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A Latin Lover in Ancient Rome

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CHAPTER 5

WHATEVER HAPPENED TO LATIN LOVE ELEGY?

That fine fellow who when I was young castrated so many beautiful ancient statues in his City so as not to corrupt our gaze . . . ought to have recalled that . . . nothing is achieved unless you also geld horses, donkeys and finally everything in nature.

—Montaigne, 3.5

It is through disobedience that progress had been made, through disobedience and through rebellion.

—Wilde, *The Soul of Man under Socialism*



WE DO NOT LIKE the fact that some artists die young, before they achieve their promise, and we are equally unhappy when mature artists find themselves and their art crushed by arbitrary and unjust Power. Ovid's exile from Rome to one of its empire's wilder peripheries, his punishment by Augustus, remains a problem as fascinating as it is mysterious. As will quickly appear, I am in the firm grip of my own private certainties in these matters, but I must nonetheless admit how dim and slippery, how fiercely resistant to proof and resolution, the whys and wherefores of the poet's fate have always been and how likely they are to remain so. With these caveats in place, let me glance briefly at two recent and influential perspectives on the conflict between Augustus and the most talented poet writing in the final decades of his long reign before I try my hand at recontextualizing the production of *Tristia* 2 and then—what concerns me most—at offering my version of the meanings that generate its aesthetic design and the pleasures that design has to offer.

For many of his readers, the thought of Ovid's opposition to Augustan ideology is all but unthinkable. To challenge the emperor, they say, or even to lightly twit him would have been too dangerous even if it were something a poet of the time might have felt like doing. A poet in that time and place would, after all, have had, could have had, no political agenda, except the emperor's. Moreover, leaving aside the question of whether the emperor would read or come to hear of the peculiar verses that seemed to allude to him in a perhaps unflattering way, what sorts of audience could a steadily dissident and lonely voice hope to capture and retain then and there? Questions such as these construct the perspective from which a satirical Ovid becomes a flat impossibility. And once that impossibility is defined and its truth secured, it's not a hard task to show that what might otherwise appear to be witticisms at the expense of the imperial ideology can instead be viewed, and were best viewed, as the natural and intricate workings of the semiological process that Power is always in control of.¹

Alessandro Barchiesi's version of Ovid's perspective on Augustus calls for a sign system in which the emperor's ability to manipulate all the signifying practices in his empire, not least of all those of the plastic and verbal arts, constrains everyone, not least of all artists, to implicate themselves in the process of replicating his own self-representations, thereby contributing, willingly or not, to exponential expansions of his ideological web and its reflecting and reflected glories. In this scheme Ovid's ambiguities and ironies, far from being deliberate spitballs hurled at an unmoving target, were best perceived as strategies of escaping headlong clashes with the emperor and his more powerful partisans. This formulation of the Augustan sign-system allows Barchiesi to have his cake and eat it too: that is, as Barchiesi imagines that milieu and moment, it was impossible for Ovid to mock the emperor explicitly, but, nevertheless, mock him he perhaps did anyhow, slyly and obliquely, or at least with the sort of fruitful (and entertaining) indeterminacy that the postmodern hermeneutics find useful and admire.

A similar if subtler belief in the ability of Augustus and his handlers to control the game of signs, indeed, to design the game board and thus determine how the game has to be played, by all players, anytime

1. See Habinek, 155–58, for a neat summary of this style of reading. This style is perhaps best characterized by 'optimistic' interpretations of Augustus, his renovations of Rome, and his entire regime. For a good analysis of what this optimism consists of, see Kallendorf, v–vii and *passim*.

and anywhere, is offered by Duncan Kennedy in his influential essay, “Augustan and Anti-Augustan: Reflections on Terms of Reference.” For Kennedy, the conflict between Augustus and Ovid is something of a fiction since the once fashionable terms “pro- and anti-Augustan” would seem to cancel each other out. Thanks to the “dynamic, dialogic framework” that constitutes Augustan discourse, “no statement (not even those made by Augustus himself) can be categorically ‘Augustan’ or anti-Augustan” (40–41). Either pole of this antinomy (those who favor Augustus versus those who don’t) can seize the other’s argument and turn it upside down. “The degree to which a voice is heard as conflicting or supportive is a function of the audience’s—or critic’s—ideology, a function, therefore, of *reception*” (40–41; emphasis in original). So far, so good: what seems to be said in blame of Augustus reminds us that what he demanded was praise, but, at the same time, his obsession with being praised, with having himself favorably represented, *semper, ubique, ab omnibus*, reminds us that there were reasons for blaming him (and that some people might even have busied themselves in such a pursuit). But Kennedy then continues his argument in this way: “Power is successful in so far as it manages not so much to silence or suppress as to *determine the consumption* of the oppositional voice within the discourse. Critics’ responses to Augustan poetry are a measure of the *continuing* capacity of Augustan ideology to determine its reception (41; emphasis in original). What this seems to mean is: not only when the Power in question is still in physical/temporal existence can it silence or not silence the opposing voices that are coeval with it, but also, even after it survives only in historical memory, it can still shape the ways in which both it and the voices that opposed it are received by posterity and judged by it. As Kennedy frames his proposition, the ghost of Power not only can influence how it is received and judged in its afterlife, but is also, in fact, very likely to do so.²

Nevertheless, barely half a century after Augustus died, Pliny the Elder, while meditating on the mutability of human fortune (*Natural History* 7.147–50), singled out Augustus as a prime example of human beings who are apparently possessed of fortune’s richest gifts but whose lives are nonetheless shot through, from beginning to end, with diverse griefs and humiliations and crimes (he lists, copiously, everything that, glaringly, does *not* find a place in Augustus’ own version of who he was and what he did, the *Res Gestae*). In Kennedy’s reading of how

