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Ovid in Exile: Fact or Fiction?

Abstract: The purpose of this paper is to retake once again the scholarly discussion on Ovid's exile reality or fictionality. The numerous (and important in some cases) arguments referred by those who argue its fictionality are here presented and analyzed typologically (subjective, objective and literary arguments). The final conclusion is that it is not possible to be categorical in either option, for both are based on solid criteria.

En este artículo se debate una vez más la posibilidad de que el exilio de Ovidio en Tomi no haya sido más que una nueva invención del poeta latino. Los numerosos (y algunos importantes) argumentos aducidos por los defensores de esta posibilidad se ordenan tipológicamente (argumentos subjetivos, argumentos objetivos, argumentos literarios) y se debaten. La conclusión es que no es posible defender categóricamente ninguna postura al respecto, pues todas están sostenidas por argumentos de peso.

Keywords: Ovid, exile, *Ars amatoria*, error, Tomi (Constanza, RU)

1. Introduction to the problem:

In 1985 A. D. Fitton Brown¹ was quite frank when questioning the veracity of Ovid's exile in Tomi; the title of his article, which appeared in the *Liverpool Classical Monthly*, stated the matter baldly: "The unreality of Ovid's Tomitan exile". This was certainly not the first time attempts had been made to initiate a debate over the fact or the fiction behind the tragedy that cast a pall over the final years of the

¹ A. D. Fitton Brown, "The unreality of Ovid's Tomitan exile", *LCM*, 10.2 (1985), 18-22.

writer from Sulmona²; yet, despite the habitual polemicising bent of classical philologists, few scholars have paid any attention to Fitton Brown's so plausible scepticism³, possibly because it is deemed either extravagant, reiterative or already definitively discredited⁴, even if there are many who had already mentioned the possibility of Ovid's fiction of his own exile⁵.

Fitton Brown's hypothesis—taken further and furnished with new arguments by the above-mentioned scholars—is nevertheless worth taking notice of and replete with good reasons. These are his main theses: 1) Many of the geographical descriptions (climate, position of the heavenly bodies, landscape, customs) of Tomi do not bear the least resemblance to reality; rather, Ovid merely relies on the Virgilian account in *Georg.* III, 349-383, for his descriptions of the city that received him in exile. 2) The description of his journey from Rome to Tomi is implausible. 3) The reason for his exile—and for the choice of

2 See the few references to earlier doubts in Fitton Brown's article, p. 18, to which should be added those cited by A. W. J. Holleman in "Ovid's exile", *LCM*, 10.3 (1985), 48 (otherwise brief and harsh with Fitton Brown) and H. Hofmann in "The unreality of Ovid's Tomitan exile once again", *LCM*, 12.2 (1987), 23 (in the same line as Fitton Brown). Also, E. Bérchez Castaño (see below), pp. 26ff.

3 Among those that have, in addition to those cited by Holleman y Hofmann, worth mentioning are W. W. Ehlers, "Poet und Exil. Zum Verständnis der Exildichtung Ovids", *A&A*, XXXIV (1988), 144-157 (p. 145); J.-M. Claassen, *Poeta, exul, vates. A stylistic and literary Analysis of Ovid's Tristia and Epistulae ex Ponto*, Univ. de Stellenbosch, 1986, "Error and the imperial household: an angry god and the exiled Ovid's fate", *AClass*, XXX (1987), 31-47 (pp. 40-41), "Ovid's Poems from Exile: the Creation of a Myth and the Triumph of Poetry", *A&A*, XXXIV (1988), 158-169, and "Ovid's Poetic Pontus", *Papers of the Leeds International Latin Seminar*, 6 (1990), 65-94; D. Little, "Ovid's last poems: cry of pain from exile or literary frolic in Rome?", *Prudentia*, XXII (1990), 23-39; G. D. Williams, *Banished Voices: Readings in Ovid's Exile Poetry*, Cambridge Univ. Press, 1994; Claassen (again), "Ovid's Exile: is the secret out yet?", *Scholia*, 3 (1994), 107-111 and *Displaced Persons. The Literature of Exile from Cicero to Boethius*, London, Duckworth, 1999; Hofmann (again), "Ovid im Exil?... *sumque argumenti conditor ipse mei*. Ovids Exildichtung zwischen Biographie und Fiction", *Mitteilungen des Deutschen Altphilologenverbandes*, 2001, 8-19; X. Ballester, "El Getica de Ovidio", in *El espacio: ficción y realidad en el mundo clásico*, M. A. Coronel (ed.), Univ. Politécnica de Valencia, 2002, 131-174 (with good linguistic, geographical and ethnic arguments); and Williams (again), "Ovid's Exile Poetry: *Tristia*, *Epistulae ex Ponto* and *Ibis*", in *The Cambridge Companion to Ovid*, P. Hardie (ed.), Cambridge Univ. Press, 2002, 233-245.

4 This is the case of Little and Claassen (see above) respectively, allowing for their differences.

5 Cf. Bérchez (cited below), p. 50.

place—is a mystery. 4) Until the 4th century, no one, except for Ovid himself, Pliny the Elder (perhaps) and Statius, mentions the poet's exile; Tacitus and Suetonius are silent on the matter. 5) What accurate information Ovid does provide about Pontus could have been gleaned from other literary sources. 6) Once he had exhausted the love elegy, it is not improbable that the writer of a work like *Heroides* should turn to the fiction of his own exile. 7) The literary possibilities of such a fiction are boundless (from the relationship alluded to in *Trist.* III 9 between the name of the place chosen—Tomi—and the story of Medea—which he himself put on stage, to the scope for rhetorical play with present / past, friends / loneliness, civilization / barbarians, safety / danger, etc)⁶.

