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School name: Geelong Grammar School

Examination session: November 2007

Submission date: 1 June 2007

Extended Essay

EG ENGLISH A1

Question: What is the literary function of the dialogue between language and nature in David Malouf's *An Imaginary Life*?

Abstract word count: 300
Essay word count: 4000

Supervisor's name: Mr. P. Julian

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Acknowledgments:
I would like to thank the library staff: Ms. Fran Walsh, Ms. Lee Allen, Ms. Anne Gaylard, Ms. Vivienne Harvie, and Ms. Tomoko Katakura for allowing me access to all material, and their aid in my research and footnoting. My supervisor: Mr. Julian, Beth Driscoll and Dr. White for their patience, lessons, and guidance.

What is the literary function of the dialogue between language and nature in David Malouf's An Imaginary Life?

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Abstract

David Malouf's *An Imaginary Life* is a complex and poetic work that provokes important questions about the construction of language, nature and identity. His lyrical, imaginative and philosophical style engages the reader in the project of re imagining these core concepts. This essay focuses on Malouf's literary techniques and how these advance his ideas about language and nature by asking:

> What is the literary function of the dialogue between language and nature in David Malouf's *An Imaginary Life?*

The scope of the essay is limited to this novella. It also considers secondary materials that supplement our understanding of the work, including interviews with the author, literary commentaries, and the work of philosophers and poets. The limitations of this essay are that does not consider how these themes are developed across Malouf's body of work. Further research might also examine related ideas such as the pertinence of this theme to Australian identity.

The essay concludes that Malouf uses the dialogue between language and nature to stimulate questioning of the formative relation between self and world. It examines three stages: crisis, education and transcendence, detailing the progression of how one may perceive and conceive of reality, and analysing its hooks into the formation of our identity, both physical and internal. Furthermore, it analyses the literary techniques Malouf employs to delineate the nuances between human, physical and natural languages, thus exploring the different possibilities for mapping the self to world equation, and intimating the potential for a true language that inspires and excites both author and reader driving the novel to conclusion and transcendence of the page. The essay acknowledges the powerful effect of the reader of the dialogue between language and nature in prompting our dramatic re-conceptualisation of the fundamental questions of who we are and how we relate to the world.

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In the novella 'An Imaginary Life', David Malouf presents a dialogue between the narrator, Ovid, and nature that stimulates questioning of the fundamental formation of self and world. The text uses the crisis experienced by the protagonist on being banished from Rome to Tomis, a tiny outpost of the empire, and his developing relationship with the archetypal wild figure of The Child to explore the interaction between language and different modes of experience. Over the course of the novel, Malouf distinguishes a range of language types: Latin, the barbarian language of Tomis, the language of animals, pure sound, the true language of dreams and silent communion. This hierarchy of language correlates with the hierarchy of social geography, from Roman Civilisation to remote wilderness and even to future landscapes. Through the processes Malouf presents of seeing, naming, defining and reconciling, Ovid undergoes a metamorphosis and achieves a state of self realisation. Malouf uses the dialogue with nature to evoke a sense of possibility and connection in our relationships with the world.

In order for Malouf to create this new communion between self and world, he first disconnects both Ovid and readers from their known language, and therefore their sense of security within their world. We have to be estranged from the language of civilisation before we can learn the dialogue of nature. Ovid is estranged from his language as a result of his exile, Malouf writes of his frustration at being unable to communicate with the villagers: 'All day I wander in a dream,'[1] His language had allowed him to name all that around him, and all that could be around him, allowing him to determine and appropriate his place in his world and the relations he has with everything in it, and this has been disrupted. Malouf has implicitly defined a role of language, of its organisation of Ovid's corporeal 'truth'. Ovid has lost his sense of place, and membership within it. His dreamlike wandering through Tomis shows that he is adrift physically, personally and consciously. Faced with the loss of language to order his world, he is

[1] D. Malouf, *An Imaginary Life,* London, Vintage, 1999, p.9.

forced to express himself through raw emotion. The first part of the text is permeated by his consequent frustration and depression.

