INTRODUCTION

The exile exists in a median state, neither completely at one with the new setting, nor fully disencumbered of the old; beset with half-involvements and half-detachments; nostalgic and sentimental on one level, an adept mimic or a secret outcast on another. Being skilled at survival becomes the main imperative, with the dangers of getting too comfortable and secure constituting a threat that is constantly to be guarded against.¹

Ovid meets this threat in the Tristia and Epistulae ex Ponto by repeatedly describing his physical insecurity in war-torn Tomis, his cultural isolation in an allegedly barbaric wasteland, and his desperate yearning for the city, friends and family he has left behind. And yet how many of these poems are the work of ‘an adept mimic’ whose exilic voice is potentially as ambiguous as the ‘median state’ it describes? Ovid is ‘a secret outcast’ in the sense that he passes unrecognized as a Romanus vates in a cultural wasteland; but to what extent is he a secretive, dissimulating outcast when he invites his Roman audience to believe that he is an exiled poet in terminal decline?

Before the potential complexities of the literary persona were fully recognized, generations of modern critics saw little reason to disagree with Ovid’s own judgement of his exilic verse. His monotonously plaintive tone, his seemingly tedious repetition of standard devices such as adunata and familiar mythical exempla, his constant appeals for help in verse which claimed no artistic merit or ambition – the evidence of Ovid’s literary demise in exile spoke for itself. More recent critics have seen behind the mask and rightly countered traditional scholarly antipathy towards the exile poetry with expositions

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of its latent quality; and yet recognition of Ovid’s dissimulating voice in exile poses a set of new questions. How is that dissimulation to be understood and interpreted? Is Ovid striving to present a seemingly candid picture of his exilic condition and failing in the attempt, his sophisticated Muse unable to convey a fully persuasive impression of artistic decline? If so, Ovid’s ingenium would indeed fail him in exile, but for the wrong reason. How is his sophisticated readership to respond to this failure? Does Ovid attempt a large-scale deception which the initiated reader cleverly sees through, or is the poet engaged in a complex experiment with literary irony for which deception is too strong a term? And is Ovid’s dissimulating technique consistently applied throughout the exile poetry, or does he modify his approach according to whom he addresses and thematic variations in different elegies? Few scholars would now argue that Ovid’s exile poetry confirms the fact of his artistic demise by its alleged imperfections. But it is not enough simply to answer Ovid’s harsher critics by demonstrating that his ars retains its creative vitality in exile. Why allow the sophisticated Muse to apply her subtle techniques if Ovid’s sole aim was to win sympathy, and perhaps even a reprieve, through an unambiguous display of his artistic and personal deterioration in exile? A sense of uncertainty over the ‘reality’ of Ovid’s physical and social environment in a desolate extremity of the Roman empire was very possibly as disconcerting for his contemporary Roman reader as it is for his modern audience. Ovid exploits this discomfort by constructing a body of verse which, on one reading, confirms every conceivable assumption about the attribitional effects of Tomitan exile; on another reading, the exile poetry undermines those very assumptions. The object of this study is to monitor the progress and extent of this undermining process.
THE ‘UNREALITY’ OF OVID’S EXILE POETRY

My use of the word ‘unreality’ in the title of this chapter is intended to imply something other than the recently revived view that Ovid never in fact set foot in Tomis. Various scholars have argued for this possibility,1 making capital out of obvious rhetorical exaggerations in the exile poetry and the absence of any reference to Ovid’s relegation in such historians as Tacitus, Suetonius or Cassius Dio, all of whom might have been expected to mention it.2 But to sound a note of caution over these recent claims is not necessarily to accept Ovid’s relegation as a historical fact which lacks supporting evidence. Two kinds of fact must be distinguished here.

