no name to my mind’ (p. 22). This desolate mood can be followed by a sense of resignation once any clinging to the possibility of return has been abandoned. In Ovid’s case he cannot return for he is out of favour with the Roman Emperor. ‘I have, by the working of the highest known authority, been cast out …’ (p. 20). But in Malouf’s novel, the Roman Law is not the highest known authority, for running parallel to this patriarchal power is the world of Nature, the mythic realm of the Great Mother. Once the legal, literal, physical, exile has been accepted, a qualitatively different, psychological journey can be attempted. Exile can then be explored as a new place in its own right. New roots, and the formulation of a new centre of reference can occur.

In fact Ovid passes through four crucial phases in his journey away from Rome. The first is the awakening of his depth imagination. In his youth the highest principles, the ‘gods’, were dead for him. The ‘Father’ world of patriarchal values and cultural conformity was rejected.
‘No more civic virtues … No more patriotism’ (p. 26). This is also a common theme in contemporary culture where there has been a massive turning away from orthodox tradition and values, producing the image of the ‘Absent Father’. Yet his dreams whilst in exile, of primitive, powerful, numinous horsemen, show that the gods are still active in his mind (p. 23). But he is unconscious of them. This situation, of the active but aloof gods, is reminiscent of Hölderlin's words:

... The gods are alive,
Yes, but yonder, up there, in another world overhead.
There they are endlessly active ...

When these dreams come to be articulated in consciousness then a development and a transformation occurs. The mythic or imaginative capacity of the psyche has been activated. Spring occurs for Ovid as the flowers burst into colour on the previously dead and dreary countryside. Simultaneously with the flowers, Ovid begins to find names for things, and for the gods. ‘Suddenly my head is full of flowers of all kinds … I am Flora. I am Persephone … We give the gods a name and they quicken in us, they rise in their glory and power and majesty out of our minds’ (pp. 31–2). One can discern in this first enthusiastic blooming of an inner activity, a trace of anti-intellectualism and anti-culture, which is an understandable, but ultimately a destructive standpoint. For example, faced with the rugged, earthy, self-sufficient life of the Aboriginal population, Ovid denounces his previous life.

My life has been so frivolous. Brought up to believe in my own nerves in restlessness, variety, change; educated entirely out of books, living always in a state of soft security, able to pamper myself, to drift about in a cloud of tender feelings ... (p. 40)

Traditional culture has long functioned as a vessel for the enactment of Western fantasies. The ‘Noble Savage’, and the ‘Pre-logical Savage’ were merely the beginning of a long line of such projections. After this first contact with the unconscious, Ovid continues in a kind of middle-class intellectual confessional. Jung terms this an *enantiodromia*, meaning the swing of opposites. In Jungian terms, it signifies psychological immaturity. Ovid's contact with the local tribes and his partial acceptance of exile is experienced almost as a religious conversion. He renounces his previous life.

The next turning point occurs when Ovid becomes free of his personal family and of its domination of his psyche. Through introspection he recalls not just the judicial rejection by the 'Father of the Empire', but the psychological rejection by his own father who favours his brother (p. 47). Jung has stressed the need to distinguish between what is uniquely personal and what is collective in our psyche. As this sorting of psychological material occurs, Ovid catches a glimpse of some footprints left by a wild child. Again, in archetypal terms, the child can represent the resolution after a period of tension. It can signify the birth of the ‘inner man’.

Ovid had communed with this aspect of his psyche, symbolized by a child, in his own boyhood. As is often the case in childhood, his young imagination has been rich and relatively unrestrained. The untamed child was a natural companion. But 'when my own body began to change and I discovered the first signs of manhood upon me, the child left and did not reappear, though I dreamt of him often …' (p. 10). With adolescence the ‘reality’ of the infantile imagination is lost and the gods, though ‘still endlessly active’, retreat into dreams and into ‘another world’. The symbolic child, a boy, is ugly and dirty at first sight (p. 59). This is perceptive writing by Malouf. Often in psychological self-analysis, people seem to be always looking for beautiful and pleasant experiences. But it is generally through the ugly and the painful that the unconscious bursts into our lives. In fact the revelation and rediscovery of the unconscious in the West came not through beautiful and ecstatic experiences from ‘above’, but from ‘below’. Perversity, mental distress, death and insanity were the harbingers of psychological discovery at the turn of the century. The savage, primitive, ugly child psychologically belongs to Ovid, and he must do psychological work to transform both the wild boy and his own ego-state. The child cautiously accepts food and having once eaten of civilized food he is inevitably captured (pp. 61–3). This is similar to the capture of Enkidu, by Gilgamesh in the ancient Near-Eastern epic, and it is the exact inverse of Persephone's capture by Hades after eating some food of the underworld. The child is of the underworld and by accepting some ‘day world’ food of
consciousness, he is compelled to stay, for a while at least. ‘Next year there will be no need to hunt him. He will seek us out’ (p. 63).

