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## **Ovid and the Pontic Populations. Identity and Otherness in Ovid's Poetry of Exile**

*Abstract: The literary production of Ovid's exile depicts the impression that the new way of life made on Ovid's identity, in his twofold condition - of an exile and a poet - by means of emphasizing the unfamiliar otherness that was characterizing the place of his exile: the wars of Scythia Minor, the conflicts between the inhabitants of Tomis and various populations, aspects of the daily life, the environmental and climatic discomfort, as well as other aspects of the life in the Danubian-Pontic land. The 96 elegies of the exile exhibit the permanent tension between what can be called centre and periphery, i.e. between, on the one hand, Rome, the undisputed centre of the Empire and of the world (Urbs-caput mundi), and, on the other hand, Tomis, a small port situated on the border of the Empire, where the civilized world ended. The Pontic elegies display, in a straightforward and unmediated way, the severe historical clash between the Roman world (Romanitas) and the Pontic Barbarian world (Barbaries), between civilization (Urbanitas) and barbarian (Barbaria).*

*Keywords: exile, identity, otherness, civilization, barbarian, centre, periphery.*

The two volumes of elegies written during Ovid's exile in Pontic land, *Tristia* and *Epistulae ex Ponto* are not only a unique literary experience, but the context where two mental horizons and two different perspectives of reporting to existence meet, two worlds located at opposite poles: the Roman world (Romanitas) and the barbarian Pontic world (*Barbaries*)<sup>1</sup>. The conflict, the split between the two worlds, that of Rome, the even center of the Empire, of the

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<sup>1</sup> Liviu Franga (1990): "Ovidius și spațiul danubiano-pontic". *Thraco-Dacica*, t. XI, no. 1-2 (1990), 225.

world, *Urbs- caput mundi* and Tomis, a small town, an obscure port, at the extreme territory, ruled by the Romans, is, in essence, the conflict between **center** and **periphery**, between civilization and the barbarian.<sup>2</sup>

The 96 elegies of exile reshape the experience the Latin poet lives and capture with a unique intensity the impact of the new way of living on the identity of Ovid, in his twofold condition, a poet and an exile, and his unique testimony to the other's world. In essence, the Pontic elegies depict the basic condition of every exile, arising from his physical relationship with the two places to which his existence is linked: the old space, now inaccessible due to his uprooting, the well-known Rome, and the new space, the port of Tomis belonging to an unknown world, which the author may describe as *his remoteness of Rome* (felt as an aggravating factor of the tragedy caused by loss of native land because it makes his return impossible).<sup>3</sup>

Once arrived at Tomis, Ovid got to know new places and people, their customs and way of life, but also a climate and a different geographical environment. The impact of the encounter with the unknown, with an awfully strange world, is so strong that causes the poet a cultural shock.

But who are these new populations which Ovid met? Who are these people to the poet and to Romans? What is the way they present themselves to the author? What are their problems? What is the image that the poet made about his new fellow? And finally, how is the Roman poet in relation to them? For the readers of Rome, in many epistles, the poet notes **the otherness** of the world from his exile: the Scythia Minor wars, the conflicts between Tomitans and other populations, the vagaries of climate, the moments of everyday life in Tomis.

The place where the poet is banished, as we have mentioned, is at the extremity of the territory occupied by the Romans, where the civilized world ends: *Haec igitur regio, magni paene ultima*

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<sup>2</sup> For a comparison with the mentality of the Greeks and the Romans on the concept of *barbarian*, see the meanings of it in Las Casas (which is not part of his habits) and Michel de Montaigne (foolish practice). *Apud* Vintila Mihăilescu. (2007): *Antropologie. Cinci Introduceri*. (Iași, 2007), 60-61.

<sup>3</sup> Dana Diaconu, "Poetul la Tomis sau „darul exilului”. *Hereditas Antiqua* (Iași, 2009), 46.