Within the context of the Tristia, Ibis and Epistulae ex Ponto the exile serves, along with the carmen et error (Tr. 2.207), as the one inescapable fact which transforms the nature and direction of Ovid’s creative life. Until recently, little difficulty has been felt in transferring this textual fact to the wider historical framework. But the recent tendency to regard the Roman elegiac persona as emotionally self-contained and penned up within a subjective enclosure, or cleverly juggling with received topoi, has reinforced the scepticism which has been growing for other reasons. Even scholars inclined to accept the traditional view that Ovid was exiled must now draw a distinction between the certainty of the textual fact, continually reaffirmed in the poems, and the meagre external evidence which can be adduced to support the recording of this text-centered hypothesis in a historical chronology. Historically


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acceptable evidence is another matter, but it is in short supply both for the period and the geographical area which relate to Ovid’s exile. Moreover, negative historical statements are notoriously hard to prove, and the burden of proof must lie with those who believe the historical exile, not with those who oppose it. Belief in the exile of Ovid as a historical fact can never be held, even by its defenders, with the conviction which the textual fact inspires in, and demands of, the readers of these poems.

The state of the evidence which is actually available to us does not allow a firm conclusion to be reached on the probability or improbability of Ovid’s relegation as a historical fact. While indecision on this issue must inevitably leave some features of the poems unexplained, it nevertheless makes it possible to read and evaluate these poems without the insistent pressure of a question which is of overriding importance only to historical biographers. The better strategy, and the one I shall follow here, is to examine the deployment of Ovid’s poetic skill in these poems, without prejudice to the extra-literary question of their status as historical documents – though my results may well have implications for that status. Critics of the exile poetry need room to manoeuvre, free from the constraints of historical preconceptions and assumptions, some of which are now seen to rest on shaky foundations. The historical features of these poems should therefore be subjected to the same critical approach as the more obvious literary features, and evaluation of the historical evidence need have no immediate relevance to the question of the historical credibility of Ovid’s exile.

To examine the reliability of the Tristia and Epistulae ex Ponto as sources of testimony for the physical, geographical and ethnographical conditions in the Pontic region during the Augustan era is an equally hazardous enterprise. Even if it also turns out to be partially inconclusive, the very nature of the difficulties revealed will tell us much about the character of the poems themselves. The crucial issue is to consider how far we can determine whether it is the Ovidian eye or the Ovidian poetic ingenium, or a combination of both, which is at work in
the descriptive sections of these poems. It remains to clarify the immediate historical background against which the evidence of the poems themselves will be measured.

Moesia, the region in which Tomis was located, was brought under firm Roman control only late in the first century B.C.; M. Terentius Varro Lucullus, consul of 73, had entered Moesia in 72 B.C. (App. Ill. 85–8; cf. Liv. Per. 97). But the Greek cities on the Pontic coast rose against the Romans under the command of C. Antonius Hybrida in 62 B.C., only to fall under the control of Burebistas, king of the Getae – who, according to Strabo (7.3.11; cf. D. Chr. 36.4), had subjugated the coastal territory from Olbia to Apollonia (and therefore Tomis as well). After his death, probably in 44 B.C., his kingdom was dissolved, and the permanent subjugation of Moesia was effected by M. Licinius Crassus in 29–28 B.C. (Dio 51.25–7). The first imperial legate recorded in Moesia is A. Caecina Severus in A.D. 6 (Dio 55.29.3), and Tacitus mentions the legatus Moesiae for A.D. 15, stating that C. Poppaeus Sabinus’ governorship of Moesia was extended (prorogatur) in that year (Ann. 1.80.1). When had it begun? At Ann. 6.39.3 Tacitus records his death in A.D. 35 after he had held provincial governorships for twenty-four years. On this evidence he presumably started in Moesia in A.D. 11 after his consulship in A.D. 9. It follows that Ovid does not invent his facts when, for example, he states that the Pontic area of Moesia has only recently come under Roman dominion (cf. Tr. 2.199–200). Moreover, historical evidence corroborates

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3 Cn. Cornelius Lentulus led later operations in Moesia to suppress the Bastarnae, Scythians and Sarmatae, but the only sources mentioning Lentulus by name (Flor. Epit. 2.28.19, Tac. Ann. 4.44) do not specify a date; Syme (1934), 115–22 favours 6 B.C.—A.D. 4. For further references to Roman operations in the Pontic region see Nagle (1980), 134. Augustus gives a vague and exaggerated account of operations against the Dacians at R. G. 30–1; see Delia Corte (1976), 57ff. Ovid’s picture of conditions in Pontus may be designed to reverse the Augustan picture (so Claassen (1986), 220).