A third turning point for Ovid is the acceptance of this country of exile as his own. He goes for long walks and becomes familiar with the details of this world. He also begins to cultivate a small garden, and learns the language of this country.

_It isn’t at all like our Roman tongue, whose endings are designed to express differences, the smallest nuances of thought and feeling. This language is equally expressive, but what it represents is the raw life and the unity of things … Somehow it seems closer to the first principles of creation._ (p. 65)

At this point, the ‘Child’ is captured (p. 68). Now begins a critical process in which I believe the Ovid character, and hence perhaps Malouf, ultimately becomes enmeshed in psychological contradictions, despite some of the most precise documentation of inner reality to be found in Australian literature. At the child's capture, Ovid writes in dismay, ‘What have I done?’ (p. 73). Jung writes repeatedly of the necessity to dialogue firmly with inner figures, saying that they are not simply to be accepted, nor is everything they say to be believed. In the move away from the rigid rational standpoint, there is always the tendency and danger, to over-value the pristine, raw, instinctual, and unconscious, forces and figures. There is a reluctance to enter into a firm yet receptive dialogue with the unconscious.

There seems to be either a rejection of fantasy (through trivialization, disbelief etc.) or an uncritically naive celebration of it. Jung writes that a balance of intellect and feeling needs to be employed, and that learning the art of such an inner dialogue is a long and dangerous process. In his analysis of the folk tale ‘The Spirit in the Bottle’, Jung gives a full discussion of the difficulties and dangers of capturing the raw, wilful, inner child and of transforming him.  

The next phase also constitutes the turning point of the whole book. Ovid is not the only one in exile, the child too is in exile from the wilderness. There is a point in the dialogue with the unconscious where both the ego and the contents of the unconscious seem to be estranged from their roots. The alchemists called the process an _opus contra naturam_, a work against nature. The seeming naturalness of things, which is largely a product of conditioning, is ruptured, questioned, and both consciousness and the unconscious seem to be suspended between what was, and possibilities to come. At such times the alchemist would put the ingredients into a secure vessel where nothing else was allowed in and nothing allowed out. This vessel and this process of cooking the psychological ingredients occurs when Ovid and the child are forced to stay confined with their reluctant host family during the interminable winter months. The tensions and the pressures gradually reach bursting point and eventually Ovid and the child flee (p. 144). During this time the physical bondage of the child is transformed into a psychological one. Ovid begins to ask not how to get back to Rome, nor how to live in this village on the borders of the Empire, but the deeper, imaginative question of how to lead the child back to his lost childhood (p. 82). He now recognizes his own orphaned, rootless psyche as being mirrored in the child. He then begins the necessary process of investigating his connection with the Mother.  

Ovid confronts a series of memories which are painful in their negation of masculinity and their sense of castration. The matriarchal power is the _real_ driving force behind Ovid's flight.

He has to fully accept his own origins, and this includes both the relation to the symbolic Father _and_ to the symbolic Mother. Only then can he ask the deeper question concerning the child's origins. At first he remembers his own earliest childhood with 'feelings of extraordinary tenderness’. He nostalgically recalls, ‘certain evenings when we were turned over, my brother and I, to the women of the household, the farm servants, to be washed and dressed for bed …’ (p. 83). The sentiment is almost cloying as Ovid recalls these occasions with the women. For him it was ‘a sense of golden beauty and cleanliness’ (p. 84). Yet the psychological reality behind this memory is the symbolic castration of his older brother expressed as a display of masculine powerlessness.

_I watch again as one of the girls, her skirt hitched up over her bare legs,… takes my brother by the prick and leads him around the tub like a goose, while all the women throw their heads back and laugh._ (pp. 84–5)
The symbolism of this event seems lost on Ovid. He is ecstatically celebrating the power of the woman's world as it demonstrates its sexual power over the men, even if in this case it is his brother who is the unwitting submissive subject. The girl who leads the brother by the prick is regularly sleeping with his father, the Master of the estate. There is a wonderful tension of cultural and instinctual power at work in this sequence, but at this point Ovid's (and perhaps Malouf's) allegiance is clear. The Father is in reality powerless in the face of the Mothers.

