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Reading David Malouf's *An Imaginary Life* through Lacanian Concepts

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The novella *An Imaginary Life* is David Malouf's fictional retelling of the last stages of the Roman poet Ovid's life, which he had to live out in exile for reasons not completely known to us and which can only be speculated upon since Ovid himself offers no clarification on this point nor does any historian or chronicler of the times thus offering a writer like Malouf "the liberty of free invention, since what (he) wanted to write was neither historical novel or biography, but a fiction with its roots in possible event" (153). Something in the "absence of fact" (Malouf 153) and details about this last stage of Ovid's life presents Malouf with the most suitable material to explicate his philosophy of unity of all things, natural and man-made alike, and present his worldview, which is marked by a sense of harmony between the human and the natural world, to his readers. In the process of (un)learning that Ovid goes through in his state of exile in Tomis, at the edge of the known world, he finally learns the truth(s) about human existence and the ideal which corresponds with it, as Malouf sees it. In this education of the highly learned poet from the civilized world of Rome, many themes are embedded within it like that of metamorphosis that explores the notion of fluid boundaries between the spiritual, the animal, and the human world (a concept especially peculiar to Ovid himself, associated with him for his work *Metamorphoses*), the theme of exile, the Nature versus Culture debate, the Primitivism versus Civilization debate, questions of Self and Identity among others.

As much as plurality is encouraged and welcome in a work of art, we believe that applying the psychoanalytical concepts provided by the eminent psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan onto this novella enhances our understanding of the dilemma of the central protagonist(s) of the novella– Ovid and the Child. Some of the Lacanian concepts which we will use in elaborating the hidden meanings in this novella and the motivations of its two main characters will be the Imaginary, the Mirror Stage, the Symbolic, Ego, Self, Subject, Subjectivity, and Unconscious amongst others. These ideas belong largely to the first two phases of Lacan's theoretical output. Albeit there is a problem with an assertion of this nature since there are not any clear cut demarcations of the four phases that Tamise Van Pelt outlines and Lacan's theoretical oeuvre is interconnected throughout, with each term developing during the course of his writing, there is nevertheless to be seen a concentration of development of the concepts used in this paper in the first two phases only. The first is where "aggressivity, mirroring, and dialectical interaction are definitive themes; the philosophical orientation is explicitly phenomenological" (Pelt 59), while the second one, which is also the more relevant one in the context of this paper, is loosely referred to as "the linguistic and structural stage" (59). A dramatic playing out of Lacanian "structural theory (which) indicates the dynamic and synchronous interaction of the imaginary and the symbolic registers" (59) can be traced in the interaction of Ovid and the Child, the former being the representative of the Symbolic and the latter of Imaginary. Simultaneously, a creative dramatization of Lacan's "previous theory (which) implied a developmental sequence through a mirror "stage" into a symbolic order" (59) is carried out, although a reversal of this chronological order of development operates in the case of both Ovid and the Child, the latter of whom barely escapes from entering the Symbolic. The ideas and concepts used in this paper thus belong to the phase before the post-structural influences began seeping into Lacan's thought and he became more and more self-referential, developing on his return-to-Freud phases. Through a reading of *An Imaginary Life* via the aforementioned Lacanian concepts, we

will seek to establish the embeddedness of these ideas in the fictional universe of Malouf's novella, whether deliberate or not.