A dream sequence exemplifies the turbulence of Ovid's rupture from known landscape and language. Having depicted Ovid's estrangement he feels during the day in Tomis, Malouf moves on to evoke the emotional clarity of his dreams:

> 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. In dream after dream I venture out beyond the stubbled fields into the desolate plain beyond, into the grasslands beyond the edge of our world'[2]

In this passage Ovid's loss of language is likened to blindness. Both are tied into his need for a physical and nameable reality that has been lost to him during the day. Malouf uses the metaphor of written and spoken language to evoke the landscape Ovid sees. On the surface, this metaphor equates an unfamiliar terrain with a language that cannot be read. At a deeper level, the metaphor reveals Ovid's assumptions that the meaning of nature is predetermined, and he is merely unable to access its coded truth. This metaphor of a page also suggests the idea of a bounded landscape. This corresponds to the limits Ovid has imposed on the world as a Roman citizen and poet, and the truth he reads as his being without language, binding him to this page until which he cannot find a release from his trappings. His venturing off the page 'beyond the edge of our world,' allows his unconscious to reveal what his conscious mind cannot. With this metaphor, Malouf has established a premise for Ovid and the reader's

[2] D. Malouf, ibid. p.10.

exploration of the connections between language and nature and its hooks into the formation of our identity, both physical and internal.

This gap between conscious and unconscious determination is discussed by literary critic and poet Seamus Heaney, Heaney is concerned with the nature of poetry, but his comments shed light upon Malouf's intent.

> I think there are two ways in which place is known...two ways which may be complementary but which are just as likely to be antipathetic. One is lived, illiterate and unconscious, the other learned, literate and conscious. In the literary sensibility, both are likely to co-exist in a conscious and unconscious tension[3]

Malouf exploits this tension, highlighting the gap between these two systems of understanding in the dream sequence described above. He dramatises the collapse of Ovid's 'learned, literate and conscious' understanding and the emergence of the alternate 'illiterate and unconscious' sensibility. In this way, Malouf presents this dream as an allegory, an extended metaphor. The same device used by the historical Ovid in his 'Metamorphoses.' Malouf's strategy allows the reader to make these connections, foreshadowing the development of the narrative, heightening the reader's engagement. Malouf's task in this early part of the novel has been to build the tension between Ovid's daytime isolation and his night time explorations, both of which are the result of the cataclysm of his exile. For the reader, this opening pre-empts a crisis concerning the adequacy of human language and questioning the connections between landscape, mindscape and identity.

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[3] S. Heaney, *Preoccupations: Selected Prose 1968-1978*, London, Faber and Faber, 1980, p.131.

Malouf's presentation of crisis serves an important purpose by establishing the conditions for revelation. As Malouf explains through Ovid, 'I had to enter the silence to find a password that would release me from my own life.'[4] Here foreshadowed is the promise of a reconciliation and therefore release of this tension for the reader. Malouf places an epiphany immediately after the staging of desolation as a catalyst for our return to radical innocence. Malouf has moved from using language descriptively to wielding it in a way that demonstrates its active potential.

The password that restores Ovid and the reader to the possibilities of language is a scarlet poppy, a moment of rediscovery that concludes the first part of the novel and allows Malouf to progress in his reshaping of Ovid's world. The episode begins with Ovid walking amongst the wild corn and suddenly recognising a poppy, and naming its colour, "Scarlet!"[5] This instant jolts Ovid out of his depression. Ovid has gone from living in a drab, inchoate world to one which one has colour and meaning. The discovery of the poppy provides him with a reference to re-establish the relationship between language and nature. "The magic of saying the word made my skin prickle, the saying almost a greater miracle than the seeing," writes Malouf. Malouf's language here holds the key to the dialogue he is developing between nature and language. The two clauses of the sentence have strongly contrasting tones. The first is physical, immediate, and active, most vividly through the use of the word "prickle" which has an onomatopoeic effect and physical impression upon the reader. The second clause is abstract, and its juxtaposition with the first allows Malouf to marry together visceral reality and discourse.