This matriarchal power is again confirmed by the dual between Ryzak, the headman of the village, and the old woman of the village, his mother. Ryzak with his cultural power, his position and authority as headman, has protected Ovid and the boy from the occult power of the old woman. Ovid is aware of this tension: ‘… for all his quiet assumption of authority Ryzak holds less sway over the village than he would have me believe … Behind his male prerogative, established in law, lies the darker power of the women …’ (pp. 100–101). When Ryzak dies, Ovid and the child flee. ‘The house is filled with the glow of her magic’ (p. 126). ‘With Ryzak dead, … we have no protection here’ (p. 133). Once again, it is by default that Ovid journeys deeper into exile. The women's power in his Roman childhood is masked. It lies hidden beneath a sentimental veneer. This matriarchal power is further highlighted by the psychological absence of his real father, and by the symbolic absence of any cultural framework, or patriarchal value system, to which Ovid could give his allegiance. Now in the village he is faced with the clearest expression of the ineffectuality of the Father and the grim power of the Mother. This is the balance of power in his psyche.

But Malouf's Ovid runs deeper into the arms of the Mother. The story ends with Ovid's ecstatic death in the vast emptiness of the plains. Ovid moves into a space which is boundless, timeless and empty. ‘The days pass and I cease to count them’ (p. 144). ‘I no longer ask myself where we are making for. The notion of a destination no longer seems necessary to me. It has been swallowed up in the immensity of this landscape’ (p. 144). The problem here is that exile was originally couched in terms of disillusionment with the Senex, the Father, Cultural Tradition. But the descent and resolution is not to a deeper comprehension of a New Father, but rather back into the ectastic arms of the Cosmic, Occult, Natural, Mother. The whole Father question is merely sidestepped.

It is crucial that a distinction is made between prematurely yielding to an ecstatic but empty death, and genuine mystical experience. A study of the phenomenology of such a difference has been made by the depth-psychologist E. Neumann. He uses the symbol of the Uroboros, by which he means an undifferentiated and womb-like state. He distinguishes it from the Mandala, which is a higher, differentiated unity.

\[Uroboric\text{\ }incest\text{\ }is\text{\ }a\text{\ }form\text{\ }of\text{\ }entry\text{\ }into\text{\ }the\text{\ }Mother,\text{\ }of\text{\ }union\text{\ }with\text{\ }her \ldots\text{\ }The\text{\ }emphasis\text{\ }is\text{\ }on\text{\ }pleasure\text{\ }and\text{\ }love\text{\ }is\text{\ }in\text{\ }no\text{\ }sense\text{\ }active,\text{\ }it\text{\ }is\text{\ }more\text{\ }a\text{\ }desire\text{\ }to\text{\ }be\text{\ }dissolved\text{\ }and\text{\ }absorbed;\text{\ }passively\text{\ }one\text{\ }lets\text{\ }oneself\text{\ }be\text{\ }taken,\text{\ }sinks\text{\ }into\text{\ }the\text{\ }pleroma,\text{\ }melts\text{\ }away\text{\ }in\text{\ }the\text{\ }ocean\text{\ }of\text{\ }pleasure \ldots\text{\ }The\text{\ }Great\text{\ }Mother\text{\ }takes\text{\ }the\text{\ }little\text{\ }child\text{\ }back\text{\ }into\text{\ }herself,\text{\ }and\text{\ }always\text{\ }over\text{\ }uroboric\text{\ }incest\text{\ }there\text{\ }stand\text{\ }the\text{\ }insignia\text{\ }of\text{\ }death,\text{\ }signifying\text{\ }final\text{\ }dissolution\text{\ }in\text{\ }union\text{\ }with\text{\ }the\text{\ }Mother \ldots.\text{\ }^{18}\]

It is common in Australian literature to confuse such ‘self-surrender and regression’ with a final mystical goal. Patrick White's *Voss* and *The Tree of Man* are examples of this, where the major character's trajectory never leaves the embrace of the symbolic Mother, who is generally envisaged as the untamed power of Nature. Yet in both of these books, as with Malouf's Ovid, the final dissolution of the protagonist is attended by a mystical and numinous resolution.