2. For an incisive critique of Kennedy’s arguments, see Davis 2006, 9–22.

Augustan power functioned and continues to function, any opposition to that power exists chiefly to validate it, to prove its capacity to structure both how it will be seen and represented by its contemporaries *and* how those representations will be received by those who seek in aftertimes to understand it and its workings. In this version of the discourse of power, Pliny's ferocious emphasis on the opposing voices who trumpeted what went wrong with Augustus' life and reign merely serves to demonstrate how inevitable was the triumph of Augustus (and his spin-doctors) over his would-be detractors.³ But what Pliny's remarkable pages actually show is that, even before Tacitus had perfected the topic, Pliny expected his carefully crafted distillation of voices in conflict with Augustan triumphalism to find sympathetic eyes and ears. After Pliny, after Tacitus, from Dio Cassius down to Gibbon and beyond, the receptions of Augustus and his ideology are marked not so much by his capacity to control how his images will be viewed, but rather by the variety of contingencies that are utterly beyond his control and that in fact determine the pattern of "dynamic dialogic framework" between his admiring and disdainful receptors. Different temperaments in different times and different places for different reasons examine the fragments of Augustan ideology in different ways.

It's true that the reception of Augustus tended to be favorable while the notion of regal divine right (which his ideology had done much to establish) retained its hold on the mind of Europe; but even before it became fashionable to execute kings and thus abrogate their celestial warrants for dominion, there were times and places when students of the Augustan Vision paid attention to, were persuaded by, the voices that opposed him and that survive in Pliny, Tacitus, and Dio Cassius, the voices whose relevance and enduring power Kennedy's formulation seeks to diminish.⁴ So, in certain places and at certain times, certain kinds of temperaments receive Augustan ideology much as he intended it to be received by his contemporaries *and* by posterity; but at other times, and in other places, certain temperaments are proof against the emperor's devices and seductions, and then the voices that opposed his ideology sound out loud and clear. (This zigzag pattern of the ups and downs of great men's reputations tends to be ignored by them when they fondly hope to be Judged by History.)

Finally, when casting our yea or nay votes on the meanings of the

3. An excellent discussion of this Augustan strategy is provided by Davis 1999.

4. For an illuminating sketch of the receptions of Augustus, see Carter.

Augustan Solution, we want to bear in mind that the evidence on which we base our judgments remains, though meretriciously plentiful, pitifully meager and hopelessly fragmentary. Recall here that Dio Cassius, the writer who provides us with our fullest account of the reign, tells us forthrightly that “much that never occurs is noised abroad and much that happens beyond a doubt is unknown, and in the case of nearly every event a version gains currency that is different from the way it really happened.” He goes on to remark (53.19.4–6) that so vast now is the Roman Empire that “there is something happening all the time, in fact, every day and concerning these things, no one except the participants can easily have correct information, and most people do not even hear of them at all” (Ernest Carey’s Loeb translation). Dio is writing of his own time in this passage, but the situation that he finds himself in as he ponders the dearth and unreliability of his evidence has not changed, he insists, since the moment Augustus formalized his control of Rome in 27 BCE. It was then that the public began to be disinformed by those who governed in their name (53.19.2): “most things began to be kept in secret and concealed, and even though some things are perchance made public, they are distrusted just because they can not be verified; for it is suspected that everything is said and done with reference to the wishes of the men in power at the time and their associates” (3). Dio goes on to say that he will, of course, sift as best he can through the abundant evidence he has gathered, unreliable and contradictory though it often is, but he makes it very clear, most especially when he comes to deal with the various plots against Augustus (54.15ff.), that the official versions cannot be trusted. So, though the information is abundant, he is aware that too many pieces of the puzzle, some having been deliberately mislaid, are missing for good. “Dio accepts the Empire,” says Fergus Millar, “as the only stable form of government, but this in no way blinds him to the gap between political realities and constitutional forms” (93). For all his acceptance of the necessity of empire and his willingness to record the official version of its birth and growth, Dio was not prevented by the official version from “writing in an ironical, not to say cynical, tone of the political structure which Augustus erected. For to Dio this political structure was a mere façade, masking the simple reality of the rule of one man” (Millar, 97). In Dio, therefore, the pro and anti portions of the Augustan debate find an ironically harmonic disharmony, in which the supportive and the conflicting, the praisers and the blamers, almost succeed in sharing the same space time. For all his defects, which seem fewer now than they did before Fergus Millar reread him, Dio stands as

a cautionary emblem for us when we evaluate the first modern European king, rating his achievement, examining his motives, grading his character. We know much less than Dio knew, and our biases are, on balance, less sophisticated than his were. Aside from a few facts, what we know that Dio didn't know is how the palimpsest of reception and its complex genealogies thicken steadily and how endless and inevitable and inconclusive revisions and re-revisions of Augustus must be.

WHAT AUGUSTUS HAD IN MIND

So much for the ongoing dilemma of praise and blame that festers when moderns look into their ancient classical mirror. What I want to do now is try to imagine the perspectives of Augustus from the years 16 BCE down to 2 BCE, that is to say, from the years after he celebrated the Secular Games, the *Ludi Saeculares*, down to the time when his daughter, Julia, was banished for her dubious entertainments and possible political intrigues (see below, 133); that is to say, from the year in which the first edition of Ovid's *Amores* appeared in five books down to the year before the *Ars Amatoria* appeared, which is roughly the time when the revised edition of *Amores*, now distilled into three books, began to be circulated. I entertain little hope of getting inside the emperor's mind (which of his historians, pro or con, does not, whatever objectivity they may aspire to, end by doing exactly that?); but, as an experiment in literary criticism, I want to see if I can look at Ovid's early career through the eyes of the person who would eventually feel constrained, very possibly with some reluctance, to give him a one-way ticket to the Black Sea.