Very recently, a young Spanish researcher, E. Bérchez Castaño, has made an uncompromising return to the subject in his doctoral thesis⁷. After establishing the *status quaestionis*, Bérchez studies in depth the different arguments put forward as proving the falsity of Ovid's exile in Tomi and then offers his own conclusions. Those arguments have to do with: 1) the details of the leave-taking and the journey (with particular attention to the leave-taking, the point of departure, the route followed and the length of the journey, the use of the literary topic of the storm and, finally, the poet's omissions and the composition and arrangement of *Tristia* I); 2) the description of Tomi as a *locus horribilis* (with particular attention to the location and history of Tomi, the trade of its port, the city's cultural and political life, its public ceremonies and its religion, the alleged aridity of its land, the Istrus and its waters, and, finally, the mistaken location of the Pole Star); 3) the Scythian climate (*semper hiems*); 4) the denizens of the place, badly differentiated into their various ethnic and cultural identities and qualified as bellicose, ferocious and rustic (*vix sunt homines hoc nomine digni*); 5) the Getican and Sarmatian tongues and literary creation in them (*non patria Camena*); whence 6) new subject-matter, for the place of exile was the inspiration for specific literary topics relating to its remoteness and distance, its differences—always for the worse—with respect to Rome, its primitiveness or its identification with the world of the dead, all of them themes which give rise to 7) a new poetry (the epistolary poetry of exile) and 8) a

⁶ See my *Exilio y elegía latina entre la Antigüedad y el Renacimiento*, Univ. de Huelva, 1997.

⁷ E. Bérchez Castaño, *Realidad y ficción del destierro de Ovidio en Tomis*, doctoral thesis written under the supervision of J. L. Vidal Pérez and X. Ballester, Universitat de Barcelona, 2008.

new art in which (if the exile really is an invention) reality and fiction are merged, while the boundaries separating the real “I” from the poetic “I”, or the private letter from the public proclamation, and so on, are blurred.

On the basis of all these factors—some of an objective nature (historical, archaeological and epigraphical data, for example), others literary (genre, poem structure, topics, formulas, and so forth)—Bérchez considers it proven that Ovid was not banished to Tomi (p. 276), but leaves unsettled the question of whether he was exiled somewhere closer to Rome⁸ or, simply, was never exiled at all.

It is not easy to be convinced by Bérchez’s arguments, but the mere fact that diverse reasons may be adduced to raise the prospect of the unreality of Ovid’s exile opens up *Tristia* and *Epistulae ex Ponto* to highly suggestive readings, not only on account of what those works mean in themselves but also of their literary importance as innovators of a particular elegiac genre. Thus the whole issue deserves reappraisal. Naturally, there would be no doubts if all the loose ends concerning Ovid’s exile were neatly tied up; but although such is the impression usually given by biographies of the poet, there still remain some significant grey areas, any clarification of which is always justified.

2. Nature of the arguments which question the veracity of the fact:

If truth be told, the available sources regarding the *relegatio* to which Ovid was subjected boil down to the references he himself made in *Tristia* and *Epistulae ex Ponto*. In addition to these autobiographical remarks, some few others may be adduced from elsewhere, such as allusions to the banishment in other writers or material remains which, albeit tangentially, may help confer veracity and coherence on the poet’s own statements. The arguments are, then, of three kinds. Some discuss and try to explain (or refute) the murky reasons behind Ovid’s exile—the well-known *carmen et error*, reasons which have only come down to us through his own work, and which are usually deemed “subjective” arguments. Others have to do with the considerable number of errors, imprecisions, contradictions, exaggerations and silences transmitted by Ovid’s works of exile regarding the circumstances and the facts surrounding it—all of them

8 In line with Ballester, op. cit.

arguments which, unlike the former, are backed up by information given by other previous, contemporary or later authors, and by data gathered from the material remains furnished by archaeologists in the region of Tomi; these arguments are usually regarded as “objective” arguments. The third group of arguments, some intertextual, others *ex silentio*, derive from later writers who either treated the subject-matter of exile (or some cognate) with the aid of literary resources proceeding from Ovid’s exile epistolaries, or wrote the history of, or otherwise referred to, the age the poet lived in; in other words, these arguments have to do with literary history and the survival of Ovid’s exile output. We shall consider these groups of arguments in turn.

2.1. “Subjective” arguments:

In 8 BC Ovid was sentenced to exile on the orders of the emperor Augustus, the whys and wherefores of the latter’s action constituting are one of most debated enigmas in the history of Latin literature⁹. For the fact is that, although Ovid refers on several

⁹ Among the wealth of scholarship dedicated specifically to the issue, see, in addition to the works cited above: G. Boissier, "L'exil d'Ovide", *Revue des Deux Mondes*, 69 (1867), 580-612 (= *L'opposition sous les Césars*, Paris, Hachette, 1905², 107-159); E. Appel, *Quibus de caussi Ovidius ab Augusto relegatus sit*, Berlin, 1872; E. Cocchia, "La relegazione di Ovidio a Tomi", *Atti Acad. Archeol. Lett. e Belle Arti di Napoli*, 12 (1902), 1-45; A. Cartault, "Encore les causes de la réléation d'Ovide", *Mélanges Chatelain*, Paris, 1910, 51 ff.; S. Reinach, "Les compagnons et l'exil d'Ovide", *Rev. de Phil.*, XXXIV (1910), 342-349; R. Zimmermann, "Die Ursachen von Ovids Verbannung", *RhM*, 81 (1932), 263-274; L. Herrmann, "La faute secrète d'Ovide", *RBPh*, 17 (1938), 695-725; N. Salanitro, "Contributo all'interpretazione dell'error di Ovidio", *Mondo Classico*, 11 (1941), 254-271; S. D'Elia, "L'esilio di Ovidio e alcuni aspetti della storia augustea", *AFLN*, 5 (1955), 95-157; K. MAROT, "L'esilio di Ovidio", *AAntHung*, 3 (1955), 150-163; C. Nardi, "Un misterio difficile a svelare: perchè Ovidio fu relegato a Tomi da Augusto?", *L'Eloquenza*, 46 (1956), fascs. 10-12 (= *Atti del Convegno internazionale Ovidiano*, 1959, I, 49-54); W. H. Alexander, "The culpa of Ovid", *Class. Journ.*, 53 (1958), 319-325; R. Marache, "La révolte d'Ovide exilé contre Auguste", *Ovidiana: Recherches sur Ovide*, 1958, 412-419; D. Marin, "Intorno alle cause dell'esilio di Ovidio", *Ovidiana: Recherches sur Ovide*, 1958, 406-411 (= *Atti del Convegno internazionale Ovidiano*, 1959, I, 29-47); D. MARIN, "Ovidio fu relegato per la sua oposizione al regime augusteo?", *Fasti Pontici Ovidio poetae dicati = Acta Philologica Academiae Dacoromane*, 1958, 99-252; G. Baligan, "L'esilio di Ovidio", *Atti del Convegno internazionale Ovidiano*, 1959, I, 49-54; A. Gregorian, "Discussioni intorno all'esilio di Ovidio a Tomi", *Atti del Convegno internazionale Ovidiano*, 1959, II, 315 ff.; J. Carcopino, "L'exil d'Ovide, poète néopythagoricien", *Rencontres de l'histoire et de la littérature romaines*, Paris, Flammarion, 1963, 59-170 (= "El destierro de