Malouf further develops this epiphany to explore the nexus between language and identity. Naming the poppy, Ovid imagines that he brings it into existence by allocating it a place and

[4]D. Malouf, op sit. p.26.
[5]D. Malouf, ibid. p.24.

role, 'I have brought you into being again'[6]. Malouf's narrator appropriates the memory, asserting the experience as his and of him, thereby relating himself into his definition and giving him a point of connection to the world. Karin Hansson explains the poppy episode to be '[a] telling example of language as an almost physical property… a prerequisite not only for our perception of reality but also for our sense of identity within that reality.'[7] Malouf's image of the poppy and the implied dialogue with nature represents the direct association of language and our sense of reality; of the poppy, of Ovid, and of the relationship between them. The physical properties of language ground us in our ability to relate to the world. Malouf's language also serves to draw the reader into the process of reforming identity through reformed language. Malouf directly addresses his audience: 'And I have seen the earth, as you have reader…Where had it come from?'[8] Like the onomatopoeia of "prickle," the immediacy of this use of the second person narrative voice has a provocative impact upon the reader, alerting them to the dynamic possibility of language. Malouf's inclusion of the reader is a deliberate attempt to place them upon the same level as his narrator, so as to follow his changing understanding of the flow between language and nature.

Significantly, this reconnection with nature alongside the reconnection with language does not restore Ovid to his previous identity as a Roman poet, but to a more primal self. This is illustrated when Malouf's narrator says, 'imagine the astonishment of my friends at Rome to see our cynical metropolitan poet, who barely knows a flower or a tree…dancing and singing to himself in celebration of this bloom.'[9] Ovid is experiencing a rebirth and simultaneously Malouf is recasting his and our view of language. Previously Ovid had used language to categorise

[6]D. Malouf, ibid. p.25.
[7]K. Hansson, *Sheer Edge: Aspects of Identity in David Malouf's writing*, Lund, Lund University Press, 1991.
[8]D. Malouf, op sit. p.23.
[9]D. Malouf, ibid. p.24.

and contain reality; now he uses it to shape and imagine the world. Ovid sees himself as a god, 'opening [flowers] out of the secret syllables as I place them like seeds upon my tongue and give them breath.'[10] Malouf's purpose in describing this epiphany is to recreate a sense of wonder and joy for Ovid and the reader at nature, and our potential to relate to it and ourselves through language.

Following the epiphany, Malouf sets about presenting the reconstruction of language, a process that reshapes Ovid's and our worlds. To delineate the dimensions of experience, Malouf depicts a blending of a range of languages: Latin, the barbarian language of Tomis, the language of animals, pure sound, the true language of dreams and silent communion.

Although Malouf used the incident with the poppy to point out the potential of Ovid's native tongue, as Ovid progresses he becomes increasingly aware of the limitations of Latin. Malouf's narrator characterises Latin as a language that compartmentalises experience and prevents a holistic engagement with nature, "Latin is a language for distinctions; every ending defines and divides." Malouf's sharp and precise articulation in this passage, the brusque alliteration of "distinctions", "defines" and "divides", communicates the reductiveness of human languages. The barbarian language spoken in Tomis is similarly limited, as explored by Irina Grigoresc Pana. Pana claims that Tomis is a 'critical variant' of Rome, "it is a complex refiguration of the centre, the realisation that Rome itself remains supplementary to an always already lost, missing 'tongue'."[11]. The alienation Ovid feels surrounded by the language of Tomis is an indication that all human languages are an inadequate substitute for a true, 'already lost' language. Pana's analysis is particularly resonant for Australian readers since she explicitly

[10]D. Malouf, ibid. p.26.
[11]I. Grigoresc Pana, 'The Tomis Complex: Versions of exile in Australian Literature', *World Literature Today,* Vol.67, Issue 3, 1993, p.527.

connects the relationship between Tomis and Rome with that between Australia and Europe. In both cases, the disjunct between civilised and uncivilised cultures is a sign of a deeper rift between us and our original selves that can only be healed through a return to nature, which is crystallised through the need to return to a 'earlier and more universal language'[12] associated with the innocence of childhood.