The five books of Ovid's first edition of the *Amores* appeared in 16 BCE or shortly thereafter. In the previous year Augustus had celebrated the Secular Games, an action, a spectacular religious event, which commemorated both the renewal of the Roman Nation and its preservation and salvation *by* the beneficence of the gods and *through* the courage and purity of will of their human agent, Gaius Julius Caesar Octavianus, the man who had received, from the senate and the people of Rome, just a decade before that, the splendid title Augustus. The decade that separated the gift of his new name from his celebration of and thanksgiving for the survival of Rome and its empire (and himself) had been rather more hectic than one might infer from glancing at the emperor's

own version of his reign or Karl Galinsky's *Augustan Culture* or even at the pages of Velleius Paterculus (2.88–91), who mentions plots against Augustus in order to emphasize both their futility and the emperor's luck and leadership.⁵ A huge portion of the Roman citizens who had survived the last wave of Rome's civil wars grew ever more willing to shut out the grim, ruinous past and to concentrate on a calm and ordered present that promised, after nearly a century of savage turmoil, a sustained abundance and an uncommon tranquility. This large and unsilent majority were delighted to have found an Augustus to protect them both from the barbarian hordes and from each other. But not everyone was dancing in the streets. A small but vigorous minority found their leader's settlement in some degree unacceptable; they were disaffected, they disliked his style of rehabbing Rome's buildings and statues, his revival—or rather reinvention—of Roman religion, his tinkering with its maps and calendars, his showy restoration of the censorship and of senatorial powers, his professionalization of the army—in short, his restoration of the republic as he claimed it had formerly been. So there were grumblings and protests (for instance, by M. Licinius Crassus and his dispute over who deserved the *spolia opima*; for which, see Cartledge, 36–37), and even some plots to overthrow the savior, though of these we hear little and know much less for reasons that Dio, as I've mentioned, makes clear.⁶ So, in these years 27–25 BCE, Augustus gets out of town and attends to various matters in Spain and Gaul; and he repeats this remedy for unrest again from 22 through 19 BCE in Sicily, Greece, and Asia Minor. He is, moreover, gravely ill both in 25 and in 23 BCE; in this latter fateful year he also endures one of the most serious of the plots against his throne and his life, as well as the death of Marcellus, his nephew on whom his hopes for his dynasty were pinned and whose loss, famously, Vergil would choose as the poignant, grieving closure for the first half of his epic.

In the year 16 BCE, therefore, Augustus must be feeling pretty well. He has weathered a swarm of dangers and difficulties, his opponents seem mostly to have perished or to have worn themselves out or to have been won over; both his retooling and his invention of the machinery of government are keeping pace with his fabrication of a viable and highly visible ideology for a distinctly Augustan Roman Empire. There is still

5. For an acute reading of Galinsky's erudite and laudatory representation of the emperor's reign, see Henderson.

6. See Seneca's pious remarks on these plots, *De brevitate vitae*, 4.5.

a lot to do, but it looks as if he now has both the means and the time to do it all, that is, to accomplish the aims of his quiet ‘revolution.’

A DOMESTIC SCENE

Then one day, someone—I like to think it’s his daughter, Julia—my inspiration for this piece of prosaic license is some of the Julia’s witticisms as they come down to us in Macrobius⁷—enters her father’s study carrying a bagful of scrolls. “Daddy,” she says, “have you heard about these swell poems by this wonderful new poet named Ovid, they are *so* funny.” No, he answers, he doesn’t know anything about any new poems. Aside from Vergil and Varius and Horace, he doesn’t, as she perfectly well knows, read much current verse. He does, though, have a vague memory of some Ovid or other—maybe it’s that bright young kid from Paelignia that Maecenas has been blathering about. His folks had sent him to study law, but apparently he ended up with the wrong crowd, so now he was doing what lots of idiots like that often did—he started scribbling so-called poems. “Couldn’t I read you a few of them, Daddy?” wheedles Julia, “just a few of them, just one?” “Sure,” says Daddy, “read me one.” When she’s finished the first one and starts a second, he stops her. “Ho hum,” says Augustus, “are people still writing that kind of stuff?” Julia attempts to counter his disdain by telling him that everybody is reading Ovid these days, that he’s all the rage, that everyone’s just crazy for him. But it turns out that by everyone she means, naturally, her cronies, those throngs of her lazy, stupid hangers-on who, having squandered their parents’ money, avoid the normal pursuits of grown-ups, the army, the law courts, government service, and, of course—despite his new laws!—marriage. These poor dismal creatures, having failed to make the transition from childhood to maturity, had latched on to an antiquated lifestyle under the illusion that it had never died or that this Ovid and other young whippersnappers like him had invented it. When Julia was barely out of diapers, her Daddy tells her, various people were still writing that sentimental crap. They called it love poetry but it was just timid smut. Catullus and his pal Calvus had started the craze back in the old days when Catiline was running amuck. This smarmy junk was fashionable for a while (he doesn’t, for obvious

7. See Richlin’s witty account of these delightful fragments of history—or gossip.

reasons, mention Gallus in this context; he skips over Tibullus; he forgets to mention Propertius or suppresses him). But nowadays, Daddy assures her, the love fad is dead as a doornail. So, her bright new discovery had better learn some new tunes or he's out of luck—he very much needs to make another career choice.

Julia rolls up her scroll, stuffs it back in her poetry bag and departs, convinced, of course, that her father is—she always knew it—a dinosaur and a Philistine and a party-pooper. Utterly ignorant of poetry, wholly lacking in a sense of humor, totally out of touch with what the age demands, with the new styles, with fashion.