It is clear at the very onset that Malouf's novella has embodied a lot of Lacan's theories and concepts but the most evident one is the discourse around the Unconscious and how it has been woven into the fabric of the text. As Jacques-Allain Miller notes, Lacan "took the unconscious not as a container but rather as something ex-sistent – outside itself – that is connected to a subject who is a lack of being" (qtd. in Homer 21). This echoes the scene where Ovid is dreaming that "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" (Malouf 24-25). He feels as if something that exists inside him, his inner self, or what we can safely assume to be his soul, is outside of him, having a life of its own and staring down at his face. In Lacanian terms this can be identified as the moment where he encounters his own Unconscious "as something ex-sistent – outside itself." We can also see Ovid indulging in a "constant process of projecting outside" (Homer 20) or what Martin Heidegger labeled as "ex-sistence" (qtd. in Homer 20). It is this projecting "on to the world and into the future" (20) that foreshadows his swapping places with the Child towards the end of the novella. When he has a close encounter with the Child when the latter drinks from his bowl, that is the moment Ovid has begun to project his self into the future, in a way making the Child the embodiment of his own Unconscious which, according to Lacan, becomes that which is projected "outside itself" in the future. And if we were to see and perceive the Child as the embodiment of Ovid's Unconscious, the language the former uses for the purposes of (non-)communication (in strictly human-consciousness terms) is very similar to the syntax that is afforded to the Unconscious by Lacan. One of Lacan's main contentions was that the Unconscious is structured like a language and we can see how the bafflement which the structure of Unconscious produces to an untrained person is similar to the lack of understanding of the real essence of the Child's language by his captor Ovid, which unsurprisingly is communicating the essence of life. Ovid has to go through a rite of passage – an analytical training of sorts, to keep up with the psychoanalytical idiom of this paper – before he can understand this language and its superiority over what the human language has to offer. This is also true of the Unconscious which is so much richer and complex than the relatively much simpler language of human beings, whether it is Latin of Rome or the Getic language of Tomis, or any modern language for that matter. The inferiority evident in the human language systems is echoed in the people using them as well. Lacan, according to Miller's commentary, connected the unconscious with a "lack of being" and the lack is supplemented in Ovid by the Child who actually complements the deficiencies and shortcomings of Ovid. Elizabeth Wright writes that, "Lacan's theory of "the subject" stresses this gap coming into being with the unconscious" (619). The Child, working as the Unconscious of Ovid, is able to make Ovid realize "this gap" in his own mental makeup, thus egging him on to embark on a journey of self-discovery. Wright goes on to say that after this realization, "the subject must perforce accept the public interpretation, the constraints of the signifier" (619). However, this holds true only if the subject wants to remain within the Symbolic Order. Since Ovid forsakes it by the end of the novella, an event precipitated by the arrival of the Child on the scene, he is free of the "public interpretation" forced upon him by "the constraints of the signifier." He is able to make an exit from the chain of signification and its process. Notice the words like force, constraints, chain which characterize Ovid's earlier existence as a constricting process, based on a principle of frugality and limitations, which is in stark contrast to the principle of multitude and bountifulness that reigns supreme in the Imaginary world order. Irina Grigorescu Pana talks about the Derridean "supplement" as "the "addition" that "adds only to replace" and "supplements" an already

"deficient" centre only to "supplant" it eventually" (524). The Child can be seen as the supplement which continues to supplement the deficient Ovid through the length of the novella and indeed takes him over so that Ovid is at last reduced to the status of a deficient centre - it is only fitting because it is reminiscent of his origin in Rome, the cultural and literary centre of his times - which the Child eventually supersedes and is able to supplant. By the end of the novella, the Child has become the embodiment of "the wolf in my dream that threatened to consume the whole pool of my being" (Malouf 77).

The argument of the Child functioning as the supplement of Ovid is strengthened when the famous Lacanian concept of the "Mirror Stage" is invoked to understand the novella better. In Lacan's own words, "The function of the mirror stage thus turns out, in my view, to be a particular case of the function of imagos, which is to establish a relationship between an organism and its reality – or, as they say, between the *Innenwelt* and the *Umwelt*" (6). A child enters the mirror stage as soon as it encounters its image, which does not necessarily have to be a reflection from the surface of the mirror only but can be anything that makes the child realize the unity of its body, an experience which is very different from its erstwhile fragmentariness and dependency on the mother or the "motherer" (as Lacan puts it, denoting anyone who takes care of the child in its early stages, and is more often than not, but not necessarily, the mother). This image of the unity of its body results in the development of the ego of the child which eventually results in the creation of its subjectivity. Thus the mirror stage, which for Lacan happens from six till eighteen months of age, is crucial for a child to step out from the realm of the Imaginary which it inhabits before entering the mirror stage and the narcissism associated with it. For the Child of Malouf's novella, his first encounter with Ovid, where he just stares at him, is supposed to be his entry into the mirror stage because this is probably the first time he has encountered a being of his own species. This encounter is the literary representation, but more importantly an inverted one, of the Lacanian idea which Sean Homer alludes to when he talks about the dilemma of the infant when confronted with this image. "The reflected image presents a dilemma for the infant because it is at once intimately connected to its own sense of self and at the same time external to it" (Homer 21). However, it must be noted that it is not the Child and rather Ovid who imagines this dilemma taking shape in the former, thus the inverted representation. Ovid observes that the Child "feels some yearning toward us, some need to satisfy himself about who we are, and why we have a shape, a smell, so unlike that of the other creatures of the forest. Has he begun to ask of what kind he is? Does he guess that some part of us, at least, is of his kind?" (Malouf 60) But what is striking here is that the Child is hardly perturbed with his presence and is not alarmed until he is taken by force by the people of Tomis, the violence of which actually initiates his mirror-stage and the accompanying dilemma for the Child. The first encounter between Ovid and the Child is responsible for bringing out in the novella "the importance of the role of mirroring in the construction of self and of self-consciousness" (Homer 21-22), but, more importantly, this first encounter is to be read as Ovid's slipping back into the mirror-stage than the Child's.