occasions to the reasons for his exile, he never actually tells us what they were. Possibly the most explicit of his texts in this regard is to be found in *Trist.* II, 207–212:

perdiderint cum me duo crimina, carmen et error,

Ovidio, poeta neopitagórico", *Contactos entre la historia y la literatura romanas*, Madrid, 1965, 51-142); F. Norwood, "The riddle of Ovid's relegatio", *CPh*, 58 (1963), 150-163; J. Carcopino, "Les raisons religieuses de l'exil d'Ovid", *Rev. de l'Hist. des Relig.*, 165 (1964), 132 ff.; F. Cumont, "Les raisons religieuses de l'exil d'Ovide", *Rev. de l'Histoire des Religions*, 165 (1964), 132-139; J. C. Thibault, *The Mystery of Ovid's Exile*, Berkeley-Los Angeles, Univ. of California Press, 1964 (the fullest statement of the facts and the various hypotheses concerning Ovid's exile); L. Herrmann, "Nouvelles recherches sur la faute secrète d'Ovide", *RBPh*, 43 (1965), 40-52; R. S. Rogers, "The Emperor's Displeasure and Ovid", *TAPhA*, XCVII (1966), 373-378; F. Corsaro, "Sulla relegatio di Ovidio", *Orpheus*, 15 (1968), 123-167; N. V. Voulikh, "La révolte d'Ovide contre Auguste", *LEC*, 36 (1968), 370-382; id., "Ovid und Augustus" (in Russian, with English synopsis), *VDI*, 103 (1968), 151-160; A. W. J. Holleman, "Ovidii Metamorphoseon liber 15, 622-870 (Carmen et error?)", *Latomus*, 28 (1969), 42-60; W. Willige, "Ovidius relegatus", *AU*, 12 (1969), 51-72; L. Herrmann, "L'Art d'aimer, les Remèdes d'amour et la faute secrète d'Ovide", *RBPh*, 48 (1970), 38-44; A. W. J. Holleman, "Ovid and politics", *Historia*, 20 (1971), 458-466; B. T. Buchert, "The reasons for Ovid's banishment", *Akroterion*, 19 (1974), 44-49; L. Herrmann, "Ovide, la Bona Dea et Livie", *AC*, 44 (1975), 126-140; B. Levick, "The fall of Julia the younger", *Latomus*, 35 (1976), 301-339 [esp. 333 ff.]; R. Verdière, "Nouvelles perspectives sur la rélévation d'Ovide", *Ovidianum. Acta conventus omnium gentium Ovidianis studiis fovendis*, 1976, 591-601; P. Green, "Carmen et error: πρόφασις and ἀ□τία in the matter of Ovid's exile", *ClAnt*, I (1982), 202-220; G. P. Goold, "The cause of Ovid's exile", *ICS*, 8 (1983), 94-107; D. Porte, "Un épisode satirique des *Fastes* et l'exil d'Ovide", *Latomus*, 43 (1984), 284-306; P. M. Martin, "À propos de l'exil d'Ovide... et de la succession d'Auguste", *Latomus*, 45 (1986), 609-611; G. Ameye, "Quel fut le motif de l'exil d'Ovide?", *Continuités et ruptures dans l'histoire et la littérature. Colloque franco-polonais, 9-14 février 1987, Montpellier*, Paris-Geneva, Champion-Slatkine, 1988, 87-97. Naturally, the issue has also been discussed in introductions to Ovid's Works; see, among others, those of S. G. Owen, in his edition of *Tristia* II, Oxford, 1923, 1-47; J. André, in his edition of *Tristes*, Paris, Les Belles Lettres, 1968, VII-XVI; M. A. Marcos Casquero, in his translation of *Tristia*, *Perficit*, 12 (1981-82), Salamanca, 1983, 3-12; V. Cristóbal, "Introducción", to his translation of P. Ovidio Naso, *Amores. Arte de amar. Sobre la cosmética del rostro femenino. Remedios contra el amor*, Madrid, Gredos, 1989, 15-24; J. González Vázquez, in his translation of *Tristes y Pónticas*, Madrid, Gredos, 1992, 7-26; R. Verdière, *Le secret du voltigeur d'amour ou le mystère de la relegation d'Ovide*, Brussels, Latomus, 1992; B. Chwalek, *Die Verwandlung des Exils in die elegische Welt. Studien zu den Tristia und Epistulae ex Ponto Ovids*, Frankfurt, Peter Lang, 1996.

alterius facti culpa silenda mihi:
nam non sum tanti, renovem ut tua vulnera, Caesar,
quem nimio plus est indoluisse semel.
altera pars superest, qua turpi carmine factus
arguor obsceni doctor adulterii¹⁰.

