

10

Who was this I you read, this trifier in tender passions?
You want to know, posterity? Then attend: –
Sulmo is my homeland, where ice-cold mountain torrents
make lush our pastures, and Rome is ninety miles off.
Here I was born, in the year both consuls perished
at Antony's hands; heir (for what that's worth)
to an ancient family, no brand-new knight promoted
just yesterday for his wealth.
I was not the eldest child: I came after a brother

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10 born a twelvemonth before me, to the day
 so that we shared a birthday, celebrated one occasion
 with two cakes, in March, at the time
 of that festival sacred to armed Minerva – the first day in it
 stained by the blood of combat. We began
 15 our education young: our father sent us to study
 with Rome's best teachers in the liberal arts.
 My brother from his green years had the gift of eloquence,
 was born for the clash of words in a public court;
 but I, even in boyhood, held out for higher matters,
 20 and the Muse was seducing me subtly to her work.
 My father kept saying: 'Why study such useless subjects?
 Even Homer left no inheritance.' Convinced
 by his argument, I abandoned Helicon completely,
 struggled to write without poetic form;
 25 but a poem, spontaneously, would shape itself to metre –
 whatever I tried to write turned into verse.
 The years sped silently by: we arrived at manhood,
 my brother and I, dressed for a freer life,
 with the broad stripe and the purple draped from our shoulders,
 30 each still obsessed by his own early pursuits.
 But when he was barely twenty years old, my brother
 died – and from then I lost a part of myself.
 I did take the first step up the governmental ladder,
 became a member of the Board of Three;
 35 the Senate awaited me; but I chose to narrow my purple
 stripe: there lay a burden beyond my strength.
 For such a career I lacked both endurance and inclination:
 the stress of ambition left me cold,
 while the Muse, the creative spirit, was forever urging on me
 40 that haven of leisure to which I'd always leaned.
 The poets of those days I cultivated and cherished:
 for me, bards were so many gods.
 Often the ageing Macer would read me what he'd written
 on birds or poisonous snakes or healing herbs;
 45 often Propertius, by virtue of that close-binding
 comradeship between us, would recite
 his burning verses. Ponticus, noted for epic, and Bassus,

pre-eminent in iambics, both belonged
 to my circle; Horace, that metrical wizard, held us
 spellbound with songs to the lyre. 50
 Virgil I only saw, while greedy fate left Tibullus
 scant time for our friendship. He
 came after Gallus, then Propertius followed:
 I was next, the fourth in line.
 And as I looked up to my elders, so a younger generation 55
 looked up to me: my reputation soon spread.
 When first I recited my earliest poems in public
 my beard had only been shaved once or twice:
she fired my genius, who now is a Roman byword
 because of those verses, the girl to whom I gave 60
 the pseudonym of 'Corinna'. My writing was prolific,
 but what I thought defective, I myself
 let the flames claim for revision. On the brink of exile,
 raging against my vocation, my poems, I burnt work
 that could have found favour. My heart was soft, no stronghold 65
 against Cupid's assaults, prey to the lightest pang.
 Yet, despite my nature, though the smallest spark would
 ignite me, no scandal ever smeared my name.
 When I was scarce past boyhood I was briefly married
 to a wife both worthless and useless; next 70
 came a bride you could not find fault with, yet not destined
 to warm my bed for long; third and last
 there's the partner who's grown old with me, who's learnt to
 shoulder
 the burden of living as an exile's wife.
 My daughter, twice pregnant (but by different husbands) made 75
 me
 a grandfather early on, while she was still
 just a slip of a girl. By then *my* father had completed
 his lifespan of ninety years. For him I wept
 just as he would have done had I been the one taken.
 Then, next, I saw my mother to her grave. 80
 Ah, lucky the pair of them, so timely dead and buried,
 before the black day of my disgrace!
 And lucky for me, that they are not still living