But Julia is mistaken. Her father is himself a master craftsman of fashion, and there is little about it that he and his image makers don't know. In her circle and in the circles that ripple from them, Ovid's glittering fecklessness may have discovered its proper space time, and he may have stumbled upon his first and, in a way his ideal, audience in the silly creatures who cluster like moths about the flame of the emperor's daughter, people among whom the gospel of an erotic imperative that is beyond good and evil may survive and thrive. But in the vast population of Rome and Italy and the known world, among her father's multitude of supporters, though adultery and salacious celibacy by no means lose their attraction, love poetry and its worldview have all but faded. Their grandfathers (and grandmothers) and fathers (and mothers) may have found, some of them, their true selves in yielding or trying to yield themselves to un-Roman passions, but the disordered world that gave rise to that mode of what now seems—to Augustus and his loyal subjects—merely sentimental lust in pursuit of a glamorous self-destruction, that world has passed away; the times have changed and changed much for the better. Those who survived those old days and their erotic illusions, these sober, purposeful citizens, are more than satisfied with the new ideology (though not the practice) of moderation and its mild austerities.⁸ It is Julia and her Ovid and their friends who, deluded by ghosts from a vanished amative Utopia, are behind the times. It is Augustus and all the people, noble and plebian alike, who have kept him and keep keeping him in power, it is they who are on the cutting edge. So it might have seemed to Augustus if he had taken any notice of the first version of the *Amores* in 15 BCE. And, essentially, he would have been right.

8. See Clarke's shrewd caveat on the degree of popular acceptance of Augustus' resuscitated morality, 89–90.

WHEN SORROWS COME

We skip ahead now a decade and a half. During this period (15 to 1 BCE), Augustus has his downs and ups, but, for a while, on balance, more ups than downs. The stability of his regime grows steadily more secure, his vision of a new Rome and of his own role in shaping it shines constantly ever clearer. Ovid, meanwhile, has written an estimable tragedy and invented a new genre, the letters of lost ladies, and he has busied himself with revising, with winnowing and distilling, his first work, the *Amores*.⁹ Whether Augustus knew or cared anything about what the poet was up to during this period is utterly unknown, but it's not improbable that he heard reports of his daughter's continuing giggling, now over passages in one of Naso's works in progress; he may have heard rumors that there were some new poems that contained a few passages packed with snide remarks about Rome and its renewal, bits that smacked of Propertian insolence. Augustus would have paid little attention to this information. He was starting to have other things to worry about. He had begun to hear grim rumors, about Julia and her friends. Not about their taste in poetry but about their other diversions, about their taste in sexual entertainments, perhaps about their penchant for political intrigue. Finally, he would be forced to banish his daughter, and Antony's son, one of her playmates, and/or political cronies, committed suicide and the gilded soirees vanished. The next decade showed more downs than ups. There were continuing, accelerating worries about the succession, there were financial and military troubles. And then, Julia's daughter, another Julia, the emperor's granddaughter, showed that she had inherited her mother's flair for disobeying the Voice of the Father. We have no information about whether, like her mother, she combined a yen for subversive verse and treasonable politics with hankerings for illegal fornication. Whatever her infractions, she followed her mother into exile, on a different island. That same year Ovid also boarded a ship, his to Tomi at the end of the earth.¹⁰

Here too we have no information about what Ovid did wrong. Maybe Augustus had heard that there were possibly slanderous passages in the strange new epic Ovid was said to be undertaking, or in the patriotic poem that he'd also begun about the Roman calendar in

9. For a persuasive account of this process, see Tarrant, 16–17, 20–21, 28.

10. For a lively account of these events, see Balsdon, 82–89; for a more elaborate discussion, see Meise, 1–46.

its new imperial incarnation. Maybe the granddaughter's crimes made him decide, irrationally but explicably, that the infamous poem that was said to be a sort of sexual instruction manual was an incitement to adultery; maybe both Julias had read it once too often, the mother in rough drafts, her daughter in the deluxe edition. If so, the Emperor had been patient or indifferent long enough. And he was old and angry and tired, and these were the last straws (and with or without the poem, it would have been enough for a jealous informer to claim he had heard that Ovid was somehow complicit, however indirectly, in one of young Julia's dalliances). In any case, the last Julia and the smart-aleck poet both disappeared from the scene they loved best.

A POET IN AND OUT OF LUCK

But a quarter of a century before, back in 16 BCE, himself just over a quarter of a century old, in the flower of his young manhood, his first love elegies just being put in circulation, Ovid had looked at the world as his oyster. Of the poets who shone brightest in the glamorous 20s—Vergil gone, Tibullus gone—only Propertius, his mentor, and Horace, that sacred monster, remained, but both of them were in semiretirement, the one pretending to fiddle with antiquarian researches, the other immersed in playing gentleman farmer whilst dabbling in literary theory. There was the solid, stolid Varius Rufus, of course, but he was soothing his dotage by editing, at the emperor's request, Vergil's noble poem about pious Aeneas. And there were a host of others who were versifying, some good, some not so good, but Ovid had felt back then that he had the knack and more than the knack—and the feeling began to grow that maybe he would end up having the field to himself. His music was copious and fluent, it floated on its lilt and swing like feathers in a breeze, the poems all but sang themselves, their rhetoric was easy and deft, almost transparent, and they were brittle and bright and fun. He had stumbled on an affable if ironic pose that let him pump a bit more genuine life into the fading forms—he could do little with their content—that Propertius had exalted and then abandoned. He was on his way.¹¹

Some of Ovid's elders and not a few of his coevals were not much

11. See Harrison, 80–82, for a good account of Ovid's treatment of love elegy.

taken by his poems, but these were people who, for one reason or another had bought into—or given lip service to—the Augustan grand renewal of antique mores, old Cato’s Rome magically and paradoxically revived right here in modern Rome, the new metropolis, Alexandria on the Tiber. The revival, the revival of law and order and prosperity and reliable public services—all that was indeed spectacular. But its success hardly meant, so Ovid and his readers thought, that individuals should abandon their cultivated pleasures and diverse delights; that they should instead start trying to live their lives as if they had actually been transformed into those sweaty, stinking peasant farmers of olden times. Surely Augustus had not really intended that Romans should abandon everything that made modern life decent and livable; surely it was enough to give (or feign) tacit approval to the new (old) morality and the divine monarch’s new emphasis on duty and citizenship. Certainly the charming people Ovid was beginning to encounter, the fashionable circles into which he had gained entrée—those people had no intention of divesting themselves of sophisticated entertainment and luxurious leisure in order to devote themselves to the well-being of the hive. Julia was hardly a convincing advertisement for her father’s antique austerities. What was good enough for Julia was good enough for Ovid.