*mundi,/ Quam fugere homines dique, propinqua mihi est (Trist., IV, 4, v. 83-84). The name itself, Tomis, has fatal connotations, since it reminds him of the crime of Medeea, and Istrus seems to be a river of Hell: Styx quoque, si quid ea est, bene commutabitur Histro,/ Si quid et inferius quam Styga mundus habet (Pont., IV, 4, v. 11-12).*

The wilderness is in the grip of eternal winter: the snow melts from one year to another, the wine freezes in the pots, the waters of the sea and Istrus freeze too, so that they can be easily passed by enemy's horses, the cold and wind blow even more. Ovid describes, almost obsessively, using rhetorical terms, the state of unsafe and climatic discomfort - a burden too heavy to endure, for a Roman citizen come from the sunny Italy. Indeed, since his arrival at the place of exile, the poet says that the land in Pontus is "burned by frost" (*Trist.* III, 2, v. 8), so cold becomes the dominant symbol, common in too many epistles, both in *Tristia* and in *Pontica*. Being the first roughness of the west Pontic nature, cold sparks a kind of panic, a sense of timeless season in which no spring or summer, but only an eternal winter is: *Nix iacet, et iactam ne sol pluuiaque resoluant,/ .../ Ergo ubi delicit nondum prior, altera uenit,/ Et solet in multis bima manere locis (Trist., III, 10, v. 13-16). But most telling is the description of the first winter that he lived in Tomis, under all its aspects (Trist., III, 10, v. 13-16) The poet stops especially upon the adverse effects of climatic conditions on his health, complaining uncessantly by the hostile geographical environment, to which he cannot adapt: *Nec caelum nec aquae faciunt nec terra nec aerae;/ Ei mihi, perpetuus corpora languor habet! (Trist., III, 8, v. 23-24).**

The climate is not the only obsession. The enemies that invade neighboring territories south of Danube, especially in winter, when the river is frozen and ravage everything their way (*Trist.*, III, 10, v.51-56), are another: *Siue igitur nimii Boreae uis saeua marinas,/ Siue redundatas flumine cogit aquas,/ Protinus aequato siccis Aquilonibus Histro/ Inuehitur celeri barbarus hostis equo;/ Hostis equo pollens longeque uolante sagitta/ Vicinam late depopulatur humum. Still more alarming are the frequent attacks by barbarian peoples of Scythia Minor on the city of Tomis, which is surrounded by a low fortress, the inhabitants living on a relentless alert: *Innumerae circa gentes fera bella minantur,/ Quae sibi non rapto uiuere turpe putant./ Nil extra tutum est: tumulus defenditur ipse/**

*Moenibus exiguis ingenioque loci./ Cum minime credas, ut aues, densissimus hostis/ Aduolat [...](Trist., V, 10, v. 15-19).* To defend against some and others attacks, the poet is forced to guard the gates and walls along with other city residents able to carry weapons, he - who in his youth had fled military service: *Aspera militiae iuvenis certamina fugi, /.../ Nunc senior gladioque latus scutoque sinistram, / Canitiem galeae subicioque meam (Trist., IV, 1, v. 71-74).*

Given this situation, Ovid becomes obsessed by the fear of not being killed, during the battles around the walls or during attacks, surprised by swords or poisonous arrows of barbarians: *Hostis adest dextra laeuaque a parte timendus/ Vicinoque metu terret utrumque latus: /Altera Bistonias pars est sensura sarisas,/ Altera Sarmatica spicula missa manu (Pont. I, 3, v. 57-60).*

In such a political climate of **neverending wars**<sup>4</sup> characterizing the northern border of the Roman Empire, the poet comes to Tomis in late March in the year 9 p. Chr. Following his experience of exile, Ovid confirms that the authority of the Empire was rather nominal, in these areas and that the Roman military protectorate manifested only by force, as late replies to barbaric attacks: *Iazyges et Colchi Mereteaque turba Getaeque/ Danuuii mediis uix prohibentur aquis (Trist., II, v. 191-192).*

