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Ovid's Exile and Death in an Elegy by Angelo Poliziano

Abstract: Angelo Poliziano, author of a large comment on the Fasti as well as on the Ovidian Sappho's epistle to Phaon, wrote also a small poem of twenty distichs entitled De Ovidii exilio et morte. This poem represented the official inaugural lecture for what was probably his last public course of lessons in 1493, the year before his death. The aim of this research is the philological, linguistic and stylistic examination of this less known work, which proves to be very interesting also because of the author's use of expressions and phrases referable to Ovid himself.

Keywords: Ovid, Angelo Poliziano, exile and death

In 1480, after the reconciliation with the Medicis and the return to Florence, Angelo Poliziano obtained the chair of Greek and Latin eloquence at the Florentine Studium and until his death (29 September 1494) he gave a long series of academic courses on various ancient authors introduced by official inaugural lectures related to the topic he wanted to develop during the course of the year.

Isidoro Del Lungo had the merit of reconstructing, at least in part, the single topics dealt with by Poliziano during his intense didactic activity¹. More than a century later, the research on Poliziano as a philologist could make reference to Armando Verde's basic volumes², which, however, concern the general structure of the Florentine

¹ *Prose volgari inedite e poesie latine e greche edite e inedite di Angelo Ambrogini Poliziano*, Firenze 1867 (reprint Hildesheim 1976). Many years later Del Lungo himself published also Poliziano's *Sylve: Le Selve e la Strega*. Prolusioni nello Studio fiorentino (1482-1492), Firenze, 1925. The recent edition edited by F. Bausi (Firenze, 1996) is definitely more scientific.

² *Lo Studio fiorentino 1473-1503. Ricerche e documenti*, Firenze-Pistoia, 1973-1985.

Studium rather than the single courses held by Poliziano. However, despite this specific research on Poliziano's comments on the texts of ancient authors, it is not always easy to trace back exactly his activity in this field during the fourteen years at the Florentine Studium.

After Poliziano's death, his library was subject to many vicissitudes and a lot of books were dispersed, essentially because of the end of the seigniorship of the Medicis (Lorenzo died in 1492) driven away from Florence with the descent of Charles VIII in 1494. Only the care of his most reliable friends and pupils permitted to save what had eluded the confiscation of the new regime³, recovering in particular the papers of Poliziano that converged then in the fundamental Aldine edition of the works published in Venice in 1498.

In the manuscript *Laurent. 90 sup.* 37, belonged to Iacopo Modesti da Prato (1463-1530), Del Lungo found one of Poliziano's pupils, a list of titles and *incipit* of fifty-two Latin poems (ff. 108r-109r) that Modesti transcribed from another codex he owned: the list is very important because twelve of these works don't appear in the Aldine anthology⁴. One of these writings, which revisits Ovid's exile and death, probably would have been lost if Petrus Crinitus⁵, the closest pupil of Poliziano, hadn't taken the initiative to publish this work as a conclusion of the entry related to Ovid in his *De poetis Latinis*, after dealing with the question of the exile and the death of the Poet. In all likelihood Crinitus had found these poems among the papers in the house of his Master; as already said, the poem wasn't for some reasons included in the Aldine anthology, but it cannot be ruled out that it was found by Crinitus after the publication of that edition. We can also assume that Crinitus, after publishing his *De poetis*, destroyed the original he owned according to a broadly settled humanistic practice.

³ His pupil Petrus Crinitus complains about the destruction of the letters to Alessandro Sarti: cf. V. Branca, *Angelo Poliziano e l'umanesimo della parola* (Torino, 1983), pp. 251-258.

⁴ For these editorial questions, cf. A. Perosa *Studi sulla tradizione delle poesie latine del Poliziano*, "Studi in onore di Ugo Enrico Paoli", Firenze 1956, pp. 539-562 and Id. *Contributi e proposte per la pubblicazione delle opere latine del Poliziano*, "Il Poliziano e il suo tempo". IV Convegno di studi sul Rinascimento, Firenze, 1957, pp. 89-100.

⁵ The *De poetis*, published for the first time in Florence in 1505 (*per Phil. Iuntam*), was repeatedly published over the XVI century. For Petrus Crinitus and his works see the contribution of L. Piacente for the same conference: *Ovidio agli albori della storiografia letteraria latina*.

During the last years of his life Poliziano showed a high interest in Ovid: in fact his comment on Sappho's epistle to Phaon dates back to 1481⁶, whereas the course dedicated to the *Fasti*⁷ dates back to the following year. In 1493 Poliziano devoted himself particularly to Ovid, especially to his exile works, collecting the *Tristia*, the *Amores* and the *Epistulae ex Ponto*, as one can deduce from one of the Bodleian manuscripts in Oxford (*Inc. Auct. P.11.2*)⁸.