Malouf depicts a yearning for this language. His narrator says:

> The language I am speaking of now, that I am almost speaking, is a language whose every syllable is a gesture of reconciliation. We knew that language once. I spoke it in my childhood. We must discover it again.[13]

The idea that language can reconcile Ovid and us to the world is integral to Malouf's literary project. The mechanism that births this new language is a reworked understanding of sound as a hinge, portrayed by Malouf through the relationship between Ovid and The Child. The Child is the literalised metaphor Malouf uses to direct Ovid and the readers towards an untainted, primal language.

The first step is the renewed valuing of sound. Malouf describes Ovid's joy at hearing with new ears as he spends time with the Child.

> I have begun to understand him. In imitating the birds, he is not, like our mimics, copying something that is outside him and revealing the accuracy of his ear or the virtuosity of his speech organs. He is being the bird. He is

[12]D. Malouf, op sit. p.98.
[13]D. Malouf, ibid. p.94.

> allowing it to speak out to him. So that in learning the sounds made by men he is making himself a man.[14]

Here, Malouf's abstract tone allows him to explicitly articulate his own creative process. The act of imagination that Malouf as well as The Child engages in, and that Ovid and the reader are learning, is one that uses sound not to communicate but to transform. In this quote, Malouf draws attention to the twofold character of words: as pure sound and as signifiers, and he deliberately privileges the first. Seamus Heaney develops this idea further when he discusses T.S. Eliot's notion of the auditory imagination, which is a way of 'thinking of the relationship between the word as pure vocable, as articulate noise, and the word as etymological occurrence, as symptom of human history, memory and attachments.'[15] Malouf sets up this dichotomy between sound and meaning only to reconfigure it.

Malouf's dissolution of the boundary between sound and meaning precipitates a related breakdown of the demarcation between self and world. As Ovid learns from The Child, his new approach to language results in an altered conception of his own identity:

> It rains and I say, it rains. It thunders and I say, it thunders. The child is otherwise. I try to think as he must: I am raining, I am thundering, and am immediately struck with panic as if, in losing hold of my separate and individual soul, in shaking the last of it off from the tip of my little finger, I might find myself lost out there in the multiplicity of things, and never get back.[16]

Malouf depicts the possibilities of change in Ovid's and our relationship with language. Whereas once, language – Latin, barbarian and implicitly English – had been constructed through the agency of the speaker, now it is dispersed, universal, impersonal. The panic that

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[14] D. Malouf, ibid. p.88.
[15] S. Heaney, *Preoccupations: Selected Prose 1968-1978*, London, Faber and Faber, 1980, p.150.
[16] D. Malouf, op sit, p.92.

Malouf's narrator experiences is necessary for the transition to take place and points to the profound nature of his metamorphosis.

Towards the conclusion of the book, Malouf brings all these ideas to a climax when he presents Ovid's death as the ultimate metamorphosis and dissolution of the boundary of self and world.

> Wandering along together, wading through the high grasses side by side, is a kind of conversation that needs no tongue, a perfect interchange of perceptions, moods, questions, answers, that is as simple as the weather, is in fact the merest shifting of cloud shadows over a landscape or over the surface of a pool, as thoughts melt out of one mind into another, cloud and shadow, with none of the structures of formal speech.[17]

The tone of this passage is contemplative with a steady, dropping rhythmic beat, where the energy building is sublimated to the energy of natural things, the syntax of the long, drawn out sentences fuses together thoughts, harmonising the ideas to one flowing stream of consciousness. The imagery of the high grasses has connotations of shift, change and transformation, where Malouf's choice of words juxtaposes those natural, 'cloud' and 'shadow' with abstract conceptions, 'interchange' and 'perceptions'. Nature has overcome the impediment of language providing a new, clearer means through which to commune with the world and thereby the self.