With regard to populations located in the north-est Roman world, Ovid leaves us with special stories. The poet says that the first inhabitants of Scythia Minor were the Getae, among whom came later Greek colonizers in commercial affairs, and a few other enclaves of people: the Sarmatians and Scythians, for example. Around them there are many barbarians' tribes who threaten the peace of the city: the Bessi, and the Iazyges and the Colchi. In comparing the information to the Getae, Ovid merely presents these barbarians as invaders and plunderers of the Pontic region. If he insists on their looting is to highlight the atmosphere of violence, anxiety and fear in which he lived, hoping thus to obtain permission to be transferred to a more quiet county: *Quod minus interea est, instar mihi muneris ampli, / Ex his me iubeat quolibet*

<sup>4</sup> Călin Timoc, "Autoritatea romană în Pontul Stâng la începutul secolului I p.Chr. la Dunărea de Jos. Mărturiile lui Ovidius de la Tomis". *Interferențe ovidiene. Studii, note, texte și (pre)texte ovidiene*, coord. by Livia Buzoianu. (Constanța, 2009), 126.

*ire locis* (*Trist.*, III, 8, 21-22). Of all the barbarians, the Getae occupy the most important place in the writings of the Ovidian exile<sup>5</sup>. They are also disproportionately represented among other populations, as indicated by the poet: *maior Geticaeque frequentia gentis* ("greater the number of Getae"), *tecta plus quoque parte tenet* ("they occupy most of the houses"). The large number of lines which refer, equally important as other data on them, are proof that the poet considers them a native population.

The description of the Getaes' physiognomy uses scattered pejorative epithets, with a pejorative connotation on behalf of the name of the population: wild (*trux Getae: Trist.*, V, 7, v. 17-18), warriors (*Marticolam Geten: Trist.* V, 3, v. 22), inhuman (*inhumanos Getas: Pont.* I, 5, v. 66): *Vox fera, trux uultus, uerissima Martis imago, / Non coma, non ulla barba resecta manu* (*Trist.* V, 7, v. 17-18). Their frightening aspect is completed by the clothes, sheepskin and stitched breeches to protect them from cold: *Pellibus et sutis arcent mala frigora braxis, / Oraque de toto corpore sola patent* (*Trist.* III, 10, v. 19-20). Their weapons are specific: the quiver, bow and arrows dipped in viper venom, and of course, the usual knife (*culter*): *Dextera non segnis fixo dare uulnera cultro, / Quem iunctum lateri barbarus omnis habet* (*Trist.* V, 7, v. 19-20). In regard to law and justice (*leges and aequum*), they are replaced by force (*cedit viribus*): *Victaque pugnaci iura ense iacent* (*Trist.* V, 10, v. 48). All these features, the physical appearance, the clothes, their warrior nature represent for Ovid the elements of the *barbarus* concept. For, indeed, what may be less Roman than this description?

Yet the war is not the main occupation of the Getae, among whom the poet lives. During peacetime, they cultivate the land, raise sheep, goats and cattle for agricultural work. We conclude that their primary occupation was agriculture, but their work was often futile because of the repeated incursions and looting of barbarians from north of the Danube: *Diffugiunt alii, nullisque tuentibus agros* (*Trist.* III, 10, v. 57). Their savings were modest, a small house, a wagon creaking, some cattle and some food reserves: *Incustoditae diripiuntur opes, / Ruris opes paruae, pecus*

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<sup>5</sup> Nicolae Lascu, *Ovidiu - Omul și poetul* (Cluj, 1971), 342. Cf. Livia Buzoianu, *Valoarea documentară a poeziei ovidiene* (Constanța, 2007), 31-32.

*et stridentia plaustra,/ Et quas diuitias incola pauper habet (Trist. III, 10, v. 58-60).*

It is also worth mentioning details of the women occupations. They do not work down delicate and colorful homespun, as the fleece of sheep is too rough for this, but they grind the flour and cover their heads with heavy water pots: *Purpura saepe tuos fulgens praetexit amictus,/ Sed non Sarmatico tingitur illa mari./ Vellera dura ferunt pecudes et Palladis uti/ Arte Tomitanae non didicere nurus./ Femina pro lana Cerealia munera frangit/ Subpositoque grauem uertice portat aquam (Pont. III, 8, v. 7-12).*