The discussion around the Unconscious, projecting of one's self onto the other, and the nuances of the mirror-stage initiated above insinuates the second main enquiry of this paper, which is to see how Ovid's attempt to lead the Child into the symbolic order of language is a failed cause to begin with. Rather than the integration of the Child into the Symbolic Order, what we see is actually the "Lacanian "reversal,"" in Amanda E. Nettelbeck's words, a reversal of the order of the psychosexual development of a human being as outlined by Lacan in his oeuvre, which results in Ovid relapsing from the Symbolic Order to the Mirror Stage and further into the realm of the Imaginary. And,

> Central to Ovid's "regression" from the Symbolic Order back towards the Imaginary is the figure of the unnamed Child…He recognizes no subject/object split, having "not yet captured his individual soul out of the universe about him…Ovid's within the Symbolic Order and the Child's within a continuous Imaginary (Nettelbeck 140-41).

When Ovid is exiled to Tomis, he becomes dependent on the people for his survival, reliant on their good-will to merely exist. "I am the *least person* here – a crazy, comic old man, grotesque, tearful, who understands nothing, can say nothing" (Italics mine) (17). He has been reduced to a sub-human category; cut off from all human communication since there is no Latin spoken in Tomis, he is helpless like a child. His hysterical reactions to any understanding on the part of people of Tomis recall to one's mind the state of infancy. He does not even chase after the Child and others have to do his bidding. Thus, Ovid exists in Tomis as a "maternally supported body" and his meeting with the Child reiterates the "conflictual relationship between the maternally supported body and the externally mediated specular image of the self as a defined body" (Vasseleu 143). The Child offers Ovid with the "specular image of the self as a defined body" through his unison with his natural surroundings. Ovid "thus finds "already there" in the mirror image a mastery that (he) will actually learn only later" (Gallop 120). While a usual mirror-stage is accompanied by the image of a unified body and a notion of the mastery of the Self, which, despite all pretensions of unity, can only come later for a child who is still dependent upon others for survival, Ovid's face-to-face encounter with the Child works as his own version of mirror-stage as he remembers what he has lost out on - a mastery of the Symbolic Order through the Imaginary, which will bring him closer to the principle of Nature. In Ovid's instance also, we see a "temporal dialectic of a moment that is at once anticipatory and retroactive" (Gallop 121), but his retroactivity consists in acknowledging the "bits-and-pieces" (121) state of his apparent adulthood and mastery, while anticipating at the same time not a "totalized body" (121) but a unification with the Nature, which is a state of totality in its own right. This should be read, in Jane Gallop's words, as "a retroactive acceptance of one's foundations…as fiction. Such an acceptance might mean an openness to revision, rather than a rigid defense against the realization of fictionality" (126). After coming face-to-face with the Child, Ovid is able to not only exact from his Self a "retroactive acceptance of one's foundations as fiction but he even goes a step further when he takes this "openness to revision" to its logical end. He renounces the world and the novella reads like the story of an ascetic who is able to embrace his true beginnings and recognize his actual substance; his essence, origin, and end lies with the Mother Nature, in the lap of the Earth. "Death, in this scheme, brings a suspension of the individual will and consummation in the oneness of being; it is an affirmative, self-transcending act such as Ovid experiences at the end of *An Imaginary Life*" (Ackland 240).