He was not much interested in what some of his new acquaintances had to say about lost liberty—they were a bit too earnest, these people, they sentimentalized idiotic old Cicero and the rotten republic as well. He had no time for that sort of conviction, and idealists tended to bore him. His only real ideal was the perfection of his art. And the more he focused on that perfection, the less he bothered himself with the gap between Julia’s worldview and the emperor’s. He was bubbling with ideas, and, as harsh, perhaps jealous, critics were quick to point out, he could scarcely dictate his verses fast enough.

Fast forward now (again) a decade and a half, to 1 BCE. Ovid is forty-two years old, smack in the middle of what was for a Roman advanced middle age; he is about to begin circulating his masterpiece, the *Ars Amatoria* (there will be, of course astonishingly, two more masterpieces after that, both of them completed in the desolation that was Tomi, certainly a testament to the purity of Ovid’s poetic will). He has arrived at the place he guessed might be his, at the pinnacle of the Roman Helicon, but the world is no longer his buffet, the world has changed again. In the previous year, Julia had been banished. The emperor, now beset by a variety of difficulties, is less inclined to tolerance for the foibles of others or indifference to what he or his loyal courtiers take to be disesteem

for the regime. The *Ars* shows all the familiar wit and dazzle and ease, but its undersongs glow with something mordant, something complexly dissonant. The emperor is no longer a remote, beneficent oddity; now he and his ideology and its ubiquitous iconography have invaded the air the poem breathes. The gap between the emperor's vision of civic tranquility and the poet's vision of libertarian innocence, never bridgeable, is no longer ignorable. A simultaneity of multiple causes, which may be conveniently symbolized by the punishment meted out to Julia and her friends, brings about a change in Ovid's thinking: he has begun to take the emperor's ideology personally. He has begun to think of liberty, not as a lost political reality but as an endangered personal, that is to say, poetic, necessity. Like Propertius before him, but in a very different way, he has begun to feel that the autonomy of his art, frivolous perhaps in the world's eyes yet precious in his own, has been threatened by the republican alibi for absolute monarchy.¹²

We will probably never know what moved Augustus to exile the last of the great poets who would come to be associated with his reign. But we do have, in the closing lines of *Tristia* 3.7 (43–54), the poet's most eloquent response to his emperor's anger:

singula ne referam, nil non mortale tenemus
 pectoris exceptis ingeniique bonis—
 en ego cum caream patria vobisque bonoque,
 raptaque sint, adimi quae potuere mihi,
 ingenio tamen ipse meo comitorque fruorque—
 Caesar in hoc potuit iuris habere nihil.

Of all we hold most dear there nothing is
 That wards off perishing save only goods
 The intellect has garnered. Look on me,
 Stripped of my country, of my friends and home—
 Whatever can be stolen, I have lost,
 Am destitute, alone, and yet I have,
 As comrade and as constant joy, my gift
 For fictions and for verse—and that I keep
 Where Caesar's jurisdiction cannot seize it.

This full-voiced challenge to Power from the spirit that Power had

12. For the pressures of Augustan ideology at this time and Ovid's response to them, see P. Johnson, 13–21, 39–40.

sought to annihilate ends with the defiant claim to immortality that echoes a similar claim made at the end of the *Metamorphoses*. But a subtler and, in a sense, more ferocious rebuke to Augustan ideology shapes the content *and* the form of *Tristia* 2, that long and elaborate poem in which brazen recriminations against tyranny masquerade as humble appeals for understanding, forgiveness, compassion.¹³

THE MEMOIRS OF ICARUS

The poem opens with an exordium in which the sincerity of the poet's spectacular abjection finds its validation in his passionate, irrational statement of complete aporia. Here he is again, he says, driven by madness to take up his pen and write in the treacherous elegiac meter, using the same medium to try to win mercy that had brought him to ruin:

at nunc—tanta meo comes est insania morbo—
saxa malum refero rursus ad ista pedem.

But now—so great is the madness, companion to disease—I carry the evil meter back to those rocks. (*Tristia* 2.15–16)

The poet is like a defeated gladiator who returns to the arena's fatal sands or a ship that escaped being wrecked only to venture back into the sea's tempests. (This latter simile, the wreck of the ship of poetry, recurs five times more—99, 330, 470, 496, 547—and becomes a prime thematic marker for the poem as a whole.) What knots the poem's exordium together is the word that we have just seen glorified in the proud boast of *Tristia* 3.7:

quid mihi vobiscum est, infelix cura, libelli,
ingenio perii qui miser ipse meo?

My notebooks, accursed obsession, what am I doing, picking you up—again? Haven't I already let my genius destroy me? (1–2)

So reads that poem's first distich: It was his *ingenium*, his gift, that

13. For a good account of this aspect of Ovid's finales, see Williams.

enabled Ovid to write his poetry, and it was his poetry that led glamorous Roman ladies and gentlemen to wish to know him better, or, more specifically, it was that infamous volume of his, the *Ars Amatoria*, his *The Joys of Seduction*, that caused his emperor to want to suppress his book and remove him from the city his songs had polluted. This confession occurs toward the beginning of *Tristia* 2.12–13:

hoc pretium curae vigilatorumque laborum
cepimus, ingenio est poena reperta meo.

