

*DECIPHERING THE BARBARIANS:  
OVID'S METAMORPHOSES AT THE ASSIMILATION  
OF THE NEW WORLD*

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In recent years we have been challenged repeatedly to rethink the ideological frames which enforce the ways western scholars approach non-western cultures. Such discussions show that ideological overcoding hardly remains restricted to the way we approach non-western cultures. Our idea of the Middle Ages or the Renaissance —our occidentalism if you will— are constructs as much as our orientalism. Canons of literature, linguistics, historiography bear within them the empires of which they are part. At times our canonical assumptions render invisible mechanisms involved in the transmission of empire. This is no less true for classical scholarship looking at the Roman empire than for Renaissance studies occupied with the rereading of ancient empire. This morning I would like to think with you about the ways ideas of empire portrayed in classical literature act as relays in the formulation of ideas about modern empire. Specifically I would make several observations about Ovid's account of his exile on the eastern frontier of the Roman empire in the first century A.D. and notice how they discover an audience on the western frontier of Christendom in the sixteenth century. As we will see, the transit from one frontier to another over a period of fifteen hundred years shows in dramatic ways how the experiences of an exile from one empire may be appropriated by another for its construction and extension.

I

The Roman empire remains for classical scholarship a mental construct of fantasy that must be reinforced through the elaboration of the classical canon. In this fantasy Ovid is a troublesome poet whose disruptive effervescence has been met by continuous efforts to control his energy. In the late classical period Quintilian warns against the seductive quality of his easy style. The Christian fathers enclose his work in an allegorical gridwork and eighteenth and nineteenth-century classical scholars overwhelmed by their renewed experience of Greek civilization cite him as a decadent example of the dissolution of classicism. Our own century slowly recovers this Ovidian history. The fate of Ovid's poems of exile demonstrate how much remains left out. Ovid's exile has been bracketed and approached—if at all—as a resource for his life in Rome not on the frontier of the empire. But let us for a moment look at the poems from the vantage point of the frontier).

In 8 A.D. when Ovid is exiled to Tomis on the Black Sea for an indiscretion that remains the stuff of high mystery, his world comes to an end. In a series of poems Ovid decries his fate. Rome, friends, wife, children, his enemies all become the object of poems that repeatedly remind the readers of his suffering on the frontier of civilization. Here he imagines the great city in its spring festivals (Tr. 3.12) and in its victories over the Germans (Tr. 4.2.57). Here he registers the death of Augustus and here in a walled city surrounded by a population in sheepskin he remembers once seeing the poet of empire, Virgil (Tr. 4.10.51).

And this truly is the frontier: (Tr. 3.10) (Tr. 4.1.65).

His own writing—his living testimony—remains the highest form of language. Even if without him they reach Rome. They are personified repeatedly: the scrolls of his poems already in Rome live without him and greet the new poems he sends. The pale bloodless parchment he writes on is like his own skin (Tr. 3.1.55). They are his mental family (Tr. 3.13.11). In his exile it is only in his own books that he finds pleasure (Tr. 4.1.35-36). It should not surprise us that Ovid is able to read himself into the very matter of his major work. *Metamorphoses* which may have appeared as the fables of distant figures now applies to him directly. As they tell of the changed forms of men they also recount Ovid's own transformation (Tr. 1.7.13) «I am one who am transformed», he says in *Ex Ponto* (1.2.33). Just as he wrote manuals on falling in and out of love, he holds hope that the skill that brought about his disaster might also bring remedy (Tr. 2.pro.20). In seeking solace he thinks back in time when the Greek had colonies where he now stands. This is the land of Medea (Tr. 3.9.9.). Here there are no ships visited by foreign ships (Tr. 4.4.57) «No interchange of speech (commercium linguarum) have I with the wild people» (Tr. 3.11.9). Thus Ovid waits for spring when a ship may appear with a sailor who may convey even rumours in Latin or Greek (Tr. 3.12.39).

At the same time he fantasizes about Rome, however, he describes the setting around him. A poet of love becomes a reporter and even an anthropologist. «What the people of the land of Tomis are like, amid what customs I live, are you interested to know?» (Tr. 5.7.9). A description of dress follows. At other moments there are accounts of the harsh life in a walled city: ice forms in wine pitchers are coarse sheepskins wrap all but his face in the winter. When the city is attacked he must wear armour and helmet to protect him from the poison arrows shot over the wall. After an attack there are so many arrows that they may be collected in the street. Here the shepherd plows his field with a sword and a helmet on his head. (Tr. 5.10.24).

