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## **Never-ending Journey**

*Abstract: Ovid's journey to Tomi may be reconstructed in a realia paradigm; nevertheless, the geographical voyage was accomplished as a spiritual translation, which led to an internal change, accomplished by the birth of a tragic hero: the Exiled, the Secluded, the Non-Accepted one to the end of his life and afterwards, as his grave remained far away from the graves of his ancestors. Ovid's journey was without end because it was without return. He is an Odysseus that travels estranging from home, whose remembrance remained as well in the land that was the host of his exile and, in time, entered the legend.*

*Keywords: Ovidius; error; exile; Odysseus; Tomi; return.*

Ovid's journey to Tomi was a real, geographical journey, imposed by the emperor's decree. This journey may be reconstructed from the poems Ovid wrote while sailing to Tomi and while being in exile at Tomi, but alongside there was a spiritual journey, which led to an internal change, accomplished by the birth of a tragic hero: the Exiled, the Secluded, the Non-Accepted one to the end of his life and afterwards, as his grave remained far away from the graves of his ancestors.

These levels are detectable from the poet's standpoint; a different perspective belongs to the local population, frequently referred to by the poet, that used to speak about the rough weather and the barbarian (though hospitable) people. The memory of the exiled poet survived his death, entering the legend and becoming a manifold reality of the popular tales. This sort of local memory continued till nowadays, being cultivated by modern poets that use to write odes to Ovid or, at least, to build poetic themes around this character.

In 8 AD Ovid was banished by the emperor Augustus to Tomi; the reasons of his exile are said to be notorious (*Tristia* IV 10, 99),

but there are only two certainties: *carmen* and *error*. The emperor considered Ovid's mistake as a personal offence (*Tristia* II, 133 sq.) and was bitterly irritated, as it reveals the place he had chosen for the exile: Tomi was a fortress where the Hellenic structures were only superficial, lying at the extreme limit of the Roman empire, that was frequently attacked by the local barbarian tribes. The poems Ovid wrote there, *Tristia* and *Ex Ponto*, are sated with complaints about the dangers he lived there, about the harshness of the climate and mostly about the spiritual and cultural isolation of the settlement. On the other hand, the kind of punishment Augustus had chosen for him, id est *relegatio* during the lifetime, was the gentlest sort of exile that allowed the preservation of the civil rights and estate. Despite the repeated appeals to Augustus' clemency, Ovid spent the last years of his life in Tomi and he died there; the precise date of his death is unknown, as unknown is the place where he was buried. Nevertheless, Tomi, the humble *polichnion* of the Augustan epoch, was to become one among the *pulcherrimae urbes* that Pliny the Elder specified on the shore of ancient Dobrudja.

The name of the place where he was exiled is known in several phonetic and morphological forms, probably generated by Greek and Latin interpretations of the local name. Greek *Tómoi*, *Tómis*, *Tómai* (*Tomeús*, *Tomítes*), Latin *Tomis*, *-is*, feminine singular; *Tomī* (*-oe*), *-ōrum*, masculine plural (*Tomītae*; *Tomītānus*; *Tomis*, *-idis*). The codices of Ovid's poems attest the *Tomis* form (e.g. *Pont. IV*, 14, 59: *tam mihi cara Tomis, patria quae sede fugatis/ tempus ad hoc nobis hospita fida manet*), but it is actually impossible to distinguish between *Tomi* and *Tomis*, as the final syllables are equally long or potentially long; the correlated ethnonym Ovid used is *Tomītae*, e.g. *Pont. I*, 2, 77 ... *in qua sint positi regione Tomitae*; *Tr. IV*, 10, 97-8: *cum maris Euxini positos ad laeua Tomitas / quaerere me laesi principis ira iubet*. The adjective is *Tomitanus* (e.g. *Pont. III*, 4, 2: *Tomitana... urbe*; *Pont. III*, 8, 2 *Tomitanus... ager*). He explicitly derives the toponym from the Greek verb *témno*, as he tells the story of *fugiens Medea* that killed her brother Absyrtus: *inde Tomis dictus locus hic, quia fertur in illo / membra soror fratris consecuisse sui* (*Tr. III*, 9, 33-34) ["so was this place called Tomis because here, they say, the sister cut to pieces her brother's body"].

