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The Exile's Lament. Solitude and Togetherness in Ovid's Later Works

Lament wygnania. Samotność i wspólnota w późnych dziełach Owidiusza

Abstract: This article is a solitude-focused interpretation of the later works of Publius Ovidius Naso (43 BCE–AD 17/18): *Tristia* and *Epistulae ex Ponto*. A celebrated poet in his heyday, in AD 8 Ovid was exiled from Rome by Augustus, never to return to his homeland again. The circumstances and causes of such a harsh sentence have never been explicitly stated: neither by Ovid himself, nor by any of his contemporary authors. Some historians speculate that the causes are related to another of the poet's works – the infamous *Ars Amatoria* that had once shocked the citizens of Rome. Others would argue that moral outrage was but a convenient disguise of Augustus' actual motives, quite possibly related to scandalous affairs of a political or personal nature. Although an exploration of the aforementioned themes is made, as well as some considerations regarding the legal implications of exile in ancient Rome, the main subject of the article is the reading of Ovid's later works as introspections that provide insight into his exile, understood as a period of loneliness. While removed from his home and from those close to his heart, the poet remained a Roman citizen, keenly identifying as part of that community. Though his proximity

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to other peoples never became togetherness, his loneliness, as evidenced by a copious body of introspective works, seems to have eventually evolved into solitude.

Keywords: Ovid; exile; solitude; loneliness; reading.

Abstrakt: Artykuł ten jest poświęconą problematyce izolacji i samotności interpretacją późniejszych dzieł Publiusza Owidiusza Nazo (43 BCE-17/18 CE) – *Żałów* i *Listów znad Morza Czarnego*. Mimo sławy i uznania, jakimi poeta cieszył się w szczytowym okresie popularności, w 8 roku n.e. został wygnany z Rzymu przez Oktawiana Augusta. Nigdy nie zezwolono mu na powrót do ojczyzny. Powody tak surowego wyroku i okoliczności jego wydania nigdy nie zostały opisane: nie wspomina o nich ani sam Owidiusz, ani inni współcześni mu autorzy. Według niektórych historyków, przyczyny należy poszukiwać w *Sztuce Kochania*, niesławnym poemacie, który Rzymianie uznać mieli za cokolwiek nieobyczajny. Inni sugerują, iż rzekome zgorzenie było jedynie pretekstem, jakim posłużył się August, by ukarać Owidiusza za udział w politycznym lub osobistym skandalu. W artykule zostają rozwinięte powyższe wątki, omówiona zostaje także kwestia wygnania w prawie rzymskim. Osią rozważań pozostaje jednak odczytanie późnych dzieł Owidiusza jako opisu przeżyć wewnętrznych osoby zmuszonej do życia wśród obcego sobie ludu. Nawet z daleka od domu poeta pozostał obywatelem rzymskim, czyniąc ten fakt kluczowym elementem swej deklarowanej tożsamości. Choć nie stał się w pełni częścią wspólnoty, do której został przywiedziony przez los, jego pierwotny stan – pełna żalu izolacja – zdaje się stopniowo przechodzić w świadomie wybraną, sprzyjającą przynajmniej częściowemu pogodzeniu się z losem samotność.

Słowa kluczowe: Owidiusz; wygnanie; samotność; izolacja; interpretacja.

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Cumque alii causa tibi sint graviore fugati,
Ulterior nulli, quam mihi, terra data est:

Longinus hac nihil est, nisi tantum frigus et hostes,
Et maris adstricto quae coit unda gelu.

Though others have been exiled for weightier cause,
A more remote land has been assigned to no one;
Nothing farther away than this land except the cold, and the enemy,
And the sea whose waters congeal with the frost
(Ovid, *Tristia* II, 193–196, in Wheeler, 1939, p. 68).

This is how Publius Ovidius Naso, once perhaps the most celebrated poet of his time, writes of his banishment from Rome. Having fallen out of favour with the emperor Augustus for reasons never explicitly stated, he was relegated to the settlement of Tomis, known to the modern world as the city of Constanța in Romania. It is a place far from the Eternal City, even by today's standards. Connected now, in the 21st century, by motorways, it is still a substantial journey over 2,000 kilometres to the east of Rome, enough to take more than 24 hours. In Ovid's time, the two locations were divided by a distance so vast it was nearly unimaginable.

How unexpected and heart-wrenching this exile must have been, after a lifetime of comfort and recognition. Born in 43 BCE, in Sulmo, to a family of landed aristocrats, Publius Ovidius Naso quickly became known as a talented poet. It is possible that he achieved a measure of fame as early as his 18th year, having given his first public recitation at that age. Though the poet might be considered an unreliable narrator where his own life is concerned, as most information on his life has been derived from his own works, we rely on his literary legacy (Knox, 2009; McGowan, 2009). It is important to note that both relative and absolute chronologies of Ovid's earlier works, as well as the authorship of some of the letters in *Heroides*, remain uncertain and provoke much debate (Hardie, 2006; Knox, 2002). For the sake of clarity, the chronologies presented here are those that are most generally accepted. After *Amores*, a collection of love poetry, Publius Ovidius Naso went on to publish an array of successful works, *Heroides* and *Metamorphoses* being the most notable. Having secured the patronage of Augustus, he began to compose *Fasti*, 'The Book of Days': this is a calendar of sorts, detailing the best-known myths of Rome and their various and vivid aetiologies in relation to traditional holidays, customs and astronomy. It was a traditional work, fitting seamlessly with the Augustan celebration of Roman customs and the emperor's will to see them brought back to life. Surely, the author of a poem

so valuable would live on to enjoy an existence of recognition, privilege, and support from the Augustan court?