The Child too is forced to move out of the Imaginary into the Mirror Stage for a short while, even coming to the very threshold of the Symbolic Order but he relapses into the pattern of regression too. Since he never enters the Symbolic Order he is never able to recognize the "subject/object split (Nettlebeck 141), which is essential to attain a sense of Self as different from the others. That is why, after all is done, at the end of the novella Ovid observes that the Child "too has survived his season among men. Some new energy is in him…He is alert to every shift of the wind and mood of the sky as it carries the weather of tomorrow and day after towards us, to every scent of the hundred grasses and their parasites, the worms, the grubs" (Malouf 148) which is reminiscent of the Child's early Edenic existence, in which he was in complete sync with the natural world around him. Homer writes,

> Lacan described two moments of alienation and suggested that the subject was doubly alienated: first, through the infant's (mis)-recognition of itself in the other during the mirror stage and, second, through the subject's accession into the symbolic and language. Alienation is an inevitable consequence of the formation of the ego and a necessary first step towards subjectivity (71).

While the first moment of alienation does indeed take place for the Child, when he comes to realize his sameness and otherness at the same time, first with the human species which Ovid belongs to and the second from the wolf species or other animals living in the forest, the second moment of alienation never occurs, or only almost occurs when he shrieks out a word in sheer agony, a sign of his reluctance of entering into the Symbolic Order, the Other with a capitalized 'o' in Lacanian terminology, which is then rejected altogether. He refuses to enter into the Symbolic Order by the end of the novella and instead reverts to using his own system of signification, his own language. Thus his process of the Lacanian Alienation is never completed; consequently he never achieves the Lacanian Subjectivity. In other words, the Child's sense of Self has not emerged so he is still in the realm of Imaginary. Thus he behaves very much like the Freudian Unconscious- mysterious, opaque, irrational and unintelligible phenomenon. This is why the Child always reads like an archetypal symbol or a mythical persona rather than an actual living human being. He never reaches a stage of consciousness and that is the reason of his being completely in sync with his natural surroundings.

Since the Child never becomes the Subject, he also never experiences Separation which is "linked to desire and designates the process through which the child *differentiates* itself from the (m)Other and is not simply a subject of language" (emphasis mine) (Homer 72). Since there is no entering into the Symbolic Order of language by the Child, there is no differentiation that occurs in the mind of the Child. Thus he can remain in unity with the world around him whereas others who inhabit this Order cannot escape this process of differentiation. The Child's inability to distinguish self from the other recalls to mind Ovid's remark about the Latin language which is "a language for distinctions" (Malouf 98). Even the "barbarous guttural tongue" (20) of the people of Tomis, which "seems closer to the first principle of creation" (65) is no match for the language of the Child "whose every syllable is a gesture of reconciliation" (98). Through these observations, Malouf is able to make a comment on the ineffectiveness of modern languages for the purpose of communication. The whole institution of human language and communication is aimed at a process of differentiation and distinction. Ferdinand de Saussure has also argued that Language is nothing but a process or chain of signification which proceeds according to the principle of difference between various signifiers in the link – signifier "insisting" (Lacan's term) on a signified which in turn becomes another signifier. Nettelbeck argues that,

> As the narrative progresses, a series of languages emerges. In their increasing simplicity – from Latin to the Getic tongue to the "language" of childhood – these languages symbolize Ovid's reconciliation not only to the place of his exile but, beyond that, to the earth itself. As such, these languages serve to mark his gradual transformation from existence within the Symbolic Order to "rediscovery" of the Imaginary (142).