My crime and punishment were my reward for my poetic labor, the exquisite revision and sleepless nights given over to the search for artistic perfection. Once again, it is to my genius for verse that I owe my condemnation:

No wonder, caught in this torrent of despondency, that the poet abjures his art so fiercely. But if one shape of poetic madness propelled him into criminal poetic licentiousness, another now takes hold of him, and he becomes first a gladiator and then a ship, both of them marked for doom. He thinks of Telephus, whose wound could be cured only by Achilles, who had inflicted it. On the surface of this equation, the poetry that wounded Ovid must heal him, but turn it on its other side, and it is Augustus, who dealt the wound, who must cure it. Another hopeful example of a miraculous salvation occurs to him: poetry is not always injurious, since Augustus himself had asked *matresque nurusque* (chaste Roman wives and their daughters-in-law) to perform choral songs at the Secular Games and thereby propitiate Ops, the goddess-wife of Saturn, as well as the emperor's own patron god Apollo (23–24). There is a nice irony lurking in this example of innocent and propitious poetry since it was to protect these very wives and daughters-in-law from his salacious Muse that Ovid and his poem were condemned; and not a few passages in the poem suggest that, for all Ovid's elaborate disclaimers, at least some of the ladies in question were among the dangerous poem's most avid readers.¹⁴ Be that as it may, seemingly self-convinced by these exempla, Ovid turns his opening line of argument inside out:

his precor exemplis tua nunc, mitissime Caesar,

14. For a telling analysis, see Roy Gibson 2003, 25–35; see also Hollis, 97.

fiat ab ingenio mollior ira meo.

Won over by such precedents as these, most compassionate Caesar, I pray that your anger grow gentler by virtue of my genius (and so, what ruined me may yet rescue me). (27–28)

There is, granted, a certain logic to this line of argument: If my poetic skill moved you to hate me, perhaps that same skill, more wisely employed, may cause you to relent. And indeed perhaps it might have done so had this letter, *Tristia* 2, been sent. Or rather, perhaps it might have been successful (had it been sent) if its poetic skill had been employed with more ambiguity and less sarcasm. But the genius that condemned Ovid to the miseries of Tomi is not deployed in this poem for the purposes of begging for a pardon that was always unlikely to come. It is used not to implore clemency, but to celebrate the purity and the indomitable autonomy of the poetic vocation. With an insolence that is both breathtaking and hilarious, the poem's structures and rhythms zigzag from what present themselves as whimpering pleas to what reveal themselves, as the poem gathers its momentum, as corrosive innuendoes.¹⁵ What some readers of the poem take as discreet or politic or timid indeterminacies or as blank sheets on which Augustan ideology inscribes itself inevitably, indelibly, eternally (one thinks here perhaps of Kafka's *In the Penal Colony*) or as the inept fumbling of servile flattery, I hear as a meticulously crafted assertion of a great poet's claim not to innocence but to the intellectual and spiritual freedom that hard-won mastery brings with it. I hear it as a ringing vindication of the transforming power of poetry, its capacity for creating nurturing beauties that endure even in the face of the forces of untruth that crave to erase them. Maybe poets don't legislate for humankind, maybe they don't always purify the language of the tribe. But if they haven't been co-opted into aiding in the replication of the status quo's official doctrine, in advertising the values of its sign-systems, they do help us to liberate our minds from the clichés we're born into and inculcated with, and they do, again and yet again, enable us to free our imaginations.

This is a modern, rather romantic way of paraphrasing what I take to be the gist of this letter to an emperor that was in fact a letter to the world. The manner of the poem is, as we expect from this poet, slyer,

15. Both Nugent and B. Gibson furnish cogent and lively readings of this aspect of the poem; see also, Hinds, 230.

more devious, more Mozartian, more ingenious than my prosaic encapsulation of its matter can suggest. ‘Ingenious’ is the key term here. A little more than halfway through the poem’s meandering, shifting patchwork of antitheses (guilty and unguilty/ crazy and sensible/ inexcusable and extenuatory), Ovid slips into Propertian mode (329ff.). A tiny rowboat, adequate on a lake, dare not venture out into the epical ocean. His frail talent is barely suited to trivial themes in trivial styles. Had he undertaken to represent, *allegorice*, per request, the Augustan Gigantomachia, he would have fallen flat on his face. Indeed, he did once try his hand at Augustan grandeur and flopped miserably. So he went back, like a dog to its vomit perhaps, to the erotic style he knew best, and he dearly wished he hadn’t because that’s exactly when he landed himself in hot water. So, lines 341–42, in the nice translation of S. G. Owens:

non equidem vellem: sed me mea fata trahebant
inque meas poenas ingeniosus eram.

Like a failed Stoic dragged unwillingly to his destiny I lavished my talent
on my own destruction.

A naïve, regretful artist, then, hoist with his own petard.