In the same or in the following year, presumably short time before his death, Poliziano showed his students Ovid's elegies, introduced by the elegy XIII in the Del Lungo edition⁹.

It is important to point out that Crinitus quotes these poems underlining that many ancient and recent writers deplored Ovid's cruel relegation to Tomis followed by a lonely death; Crinitus claims that, among all these writers, his master Poliziano was the most critical: *sed eleganter in primis et copiose (ut ego existimo) Ang. Politianus id fecit his versibus*¹⁰. Then Crinitus quotes the poem without any title¹¹, whereas Del Lungo, as he used doing with all the works he published, adds both an alleged title (*De Ovidii exilio et morte*)¹² and informations about the circumstances when it was

⁶ Cf. A. Poliziano *Commento inedito all'epistola ovidiana di Saffo a Faone*, edited by E. Lazzeri (Firenze, 1971).

⁷ The recently published text of this comment (*Commento inedito ai Fasti di Ovidio*, edited by F. Lo Monaco, Firenze, 1991) is a rich collection of materials, which Poliziano himself didn't probably consider ready to be printed: cf. V. Branca *Poliziano Angelo Poliziano e l'umanesimo della parola* (Torino 1983), pp. 80-81.

⁸ Cf. Verde *Lo Studio* cit., IV, 3, Firenze, 1985, p. 1092.

⁹ *Prose volgari* cit., 255-256. For the convenience of the reader, the text of the twenty distichs object of the research and a poetical translation into Italian are located in the appendix.

¹⁰ A similar appreciation of the refinement of these verses may be found also in F.O. Mencke, *Historia vitae et in literas meritorum Angeli Politiani ortu Ambrogini, Italarum saec. XV nobilissimi, philosophiae jurisprudentiae, grammatices et omnis doctrinae elegantioris instauratoris felicissimi, atque omni laude maioris* (Lipsiae, 1736).

¹¹ Note that Modesti, at f. 109r of *Laurent. 90 sup.* 37, reported this poem with its *incipit* and with the title *de vita Ovidii*, rather different from its content which deals only with the Poet's exile life and death.

¹² Del Lungo probably retrieves this title from the eighteenth-century anthology *Carmina illustrium poetarum Italarum*, VII, Florentiae (Typis Regiae Celsitudinis, apud Joannem Cajetanum Tartinium et Sanctem Franchium) 1720, pp. 382-383 by an anonymous editor. This anthology is attributed to Giovanni Gaetano Bottari in the *Dizionario di opere anonime e pseudonime di scrittori*

composed - in this case the inaugural lecture for an academic course (*In principio Studii*) - and a possible date (MXCIII).

So, to understand the structure of the text of this poem we have to refer to an indirect printed tradition, the one of the *editio princeps* of Crinitus' *De poetis Latinis* and the one of the following reprints,¹³ a completely reliable source as presumably very close to the originals of the Poet. However, if it is true that Humanists had no hesitation about intervening on texts of others, even more so if published posthumously, the deep affection of the pupil toward his Master restrained Crinitus from intervening on a text which showed a refined formal structuring. Moreover, Ovid's poem didn't allow any political speculations unlike some letters which, for similar reasons, were revised by the editors of the Aldine edition of 1498.

The elegy on Ovid's exile and death is composed of twenty well-made distichs, from which emerges Poliziano's great culture and, in particular, his deep knowledge of Ovidian and Latin poetry in general. In fact the poem is not retrieved through a scholastic centenary practise but is revised and remoulded to emphasize the Author's strongly sympathy for the sad situation of the exiled Poet¹⁴.

First of all, two short remarks on the text: at verse 27, the transmitted and refined *et sylva feraeque* is trivialized in the above mentioned¹⁵ eighteenth-century anthology with an emphatic *silvaeque feraeque*, thus creating a too much refined polysyndetic epiphore, a rhetorical figure frequently used with the enclitic *-que*¹⁶. Del Lungo reproduces this lection, but it may be useful to take into consideration other two Ovidian elements where the Poet wisely the alternation singular/plural (*sylva/ferae*) which is appreciated and so reused by Poliziano: *Fast.* 2,216 *silvaeque montanas occulere apta feras* e *Ars* 2,471 *silva feras, volucres aer accepit habendas*.

italiani o come che sia aventi relazione all'Italia, work of Gaetano Melzi, I, A-G, Milano, with the press of Luigi di Giacomo Pirola, where on page 177 you can read: "Devesi questa raccolta a mons^e. Bottari, di cui è la prefazione".

¹³ See note 5.

¹⁴ This elegy has been object of a careful and accurate examination by Rita Degl'Innocenti Pierini (*Il Poliziano e Ovidio esule. Per l'esegesi dell'elegia De Ovidii exilio et morte*, "St. Uman. Piceni" 10,1990, 215-227 = "Resp. Litt." 16, 1990). I refer myself to this examination for an accurate exegesis of the text with a broad list of classical sources.