4 Appian (Ill. 86) sets the date at the start of Tiberius’ reign (coinciding with the extension of Sabinus’ governorship of Moesia in the same year); so Parvan (1921), 192. But excavations in Constanza (modern Tomis) have revealed a rich supply of bronze coins, some dating from the Augustan period; see Stoutz (1881), 298. At Histria, near Tomis, a temple was dedicated Αὐτοκράτορ Κοινοφύτῳ Σέβαστῳ, suggesting that the imperial cult reached the Pontic region in Augustus’ lifetime; see Pippidi (1977), 250–1.
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...his claim that Tomis is constantly threatened by outside attack (cf. *Tr.* 4.1.6ff., 5.2.69–72 etc.). Two inscriptions from Tomis, dated to the time between Burebistas’ death and the early years of the first century A.D., mention the creation of a civic guard within the town and the panic of its inhabitants when threatened by attack. A primary cause for concern is the condition of the town’s defensive wall, which offers such meagre resistance to outside attack that part of the population abandons Tomis. Ovid is equally unconfident about the town’s defences (cf. *Tr.* 4.1.69–70, 5.10.17–18).

These initial consistencies are deceptive, however. The general picture suggests that, if not worthless, the historical value of the exile poetry is certainly limited – as the recent studies by Vulikh and Podosinov have demonstrated. Take, for example, Ovid’s grossly exaggerated portrayal of the barbarian threat in and around Tomis. Besides the Getae, he mentions the Bastarnae, Bessi, Bistonii, Colchi, Cizyges, Coralli, Iazyges, Odrysii, Sarmatae and Sauromatae at various points in his narrative. As Syme observes, Ovid is the first Latin author to mention the lazyges, but Tacitus, who mentions them next (*Ann.* 12.29.3), locates them differently, beyond the Carpathian range in modern Hungary. Syme puts this discrepancy down to a possible migration, undertaken later with Roman encouragement, but Ovid’s geographical vagueness is a more plausible explanation. The Coralli are nowhere attested except by Ovid as inhabitants of Dobrogea; Strabo locates them with the Bessi (7.5.12). And if we accept that Ovid knows the Bessi as his immediate neighbours (*Tr.* 3.10.5, 4.1.67), we also have to accept that all or part of this tribe made a substantial move north-eastwards from their attested home; Strabo locates them in the region of Mt Haemus and the upper waters of the Hebrus in Thrace (7.5.12), while ac-

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5 For these inscriptions see SIG3 731; for their date see Pippidi (1971), 279 n. 73.
6 Aricescu (1976), 85–90 argues that Ovid’s description of the defensive walls around Tomis closely accords with archaeological evidence; but see contra Claassen (1990), 93 n. 63.
8 (1978), 165.
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cording to the elder Pliny they lived on the left bank of the Strymon (Nat. 4.40). It is scarcely credible that, as Ovid claims, tribal forces from throughout the vast geographical area of Thrace, Scythia and Moesia are all active in the immediate vicinity of Tomis. Nor is there any evidence to suggest that the Greek language and culture of Tomis, originating from its Milesian foundation, were barbarized by the Getic presence in and around the town (cf. Tr. 5.7.51–2, 5.10.27–34 etc.). The enduring Hellenistic character of Tomis up to and including the era of Roman influence is beyond reasonable doubt; though it is likely that the Getic and Thracian peoples had considerable involvement with the Greeks, the traditional culture of Greek/Milesian Tomis remained intact.