85 to witness my misery, that they felt no grief
 on my account. Yet if there survives from a life's extinction
 something more than a name, if an insubstantial wraith
does escape the pyre, if some word, my parental spirits,
 has reached you about me, if charges stand to my name
 in the Stygian court, then understand, I implore you
 90 – and you I may not deceive – that my exile's cause
 was not a crime, but an error. So much for the dead. I return
 now
 to you, my devoted readers, who would know
 the events of my life. Already my best years were behind me –
 age had brindled my hair, and ten times since my birth,
 95 head wreathed with Pisan olive, the victorious Olympic
 charioteer had carried off the prize
 when the wrath of an injured prince compelled me to make my
 way to
 Tomis, on the left shore of the Black Sea.
 The cause (though too familiar to everyone) of my ruin
 100 must not be revealed through testimony of mine.
 Why rake up associates' meannesses, harm done me by house-
 slaves,
 and much further suffering, not a whit less harsh
 than the exile itself? Yet my mind disdained to yield to trouble,
 showed itself invincible, drew on its strength,
 105 till I, forgetting myself and my old leisured existence,
 took arms on occasion with unpractised hand;
 by sea and land I suffered as many misfortunes
 as the stars between the unseen and the visible poles.
 Through long wanderings driven, I at length made landfall
 110 on this coast, where native bowmen roam; and here,
 though the din of neighbouring arms surrounds me, I still lighten
 my sad fate as best I can
 with the composition of verse: though there is none to listen
 this is how I spend, and beguile, my days.
 115 So the fact that I live still, to grapple with such grim hardships,
 unwearied, yet, of the light and all it brings,
 I owe, my Muse, to you: it's you who afford me solace,
 who come as rest, as medicine to my cares;

you my guide and comrade, who spirit me from the Danube
 to an honoured seat on Helicon; who have
 120 offered me that rare benefit, fame while still living,
 a title rarely granted till after death.
 Nor has Envy, belittler of all that's present, sunk her
 malignant fangs into any work of mine:
 125 for although our age has produced some classic poets,
 Fame has not grudged my gifts renown.
 There are many I'd rank above me: yet I am no less quoted
 than they are, and most read throughout the world.
 So if there's any truth in poetic predictions, even
 should I die tomorrow, I'll not be wholly earth's.
 130 Which I was it triumphed? True poet or fashion's pander?
 Either way, generous reader, it is you I must thank.

IV.10

This is the most famous of all the exilic poems, and indeed among the best-known works that Ovid ever wrote. The fame, however, has stemmed almost entirely from the fact of its being, uniquely, a poetic autobiography, the major source for our knowledge concerning Ovid's life, and this has fundamentally influenced the way critics have looked at it. Correcting this trend, recent scholarship (Fredericks [Nagle], Evans, Dickinson, Fairweather) has emphasized that, as Fredericks (p. 141) put it, IV.10 should be treated 'as a poem which happens also to be an autobiography, rather than an autobiography which happens to be a poem'. Such an approach has yielded interesting results, but also much disagreement on detail, especially – and predictably – as regards the poem's structure, which tends to get over-schematized in incompatible ways. In general we can probably agree on a proem (1–2) and conclusion (131–2) addressed to the reader, with the main body of the poem divided into two halves: the first (3–64) dealing with Ovid's public career, his choice of poetry over the senatorial *cursus honorum*, the second (linked to the first at 65–6 by the juxtaposition of amatory poetry and the admission of a romantic heart) being an account of his personal life – marriages, exile, the comfort afforded by his art (67–130), with a clear distinction drawn between literature and life, between the erotic poems and the personally blameless life of their author.