> I am growing bodiless. I am turning into the landscape. I feel myself sway and ripple. I feel myself expand upwards toward the blue roundness of the sky. Is that where we are going?[18]

[17] D. Malouf, ibid, p.145-6.
[18] D. Malouf, ibid, p.146.

Malouf has achieved through his narrator this metamorphosis unto the natural world which ultimately issues Ovid with his death, but that has paradoxically birthed him with a new life. Ovid's questioning of the reader 'is that where we are going?' acts as a query of this new consummation, whilst subtly questioning the reader of their comprehension and invoking within us the limitless scale of possibility. The strongest justification for this sense of possibility the novel evokes is the depiction of this transcendent state that dissolves the boundaries between individual identity and the cosmos.

The repeals to nature echo the images of 'the bounded landscape' that were established in the beginning of the novella, rekindling the metaphor of a 'coded truth'. This coded truth however, has turned out to be less 'coded' than it had been 'encoded' by the languages enforced upon it. The dream sequence preceding it is the first depiction of the river Ister:

> I walked on the river, which swirled like smoke under me, and I was moonlight. I came to the further bank. A vast plain stretched away, flat, flat, featureless, it was all dust, no creature stirred, not a serpent even…It was there, outside me, a stranger. And something in me that was its reflection had come up to meet it.[19]

The repetition of 'flat, flat, featureless' and negation of 'all…no… not… even' serves to intensify the sense of dislocation that Ovid and the reader feel, as well as the weightlessness that is in direct contrast to the previous scenes, that were weighed down in their helpless remorse. The premonition like nature of this sequence reveals itself towards the end of the novel when it is echoed around a hundred pages later,

> Is-ter. Is-ter. It has been there always, somehow waiting, even as my eye noted it on maps, as the final boundary of my life, waiting to be crossed, and

[19] D. Malouf, ibid, p.16-7.

> patient year after year for my arrival. However many steps I may have taken away from it, both in reality and in my mind, shifting its tides, freezing each season, cracking up, flowing again, whispering tome: I am the border beyond which you must go if you are to enter into your true life, your true death at last[20]

The transformative nature of his death is mirrored in the transient imagery of the freezing and melting river, and strengthened by the hints of a cyclic, eternally returning treatment of time, and structure of parts. The syntax of half-formed sentences and undeveloped thoughts protracts the pace, and gives the pronouncements an air of finality, resolution and of self realisation.

> But the earth goes on. Even beyond Ister. There is another world out there.
>
> We have come to the shores, and prepare to enter.[21]

The discursive nature of this last section engages the reader in the same desires for release. Ister had become the physical representation of the barrier fashioned by language and its imposing definition on reality, overcoming this Malouf is able to establish the enduring metamorphosis, achieved through the unearthing of the 'true language'.

> I belong to this place now. I have made it mine. I am entering the dimensions of my self.[22]

The very last words of *An Imaginary Life* 'I am immeasurably, unbearably happy. I am three years old. I am sixty. I am six. I am there'[23] fuse a sense of bliss, timelessness, and

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[20] D. Malouf, ibid, p.135.
[21] D. Malouf, ibid, p.137.
[22] D. Malouf, ibid, p.91.
[23] D. Malouf, ibid, p.153.

groundedness. They directly recall the opening of the novel in a way that impresses the reader with a sense of circularity and resolution. Within Malouf's prologue, the landscape of memory shifts in time and place revolving around the Child. Malouf writes: 'the Child is here. I am three or four years old. It is late summer. It is spring. I am six. I am eight. The child is always the same age.'[24] From this beginning; the narrator asserts his reality through direct subject statements such as "I am", "this is" and "he is..." He defines everything in relation to himself, so as to claim it. These sensory descriptions are, however, incongruous to any one place; his experiences are instead bound in time through the recurring presence of the boy. The reader experiences an epiphany on realising Malouf's sophisticated and deft structuring of the novel. This structure has mirrored the process of rediscovery and arrival back at our origins that is only possible through a recasting of the dialogue between language and nature. Malouf relies upon this transitory setting to establish the cyclic structure of the novel, which is in a continuous process of returning upon, revising and transforming his and the reader's perception.