Just as a piece from an imaginary cabinet of curiosities is to be mentioned a text that belongs to the Romanian culture of the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. In 1911-1912, a school-pupil from Blaj offered the

Romanian Academy an autograph manuscript, written in Cyrillic characters, bearing the date “1804”, that included the translation of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* accomplished by Vasile Aaron (*Alesea istorii din Cartea Mutărilor a lui Ovide Naso, de pe limba latinească pe rumînie întoarse*, published for the first time in *Analele Acad. Rom. I, Partea administrativă și dezbaterile*, tom XXXIV, 1911-1912, 17), preceded by a short biography of the poet that remained inedited until 1977: it is the first Romanian biography of Ovid that has mostly a documentary value. Besides the memorable titles of the poetic works (*Cartea Mutărilor, Cărțile ceale triste, Din Pont*), the pages of Vasile Aaron deal with the problem of the ancient toponym *Tomus* (*sic*: “...trimis la izgonire în Sțitia, într-o cetate barbară ce să chema Tomus, la țărurile Dunării, care almintrilea să chema și Ister”). The geographic coordinates are totally different from the ones generally accepted: the modern Timișoara, in Western Romania. The Romanian text is full of savour:

Unde ar fi locul acela Tomus în care au fost Ovidie în izgonire? [...] această cetate au fost acolo unde-i acuma Temișoara; din Tomus ungerii făcînd Temeș și adăugînd cuvîntul *vár*, care atîta însemnează cît cetate, ca și cum ai zice cetatea Temeș sau Tomus. Apoi rumîinii pe *v* mutîndu-l în *o* zic *Temișoara*, precum *Ujvár* Uioara, *Földvár* Feldioara. [...] Zic unii împotriva: De la Temișoara pînă unde intră Dunărea în Pontul Euxin sînt 105 mile nemțești, și Ovidiu zice că au văzut acest Pont înghețat, ba au și umblat pe ghiață: *Vidimus ingenti concretum frigore Pontum /Nec uidisse sat est, durum calcauimus aequor*. Ovidie prin Pont înțalege Dunărea, căci firește cine bine știe cumcă Pontul sau Marea Neagră nice odată nu îngheață, sau tocma de au și înghețat (*sic*), aceia au trebuit să vadă Ovidie atuncea cînd au trecut pe acolo de au venit la Tomus. [...] fără poame, vin, totdeauna iarnă: punînd Bănatul lîngă Italia, de unde era Ovide, lesne putea zice că în Bănatul Temeșvarului iaste tot iarnă și nu sînt poame, vin etc. [...] Acolo au fost marele acest om, de a cărui versuri să miră toată lumea cea învățată, batăr că foarte ușor și fără de nice o greutate au scris, și ce a scris odată n-au avut grije să mai mute sau să întogmească. O greșală într-însul găsesc mulți, adecă, cumcă ar fi avut prea mare minte, care greșală puțîni sînt care să o aibă.

The journey did not begin in Rome, but in the island of Ilva (today’s Elba), where Ovid was spending some time together with his friend Maximus Cotta; when the emperor imposed him to leave for Tomi, he hardly had time to go to Rome to prepare his depart. The date of the emperor’s decree is uncertain, despite the details we

are offered in the nine books of his exile letters (five books of *Tristia*, four books of *Ex Ponto*). We may suppose that he arrived at Tomi during the year 9 AD, which places the decree in the autumn of the previous year. This assumption is supported by the relative chronology of the poems included in *Tristia*: Ovid spent his first anniversary (Tr. III, 13) at Tomi by March 20, 10 AD, so that, implicitly, he arrived there after March 20 of the previous year. He left Italy from Brundisium (nowadays Brindisi); the departure was in great hurry, and painful because of the wintertime; the Boreus wind was pushing him back to Italy that was for him the beloved but now forbidden land.

*quod nisi mutatas emiserit Aeolus auras, / in loca iam nobis non  
adeunda ferar. / nam procul Illyriis laeua de parte relictis /  
interdicta mihi cernitur Italia. / desinat in uetitas quaeso  
contendere terras, / et mecum magno pareat aura deo.* (Tr. I, 4,  
17-22) [„and unless Aeolus changes the winds he sends forth, I  
shall be driven to a region that I must not now approach, for  
Illyria’s shores are far behind on the left and forbidden Italy is  
beginning to appear. I pray the wind may cease its striving towards  
a forbidden land and may unite with me in obedience to the mighty  
god.”]