¹⁵ See note 12.

¹⁶ The lection *et sylva feraeque* may be found in the volume IV of Ovid's *Opera Omnia* edited by a P. Burmann (Amstelodami, 1794), p. 233.

An unfortunate (and also not declared) intervention of Del Lungo may be found at the v. 35, where the noun *carmine* is unexpectedly replaced by *nomine*¹⁷: it is not only a name engraved on Ovid's gravestone but rather a whole verse (36) which identifies the departed. To tell the truth, here Poliziano takes the verse 2,326 *signant quoque carmine saxum* of *Met.* as a model, although he doesn't drift away from it.

The poem is "Ovidian". To avoid the danger of completing the short elegy within the limits of a refined exercise, with the term "Ovidian" we refer to a parameter which indicates a fine expressive sensitivity where Poliziano's noble feeling and living the classical word finds achievement. So the Ovidian lection is really too evident here: its elegiac genre, its structure, its modules and even its syntagmas; anyway the most typical element of Poliziano's style is the core concept expressed in this poem, *i.e.* the deep value of poetry as a factor of civilization.

Before Ovid's death in a remote area far from Rome, an incredulous astonishment takes shape in the contrast between civilization and barbarism and on such contrast Poliziano plans and develops an event where there is a reversal of values: "civilization" slides to barbarism and incivility because of insensitivity; "barbarousness" rises to civility because it has understood the message of poetry.

The poem, which is the result of a long meditation, starts hardly with the initial monosyllable (*Et*) which verbalizes the feelings with respect to a definitive reality (*iacet*): see *hic ego qui iaceo ... in Trist.* 3,3,73, cause for regret which covers four verses through an insisted and varied iteration of syntagmas, also differently positioned. The Roman Poet (*vates Romanus*) who towers above the second hemistich of the first verse becomes object in the *incipit* of the pentameter where is stifled by *barbara terra tegit*, which stands powerful in the second hemistich with alliterating clause that, in its turn, in the *incipit* of the following verse, unloads all its power on *vatem teneros qui lusit amores* (*hic ego qui iaceo tenerorum lusor amorum in Trist.* 3,3,73; *Ille ego qui fuerim tenerorum lusor amorum, Ibid.* 4,10,1) which, even in contrast with *terra tegit*, loses any grace (even sonorous) of definition of the *vates*, even because of the following presence of *barbara* (perfect dactylic *incipit*) that qualifies *terra* and at the same

¹⁷ The same lection, retrieved in the Del Lungo edition, may be found in the text with Italian translation by Lucia Gualdo Rosa in *Poeti Latini del Quattrocento* edited by F. Arnaldi, L. Gualdo Rosa, L. Monti Sabia (Milano-Napoli, 1964), pp. 1044-1047.

time opens on a desolate and inhospitable landscape: *quam gelidis alluit Ister aquis* (*Gelido ... ad Histro in Pont. 2,4,1; Et coit adstrictis barbarus Hister aquis? Ibid. 3,3,26; barbarus Hister, Ibid. 4,2,28*). The opposition between grace and desolation is symmetrically structured with the distinctive adjectives (*teneros / gelidis*) both trisyllabic and in the same position within the verse.

The bitter resentment of the poet is present in the apostrophe to Rome, which is implicated to explain the reasons for such inhumane behaviour (*immitis*) whose ignobility (*nec te, Roma, pudet*: the idea of the *pudor* is categorically deleted by the opening *nec*) doesn't take care of and which shows *pectora ... barbariora* (the pentasyllable which qualifies *pectora* extends the pentameter rhythm, intensifying the negative connotations implied by the comparative degree adjective); that is a higher pitilessness and incivility than the barbarians themselves (*ipsis...Getis*) towards *tanto alumno*. The position of the vocative *Roma*, in clear contrast with the central *immitis*, indirectly reminds a really different function of Rome, the one of *magistra*, clearly disregarded: further cause for blame!

There is no answer. Poliziano evokes the Muses in his presence: they haven't certainly abandoned the poet in that desolate vastity (*Scythicis in finibus*), where the poet lived in an incomparable seclusion.

An unquiet rhythm permeates the verses (there are continuous anaphoras: *ecquis ... ecquis* in distich *incipit* or *aut qui* in *incipit* or with the repetition of the module within the same verse), following the anxious torment of the questions whose answer is unique: nobody. *Ullus erat* in clause is definitive, rules out all possibilities and is retrieved afterwards (v. 15) in *incipit* with a pronoun change in an anaphora which absolutizes also rhythmically the negativeness.

Ovid stands out in the broad scenery: *aegro* in clause defines a condition of physical and moral prostration without remedy.