But it is not the story of his exile that I would recount here. Instead I would observe that Ovid's poems document in remarkable ways the confrontation of Latin with alien languages. Ovid, the master of describing figures shaped or deformed by language here becomes a victim and example of metamorphosis. As poem follows poem, he becomes concerned with his language. «If any expressions perchance shall seem not Latin, the land wherein he wrote was a barbarian land» (Tr. 3.1.18). Repeatedly he asks his readers to remember the barbarian setting of his verses. In his defense he recites the absence of books, the lack of a critical audience: «Often I am at a loss for a word, a name, a place, and there is none who can inform me. Oft when I attempt some utterance—shameful confession!— words fail me: I have unlearned my power of speech (verba mihi desunt dedidicique loqui). Thracian and Scythian tongues chatter on almost every side, and I think I could write in Getic measure. O believe me, I fear that there may be mingled with the Latin in my writings the language of the Pontus». (Tr. 3.14.37-48). At another moment his writings «are not more barbarous than the place of their origin» (Tr. 5.1.72). Here there is «none who can comprehend Latin words... Will the Sauromatae and the Getae read my writings?» (Tr. 4.1.90) (Tr. 4.10.113). There is no one who speaks Latin and those who speak Greek do so with an accent (Tr. 5.2.68). After learning of the Roman victory over the Germans he realizes that because of the atrophy of his language he can no longer hope to undertake such a grand subject (Ex. 2.5.29). In such a setting Ovid must rely on gestures that cause his listeners to laugh: «the Getae laugh stupidly at Latin words, and in my presence they often talk maliciously about me in perfect security...» «Here it is I that am a barbarian understood by nobody» (barbarus hic ego sum) (Tr. 5.10.37). What Ovid acknowledges is that language engenders power and that civilization becomes defined by linguistic identity. In Rome, the barbarian are the *other*. In Tomis, Ovid becomes the alien, the *other* and Latin the barbarous language.

Ovid describes his response to alienation with a directness not found in other classical writers. After railing against the barbarian speech that surrounds him, he confesses that he too has started to speak the Sarmatian language. At the same time Latin becomes the object of a psychological exercise. «I, the Roman bard—pardon, ye Muses!— am forced to utter most things in Sarmatian fashion. Lo! I am ashamed to confess it; now from long disuse Latin words with difficulty occur even to me!... Yet for fear of losing the use of the Ausonian tongue and lest my own voice grow dumb in its native sound, I talk to myself...» (Tr. 5.7.55). In subsequent letters he directly acknowledges that he has given in to the alien languages: «I myself, I think, have already unlearned my Latin, for I have learned how to speak Getic and Sarmatian» (Tr. 5.12.55). Other letters report conversations that he has had with the inhabitants of Tomis in their language (Significantly a person he converses with is not a barbarian but a *senex*). (Ex 3.2.41). As the years progress Ovid does more than learn how to speak. In the *Ex Ponto* he playfully thinks of becoming a poet to the uncivilized (1.5.66). At the same time his pleasure in writing diminishes because there is no audience—«to whom (can I) read my compositions except the yellow-haired Coralli» (Ex 4.2.360) he begins to write poems in the barbarian tongue. At the final epistles of *Ex Ponto*, as if to dramatize the transformation that he has undergone, he declares that he is «almost a Getic poet». «I have ever written a poem in the Getic tongue, setting barbarian words to our measures: I even found favour... and began to achieve among the uncivilized Getae the name of poet». (Ex 4.13.19) And what is the subject of the poem? Is it surprising that even though written in an alien language, the theme remains the empire?

## II

At this point, rather than further exploring how Ovid plays open the theme of language and empire, I want to shift to the later discovery of Ovid's poems, a shift that takes us from the eastern frontier of one empire to the western frontier of another. With late fifteenth and sixteenth century exploration Ovid's experience begins to resonate more intensely and begins to facilitate a view *not* toward the grandeur of a past empire but to the new European empires. In the sixteenth century Ovid's work becomes a vehicle not only for the ongoing assimilation of classical culture but comes to provide a mechanism for comprehending alien cultures confronted on the Western frontier of Christendom. (Although I cite examples from the Spanish conquest of Mexico in the following remarks, a similar argument could be developed for the English and Dutch experience in North America).

Although it was too long that sixteenth-century Spanish settlements in New World were preoccupied with the evangelical efforts of the Jesuits to the exclusion of classical culture we now know that this is not the case. The same ships that returned to Spain with their holds filled with gold, sailed to the New World with large numbers of books among their cargo. Books are part of sixteenth-century mercantilism and within such transatlantic commerce we find works of Ovid cited frequently. During the sixteenth-century Ovid becomes exiled for a second time but this time not as a threat to empire but as its agent.

The presence of the *Metamorphoses* in sixteenth-century Spanish manifest should not make us think that the conquistadors were occupied with cultivating *pietas* for Latin antiquities. An indication of the use they found in Ovid's major poem appears in the Preface to Jorge de Bustamante's Catalan translation (1564). Here Ovid's poem appears not as a constricted vehicle for moral edification based on the Greek and Roman pantheon but as a mechanism for assimilating the strange new deities of the Indian religion (Cartari, 2nd. edition). Ovid's text—or more precisely the interpretative apparatus from the poem—offered reassurance that the alien Indian religion would also be assimilated into the hermeneutical matrix that comprises the Christian religion. Just as pagan gods and heathen beliefs were consumed by the divine word of the Christian religion, so will the Indian beliefs be resolved by Christian interpretative strategies. What happened in the past is «similar to our current experience in the Indies» (como desto en nuestros tiempos tenemos experiencia en las Yndias (164)).