Many and varied are the interpretations which have been proffered for this passage with the aim of breaking the silence which the very poet forced on himself lest he should offend once more—simply by mentioning the reasons for his penalty—the majesty of Augustus. Ovid's silence is, therefore, voluntary in so far as, together with the poems he wrote from exile, it allowed him to nurture the hope of a pardon.

There seems to be no doubt regarding the identity of the *turpe carmen* referred to in these lines: it is his *Ars Amatoria*, since he seems to allude to the mastery which, thanks to that work, was accorded him in the phrase *obsceni doctor adulterii*. What is more, he insists on that identification elsewhere, for example in *Trist.* I 1, 67–68, the propempticon which accompanies his book to Rome, where he exclaims:

'inspice' dic 'titulum. non sum praeceptor amoris;
quas meruit, poenas iam dedit illud opus'.

Other such identifications are to be found in *Trist.* II, 7–8 (*carmina fecerunt, ut me moresque notaret / iam demi iussa Caesar ab Arte meos*); 61 (*quid referam libros, illos quoque, crimina nostra...?*); 239–240 (*at si, quod mallem, vacuum tibi forte fuisset, / nullum legisses crimen in Arte mea*); 303–304 (*et procul ab scripta solis meretricibus Arte / summovet ingenuas pagina prima manus*); 345–346 (*haec tibi me invisum lascivia fecit, ob Artes, / quis ratus es vetitos sollicitare toros*); III 1, 7–8 (*id quoque, quod viridi quondam male lusit in aevo, / heu nimium sero damnat et odit opus*); 14, 5–6 (*conficis exceptis ecquid mea carmina solis / Artibus, artificii quae nocuere suo?*) and in

¹⁰ Latin texts of *Tristia* from Owen's edition, OCT, 1969.

III 7, 29–30 (*pone, Perilla, metum, tantummodo femina nulla / neve vir a scriptis discat amare tuis*), etc.¹¹

But for all this insistence, there is still some room to doubt the truth of such declarations given the odd fact that the reason for the banishment was a work published at least eight years earlier. Might that not have been a mere pretext on Augustus' part, behind which lay another reason? Ovid himself expressed his puzzlement at the long time that had lapsed between the publication the *Ars amatoria* and his exile in *Trist.* II, 539–546:

nos quoque iam pridem scripto peccavimus isto:
supplicium patitur non nova culpa novum;
carminaque edideram, cum te delicta notantem
praeteriit totiens inreprehensus eques.
ergo quae iuvenis mihi non nocitura putavi
scripta parum prudens, nunc nocuere seni.
sera redundavit veteris vindicta libelli,
distat et a meriti tempore poena sui.¹²

For all that the poet casts around for justification of the emperor's tardiness (seeking indulgence through his own kind understanding) and puts it down to Augustus's late reading of the confounded book¹³, the doubts concerning the real cause of his exile persist.

11 Other writers of antiquity retailed the same explanation; cf. Aurel. Vict., *De Caes.* I, 27: *poetam Ovidium pro eo quod tres libellos amatoriae artis conscripsit exilio damnavit.*

12 However regarded, Ovid's attempt to have us believe here and at *Trist.* III 1, 7, quoted above, that the *Ars* is the work of a young man is stretching things a bit given that he was 42 at the time of publication.

13 Thus in *Trist.* II, the passage between lines 207 and 239 (both already quoted) alludes to the emperor's excessive occupations. But the publication of such a book, which flew in the face of Augustus' moralising legislation (which between 18 BC and 9 AD took the form of legislation such as the *lex Iulia de adulteriis coercendis*, the *lex Julia de maritandis ordinibus* or the *lex Papia Poppaea*), may not have been so grave a matter in the beginning as the consequences later

It may be, as Ovid himself would have us understand, that the true reason is to be found in the *error* (see *Epist. ex Pont.* III 3, 70-72: *artibus et nullum crimen inesse tuis. / utque hoc, sic utinam defendere cetera possem! / scis aliud, quod te laeserit, esse, magis*). But even greater are the problems attached to explaining that *error* (see above, *Trist.* II, 207, or, a little earlier, 109: *illa nostra die, qua me malus abstulit error*; también en *Trist.* III 6, 26; IV 1, 23 y 4, 39), elsewhere acknowledged as *culpa* (see *Trist.* IV 1, 24: *et culpam in facto, non scelus esse meo*), *stultitia* and *crimen* (see *Trist.* III 6, 35, cited below), or as *peccatum* (*ibid.* 33 and 34), which—together with the *carmen*, and according to Ovid himself—was the direct, express cause of his exile.

There is no space here for a complete review of the different hypotheses that have been formed in this regard, but researchers coincide in pointing out that the cause must have been directly related with the figure of Augustus himself given that the mere mention of the affair on the part of the poet could reopen old wounds (see *Trist.* II, 209, quoted above); moreover, in the light of *Trist.* II, 103–104 (*cur aliquid vidi? cur noxia lumina feci? / cur imprudenti cognita culpa mihi?*), it would seem to involve his having seen something, which became a serious act of indiscretion regarding the *culpa* of another; later on, in *Trist.* III 6, 25–36, Ovid uses witting ambiguity to explain that indiscretion at greater length, but once more cloaking in thick shade the whole murky business:

idque ita, si nullum scelus est in pectore nostro,
principiumque mei criminis error habet.
nec breve nec tutum, quo sint mea, dicere, casu
lumina funesti conscia facta mali:
mensque reformidat, veluti sua vulnera, tempus
illud, et admonitu fit novus ipse pudor:
et quaecumque adeo possunt afferre pudorem,
illa tegi caeca condita nocte decet.

attributed to it proved to be.

nil igitur referam nisi me peccasse, sed illo
praemia peccato nulla petita mihi,
stultitiamque meum crimen debere vocari,
nomina si facto reddere vera velis.