It was a theme that Ovid was perhaps a bit too fond of. We remember in the *Metamorphoses* the fate of Marysas when he vies with Apollo in a music contest or the punishment of the daughters of Pierus who were transformed into magpies by the Muses whose artistry they had challenged, or—in a tale that unfolds with a peculiarly sinister beauty—the vengeful transformation of Arachne after she triumphs over Minerva as a weaver of tapestries. More spectacular than these punishments, and more complex, is the tale of Daedalus and his son Icarus, which Ovid recounts in both the *Metamorphoses* and the *Ars*. Daedalus, the ingenious master engineer, had been summoned to Crete by King Minos to design and build a labyrinth to contain the monstrous Minotaur. When he completed his work, the king refused to let him and his son Icarus leave the island. In order to provide himself and Icarus with a means of escape, Daedalus constructs flying machines for himself and the boy (feathers held together by wax are strapped to their bodies). When he has fitted his son into the winged contraption and demonstrated how to operate it, the pair of them fly off to freedom. But Icarus, who fancies himself a sort of artist of the air, forgets the instructions his father had carefully given him, surges upward too near the sun, melts the wax

that holds his wings together, and plunges into the sea to which he thus gives his name. Icarus doesn't anger the gods with an artist's vanity like Arachne or Marysas (he is merely youthful, naïve, impetuous); but like them he is an overreacher, and he transgresses authority in another way: like Phaethon, extravagantly overestimating the degree of his skill, he disobeys parental instruction, he defies the Voice of the Father. In this story, like father, like son. Daedalus, himself something of an overreacher, challenges both the authority of the king and laws of nature. Too much *ingenium*, too much confidence in the powers of one's genius, too little respect for one's limitations. Both of them, then, father and son alike, are in different ways emblems of the capacity of art for self-destruction. Fused together, the artist and the victim of his art unite to symbolize both the power of art and the dangers of that power.

The poet as transgressive artist, the self-destructive artist as criminal, that is the unambiguous confession that Ovid makes when he characterizes himself as fatally and wickedly *ingeniosus*. But then *Tristia* 2 takes a strange turn and subtly modulates into an ingenious and incontrovertible defense which renders Ovid innocent of salacious intent even as it reveals Augustus as guilty both of astonishing and almost systematic misreadings of Greek and Roman poetry and of what can only be thought of as a malicious or stupid misuse of his legal powers, namely, his wanton condemnation of an innocent man, one who is the faithful servant of the Muses, who stands squarely in the great tradition of Greco-Roman poetry.

Never, Ovid insists, had he tried to lure decent women into indecencies; his amatory poems were not really improper. Furthermore, taking a leaf from Catullus that Martial will also borrow, he claims that his personal life has been virtuous (*vita verecunda est, Musa iocosa mea*, 354) though his Muse has liked to fool around. You can't judge a book by its covers—if you do, you might end up thinking that writers of epic were serial killers. In any case:

denique composui teneros non solus amores:
composito poenas solus amore dedi.

Finally, I am not the only poet to compose delicate love poems, but I am the only poet to have been punished for writing such verse. (361–62)

Ovid begins his long list of the unindicted with Anacreon and Sappho and Callimachus and Menander—love poets all of them, a predictable

selection, though one not without its dangers for this line of argument since these poets, even if they are read Horatianally, that is, by boys and girls, *pueris virginibusque* (370), might seem to some readers a bit racy. So, suddenly he shifts gears. His next example is the *Iliad*, which, like the *Odyssey* that follows it on the list, turns out to be essentially concerned with erotic entanglements hardly less suggestive than those featured in Ovid's own volumes. He then devotes twenty lines to the illegal passions strewn throughout Greek tragedy before he breaks off from citing these instances, overwhelmed by that embarrassment of riches. He next passes on to satyr plays and to various authors who write overtly pornographic works, sometimes with a distinctly autobiographical cast to them. Works like these find their place beside the lyric and epic and tragic authors in public libraries where they are ready to be opened by all and sundry.

Cross over to the Latin section of the superb library on the Palatine that Augustus himself had built and stocked with classic volumes and you find, to be sure, high-minded poets like Ennius and Lucretius, but—and these by far outnumber their sober opposites—you also come upon those poets who, like Ovid himself, offer their readers *multa iocosa*, lots of laughs. In defining these poets with whom he classes himself, Ovid heads their list with Catullus and Calvus, founders of Roman love elegy, then breezes through other poets whose works are lost to us, then briefly and bizarrely mentions the infamous and tragic Gallus whose crime was not the composition of amative verse but drunken slander of his emperor (445–46). Oddly, having characterized the major themes of the genre by describing them as they appear in the corpus of Tibullus (447–64), he relegates the poetry of his chief model Propertius to a single distich, emphasizing the fact that Propertius, even Propertius, who closes this list of frivolous poets of eros, suffered no disgrace from writing the kind poetry he wrote (*destrictus minime nec tamen ille nota est*, 466). Slyly, Ovid then moves away from the topic of erotic verse to take up other frivolous poetic genres, instructions for games of chance and skill, poetry about physical training, cosmetics, throwing parties. He admits that he indulged in composing this sort of trivia when he wrote a book on cosmetics (instead of slaving away at imperial epic as the age demanded). Having confused the issue thusly (and transparently) by mixing eros with other trivial pursuits, he again remarks that he alone has been singled out for punishment from all the unepical poets (as though writing a sexual manual were the same as writing a manual for playing monopoly or poker). He then compares his own style of frivolity with the filthy frivolities of mime shows (which the emperor delights in witnessing and

which he handsomely funds). Ovid briefly remarks that there is nowadays a taste for smuggling lascivious representations into serious paintings of mythological scenes. Then, having added, apparently, the last ingredient to this bewildering stew of extenuating circumstances, he suddenly veers back to poetry and presents his final and unannounced witness for the defense. It is Augustus' own personal poet, the author of the epic that proves the claim of the Julian clan to unending hegemony in Rome even as it proves the claim of Rome to unending world empire.