Passing by the island of Odysseus (wherever Ithaca was located), he enters Corinth through the western gulf, where he allowed himself a stopover, probably for a couple of weeks. After that he passed on foot the Isthmus and he embarked again at Cenchreae (today’s Kénkri), in the Saronic Gulf, on another ship. The name of this new ship seems to him a good omen and he poetically exploits it: Minerva – but it was more probable Athena, as it must have been a Greek ship. The journey of Ovid is placed now under the sign of this goddess, as he emphasizes the similarity between himself and the protégé of Athena, Odysseus. The similarity is revealed by the poet but, nevertheless, there is an inverted Odyssey, where the hero is going always far away from home and his wife. Several other passages highlight the resemblance between Ovid and Odysseus, such as Tr. I, 5, 60 *sqq.*, or between his wife and Penelope (*e.g.* Tr. V, 6; V, 14, 35 *sqq.*)

He was already entering the Helespont (nowadays Dardanelles) when, from unknown reasons, he changes plans going to Imbros and afterwards to Samotrake. From there he sends his ship with the entire luggage to Tomi, and he goes by land to Tempyra, in Tracia, near the place where Hebrus (nowadays Marita) enters the sea. A journey on land was anyhow much too dangerous, so that he

decided to stay for a while in a Greek town, maybe Odessus (nowadays Varna), waiting for the ship Minerva – as some scholars consider that he arrived in Tomi by this ship; some other scholars consider on the other hand that he arrived there by land.

The journey could not last for one whole year, nor could the stay in Corinth be too long, as the emperor ordered the poet to reach Tomi as soon as possible. Only a severe command could explain the hurried depart from Italy, during a season improper for sailing. But we must admit that he travelled slowly enough to get news from Rome during the journey and to write eleven elegies: even before reaching Tomi he had sent to Rome the first book of *Tristia*.

Up to a certain point, the poems of the exile (*Tristia, Ex Ponto*) may be considered a travel diary. The first book includes the actual travel, although not in a continuous and complete manner. The other books offer information about a land (that he just discovers) and this information is given to his friends that know absolutely nothing about it. Considering the letters this way, the exaggerations are quite understandable, such as the seven branches of the Danube (*Tristia* II, 189): this overrate is unwarranted (though not without some literary testimonies in the ancient texts), but it fits the tenor of the whole writing and, generally speaking, the normal exaggerations of travel notes. The crowd of miraculous elements – or, at least, unusual elements – was supposed to catch attention of people that were obviously ignorant about this Pontic land, which Ovid himself considered an arctic land, although Constanta is placed approximate on the same latitude as Florence: *Proxima sideribus tellus Erymanthidos ursae / me tenet, adstricto terra perusta gelu* (III, 4, 47-8) [“a land next the stars of the Erymanthian bear holds me, a region shrivelled with stiffening cold”].

The unusual elements seem to have a permanent negative aura and are depicted in dark colours, as the aim of the poet is not at all the description of an exotic land but to seek for compassion and forgiveness. The plea for returning home is sustained by his constant claim of being not guilty or, at least, by being guilty without any criminal intention. This is why the whole travel diary is completely changed into a story on the theme “exile”: significantly, his “diary” lacks any reminiscence about the stay in Corinth that was, most likely, agreeable.

That his plea was unsuccessful does not mean it was unjustified or badly written; its lack of efficiency only reveals a hostile attitude toward the poet that deeply displeased the emperor. On the other hand, the rehabilitation trial, held about forty years ago in Sulmo,

had no juridical value and revealed, on the contrary, a totally favourable attitude toward the poet (December 10, 1967, by the tenth anniversary of the bimillennial celebration of his birth; among the judges was Prof. Nicolae Lascu).

Besides the geographical and historical frame, the letters from the exile are poetic books of becoming. Although we cannot believe Ovid whenever he emphasizes that the events of the journey are immediately converted into poetry, it is obvious that the internal changes and becoming may be detected, both in the human and artistic level. His journey is an initiating act where, we must admit, the intention is absent: probably the poet is not even aware of it. From this point of view, his initiation is a counterpart of the mysterious *error* that led to his relegation. He is initiated to a certain segment of world and, more important, to a stage of his own life he never thought about, a place where he arrived after a journey that was both painful and full of ordeal and, finally, where from he could never return to the initial stage. He takes a lesson of suffering that is imposed by the reality and is accomplished in poetry.

The tempest of the sea is a simple reality of sailing in wintertime; but in his poetry there are little images that may be considered real description of a sea tempest. Most of them are growing heavier by artistic meanings and are gradually settling down – as the ship which, being no more the actual instrument of travel, becomes subject of meditation. There are only a few instances where the ship is described as a real vehicle: *quaeque modo Euboicis lacerata est fluctibus, audit / Graia Capheream currere puppis aquam* (V, 7, 35-6) [“the Grecian bark that but now was shattered by the Euboean waves dares to skim the waters of Caphereus”].