However, as Neumann writes:

\[Notwithstanding\text{\ }its\text{\ }own\text{\ }dissolution\text{\ }and\text{\ }the\text{\ }deadly\text{\ }aspect\text{\ }of\text{\ }the\text{\ }uroboros,\text{\ }the\text{\ }embryonic\text{\ }ego\text{\ }does\text{\ }not\text{\ }experience\text{\ }uroboric\text{\ }incest\text{\ }as\text{\ }anything\text{\ }hostile,\text{\ }even\text{\ }though\text{\ }it\text{\ }be\text{\ }annihilated.\text{\ }The\text{\ }return\text{\ }to\text{\ }the\text{\ }great\text{\ }round\text{\ }is\text{\ }a\text{\ }happening\text{\ }full\text{\ }of\text{\ }passive,\text{\ }childlike\text{\ }confidence.\text{\ }^{19}\]

As Ovid is taken back into the Earth, he celebrates the power of the Mother and the ineffectuality of the Father. ‘I am immeasurable, unbearably happy’ (p. 152). Hillman has a characteristically pithy comment to make concerning this process:
When the father is absent, we fall more readily into the arms of the mother … The missing father is not your or my personal father. He is the absent father of our culture, the viable senex who provides not daily bread but spirit through meaning and order.20

But it appeared earlier as if Ovid were moving carefully along a trajectory which would take him into an orbit beyond the Mother's total domination of his psyche. However, several clues are apparent which belie this expectation, for example the uncorrected swing towards anti-intellectualism, the uncritical celebration of childhood impotence, the weakness of both the real and the symbolic Father, Ovid's reification of the local aboriginal population, the untrustworthy Emperor, the rejection of social values. The most important turning point however, occurs in his dialogue with the Child.

It is primarily through an overt discussion of the acquisition of a new language that Malouf traces Ovid's psychological journey. Indeed in this work, Malouf outlines one of the richest and most precise descriptions of the language of the depth imagination I have encountered in fiction. At first, Ovid is aware of the ‘tunes’ of such discourse but has no ‘names’ with which to participate in a dialogue (pp. 21 and 39). It is generally the case when beginning self-analysis that moods, experiences and so on are recognised but cannot yet be named. There is a state of imaginative or mythic illiteracy. Time and again Jung writes of the need for depth psychology to evolve a new language, one that is appropriate to the complexities and tone of the psyche. He advises that the terminology of scientific discourse lacks the pregnant symbolism, and the experiential, evocative nature of imaginal discourse.21 The inner figures then have to be taught conscious, day world language. This is similar to Freud's dictum ‘where there is id there shall be ego’. In Ovid's case he teaches the Child to speak (p. 90). At the same time, Ovid learns the Child's language, the language of nature, of birds, of the wind and the grass (pp. 90–4).

But this mutual sharing, learning and dialogue, ends when Ovid and the Child flee from the village and from the Old Woman's power. Ovid joyfully exclaims, ‘This is the Child's world at last. He plunges through it joyfully, dragging me after….’ (p. 143). Ovid has relinquished all responsibility for his own psychological and spiritual development. He becomes a slave of the process and no longer its conscious participant.22 The Child leads him like the pied piper deeper into empty space,

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\text{further from the far, safe place where I began, the green lands of my father's farm, further from the last inhabited outpost of the known world, further from speech even, into the sighing grasslands that are silence … And where is he leading me, since I know at last that it is he who is the leader (p. 145).}
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In this passage, Ovid still nostalgically remembers his father's farm as a safe place, yet it was precisely here that the woman's power and the Father's absence were initially encountered. The final ecstatic death is simply a recapitulation of this original unresolved scenario. A comment by Jung seems particularly relevant at this point. He observes that when the Spirit-child is prematurely released, either by naivety or accident, then 'the whole laborious opus comes to nothing and has to be started all over again.'23 In the village, Ovid was exhausted by his attempts to establish a dialogue with the Child, and to protect the educational and psychological process from the power of the negative Mother. It is significant that at the beginning and end of the book, where Ovid is passive and accepting, the symbolic Mother appears benign and comforting. Whereas when he is working, and actively participating in the psychological process in the village, the dark, angry, destructive aspect of the Mother appears. He never confronts nor dialogues with this archetypal power. He either flees from Her negative aspect, or else he ecstatically embraces Her benign qualities. He is therefore totally dominated by this state of consciousness. Psychologically, Ovid's long journey from Rome traces an arc from the Mother and then back to the Mother. His whole drama is contained within Her orbit. Ovid is the plaything of the symbolic Mother. Any attempt at independence on his part is met by anger, whilst his passivity is greeted by a comforting, almost ecstatic approval.

Malouf's novel is both an essay in the linguistics of the depth imagination, and also a precise portrait of an Australian dilemma. Many white Australians find themselves in a form of exile. They have left family, history and culture behind. Increasingly Europe is receding as a focus of meaning and psychological connection. As Malouf's work indicates, great care is needed, and also a precise attention to detail, in the
process of discovering new roots and orientations, and also in the re-education of an imaginative literacy. A Jungian, or archetypal, reading can perhaps provide an additional ‘map’ with which to understand the psychological complexities of the search for new roots.


19. ibid, p. 17.


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