As autobiography the poem is selective, artful, carefully put together to present a persuasive case: in fact, as has recently been pointed out (Fairweather, pp. 182–5), in many ways it resembles a courtroom speech for the defence, an *apologia*. There is a good deal of chronological emphasis (a boon for modern scholars, but probably designed in the first instance to create a spurious sense of specificity). Ovid is characteristically ingenious in the way he conveys a series of dates by poetic periphrasis and allusion to anything from the consular year or the religious calendar to Olympiads and the official dress code (see below). The recurrent notion of exile-as-death is underscored by deliberate echoes of funerary inscriptions (Fairweather, pp. 186ff., and cf. *Tr.* III.3, with my notes), suggesting that at one level IV.10 is to be regarded as a self-composed epitaph. Most fascinating of all (Fairweather, pp. 193–6, a brilliant piece of detective work), Ovid appears to have trimmed the account he gives of his life to coincide as far as possible – and some of the coincidences are indeed striking – with Augustus's own career, as recorded in the Emperor's lost *De Vita Sua*, but partially recoverable from the *Res Gestae* and Suetonius. Fairweather (p. 195) summarizes the 'secret message' Ovid may have

been sending Augustus in a new bid for sympathy based on community of experience:

I am a man like you. Just how much like you perhaps you have never considered. I too am *equestri familia ortus* [sprung from an equestrian family]; the year when both consuls fell in battle was important to me too: that was the year I was born. At the age of nineteen, like you, I was bereaved and, like you, I entered public life. I was actually a *triumvir*. Can you imagine it? What a laugh! And then, consider my private life. I too have been married three times, and it is my third wife who has brought me happiness. I too have a daughter, married more than once. I too have grandchildren.

Was Aristotle's dramatic theory (if not the *Poetics*) known in Rome? Ovid's claim to have erred rather than sinned is oddly like the position of the tragic hero whose sufferings stem not from misdeeds but rather from *hamartia* (*Poet.* 1453 a 8ff.); and such ill fortune should cause, not only pity, but also fear that it can happen to a man like ourselves (*ibid.* a 5). Could Ovid have been applying this *argumentum ad hominem* to Augustus?

All the emphasis in IV.10 is on Ovid's creative achievement, justification through his poetic *œuvre*. The Muse – he repeats – is not merely his companion in exile, a theme picked up (along with several others) from the introductory poem to Book IV, but the linchpin of his entire career, the guarantor of his posthumous immortality. The love-poetry that ruined his life is also his true glory. The omission in this context of any serious mention of what today is regarded as his major work, the *Metamorphoses*, has caused unnecessary puzzlement. Ovid was not delivering an academic judgment. As Evans saw (*PC*, p. 86), what he is after here is a maximum contrast between Ovid *then* and Ovid *now*, between the erotic elegies and those written from exile. Selectivity applied to more than the details of his life. While we should be grateful for the facts thus revealed, we need to recognize that they are all subsumed to Ovid's exposition of the poetic vocation as the major obsession of his life. Here even the usual self-exculpation version of his fall, the hyped-up complaints about Tomis, are replaced by a stoic, almost contemptuous retelling of the facts (97–114), followed by a splendid tribute (115ff.) to the sustaining power of creative art, and a confident prediction of immortality. Almost two millennia later that proud claim has been triumphantly vindicated.

3–4 Sulmo, the modern Sulmona, lies in a flat rich plain among the mountains of the Abruzzi. In Ovid's day the region was the home of the Paelignians. Cf. *Am.* II.16.1–10, and in general, for biographical details drawn from this poem, my Introduction, pp. xvff.

5–6 The consuls A. Hirtius and C. Vibius Pansa in 43 BC fought Mark Antony at Mutina, defeating him but losing their own lives in the process: cf. Vell. Pat. 2.61.4, Tac. *Ann.* I.10.

7–8 On Ovid's equestrian status see, e.g., *Am.* III.8.9, III.15.6, *Tr.* IV.2.15–16; and above, Introduction, p. xiii.

9–14 The festival alluded to was the Quinquatrus (19–23 March), on the last four days of which gladiatorial combats took place. Ovid places his, and his brother's, birth on the first of these four days, i.e. on 20 March. The connection with Minerva was early, but fortuitous, linked to the fact that the goddess was traditionally believed (a) to have been born and (b) to have had a temple dedicated to her on that day. The nineteenth of March was originally a festival of Mars. See De Jonge, pp. 194–5 for a full discussion.