Not so. In AD 8 – how ironic that this was also the year of *Fasti*'s publication! – by the decision of the emperor, Ovid was banished from Rome (Hardie, 2006). The causes of such a harsh sentence were never named: not by the poet himself, nor by any historians contemporary to him – not even, perplexingly enough, by the man who so wished to see him banished (Hardie, 2006; Knox, 2009; McGowan, 2009). This banishment, its legal and political contexts – but most of all, its anthropological, cultural and psychological implications – are the main subjects of this article.

The Romans, during the times of the republic and early principate, distinguished between three types of banishment. *Relegatio* was an order to temporarily leave Rome. The place the *relegatus* was to spend their time away from the city was sometimes also mentioned in the edict issuing the sentence, yet not in all cases. Unlike another type of banishment, *deportatio*, *relegatio* did not require the presence of armed guards to ensure that the person sentenced reached their destination and remained there. A subtype of *deportatio* was *deportatio in insulam*, where the exiled was to live out their days on a specific island, usually with no company but the guards sent to prevent their escape. Such was the fate of Augustus' own daughter, Julia the Elder, and his granddaughter, Julia the Younger – the latter sentenced in the same year as Ovid. The third and harshest form of banishment was *exsilium*: an alternative to the death penalty, though it bore the same legal consequences. The *exul* would lose their belongings and their citizenship, along with what was seen as the most basic of human rights at the time: *hospitium*, the 'guest's right'. Rather than offer shelter, anybody whom the *exul* might turn to for aid was legally obliged to do them harm (Kelly, 2006; Rich, 1875).

Of these sentences, Ovid's was the least severe: he was merely a *relegatus*, retaining his citizen status, his marriage – to a third wife, never named, yet often praised in his work – and his right to maintain correspondence with friends and family still in Rome (Helzle, 1989; McGowan, 2009). Most of all, he retained the status that was not Augustus' to give or take: he remained a poet, detailing his bitter experiences in two notable works: *Tristia* (Sorrows), dated to AD 8–12, and *Epistulae ex Ponto* (Letters from Pontus), a later work dated to AD 8–16 (Hardie, 2006).

As for the mysterious causes of such a fate, Publius Ovidius Naso never mentions them, in spite of the vast body of works written in exile, and plentiful opportunity to do so. There are merely vague hints, the most notable of which cites the causes of his exile as *carmen et error*: a poem and a mistake.

The poem in question would seem to be *Ars Amatoria* (The Art of Love), yet it seems a rather flimsy pretext. It was published, to instant popularity, between 2 BCE and AD 2; even the latest date places it years before Ovid's exile (Hardie, 2006). Would the Emperor be so unaware of the works of his poet that he remained ignorant of the existence of *Ars Amatoria* until seven years after its publication? The works of a popular author would surely be discussed at court; any scandal they might have initially caused would likely have lost its impact after such a long time. Why, then, a sudden change of heart? And why, most of all, would *Ars Amatoria*, a work mild by Roman standards, be so unacceptable during a time when works such as *Priapea*, detailing far greater obscenities, were celebrated and encouraged – and by a personage no less than Gaius Cilnius Maecenas, the Emperor's confidant and friend?

Such questions will probably remain unanswered forever. What remains is an extensive account of Ovid's exile itself. The personal nature of the works, their introspective narratives, the autobiographical theme, and most of all, the language – vivid, yet far less formal and conventional than that of Ovid's contemporary authors – allow a glimpse into the psychological processes accompanying the state of exile. The letters also provide a valuable insight into its anthropological status as an atypical experience of living in a community and then being forcibly removed from it into the context of another one. A transition from togetherness to loneliness... and from loneliness, perhaps, to solitude.

Barbarus hic ego sum, qui non intellegor ulli,
et rident stolidi verba Latina Getae.

Here, I am the barbarian no one comprehends,
The Getae laugh, foolishly, at my Latin words
(Ovid, *Tristia* V, X, 37–38, in Kline, 2003).