Let me notice if only by passing the fate of the classical gods and goddesses in the New World as well. As one read the lyrical poems and epic poems of the new world, references to the classical pantheons of the West diminish steadily. The Spanish epics are a good example. Detailed allusion to ancient mythology become foregrounded by references to the New Indian mythology. But such a shift in pantheons hardly means there is a shift in the interpretative strategy. While the names of the divinities are changed, the assumptions remain the same. An important indication that this is so comes from the comments—say by Garcilaso de la Vega—comparing Greek and Roman Gods by name to the gods of the Indians. In a setting where ancient religion provides a taxonomy for comprehending the new religion, Ovid's *Metamorphoses*—as an encyclopedia of pagan religions—provides a hermeneutic tool.

But Spanish attraction to Ovid depends on more than the faith placed in the *Metamorphoses* as a kind of anthropological *Guide Michelin*. It comes as well from the Spanish rediscovery of Ovid's poems of exile. We have remarkable evidence of such a discovery on the very frontier of their new empire, for the *first* secular text printed in

the New World is an edition of Ovid's *Tristia* and *Ex Ponto* published by the Press of Antonio Ricardo in Mexico City in 1577. The book is noteworthy as an Ovidian text published with the authorization of the Jesuits; it is above all remarkable because the printer consciously draws together Ovid's exile experience in the orient with his own public's alien experience on the western frontier of Christendom. Given our glimpse at Ovid's poems above, it is not difficult to imagine why the poems would be popular in Mexico City.

Ovid's poems reinforce the Spanish interest in reportage. Like Ovid the Spaniards describe what they see within their new horizons and like Ovid they pay attention to the new languages they encounter. While Ovid only refers to the barbarisms that threaten his Latin, Spanish poets continually register Indian words in their work. In his poetic description of the waterways surrounding Mexico City, Eugenio de Salazar includes one of the first references to chile and tomato (59). We must not think, however, that the Mayan is being integrated with Spanish. The citation of individual words is rather like the display of a trophy.

In Mexico City, Ovid's letters from Tomis are companions. They are hardly models for Christian piety but appear instead as epistolary models for a generation of students who would maintain contact with their mother country. The reconnaissance from Tomis may be compared to the letters and reports the conquistadors sent back to Spain. Each communication—each fragment—bears an assumption that it is part of a large purpose.

## III

At the beginning of my remarks I suggested that the discussion of cultural periods becomes negotiated through multiple interpretative codes. In conclusion I would notice how the dissemination of Ovid's poems of exile in Mexico contributes to a shift in an interpretative code used for the assimilation of alien experience. Above I suggested that the allegorical strategies present in the pedagogical use of the *Metamorphoses* offered a means for approaching Indian religion. Ovid's major work does not, however, provide a model for writing about actual confrontations. The *Tristia* and *Ex Ponto*, in contrast, offer such an existential model for the very question of empire is set in terms of personal experience. Here empire is not mythologized as a transcendent foundation story (Virgil) or looked upon as the stable culmination of a universal story (Ovid) but set forth as if it is being personally measured daily by an aging poet who counts barbarian arrows in the streets. The exile poems rediscover the place of the individual in time and it is such a rediscovery that their publication in Mexico City reenacts.

The turn to Ovid's exile poems also tells us something about allegory. Spanish and Meztizo students learning Latin in Mexico City would have little practical use for Greek and Roman gods and goddesses and the moral allegories associated with them. The experience of New World poets appears to have been similar to Tasso's in writing an epic about the first crusade. As historical rather than fictional narrative becomes central, the very purpose of allegory alters. Instead of rewriting Ovidian fables and the localized allegory associated with them, the historical narrative itself becomes the source for patterns that may be allegorized. At the same time the Indian religions are being demythologized, the Spanish experience is itself being mythologized. In the epics written in the New World (Ercilla), it is neither the classical western gods or Mayan deities that receive the greatest attention, but the leaders of the conquering armies: neither Minerva nor Tlaloc but Cortez. The cultural extension of empire does not involve the dissolution of the ancient pantheon, or its replacement by alien deities but its reconstitution in

historical narratives. Ovid's poems of exile are relays in the formation of new allegories of history for the simple reason that they condense historical narrative.

In closing let me notice that my comments have pertained to a succession of stories entwined in the very idea of empire. Stories first told to affirm individual identity and to appeal for the cancellation of Ovid's *relegatus* or banishment —*relegatus* is a technical word used in Roman law to describe Ovid's exile— become more than a millennium later in their retelling narratives for self-knowledge and new empire. Here the linking or reading together of stories —born in the very idea of legation in Latin— we discover a means for affirming continuity, a rejoining. Let the final word come from Antonio de Nebrija, who in the first Spanish grammar (1492) declares with a sense of Janus-like looks back and forth in time: «language has always been the companion of empire».