Despite all this, the Pontic land remains a sinister county for the poet - *sinistra terra* - because everywhere he saw crowds of barbarians threatening; he incessantly calls them *hostes* (enemies). They are, for Ovid, rather **alieni** (hostile, negative) than **alteri** (others). Therefore, the length of the time spent in exile increases and three years seem like "the war of Troy" (*Trist. V, 10, v. 1-4*). The picture of Troy is the very symbol of the opposition between East and West<sup>6</sup>, marking the transition from one world to another, where time has other dimensions and the order of nature is different from his pre-exile period: *Ut sumus in Ponto, ter frigore constitit Hister,/ Facta est Euxini dura ter unda maris./ At mihi iam uideor patria procul esse tot annis,/ Dardana quot Graio Troia sub hoste fuit (Trist. V, 10, v. 1-4).*

So even people who claim to be Greek changed clothes and their language is colorful with barbarian elements: *Hos quoque, qui geniti Graia creduntur ab urbe,/ pro patrio cultu Persica braca tegit./ Exercent illi sociae commercia linguae (Trist. V, 10, v. 33-35).* The poet finds he has no one to talk Latin, and Greek is also spoken very little, given that the Getae were the majority of Tomi: *In paucis remanent Graecae uestigia linguae,/ Haec quoque iam Getico barbara facta sono./ Unus in hoc nemo est populo, qui forte Latine/ Quaelibet e medio reddere uerba queat (Trist. V, 7, v. 51-54).* From this point of view, Ovid realizes that there, in Pontus Euxinus land, it is he who is the **barbarian** because nobody understands him. Moreover, the poet expresses his linguistic isolation, his inability to communicate, except by signs: *Per gestum*

<sup>6</sup> Dan Slușanschi, "Ovide, Tristia, V, 10. Les gestes et les paroles d'un exilé". *Interferențe ovidiene. Studii, note, texte și (pre)texte ovidiene*, coord. by Livia Buzoianu (Constanța, 2009), 53.

*res est significanda mihi./ Barbarus hic ego sum, qui non intellegor ulli./ Et rident stolidi uerba Latina Getae* (*Trist.* V, 10, v. 36-38). It is, therefore, a reversed situation: from the Roman perspective concerning the **barbarian** concept, for Pontic people, the barbarian is Ovid himself.

In some elegies, the poet also refers to the Sarmatians who lived near Tomi, alongside the Getae. Of Iranian origin and related to the Scythians, Sarmatians came recently in Dobrogea from the north Pontic region and represented the new enemies of the Empire in the north-west and west Pontic territory. Ovid speaks presumably to emphasize the insecurity in which he lived<sup>7</sup>. Sometimes he calls the Pontus Euxinus "Sarmatic Sea" and its coastline "the Sarmatic shore" (*Trist.* V, 10, v. 13-14). Some researchers believe that Ovid made the confusion between the Scythians, living for centuries, the south coast of Tomi, and Sarmatians, by virtue of similarities in physical appearance, clothing and language, in order to impress his readers in Rome, where the echo of Sarmatian invasions in Low Danube region was still present<sup>8</sup>.

In any case, for Ovid, the Sarmatians were, after the Getae, an ethnic usual presence: *Quem nunc subpositum stellis Cynosuridos Ursae/ Iuncta tenet crudis Sarmatis ora Getis* (*Trist.* V, 3, v. 7-8). Elsewhere, he confesses to have forgotten the Latin language and learned the Getae and Sarmatians language: *Ipsae mihi uideor iam dedidicisse Latine:/ Nam didici Getice Sarmaticeque loqui* (*Trist.* V, 12, v. 57-58). In another epistle, the poet mentions the Sarmatians beside the Getae and Bessi whom he considers natives: *Sauromatae cingunt, fera gens, Bessique Getaeque,/ Quam non ingenio nomina digna meo!* (*Trist.* III, 10, v. 5-6).