What relation does the Child share with the big Other– the Symbolic Order of language? It is one of exteriority, of existing outside of it, rather than being constituted by it. Therefore the Child is not entirely a Subject and consequently there is no awareness of the associated element of lack. The Child represents the "non-egoistic, pre-Symbolic unity which the infant enjoys prior to the awakening of "self" – the unity of Lacanian Imaginary" (Nettelbeck 139). In fact,

Ovid's restlessness at the beginning of the novella can appropriately be read as the nostalgia for this unity which "will always preoccupy the subject and perpetuate that insatiable desire which arises not from the presence of desirable objects but from the absence of a sense of wholeness" (139). We see the Child leading Ovid towards this sense of unity and wholeness towards the end of the novella, when the latter is increasingly seen to be at home in his natural surroundings. Ovid has not been shown as completely existing outside this harmonious vision of life. He always has had intimations of his ultimate future. In most of his dreams, he is in unison and working in tandem with the Nature and the beings which inhabit it, whether it be the digging alongside wolves, or being the moonlight himself, or being the ocean (the undiminishable ocean) from which the stag drinks. To quote Netttelbeck at length,

> The final "language," which the Child represents and which haunts Ovid in his dreams, is not a language in any true sense, in as much as it evades the function of any language to express differences. It is what Ovid sees as the language of childhood, a wordless communicative form which is free from binding structures and which expresses, not distinction, but oneness with the external world. This is the language of the Imaginary, and as such it is one to which Ovid, as speaking subject, is denied access. Only in an unconscious state like sleep can he catch a glimpse of what it would be like to recall this "tongue" (144).

These dreams foreshadow his final union with the Nature and work as the Oracle-Unconscious, to appropriate Freudian terminology, of Ovid himself, as it is said to work in the case of Oedipus. His desire of growing roots into and being assimilated and absorbed by the earth "under me" (Malouf 146) can be understood as an expression of a displaced desire of going back to the womb from where he has originated. He yearns for the pre-Oedipal stage and one can definitely read into this the process of "reversal," as Nettelbeck has argued, although it is interesting to point out here that Ovid is still using the human language to convey this desire, a discrepancy that could and should be overlooked as the "deconstructionist irony that offers itself (to the readers) – that Ovid's wordless state is described in words" (McDonald 51).

A man of letters and coming from the centre of civilization, Ovid is firmly grounded in the world of language and thus the Symbolic Order. He knows the seeds only through the mediation of language – "I know the names of seeds, of course, from having used them for the beauty of the sound itself in the poems I have written…but I have no idea what any but the commonest of them look like" (Malouf 21) – and that is the extent of his knowledge of them. He knows about a natural phenomenon through the human device of language. Thus it is the mediated version of reality he is aware of which has, paradoxically enough as far as the apparent purpose of language goes, taken him away from the reality. He asks his future readers if "some phrase of mine (has) slipped through as a quotation…in a saying that has become part of common speech and cannot now be eradicated?" (19) This hankering after permanence in the Symbolic Order betrays the immense stock he sets on his Self and Subjectivity. So much so that his works of art become kind of mirrors for him which raise the monumental structure of his ego and thus form an important part of his subjectivity. This insistence on survival of his own works, even if it is a phrase, is his plea to be remembered – desperate call against the Death-Pleasure principle, which once attained, paradoxically, does not allow any subjectivity to survive, thus becoming the Derridean "transcendental signified" – and is symptomatic of the insistence of the Self that insists on a Survival principle. When he captures the Child, he tries to initiate him into the Symbolic Order of language as well but he fails. But, even when the Child seems to be learning, he is only imitating, like the voices of various animals and birds he