If this *error* or *crimen* was committed alone or in the company of someone else is a secondary issue, even if Ovid's writings seem to imply that others were caught up in the affair who might have been compromised by its disclosure¹⁴. However, we do not know whether any other possible participant in the matter met the same fate as the poet; indeed, it would seem to have been the case and that Ovid was the chief perpetrator and only victim of the whole sorry episode.

These premises have formed the basis of many hypotheses concerning such diverse matters as the facts allegedly related to the morality of a female member of the imperial family (to be more precise, Julia, daughter of Augustus and Scribonia, or Julia, granddaughter of the emperor and daughter of the same Scribonia and Agrippa¹⁵), or the participation in supposed political plots more or less associated with neo-Pythagorean sects which were opposed to the political system introduced by Augustus and given to all sorts of divinatory practices which had been banned once he came to power¹⁶. Of particular interest is the hypothesis put forward by Aldo Luisi (and Nicoletta Berrino) in various places which is adamant in its proposal that Ovid's error was due to his central and active role in a plot, alongside the two Julias and Germanicus, against the regime introduced by Augustus. The plotters wanted the figure of princes to resemble more its oriental counterpart and would therefore have impeded Livia's furthering her interests in favour of Tiberius—a fact

14 See, for example, *Epist. ex Ponto* I 6, 21-22: *nec breve nec tutum peccati quae sit origo / scribere...*

15 For the former, see Baligan, for the latter, Boissier, Wilkinson or Alexander (see references above). Cf. *Apol. Sid., Carm.* 23, 158-161: *et te carmina per libidinosa / notum, Naso tener, Tomosque missum, / quondam Caesareae nimis puellae / ficto nomine subditum Corinnae?*

16 See, among many others, Reinach, Marin, Carcopino or Cumont, each qualifying or adding more precision to the other.

which would explain why the punishment was not lifted by Augustus's successor either¹⁷.

These hypotheses, together with others which hold less water¹⁸, would demonstrate the degree to which the *Ars amatoria* was merely the pretext which enable the emperor to eliminate someone who, for obscure reasons, was annoying or even dangerous. But the fact that Ovid's exile to Tomi was more a *relegatio* (not an *exilium*¹⁹)—albeit

¹⁷ See, for example, A. Luisi, "Livia Augusta e l'ironia di Ovidio", *Invigilata Lucernis*, 22 (2000), 81-88; A. Luisi, *Il perdono negato. Ovidio e il corrente filoantoniana*, Bari, 2001; A. Luisi – N. F. Berrino, *Culpa Silenda: Le Elegie dell'Error Ovidiano*, Bari, Edipuglia, Quaderni di "Invigilata Lucernis" 17, 2002 (cf. J. A. Richmond's sceptical review in *Bryn Mawr Classical Review* 2003.01.12); A. Luisi, "Gli occhi di Ovidio", *Invigilata Lucernis*, 24 (2002), 111-118; A. Luisi, "Ovidio i suoi *propinqui* e *adfines*", *Invigilata Lucernis*, 25 (2003), 87-120; A. Luisi – N. F. Berrino, *Carmen et error: nel bimillenario dell'esilio di Ovidio*, Bari, Edipuglia, Quaderni di "Invigilata Lucernis" 36, 2008 (cf. Maria Luisa De Seta's review in *BMCR* 2010.07.24). Luisi and Berrino have returned to the same issues this year in *L'ironia di Ovidio verso Livia e Tiberio*, Bari, Edipuglia, Quaderni di "Invigilata Lucernis", 38, 2010.

¹⁸ Such as Ovid's surprising Livia naked in a bath (*Trist.* II, 105 ff.; Boissier, Marin), either during the celebrations in honour of Isis or the Good Goddess (Herrmann), or his coming upon Augustus in a hideous rage after the Varo debacle (Masera, in his edition of *Trist.* II, Turin, 1931), or his attempts to take part in the conspiracy of Fabius Maximus, who sought to win the successory rights for Agrippa Postumus, Augustus's grandson (E. RIPERT, *Ovide, poète de l'amour, des dieux et de l'exil*, Paris, 1921; Zimmermann, Norwood). Recently, Porte has tried to read *Fasti* II, 371-380 in connection with this episode (the passage would allegedly argue Germanicus' cause as successor); see Martin's favourable remarks (cited above).

¹⁹ As Ovid himself acknowledges in *Trist.* II, 125-137, thus leaving the matter settled:

Cuius in euentu poenae clementia tanta est
uenerit ut nostro lenior illa metu.
Vita data est citraque necem tua constitit ira,
o princeps parce uiribus use tuis.
Insuper accedunt te non adimente paternae,
tanquam uita parum muneris esset, opes.
Nec mea decreto damnasti facta senatus
nec mea selecto iudice iussa fuga est;
tristibus inuectus uerbis, –ita principe dignum–
ultus es offensas, ut decet, ipse tuas.
Adde quod edictum, quamuis inmite minaxque,
attamen in poenae nomine lene fuit:
quippe relegatus, non exul dicor in illo
priuaque fortunae sunt tibi uerba meae.

an extremely harsh one—than a genuine civil death is evidence that Ovid's *error* was not of the highest order of gravity; there was no confiscation of the poet's goods, no loss of civil rights or of citizenship, although his works were condemned together with him, removed from libraries and made prohibited reading²⁰. Nevertheless, unlike the works of other writers (such as Cornelius Gallus and Asinius Pollio) sentenced to some sort of *damnatio memoriae* during Augustus' reign, Ovid's have come down to us virtually intact (with the exception of his tragedy *Medea*), including the "dangerous and abominable" *Ars amatoria*—a fact as remarkable as it is surprising.

2.2. "Objective" arguments:

In the same way, the details concerning his banishment that the poet supplies in his poems (his last night in Rome, the point of embarkation, the storm at sea, the route followed, the description of the place and its people, life in Tomi, and so forth) all turn out to bear little relation to the truth but rather to be to exaggerations, distortions or plain falsehoods.