The ship driven away by the sea storm is taking him into unexpected situations, even in a paradoxically manner: *quod faciles opto uentos, - quis credere possit? – / Sarmatis est tellus, quam mea uela petunt. / obligor, ut tangam laeui fera litora Ponti: / quodque sit a patria tam fuga tarda, queror* (I, 2, 81-4) [“The reason of my prayers for favouring winds (who could believe it?) is the Sarmatian land, the object of my voyage. I am constrained to reach the wild shores of ill-omened Pontus (Ovid wrote Pontus-on-the-left instead of the Pontus of the fair name, as it was called in Greek: *ho Euónymos Póntos*), and I complain that my journey into exile from my native land is so slow!”].

Being named after a goddess, the ship may help him communicate directly to this divinity:

*Est mihi sitque, precor, flavae tutela Mineruae, / nauis et a picta casside nomen habet* (I, 10, 1-2) [„I have, and pray that I may always have, the protection of golden-haired Minerva, and my bark draws her name from an emblazoned helmet” – as the ship was probably adorned with tutelage, a protecting emblem].

The ship, although being the actual vehicle, is getting multiple meanings when it is placed in the same frame with the prayers: *ergo idem uenti, ne causa laedar in una, / uelaeque nescio quo uotaque nostra ferunt* (I, 2, 17-18) [“So the same winds, that I be not punished in one way only, are driving – I know not whither – both my sails and my prayers”].

The common trait of Ovid’s letters from the journey is the metaphorical reference to the elements of sailing, which bears no sign of originality. The metaphors of sailing are frequent in the poetry of his time. Creating a poem is equivalent to a journey on the water, the poet is the sailor: the epic poet is sailing on the sea, by ship, the lyric poet is sailing on the river, by boat. The particularity of Ovid’s sailing metaphors is that he never considers himself the helmsman, probably as he is not allowed to decide over his own fate. His sailing metaphors are built less upon the artistic creation (*Tristia* II, 548) and more upon the sudden changes of his destiny: *quo ferar? unde petam lassis solacia rebus? / anchora iam nostram non tenet ulla ratem* (V, 2, 41-2) [“Whither shall I rush? Whence seek comfort for my weary lot? No anchor now holds my bark”].

On his wife’s birthday he wrote: *et tua, quod mallet, pietas ignota maneret, / implerent uenti si mea uela sui* (V, 5, 59-60) [“Thy loyalty, too, as thou wouldst prefer, would remain unknown, if favouring winds filled my sails”].

Or, addressing a friend: *qui ueritus non es portus aperire fideles / fulmine percussae confugiumque rati* (IV, 5, 5-6) [“thou who didst not fear to open a secure harbour of refuge for a bark smitten by the thunderbolt”].

This ascent from the proper and actual meaning to the artistic value, passing through paradoxical and religious stages, is continued into gnomic formulas: *fert bene praecipites nauis modo facta procellas: / quamlibet exiguo soluitur imbre uetus* (IV, 6, 35-6) [“The new-built ship bears well the headlong blast, even a little squall breaks up the old one”].

And again to the wife: *nec te credideris, quia non facis, ista moneri: / uela damus, quamuis remige nauis eat* (V, 14, 43-4)

[“Nor believe that I am reminding thee because thou art not acting: I am but giving sails to a bark that is already using the oars”].

The general frame of Ovid’s exile (actually, *relegatio*) has a famous sequel, both in the life and work of Seneca the Younger. Being relegated to the island of Corsica, Seneca suffered from the rough climate and the barbarian world around him (e.g., *Consolatio ad Heluiam*, 7, 8: *feritatem accolarum; caeli grauitas; natura inportuosi maris*); vide Tr. 4, 4, 55-58: *frigida me cohibent Euxini litora Ponti: / dictus an antiques Axenus ille fuit. / nam neque iactantur moderatis aequora uentis, / nec placidos portus hospita nauis adit*). Just like Ovid, he pleads for his return, warmly and wisely (*Consolatio ad Heluiam*) or shrewdly – though ineffectively (*Consolatio ad Polybium*).

Ovid’s journey was without end because it was without return. He remained in Tomi to the end of his life: the remembrance remained as well in the land that was the host of his exile and, in time, he entered the legend. He remains an Odysseus that travels estranging from home, going away from his people, a traveller despite his desire, in a land that he does not wish to know; he is a poet who, by a decision that is not his own, remains far away from his audience, in an icy gigantic prison, becoming a tragic hero in his own play, expiating a guilt he unwillingly committed.

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*Never-ending Journey*

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