Within four distichs (vv. 7-14) no less than seven verses identify functions or human gestures which could relieve moral uneasiness (*qui demeret taedia morbi / qui falleret diem dulciloquo ore / qui pius legeret summam animam*) or also physical infirmity (*qui imponeret lecto frigidulos artus / qui tentaret tempora salientis venae / qui daret fomenta*) or even make the pitiful last gesture of closing the eyes: (*qui conderet oculos media iam morte natantes*).

The sequence, (*ecquis / aut qui*) the positive action verbs which indicate disregarded actions to relieve grief *deremet / falleret / imponeret / legeret / daret / conderet*, the syntagmas (*taedia morbi / dulciloquo ore / summam animam / properata manu / oculos iam*

media morte natantes) paint the picture using the disquieting colours of loneliness and absence. A gloomy disappointment originates from it (*nullus erat, nullus*) which emphasizes a behaviour guilty of unprecedented cruelty (*tu dura / Martia Roma*), which imposes indifference (*procul ... tenes / procul*) even on the closest feelings (*veteres sodales / coniux parvique nepotes / nata*).

Where it is not possible to find the smallest sign of sharing humanity, anyway the author identifies (*scilicet* in anaphora) a presence of support (*solamina*) and the desert becomes populated and animated with Bessi, Coralli, Getae, Sarmatae, peoples which the lexicon makes visually distant and different because of their physical look (*immanes Bessi flavique Coralli / pelliti...Getae / pruinoso crine*) or primitive roughness (*saxea corda / horribili vultu / rigidam frontem*).

The image in vv. 23-24 (*Sarmata cui ... sonant*) boasts a marked plastic vigour: horseman and horse are portrayed with studied ambiguity as they were an organic whole, with the man who takes the same harsh and wild characteristics as the animal (*rigidam frontem, demisso in lumina ... pruinoso ... crine, mota ... tempora*; there is also a sonorous evocative word, *sonant*, the rumbling produced on the temples and on the forehead by the frozen manes during the impetuous running). A very strong image is the reference to the typical tradition of the Sarmatae warriors of feeding on the blood of their horses during fights (*epoto equo*: the dramatic effect of the hyperbolizing metonymy is undoubted), which already Martial alludes to (*spect.* 3,4). Everything in this portrayal contributes to create a sombre, wild and primitive atmosphere, which involves equally men, animals and natural environment: a much more painful, almost oxymoric image is the contrast with the feeling of deep *pietas* that this *barbaries*, so brutal and frightening from the point of view of outward appearance, has towards the death of the Poet.

In fact these rough native peoples (*sed tamen* refers to what comes before and precedes the reversal) have caught a message of "civility" in the presence of that lonely and grief-stricken man: his poetry must have certainly touched the *saxea corda* if even that people showed a moved sympathy when he died (*extinctum et*: insisted module, the verb *fleo* is repeated and varied). Any harshness and indifference disappear: *saxea corda* and the negative connotation syntagmas of the previous image are confirmed by the persistence of *fleo* (*flevire* [v. 25] – *flebant* [v. 27] – *flesse* [v. 28]). The lament becomes unanimous, with the participation of an inhospitable nature (see also *pruinoso crine*, v. 24) which becomes emotional and takes sweet forms and

aspects (*et montes flebant et silva feraeque*); even the *Ister* with its frozen waters becomes sweet: *gelidis aquis* (v. 4) *flesse in mediis aquis* (*gelidis* has become the crying murmuring, almost a funeral lamentation!). Human warmth spreads with the tepid tears of the Muses (*Nereidum lachrymis intepuissse*) and “warms” the whole scene (*pigro concretum frigore Pontum*).

The myth is created (*dicitur / ferunt*), anyway the civilization of those barbarians is evident if compared to the gesture and to the rudely cruel behaviour of the “civil” Rome, which, on the contrary, is apathetic. It’s the receipt of the high message of poetry which transforms the lands where there is now a higher presence (*volucres / paphia mater* are evidence of serene peace!) and people celebrates a mortuary rite of “almost” pacification (the *volucres* light the fire: *arsuroque faces supposuere rogo*) with the cremation of the body (*absumpsit rapidae violentia flammae*) and the layout of the remains (*reliquias tecto composuere cado*); with the sanction of poet’s immortality through the epigraph engraved on his gravestone (*Qui iacet hic teneri doctor amoris erat*), the place becomes “sacred”, with Venus who sprinkles him with ambrosia (*sancto ... liquore / Irrorat nivea terque quaterque manu*) and with the singing of the Muses, which men haven’t any possibilities of retrieving (*carmina, ... nostro non referenda sono*). They were present because Poliziano evoked them looking for answers, but they also helped him with their afflatus in “humanistically” developing this little gem of poetry, where the easiness of Ovid’s verses combines wonderfully with the poetical images which spring from Poliziano’s high sensitivity.

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