Ovid is in the process of writing his past into a present, language mediates his experiences, and nature is the setting for and key to the exploration of his memory. 'As empty as far as the eye can see or the mind can imagine, cloudless, without wings. But I am describing a state of mind, no place.'[25] The metaphor of landscape as applied to his consciousness suffuses the text, so that they become interchangeable, language and nature are brought to relief, and their roots into the way Ovid perceives and conceives of his reality are drawn. Malouf's imagery of release is intensified by the construction of the sentence, where the clauses shorten, the syllables decrease, the rhythm peters out and the tone becomes increasingly detached. Yvonne Smith, writing about Malouf's writing practices remarked, 'in light of the interweaving of

[24] D. Malouf, ibid. p.1-3.
[25] D. Malouf, op sit, p.8.

all these aspects in Ovid's narration what Malouf terms 'mood' has an underlying influence on the fabric of the text, it's blending, through emotionally heightened language, of inner states and 'external' objects that a reader experiences as 'poetic','[26] Smith establishes the utility of Malouf's imagery as a means not only to forward the narrative, but as subject to a creative discourse itself, whereupon the affective relationships between internal and external relationships are considered and realigned.

Malouf himself describes the structure of his works as,

> They are constructed in terms of correspondences, analogies, metaphors, rather than plot. This is an attempt to render the way I see the world, or at least the way I want to read the world: that things make sense in terms of those correspondences ... My tendency is always to interpretation, and that means reading, looking at things and offering a discovery of how they fit together, what corresponds with what, what mirrors what, what is the opposite of what, and so on[27]

Malouf's aim in portraying the experience of timeless, placeless, languageless being is to expand the reader's consciousness of life's purpose and potential. The idea of coming back to this place of origin is further developed by Deleuze, who explains,

> There is a present of the future, a present of the present, a present of the past, all implicated in the event, rolled together in the event, and thus simultaneous

[26] Y. Smith, *In the Beginning: David Malouf's An Imaginary Life*, Brisbane, University of Queensland Press, 2005, p.1.
[27] P. Kavanagh and P. Kuch (eds), 'With Breath Just Condensing On It: David Malouf', *Conversations*, Sydney, Collins/Angus & Robertson, 1991, p,184

> with each other and inexplicable. From affect to time: one discovers a time which is interior to the event[28]

Malouf's narrative realises Deleuze's more abstract concept of time in flux. The meetings between Ovid and The Child provide a transcendence, from which the subtext of the narrative can be offset. The various dream sequences, and those moments where author, reader and the protagonist achieve clarity, lead to our metaphorical transcendence, and a shift in the way we 'read' the world.

Malouf's complex and nuanced portrayal of the dialogue between language and nature has a powerful effect on the reader, prompting a dramatic re-conceptualisation of the fundamental questions of who we are and how we relate to the world. The journey Malouf depicts through his narrator, Ovid, allows the reader to progressively undertake this metamorphosis.

Malouf's purpose in delineating the nuances of human, physical and natural language is to explore different ways of mapping the self to world equation, and to intimate the possibility of a true language that inspires and excites both him and the reader, and which upon Ovid's arrival at transcendence concludes the narrative, releasing author, narrator and reader of its trappings, and dissolving the boundaries between human languages and our understanding of the natural world, and between our self and encompassing world.

[28] G, Deleuze. *Cinema 2: The Time Image* (translated by H. Tomlinson and B. Habberjam), London, The Athlone Press, 1989.

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