Those words, a quote from a fairly late work – book V of *Tristia* – offer a concise and moving description of a changing status: as a *relegatus*, Ovid became a rare example of a member of the dominant culture suddenly finding himself viewed as the Other. The bitterness of this experience is projected upon his surroundings. The climate is described as harsh, the surroundings uninhabitable, the people malicious and indifferent to his plight. The poet wrote in book I of *Tristia*, while comparing his journey to that of Odysseus: 'Nos freta sideribus totis distantia mensos sors tulit in Geticos Sarmati-

cosque sinus’ – ‘I, after traversing seas whole constellations apart, have been carried by fate to the bays of the Getae and the Sarmatians’ (Ovid, *Tristia* I, V, 61–62, in Wheeler, 1939, p. 32). The reality of exile, one imagines, was made even more difficult to bear by the only methods of travel available to a man of his times: by land and by sea, at a pace slow enough for the journey to take many months. Ovid departed from Rome in December of AD 8, to finally arrive at Tomis in the summer or autumn of the following year (Green, 1982; Hendren, 2014; Wheeler, 1939). It appears that such a voyage would enforce a state of awareness. Ovid seemed to have no choice but to be completely mindful of the distance travelled, each mile observed, each day of the perilous journey taking him further away from the city he had never wanted to leave. Such an experience takes a toll on the ability to notice anything else; and any reader of Ovid’s exile works finds plentiful proof of this.

Siquis adhuc istic meminit Nasonis adempti,
 et superest sine me nomen in urbe meum,
 suppositum stellis numquam tangentibus aequor
 me sciat in media vivere barbaria.

If there still be any there who remembers banished Naso,
 If my name still survives in the city,
 Let him know that beneath the stars which never touch the sea
 I am living in the midst of the barbarian world
 (Ovid, *Tristia* III, X, 1–4, in Wheeler, 1939, p. 136)

The first three books of *Tristia* speak of unmitigated despair, detailing loneliness and illness, misery and isolation: a deep depression – a stage of grief, if you wish, lasting for many years before a glimmer of hope appears. By Book IV, Ovid begins to write poetry again.

He still bemoans his current state, asking with a characteristic sense of futility: ‘Cui nuc haec cura laborat? An mea Sauromatae scripta Getaque legent?’ – ‘For whom this careful toil? Will the Sauromatae and the Getae read my writings?’ (Ovid, *Tristia* IV, I, 94–93, in Wheeler, 1939, p. 164); yet the poet also begins to describe his surroundings – perhaps as he gradually becomes aware of them again. He gains respect and status by learning the local languages, and taking up arms to defend his adopted land. By Book V, his account of the *Getae* and the *Sauromatae*, while still revealing an unmistakable ethnocentrism, becomes much more mellow than the initial reports: it details the customs of those peoples, their virtues, and gives accounts of

some of the conversations held with them, wherein they are portrayed as a sensible and to an extent learned people, capable of deep and refined feeling. In *Epistulae ex Ponto*, he writes to an enemy that the wild *Getae* wept at his account of his own misfortunes: why cannot the addressee summon a touch of compassion for his plight as well? Whether such a reaction was true, whether there really had been barbarians weeping upon hearing Ovid's tale, we shall never know. What we can see, however, is how vastly different this portrayal is from the initial image of the exiled poet being shunned and mocked by an alien people.

However, a sense of pervasive melancholy remains, never to dissipate. Even after becoming adapted to his new life, the poet remains a Roman citizen, firmly identifying with the city and expressing hopes of returning there. By Book IV of *Epistulae ex Ponto*, after nearly ten years in exile, and with no end in sight, Publius Ovidius Naso senses that he might die soon – yet, though he keeps requesting that his remaining friends use their influence to persuade Caesar to revoke the sentence, he appears to have discovered a cure for his mental anguish. ‘Mente tamen’, writes Ovid, ‘quae sola loco non exulat’ – ‘I shall use my mind, which alone is not in physical exile’ (Ovid, *Epistulae ex Ponto* IV, IX, 41, in McGowan, 2009, p. 1).

Only in spirit would witness his friend Graecinus assume the mantle of a consul. His sentence would not be revoked, neither by Augustus nor by his heir: and yet, among fears of death and the bitterness of exile, a slightly more hopeful tone is struck, with unmitigated despair giving way to an experience explored, an identity renegotiated. His eyes opened to the realities of the world he found himself in: from his loneliness among the *Sauromatae* and the *Getae*, Publius Ovidius Naso appeared to have ascended into a state of solitude – a chosen and self-aware response to his new situation that was probably vital to his sense of self: a Roman citizen among a people not his own, a poet of gentle sensibilities among warlike tribes. No longer portrayed as uncomprehending and malicious barbarians, his adopted countrymen are simply different. ‘Nulla est mea culpa, Tomitae’, he wrote to the Tomitians after having been accused of insulting them, ‘quos ego, cum loca sim vestra perosus, amo’ – ‘I am not at fault, Tomitae, for you I esteem, though I detest your land’ (Ovid, *Epistulae ex Ponto* IV, XIV 23–24, in Wheeler, 1939, p. 480). No longer blamed for their qualities, they just are. We can say the same of Ovid: by the end, he simply is – alone, yet no longer irreversibly isolated; thus, in solitude and not loneliness.

Exile can, perhaps, become an eye-opening ordeal, allowing the subject to completely recontextualise their vision of the self and the world, caus-

ing both to become deeper and more nuanced. It can also be construed as a liminal stage between togetherness and loneliness. Whether the latter ever becomes solitude is dependent on the subject's ability to cope with their experience.

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