29–30 The 'broad stripe and the purple' indicated the *tunica laticlavata*, restricted to the sons of senators and *equites*, and signifying the wearer's intention of pursuing a political career. Cf. Suet. *Div. Aug.* 38, 94; Luck *Tr.* II, p. 269.

33–4 The 'Board of Three' meant the *tresviri* (though an indirect allusion to the *triumviri* was also likely): either the *tresviri monetales*, who oversaw the public mint, or the *tresviri capitales*, in charge of prisons and executions. For no very good reason (except perhaps to further an ironic sense of subsequent rough justice) most scholars have preferred the latter: cf. De Jonge, p. 200.

35–6 The reference to choosing 'to narrow my purple stripe' refers to Ovid's adopting the *tunica angusticlavata*, the normal dress of an *eques* without senatorial ambitions.

43–54 For the various members of this Poetic Succession see Glossary, Bassus, Gallus, Horace, Ponticus, Tibullus, Virgil.

57–62 For 'Corinna' see *Am.* I.5, I.11, II.6, II.8, II.11, II.12, II.13, II.14, II.15, II.17, II.19, III.7, III.12; and cf. Green *OEP*, pp. 22–5.

61–3 Ovid often refers to burning his own inferior work: see, e.g., *Tr.* I.7.15–16 and 21–2, IV.1.101–2, V.12.61. The fact that such references only occur in the exilic poems suggests that the gesture may have been meant to imply symbolic funereal connotations.

69–74 On Ovid's marriages see Introduction, p. xiv–xviii, and Green *OEP*, pp. 21–5, 30–32, 40–43. Cf. notes on *Tr.* I.6.25ff. (above, p. 214) and IV.3 (above, p. 258–9).

75–6 For Ovid's daughter by his second wife, and her two marriages, see note to *Tr.* I.3.19–20 (above, p. 209).

77–8 Though the evidence does not allow a precise chronology, it seems clear that if Ovid's father died, at ninety, c. AD 5 (i.e. long enough before Ovid's *relegatio* to leave time for his wife to follow him), having thus been

born c. 85 BC, then Ovid's own birth in 43 BC, when his father would have been in his forties, was somewhat late, so that he and his brother may have been the offspring of a second or third marriage on his father's part.

85-6 Ovid seems (naturally enough, considering his Epicurean leanings) to have had considerable doubts about any kind of survival after death: the concept is almost always introduced, as here, by a conditional. See, e.g., *Am.* III.9.59-60, *EP* I.2.111, III.2.98, and especially *Tr.* III.3.37ff. with my note *ad loc.* (above, p. 237).

93-6 Ovid was exiled in late AD 8 at the age of fifty-one. The Olympic Games were held quadrennially, i.e. every fifth year by inclusive reckoning, at Olympia near Pisa in the north-west Peloponnese, with a wreath of wild olive as prize; Ovid here, as elsewhere (*EP* IV.6.5-6), equates the Olympiad with the Roman five-year *lustrum*.

105-6 Some scholars interpret these arms in a quasi-metaphorical sense as the weapons of patience and equanimity which the times demanded (cf. De Jonge, p. 216), but this is surely wrong: what Ovid is thinking about, here as elsewhere (e.g. *Tr.* IV.1.69-78, with my note, pp. 256-7), is the need, shared by young and old alike, to man the defences of Tomis against tribal raiders.

123-4 Ovid's references to Envy (*Livor*) are suggestive: cf. *Am.* I.15.39, *EP* III.4.73-4. Is it possible that Ovid on such occasions is hoping the reader will think, by verbal association, of Livia?

OVID

THE POEMS OF EXILE

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With a New Foreword

TRANSLATED WITH
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