The principal argument adduced (see Bérchez, cited above, *passim*) to support the theory of the fictitiousness of the exile poems is their constant use of rhetorical and literary topics—together with a high density of intertextuality—when recounting the points of greatest tension in Ovid's odyssey. For the proponents of this theory, that diminishes the works' credibility as autobiography, the result being that, once again, and as is the case with *Amores* or *Heroides*, the real "I" would seem to have little to do with the fictional "I". Naturally, the use and abuse of such topics issues in repetitions, imprecisions, incongruencies, contradictions and exaggerations, all of which hamper the modern reader's attempts to "sympathise" fully with the protagonist. This may explain the low literary evaluation which many scholars have accorded the exile works; it seems that no real life pulses beneath the thick and apparently unpolished literary skin which, for example, covers the entire account of the events which took place from the poet's receiving the fateful news while on Elba to his immediate abandonment of Rome; and this despite Wilkinson's view

See also *Trist.* V 11, 9-10 y 15.

20 Cf. *Trist.* II, 8; III 1, 65-66; *Epist. ex Ponto* I 1, 12. For the legal issues surrounding banishment, see A. N. Popescu, "L'aspect juridique de la rélégation du poète Ovide à Tomis", *Studi in onore di Cesare Sanfilippo*, Milan, Univ. di Catania-A. Giuffrè Ed., 1983, vol. III, 547-559.

that the first elegy of *Tristia*, which narrates those events, is “as sincere as anything he wrote”²¹.

Nor does any credence attach to the information supplied about the point of departure to exile (it is not clear whether the poet sailed straight from Ostia or whether he first went overland to embark at Brindisi or, much further north along the Adriatic coast, Arpos or Bario); about the route taken to reach Tomi (a route more appropriate to the Argos or Catullus’ *phasellus* than to a Roman merchant vessel) and the excessive time it took; or about any of the circumstances of the journey such as the storm, which seems to belong to a long epic tradition, some of whose landmark achievements may be found in Ovid’s own works²².

But where critics have been most energetic in denouncing the distance between reality and the Ovidian account of it is, undoubtedly, the depiction of Tomi itself, the site of the *relegatio in insulam* to which the poet was subjected²³. What the poet himself termed *locus horribilis* seems not to have been so whether in terms of climate (according to paleo-climatological studies of the region), geographical location (Tomi is in a zone that had been visited for centuries by first Greek and then Roman traders, and is much further to the south than is suggested by the reference to the Pole Star’s being right above the heads of its inhabitants), landscape (much less inhospitable than the poet would have us believe at *Trist.* III 10, for instance, where he is inspired by Virgil’s account of the Scythian wilderness *Georg.* III 349–366²⁴), buildings (according to the archaeological record), or people (in addition to the indigenous Geticans and, perhaps, other

21 Wilkinson, *Ovid recalled*, cited above, 2005, p. 312.

22 Cf., for example, V. Cristóbal, “Tempestades épicas”, *Cuadernos de Investigación filológica*, 14 (1988), 125-148.

23 Many are the studies devoted—by Rumanian scholars in particular—to the Tomi which Ovid is supposed to have known. Cf., among others, Ch. Favez, “Les Gètes et leur pays vu par Ovide”, *Latomus*, X (1951) 425-432; S. Lambrino, “Tomis, cité gréco-gète, chez Ovide”, *Ovidiana* (cited above), 379-390; E. Lozovan, “Réalités pontiques et nécessités littéraires chez Ovide”, *Atti...* (cited above) II, 355-370; R. Vulpe, “Ovidio nella città dell’esilio”, *Studi Ovidiani*, Roma, Istituto di Studi Romani, 1959, 39-62; I. STOIAN, “Contribution à l’étude des tribus de Tomis”, *Studii Clasice*, III (1961) 175-202; V. Barbu, “Considérations chronologiques basées sur les données fournies par les inventaires funéraires des nécropoles tomitaines”, *Studi Clasice*, III (1961) 203-225; V. Canarache, “L’édifice à mosaïque découvert devant le port de Tomis”, *Studi Clasice*, III (1961) 227-240.

24 See S. Besslich, “Ovids Winter in Tomis. Zu *trist.* III, 10”, *Gymnasium*, 79 (1972), 177-191.

Thracian tribes, there were also, no doubt, Greek traders and Roman civil servants).

Nor should great store be set by Ovid's insistent claims to be unable to speak to anybody except in Getican²⁵, a language he had to learn and even, if we are to take his word, was bold enough to write in; or that his only solace was to be found in the very medicine that had been the cause of his misfortune, namely writing Works that no one in Tomi was able to read. In short, Ovid was quite able to throw himself into his writing during the ten years his exile lasted on the Black Sea until his death. Tomi witnessed the creation of the five books of *Tristia*, the four books of *Epistulae ex Ponto*, the satirical poem *Ibis*, the elegy *Nux* and the *Halieutica*; it is probable too that he continued working on *Fasti* there²⁶. For as he says (*Trist.* V 7, 65-68)²⁷:

Sic tempus traho, me sicque reduco

a contemplatu submoueoque mali.

Carminibus quaero miserarum obliuia rerum:

praemia si studio consequar ista, sat est.

But none of that output would have survived, been known or transmitted to posterity if it had not been sent punctiliously to Rome where friends might see to it that the poet was not consigned to total oblivion. After justifying his last works as the final lament of a torture victim, Ovid cried out in desperation (*Trist.* V 1, 79-80):

cur scribam docui. cur mittam, quaeritis, isto?

uobiscum cupio quolibet esse modo.

25 Cf. *Trist.* III 14, 47-50:

Threicio Scythicoque fere circumsonor ore
et uideor Geticis scribere posse modis.
Crede mihi, timeo ne sint inmixta Latinis
inque meis scriptis Pontica uerba legas.

Or, *Epist. ex Ponto* IV 13, 19-20:

A! pudet et Getico scripsi sermone libellum
structaque sunt nostris barbara uerba modis.