This evidence confirms that accuracy of geographical and social detail in these matters was not Ovid’s chief concern. Though he draws on many names, incidents and features which can be paralleled individually here and there in the very wide area of which Tomis forms a part, Ovid’s portrayal of the Pontic environment is primarily literary, by which I mean that the material at his disposal was freely manipulated to serve his literary intentions. Such a result might have been expected anyway: elegy was never the medium for the bland reporting of geographical surveys. The very remoteness and alien nature of Tomis, which might in other contexts have required accuracy to be a prime virtue, here ensured that very few potential readers would be able to check Ovid’s details from their own experience. Rather, it was to the literary experience of his readers that Ovid primarily appealed, adapting an alien environment and culture for his special purposes.

9 Taking Tr. 3.10.5 and 4.1.67 at face value, Casson (1927), 97–101 accepts that the Bessi did make such a move. Syme (1978), 164 is forced to the same expedient, referring to ‘a portion … which the Romans had transferred from their homeland in inner Thrace’.

10 See further Videau-Delibes (1991), 162–5.

11 See Lambirino (1958), 379–90 for the alleged corruption of Greek culture in Tomis; cf. Gandevia (1968), 106, arguing that Getic was the predominant language in Tomis.

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While this point has not passed unrecognized in previous scholarship, the extent to which Ovid’s literary considerations outweigh his alleged commitment to factual reliability in the exile poetry bears further examination; the complexity of Ovid’s artistic designs in exile has yet to be fully recognized.

Tomis and the Tomitans

Though Tomis was actually located in Moesia, Ovid states that Scythia is his destination: *Scythia est, quo mittimur* (Tr. 1.3.61; cf. 3.2.1). His citation of Scythia may at first sight appear to be innocent enough and typical of the licence with which Roman poets often distort geographical detail; but on closer examination it proves to be no accident. Ovid stretches geographical fact for a purpose which is determined by the traditional depiction of Scythia in Roman literature.

Scythia was of course standardly portrayed as a geographical extreme, set at the very edge of the Roman world. In C. 2.11, for example, Horace urges Hirpinus not to concern himself with distant problems, but to enjoy his youth while he can: *quid bellicosus Cantaber et Scythes … cogitet … remittas quaerere* (1–4). The Cantabrians pose a threat in the extreme west of the Roman world, the Scythians in the east. What Horace portrays as the eastern extremity, Virgil portrays as the northern at G. 1.240–1:


> mundus, ut ad Scythiam Riphaeasque arduus arces consurgit, premitur Libyae deexus in Austros.

The contrast between Scythia in the north and Libya in the south is developed more fully at G. 3.339–83. Virgil has just completed his account of the seasonal management of live-

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13 Cf. Podosinov (1981), 194: ‘In using Ovid’s work of the Tomis period, we must take into account that much of it is written for the educated reader, and therefore corresponds to established notions about these places, and composed in a style thick with the literary clichés and rhetorical rules of his day.’


15 Cf. C. 3.8.18–24, 4.5.25–8 and 4.14.41–4, where Scythia represents the same extreme.
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stock in winter (295–321) and summer (322–38). Italy’s balanced climate, with its clearly defined winter and summer, is contrasted with Libya’s unrelenting heat in the south (339–48) and Scythia’s permanent winter to the north (349–83).16

These contrasts had long formed part of the way in which writers conceived the limits of the inhabited world. Whether Scythia’s function was to provide the uniform background of a remote wilderness in the Prometheus Vinctus, or to support the more complex Herodotean symmetry which required a counterpart to the climate and civilization of Egypt in the south, the need for a coherent conceptual picture tended, at least in literary texts, to take little account of those inconvenient inconsistencies which unpredjudiced research, had it taken place, might have brought to light.17 The earlier literary pictures already reflect the fact that the solitudes and harsh climate of Scythia were proverbial. The same must be true of Horace and Virgil, though the picture in Greek writers is sometimes less uniform and monotonously bleak. Virgil, for instance, exaggerates when he claims that the winter in Scythia is permanent; a different picture emerges from the Hippocratic De aeribus, locis, aquis (19 Heiberg), Strabo (7.3.18) and Herodotus (4.28), though the latter in particular had his own structural reasons for wanting to complicate and systematize the conventional picture. Indeed, the resulting symmetry between the second and fourth books of the Histories only intensifies suspicion that Herodotus never actually visited the Black Sea region, despite his claims to that effect.18