imitates. In sharp contrast to what Ovid believes he is doing, the Child is actually making him unlearn his language and preparing him for an exit from the Symbolic Order. The capacity to withdraw from this Order has always been latent in Ovid, even when he has been protesting against it. He mourns his loss of ability to communicate with the child, the symbol of the innocence of childhood: "I have forgotten the language we used, and if he were to reappear, perhaps we could no longer communicate…The language he used on whatever occasion it was had already passed my understanding and could not be translated into daily speech" (Malouf 10). He yearns for a return to the realm of the Imaginary. And the language he is speaking of here is the language of his Unconscious, which is unintelligible without the intervention of a psychoanalyst. And it is our contention that the Child actually works in the capacity of a psychoanalyst for Ovid, helping him get in touch with and understand the primitive language of his Unconscious. The Child's deployment in this capacity is only possible, and only then desirable, because Ovid has the potential to retrieve that innocent language. Recalling a dream, Ovid tells us, "I woke, cried out. And the word I uttered was not in my own tongue. I have tried since to remember that word but the sound has sunk back into my sleep" (Malouf 25). This word, it is safe to assume, was in the language of his Unconscious, which sure enough is a "tongue", as Lacan has successfully proven it to be, with its own system of codification and signification. This episode is similar to the one in which the Child shrieks out a word in sheer agony, but in both the cases the word (are they different words or the same word?) is not revealed, in the first case by a willful forgetting and in the second by willful suppression. Pana, while discussing Derrida, says, "The "unremembered" word is the already lost (and remembered only as lost) space of a "mother tongue" away from all tongues" (529). This "mother-tongue" allows for the most genuine mirroring of the self and tells "of origins, without any risk, contamination, or domination" (Derrida, qtd. in Pana 529). The act of speaking this word in the "mother-tongue", which allows for an articulation of the deepest of desires, has to be understood as fulfillment of a desire, which in Lacanian terminology is something that can never be fulfilled completely and only partially, to return to the origin. And thus the Child is deployed to help Ovid fulfill his desire but not before he has asserted his own desire to go back to the origin as well by making the utterance, in another instance of mirroring in the novella. The Child utters the same word, willfully undisclosed in his case, and it is extremely crucial that he makes this utterance just when he is about to enter the Symbolic Order and is thus saved from assimilating into it. This instance of utterance should not be read as the entry into the world of human communication, as Ovid argues, but rather as a willful rejection of it by stating the desire to go back to the origin. "Ideally this dialectic of willing and knowing gives, in Heidegger's words, "entrance into and compliance with the unconcealedness of Being." The result is not so much heightened self-awareness as, again in Heidegger's words, "the opening up of the human being, out of its captivity in that which is, to the openness of Being"" (Ackland 241). It is only after a desire to reach the state of openness of Being is articulated by them that the processes of reversal for both the Child and Ovid begin in the Lacanian scheme of things and we head for the finale of the novella. The entry into the mirror stage by the Child, which Ovid terms as "intelligence" (Malouf 79), and his standing on the verge of the Symbolic Order, are all nullified and the process of reversal in Ovid is mirrored in the Child - from Imaginary to Mirror Stage to the threshold of Symbolic Order and back.

Two instances from the novella which are symbolic of the Child's refusal to enter into the Symbolic Order are: first, when "the boy goes barefoot, and bare except for a loose robe, which he tears off as soon as we are out of sight of the village" (90), the tearing off of the robe being an assertion of the Imaginary over the Symbolic Order; second, when Ovid forcibly tries to drag the Child inside the hut from the freezing weather of the outside and when the Child resists and "lashes out at me, spitting, tearing at my cloak, and…scratching at the raw timber in

his attempt to scale it" (106). We know that he has chosen to stay outside the Symbolic Order of human beings, which has brought him nothing but decay, degradation, and illness. Soon it will be clear that he has to exit the human colony if he is to survive and Ovid can do nothing about it, but follow him and complete his own cycle of reversal, not just in terms of the psychosexual development but also the Lacanian "slave-master discourse" (Hill 88) which informs the relationship he shares with the Child. The novella ends with a triumphant "I am there." Ovid's process of reversal is complete. He is finally in the realm of the Imaginary. His "I am there" echoes Lacan's ontological dictum - a revision on Descartes' "Cogito ergo sum" (I think, therefore I am) – "I am where I think not." The last line of the novella fits perfectly with Lacan's dictum since he is finally in the Imaginary Order, shorn of his Subjectivity and Self and thus unable to think anymore. He just is. He is there. Lacan's dictum rings even more true when we consider that whatever has gone before this last line in the novella has been a sort of one-way dialogue, narrative commentary, and hardly any action or dialogues are there in the novella which comes across as a fictional collection of Ovid's broodings and musings. He carried these out in the human language, closer to Cartesian dictum. But the novella breaks off at "I am there" which means that he is no longer thinking, a fact reinforced by his death as well as the end of the novella itself. He is there where he is not thinking, he cannot think. He is where he thinks not.

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