Others sing of war, some of the victories of your clan, and some of your personal victories. I can't do that, repeats the poet for what seems the hundredth time, because nature has provided scant powers to my *ingenium* (that fatal word again). But the lucky poet of your *Aeneid* (yours now, not his) conducted "weapons and the man" (*arma virumque*) right into the boudoir of that Carthaginian temptress. And no part of the poem is more eagerly read and reread than this section, the one that centers directly on *non legitimo foedere*, 536, "on an unlawful compact," as Owen dryly renders the snickering euphemism. Dido and her new friend, that heroic pair, were fornicating, they were committing adultery. A few centuries later, St. Augustine, no partisan of fornication, will memorably, as we have seen, confirm Ovid's judgment on the best-loved book of Vergil's epic. Not everyone will agree with those judgments, but quite a few readers will. In any case, it is the last thing that Augustus would want to hear about *his* poem, and Ovid underlines this final intertextual zinger by reminding his most prominent intended reader that Vergil had been prone to romantic notions from the very first, when, in his *Eclogues*, he imagined his very close friend, Cornelius Gallus, and others of his erotic ilk, yearning for bucolic embraces.

Having gathered together this mass of exculpatory evidence from classical literature and from the emperor's own aesthetic predilections, Ovid reverts, in his peroration, to the groveling abjection that informed his exordium. The crime is old, he says, but the punishment is new (540): *supplicium patitur non nova culpa novum*. He has had a good record up to now, he says, the work in question was written when he was a young man, and his recent work shows a change of heart; it is no longer, *remissum*, flippant, easy going. The poet is now sailing the epic ocean in a sturdier boat, he is at work on a patriotic poem on the Roman Augustan calendar and a long narrative of huge philosophical and patriotic import, a new style of epic, a sort of universal history that gestures to the inevitability of the Augustan settlement. These protestations and pleadings judder and speed their way to a respectful and decorous finale—Ovid

was not for nothing trained as a lawyer—in which he advances, rather in the manner of Socrates apologizing, a modest proposal. The poet doesn't expect to be recalled from exile, but in exchange for dreadful Tomi, he would appreciate a safer, slightly more tranquil and more civilized spot for his chastisement, one more suitable to his misdemeanor—or to his rotten luck in attracting the hostile gaze of an elderly autocrat.

WHEN WORLDS COLLIDE

The poem amazes for its brilliant display of sustained improvisation and for its torrent of daredevil tactics. But of course the letter was not written to be sent to its addressee, nor was it really composed to establish the innocence of its writer, nor even, very much, his desire to define and fix the malice of his tormentor. Instead, it celebrates what happens when two irreconcilable sign-systems collide and the feeble energies of art smash into the seemingly irresistible yet curiously inefficacious brute force of governments that are desperate to usurp the strengths of art and direct them to their own designs. Very much of the time in such collisions it is art that shatters into oblivion, and sometimes the artists who confront despotisms are noble, or if you like, naïve: they are idealists who put their art in the service of truth and martyr themselves and their art in the eternal name of truth. Ovid was not noble and he was not naïve, nor did he shatter.

It was chance or temperament or a bit of both that caused him to take up and don the mantle of Propertius and so become the standard bearer of a threadbare residual ideology, that of the glamorous libertarianism of Catullus and Calvus, of Antony and Gallus and of their companions. At some point, maybe just after he had published his first version of the *Amores*, he may well have begun to sense that his poetic manner and matter were becoming not only passé but increasingly ill-suited to the ideology that was now clearly dominant and that was likely to remain so, barring various accidents or miracles, for the foreseeable future. And soon after that, like Propertius before him, he began to discover that his poetic and his civic ego were all but identical, and by that time—like Lucan or Marlowe or Blake or Byron or Hugo or Wilde or Pound or like Mandelstam, who called his second volume of poems *Tristia*—by that time he had realized his talent lay both in imagining extravagant beauties and in dissecting, with a keen, quick scalpel,

a smug grandiloquence that wants to control beauty and to expropriate it for its own needs or, failing in that attempt, to expunge it. By the time this coherence of identity had become not only a dawning reality but a conscious choice, Ovid had been taken up by Julia and her pretty friends. And that cursed blessing seems to have provided him with an enthusiastic audience and a quite false sense of security.

In any case, at this time (we are now roughly between the publication of the first edition of *Amores* and the first Julia's banishment), when the emperor is still anxious to perfect the façade and perhaps the reality of his great-uncle's legendary clemency and tolerance, the loudest critics of his regime, Labienus, Cassius Severus, and Cremutius Cordus, are still flying safely under the radar.¹⁶ So, Ovid in his heyday finds himself imitating the bravado and the hijinks of his Icarus without much concerning himself with how that story invariably ends. *Tristia* 2 looks back at the moment when its poet gave into the temptations of Icarus, and it does so with an exuberant mixture of small regret and giddy rejoicing. Like Icarus, Ovid had defied the Voice of the Father and he had crashed and burned in the process; but, unlike Icarus, he was not annihilated—shipwrecked, yes, but, amazingly, still alive and kicking, with his self-respect and his genius and his poetic integrity intact.¹⁷ And the bravado that had landed him there on the Black Sea at the fringes of civilization, far forever from his wife and friends and the city he loved, that bravado survived to nourish the last perfections of his art and gave him the strength to announce that his art would outlast the empire whose emperor had inspired him and also tried to destroy him; that when the empire was gone and its first emperor existed mainly as a ubiquitous yet ghostly memory, stored in the history books which tried to piece its puzzles together, the complete beauty of his art would continue to flourish and, century after century, to seed new beauties, not least among them, his testament, his own version of the erotic imperative whose core meaning, freedom, he had learned from his mentor, Propertius.

16. For the state-sponsored suppression of intellectual and artistic freedom at this time, and for what little we know about these orators and historians who bravely celebrated the ideologies that challenged “the Augustan settlement,” see Forbes and Dettenhofer; for an excellent discussion of the significance of Phaedrus' *Fables* 3.10, see Langlands, 220–23; for a different version of these matters, see Raaflaub and Samons.

17. For judicious estimations of his final stance, see Newlands and also P. Johnson, 122–24.