A good example of the difficulties faced in establishing an accurate picture of the Scythian climate is provided by ancient reports of how the streams in the Pontic region, and even

16 Martin (1966), 301 claims that the Scythian passage was partly based on information retrieved from an expedition to Moesia in 29. But the details of Virgil’s account – and so Ovid’s parallel version in Tr. 3.10 – are traditional; see Richter (1957), 304–5.
17 On the function of Scythia in earlier literature see Hartog (1988), 12–33. This paragraph draws heavily on Hartog’s analysis of the Herodotean picture and on supporting citations in Thomas (1982), 66 n. 70.
18 Cf. Kimball Armayor (1978), 62: “If we cannot believe that he [Herodotus] saw the Pontus that he talks about, we can hardly be sure that he went to the Pontus at all.”
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whole stretches of the sea, freeze over so solidly that men and waggons can cross the ice. Herodotus (4.28), Strabo (7.3.18) and the elder Pliny (Nat. 4.87) all report the phenomenon, but even in antiquity such claims were sometimes met with scepticism.19 Reliable or not, the phenomenon became an indispensable feature of Scythia in poetry.20 Plutarch offers a telling insight into the proverbiality of the Scythian climate; in the preface to his life of Theseus (1.1), he notes the free licence which geographers allow themselves in plotting on their maps parts of the earth of which they have no first-hand knowledge and to which they append such vague explanatory comments as Σκυθίκων κρόος. This proverbial picture was reproduced by several Greek poets (e.g. [Aesch.] Pr. 2, 417–19, Ar. Ach. 704), for whom Scythia was a cold, barren, deserted region with no favourable features.

Roman poets generally continue to portray Scythia as a uniformly frozen desert, ignoring the modifications to this picture which appear in Herodotus and Strabo.21 Virgil’s account in Georgics 3 for the most part clearly provides the model for Ovid’s depiction of Pontus in Tr. 3.10 – despite Ovid’s insistence that his narrative is based on personal observation (cf. 35–40). His dependence on Virgil has been well documented,22 though different reasons are given why he chose to follow a model so closely. One suggestion is that Ovid pays homage to the accuracy of Virgil’s Scythian description by alluding to Georgics 3 in his own account of climatic conditions in Pontus;23 another is that Ovid’s use of

19 See, e.g., Plutarch on Theseus’ campaign against the Amazonian women: δ ων οὖν, ζος Ἑλλάνων ἤτοι, τὸ Κυμάτων βοτάνων παγκύτος δαίμονας περιβόλου, ἠγετον ἐπί τεταυεῖον (Thes. 27.2; FGrH 323fr. 17). Cf. Gellius’ depiction of the philosopher Taurus debating the question of why rivers freeze but not the sea (17.8.16); Taurus dismisses as highly unorthodox Herodotus’ claim that the Black Sea does in fact freeze (contra omnium ferme, qui haec quaesiverunt, opinionem).

20 So, e.g., Virg. G. 3.360–2, Od. Tr. 3.10.27–34, P. 4.7.9–10, Luc. 5.436–41, V. Fl. 6.328–9; see further Hornstein (1957), 154–61.

21 So, e.g., Prop. 4.3.47–8, Sen. Her. F. 533ff. Cf. Ov. M. 2.224, where even Scythia’s cold melts before the global fire which Phaethon precipitates (see prosumt Scythiae sus frigores).