In such circumstances beyond his civilization, the Roman poet best expresses the difference of civilization and living standards between Rome and the provinces. The impact of the devastating realities of Tomi for the pedantic, preachy poet, an aristocrat of the

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<sup>7</sup> Mihai Irimia, "Bastarnii și sarmații-realități istorice la Dunărea de Jos-și percepția lor în opera lui Ovidius". *Interferențe ovidiene. Studii, note, texte și (pre)texte ovidiene*, coord. by Livia Buzoianu (Constanța, 2009), 118.

<sup>8</sup> Radu Vulpe, I. Barnea. *Din istoria Dobrogei. Romanii la Dunărea de Jos* (București, 1968), 39; cf.: Nicolae Lasca, "Pământul și vechii locuitori ai țării noastre în opera din exil a lui Ovidiu". *Publius Ovidius Naso* (București, 1957), 128-129.

Imperial Palace of Augustus, a Roman citizen belonging to the equestrian order, are great: *Utque neque insidias capitisque pericula narrem,/ Vera quidem, veri sed graviora fide,/ Vivere quam miserum est inter Bessosque Getasque/ Illum, qui populi semper in ore fuit!* (Trist. IV , 1, v. 65-68). Facing the extreme barbarism, a hostile and oppressive violence, the attitude of the poet in exile is the first release of pride, an amplification of loneliness, denial and refusal in the territory of his exile : *Siue locum specto, locus est inamabilis, et quo/ Esse nihil toto tristius orbe potest,/ Siue homines, uix sunt homines hoc nomine digni,/ Quamque lupi, saevae plus feritatis habent* (Trist. IV , 1, v. 65-68). As we can notice, Ovid is conscious of the loss of his country and language, living intensely his exile as a discontinuous state of being. Haunted by grief, pain, missing Rome, he sees in the new environment the signs of barbarism and adversity: the climate (rain, freezing wind, snow, extreme cold, discomfort), the inability to communicate and understand the language and customs of others. He made a negative evaluation of the new territory by comparing it to hell or to episodes of dark mythology.

Ovid's references to Tomi's population, as to different surrounding tribes, can be gathered in most of his epistles, which compose the two volumes of poetry. But the author tries to impress, not to inform the reader, often merely from simple sketches, bypassing or ignoring more details about the race, geographic location, religion, way of living and other aspects of native life. From the trace of his exiled period of life at Pontus Euxinus we can notice at Ovid a change of perspective, a new way of looking at the world and into himself as individual and as a poet, from the reassessment and realignment with the past, to the attitudes and personal experiences and poetry related to Rome, Empire or homeland, and his writings from that era.

If the first stage of exile, Ovid is deeply marked by his previous existence, if the barbarism from Pont produced him obvious repulsion, in the second part of his residence at Tomis a possible **integration** of the poet in the new territory takes shape. Therefore, the attitude towards the Getae changes very much. Ovid's lamentations in Potica will be more than desperate, compared with those of Tristia. The poet was more familiar with the new situation or even started to accept. His attitude of goodwill towards the

"barbarians" increases as the hope of repatriation decreases. If the idea of living next to them was hard to accept, if he was too proud to learn<sup>9</sup> their language, at the end of the life, he begins to speak it, and willing to prove his friendliness, he drew up a poem in their language, getting to consider himself "the greatest poet on the Istrus shore".

In turn, the inhabitants of Tomis show care and love for the suffering poet: *Molliter a uobis mea sors excepta, Tomitae* (*Pont.* IV, 14, v. 47). The poet tells in other epistles that they were sensitive to the beauty of verse when he read the poem in their language, in honor of the imperial family, and how their satisfaction manifested: *Haec ubi non patria perlegi scripta Camena,/ Venit et ad digitos ultima charta meos,/ Et caput et plenas omnes mouere pharetras,/ Et longum Getico murmur in ore fuit* (*Pont.* IV, 13, v. 33-36). The poet evokes the humanity of the Getae also, when he describes his own suffering and compassion, despite the fact that "there is no population more barbarous than themselves" : *Nulla Getis toto gens est truculentior orbe,/ Sed tamen hi nostri ingemuere malis* (*Pont.* II, 7, v. 31-32).