26 Cf. F. Peeters, *Les Fastes d'Ovide. Histoire du texte*, Brussels, 1939.

27 The same idea is developed at greater length in *Trist.* IV 10, 111-132, quoted below.

In short, Tomi was not the sordid and cold place Ovid was at constant pains to depict in his works. It is just that, compared with Rome, any other place would have seemed to him the same.

2.3. Intertextual arguments and arguments *ex silentio*

What is most surprising is the fact that no other writer from antiquity, no other written source, makes any mention of Ovid's *relegatio* until well into the 4th century, when Aurelius Victor, author of the additions to Eutropius, and Jerome do so²⁸. These two were the first to realize, even if tangentially, the importance of the event for literary history—but as the instantiation of a rhetorical *topos*. The silence is deafening in the case of historians Tacitus and Suetonius, both of whom have no qualms about describing the punishments meted out to other writers during the reign of Augustus, Tiberius or any other first-century AD emperor. The indebtedness of later poets to Ovid's exile works is proved only that those poems were known. Thus, in much the same way as Ovid, Seneca lived in limited exile on Corsica, where he must have written, according to the tradition as reported in the *Anthologia Latina*²⁹, some of the many epigrams attributed directly or indirectly to him, most of which are composed, in Ovidian fashion, in elegiac distichs; indeed some of them rate consideration not so much as epigrams but as genuine elegies, the most outstanding case being 24, *Spes fallax, spes dulce malum, spes summa malorum*. But nowhere is there to be found in them any clear evocation of Ovid's banishment or of his exile works. Yet the author of this body of epigrams knew those works, availing himself of them to recreate his own emotions. It is not merely a matter of using *topoi* familiar from exile poetry³⁰, such as the aversion to the land of exile and its insufferable climate expressed epigr. 3:

Barbara praeruptis inclusa est Corsica saxis,

28 For Aurelius Victor, see above; for the author of the additions to Eutropius, cf. *MGH Auct. Ant.* 2, p. 297, chapter 121; for Jerome, see *Chron. Euseb.*, an. 17.

29 Vid. *Anthologia Latina* (Riese) and, specially, H. Bardon, "Les épigrammes de l'Anthologie attribuées à Sénèque le philosophe", *REL*, 1939, 63 ss.; and *Gli epigrammi attribuiti a L. Anneo Seneca*, ed. de C. PRATO, Roma, Ed. dell'Ateneo, 1964. Vid. also L. Herrmann, *Douze poèmes d'exil de Sénèque et 24 poèmes de Pétrone*, Bruselas, 1955.

30 Cf. A. Herfurth, *De Senecae epigrammatis quae feruntur*, Vimariae, 1910, 65 ff.

horrida, desertis undique uasta locis.

Non poma autumnus, segetes non educat aestas

canaque Palladio munere bruma caret.

Imbriferum nullo uer est laetabile fetu

nullaque in infausto nascitur herba solo.

Non panis, non haustus aquae, non ultimus ignis;

hic sola haec duo sunt: exul et exilium³¹.

More than that, the Ovidian model even supplies formal loans. While it is true that, as is only to be expected, most such loans come from better known Works (*Metamorphoses*, *Heroides* or *Ars amatoria*), there are also some from *Tristia* and *Epistulae ex Ponto*, works which Seneca draws on in epigrams with a subject-matter different from exile. But even so, there is a very likely loan in the epigram just quoted: *non poma... segetes non educat aestas* seems to respond to Ovid's *Epist. ex Ponto*. I 3, 51: *non... pomum, non dulces educat herbas*³². Again, "Seneca" calls Corsica *barbara* (3, 1), an adjective Ovid had used for Tomi, for example, at *Trist.* III 11, 7 (*barbara me tellus et inhospita litora Ponti...*); Seneca also uses another adjective, *horrida* (3, 2), which Ovid had applied for the same purposes at *Epist. ex Ponto*, I 3, 84 (*...nulli datus omnibus aeuis / tam procul a patria est horridiorue locus*). The same is the case with *canaque...bruma* (3, 4) and Ovid, *Trist.*, IV 7, 1 (*Bis me sol adiit gelidae post frigora brumae*).

Nevertheless, despite these parallels of form and content, it would be going too far to suppose that "Seneca" consciously carried on the

³¹ One might also recall 2, 5-6, for example: *Corsica terribilis, cum primum incanduit aestas, / saeuior, ostendit cum feras ora Canis*. As a matter of fact, the anti-Corsican matter is in the *Consolatio ad Helviam* 6, 5: *Quid tam nudum inueniri potest, quid tam abruptum undique quam hoc saxum? Quid ad copias respicienti ieiunius? Quid ad homines immansuetius? Quid ad ipsum loci situm horridius? Quid ad caeli naturam intemperantius?* Cf., of course, Ovid, *Epist. ex Ponto* I 3, 47-60. See R. Innocenti Pierini, "Echi delle elegie ovidiane dell'esilio nelle *Consolationes ad Helviam* e *ad Polybium* di Seneca", *SIFC*, 52 (1980), 109-143.

³² Vid. Prato, *ed. cit.*, 9-16 and 111-116.

Ovidian model of exile poetry. That pair of epigrams (2 and 3), allegedly attributable to the exile on Corsica, amount to barely more than a fleeting evocation and have no bearing at all on the creation of the *Ovidius exsul* topic on the basis of a shared experience. Nor do they prove anything about the truth of Ovid's exile; all they show is that his exile works were known at the time the two epigrams were written.

Nor does Pliny's testimony in *Naturalis Historia* XXXII 152 throw any clarifying light on the matter. He writes:

his adiciemus ab Ovidio posita animalia, quae apud neminem alium
reperiuntur, sed fortassis in Ponto nascentia, ubi id volumen
supremis suis temporibus inchoavit.

From these words all that can be deduced is that Pliny was aware of the exile poems and believed that, indeed, Ovid has spent his last years in Pontus; no more importance is attached to this story. Something similar happens in Statius, who, in *Silvas* I 2, 254-255 writes:

hunc ipse Coo plaudente Philitas

Callimachusque senex Vmbroque Propertius antro

Ambissent laudare diem, nec tristis in ipsis

Naso Tomis

But neither do these words allow any hard and fast deduction that Ovid had actually been exiled to Tomi.

Ausonius may also be argued to have been familiar with Ovid's exile works and to have used them in some of his own poems. Thus, the terrible experience in Aus. *Parentalia* IX (Prete) of the uselessness of the passing of time for curing the pain caused by premature widowhood may be related to Trist. IV 6; cf. Ovid's ll. 21-30 (*nec quaesita tamen spatio patientia longo est, / mensque mali sensum nostra recentis habet. / scilicet et veteres fugiunt iuga saepe iuveni, / et domitus freno saepe repugnat equus. / Tristior est etiam praesens aerumna priore: / ut sit enim sibi par, crevit et aucta mora est. / Nec tam nota mihi, quam sunt, mala nostra fuerunt; / nunc magis hoc, quo sunt cognitiora, grauant. / Est quoque non nihilum uires adferre recentes / nec praeconsumptum temporis esse malis*), 37-38

(*Nos quoque, quae ferimus, tulimus patientius ante, / quae, mala sunt longa multiplicata die*) and 43-44 (*Corpore sed mens est aegro magis aegra malique / in circumspectu stat sine fine sui*) with:

nec licet obductum senio sopire dolorem:

semper crudescit nam mihi poena recens.

Admittunt alii solacia temporis aegri:

haec grauiora facit uulnera longa dies.

(ll. 9-12)

From this point in time, distant now from the original events, it is no longer unusual to find formal and thematic loans from *Tristia* or *Epistulae ex Ponto*, or the conviction that Ovid had been an exile. To add more examples, Sidonius Apollinaris³³ mentions in passing events relating to the causes of the penalty to which the great poet of love was sentenced, while Boethius opens his *Consolatio Philosophiae* with an elegy comprising a virtual *centón*, or patchwork, of Ovidian motifs³⁴:

Carmina qui quondam studio florente peregi

flebilis heu maestos cogor inire modos.

Ecce mihi lacerae dictant scribenda Camenae,

et ueris elegi fletibus ora rigant.

Has saltem nullus potuit peruincere terror,

ne nostrum comites prosequerentur iter.

Gloria felicitis olim uiridisque iuuentae

33 *Carm.* 23 (*Ad Consentium*), ed. *MGH, Auct. Ant.* 8.

34 See W. Stroh, "Tröstende Musen: Zur literarhistorischen Stellung und Bedeutung von Ovids Exilgedichten", *ANRW*, II 31.4, 1981, 2638-2684 (especially pp. 2670-2671); L. Alfonsi, "De Boethio elegiarum auctore", *AIV*, 102 (1942-1943), 723-727.

solantur maestae nunc mea fata senis...³⁵

Antecedents of these lines are to be found in *Trist.* V 1, 5–8 (for the first distich); *Am.* II 1, 38 or *Pont.* III 3, 29 (for l. 3); *Am.* III 9, 4 (for l. 4); *Trist.* IV 1, 19–22 and 10, 119 (for the third distich), and so on.

Yet the value of all this testimony as proof of Ovid's banishment is, evidently, scant indeed.

3. Conclusions

From this three-fold group of arguments some conclusions, best described as paradoxical, may be drawn. In my opinion, the so-called "objective" arguments, which I treated second, have no force as evidence since they only show—with great efficacy, it is true—that, even if Ovid had been exiled and relegated to Tomi, he manipulated the real facts through his exaggerations, silences and downright lies. None of the arguments proves that he was not exiled or that he was never in Tomi; they only show that all that "rhetorical"—for want of a better term—activity was carried out because it suited his literary purposes and the intentions attributed to his exile poems. True enough, those poems would have been far from seeking a faithful depiction of reality with a view to informing his interlocutors about the "objective" facts surrounding his exile; their aim would rather have been to move his family, relatives and acquaintances, and the Roman public at large so that they would intercede for him and win some show of mercy from the emperor. What did it matter, then, if he exaggerated or lied? The elegiac genre does not aspire to the same truth standards as historiography, nor was Ovid a choreographer. Nor, in my opinion, are other arguments, such as the dubious nature of the *error*, *culpa*, *stultitia* or *peccatum* committed by the poet against the majesty of Augustus or the presence of *e loci similes* in the exile works of later writers, convincing as proof.

Paradoxically, other arguments, considered not to be "objective" (however much they may be to one degree, or in one way or another) and set out in first and third place above, may have more power to disprove or at least cast doubt upon the truth of Ovid's exile. It is, for instance, surprising that the *Ars amatoria* survived the sentence which, it seems, was imposed on Ovid's literary corpus—albeit that work had been one of the causes of his punishment. Also,

³⁵ Boeth., *Carm.* 1, 1-8.

despite being an argument *ex silentio*, considerable probatory force attaches to the puzzling absence of an reference to the poet's exile in the writings of Tacitus and Suetonius (or in any other Greek or Latin source which deals with that time), while the testimony of neither Pliny nor Statius helps to clear away the doubts that cloud the whole episode.

All we are left with, then, are doubts; there are no certainties in one direction or the other. It may well be wisest to abandon the subject at this point, for all that the simple registering of the doubt forces one to ask other questions such as, why would Ovid want to make up his exile? or, by what means was the poet able to create and sustain the fiction? or, what significance would these works then have for the history of Latin literature as a whole? There are also some scholars who have tried to gain a reputation (naturally, those who choose to deny the truth of the exile) by stating that Ovid was the only Roman writer able to feign and create from fiction a new poetic genre, or that *Tristia* and *Epistulae ex Ponto* become much more interesting once considered as purely fictional works rather than autobiographical testimony. But these are issues whose consideration must await another occasion.

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