Sometimes, Ovid stresses even native sympathy for him, stating that they would be happy to stay with him if he agrees: *Illi me, quia uelle uident, discedere malunt,/ Respectu cupiunt hic tamen esse sui* (*Pont.* IV, 9, v. 99-100). Moreover, the inhabitants of Tomis, as a sign of deference, exempted him from taxes and gave him a laurel wreath for his poetic talent: *Solus adhuc ego sum uestris immunis in oris/ Exceptis, si qui munera legis habent;/ Tempora sacrata mea sunt uelata corona,/ Publicus inuito quam fauor inposuit* (*Pont.* IV, 14, v. 53-56).

Faced with sympathy from the natives, the poet feels guilty because he did not have, in previous epistles, nothing else for them but contempt. Therefore, he seeks an explanation of his lyrics, motivating that he complained about the rough location and climate, and never by the inhabitants of Tomi: *Sed nihil admisi, nulla est mea culpa, Tomitae/ Quos ego, cum loca sim uestra perosus, amo./.../ In loca, non homines uerissima crimina dixi* (*Pont.* IV, 14, v. 24; 29). Towards them, he not only has all the

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<sup>9</sup> Andra Șerbănescu, "Reacția indivizilor la șocul cultural: aculturarea și alienarea". *Cum gândesc și cum vorbesc ceilalți*. (Iași, 2007), 276.

sympathy and appreciation, but he is also grateful that they received him as his compatriots from Sulmona would not dare: *Molliter a uobis mea sors excepta, Tomitae,.../ Tam mihi cara Tomis, patria quae sede fugatis/ Tempus ad hoc nobis hospita fida manet* (*Pont.* IV, 14, v. 47; v. 59-60).

We find a dramatic change of Ovid's point of view towards Pontic populations, considered until recently *hostes* (enemies). The exile poet, self-proclaimed *hospes* (the stranger come from elsewhere, who is *housed, guest*), is the *other* who, vulnerable by the very condition of the *hospes* needs acceptance, care, protection (*hospita fida*)<sup>10</sup>, which finally recognizes that Tomis offered him. The stranger, the guest, the visitor, is from an anthropological perspective **near**. That is why, the exile land is not sad anymore so, he considers Tomis another Rome. *Nil fore dulce mihi Scythica regione putavi:/ Iam minus hic odio est quam fuit ante locus* (*Pont.* II, 1, 3-4). Despite its initial desire that, after death, his remains will be gathered and put in a funeral urn in Rome (*Trist.* III, 3, v. 65), the poet does not exclude any possibility now to be buried in a tumulus in Tomis: *Inque Tomitana iaceam tumulatus harena* (*Pont.* I, 6, v. 49).

If in the first part of the exile, Tomis was the country of present sadness, and Rome the land of the lost happiness, in the second one, this perspective would change. Tomis becomes little by little a privileged land, while Rome transformed itself in a cursed, illusory damned space. The poet finds in a compensatory manner, a new cosmic center, of the world and himself, proving that, between home and country there is no contradiction<sup>11</sup>. In other words, we can talk about removal of the emotional and spiritual barriers between Ovid and the Tomitan population, about a transition of the **center** near the **periphery** and vice versa.

At the Pontus Euxinus, Ovid gathers awareness of his individual destiny in the context of history and his human condition. A new writing and identity is formed at the same time, the first as a consequence of self change. Ovid will continue to write for the old Romans and also for the Tomitano-Pontic public; outrage vanishes

<sup>10</sup> Martin Buber, *Eu și tu* (București, 1992), 25.

<sup>11</sup> Demetrio Marin, *Publius Ovidius Naso. Misterul relegării la Tomis* (Iași, 2009), 15.

in a deep reconciliation with himself and the rest of the world<sup>12</sup>. Ovid will always to support Latin, in which he dreams and writes and which makes him eternal.

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<sup>12</sup> Liviu Franga ; Mariana Franga, "Poetica relegării, relegarea poeziei". *Interferențe ovidiene. Studii, note, texte și (pre)texte ovidiene*, coord. by Livia Buzoianu (Constanța, 2009), 41.

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