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Ovid's *Tristia* and *Pontica*: The Place of Exile as Borderline between Civilization and Barbarity Revisited

Abstract: The present study explores the role of exile – particularly, of the place of exile – as an occasion for Ovid's poems to fashion a representation of the “barbarian”, emerging, apparently, as contrary to what he himself portrays as civilization. First, a general survey on how Ovid sees “barbarian” life on the fringes of the Empire will be presented. Secondly, our study will try to elaborate, in the light of Ovid's own experience, on the particular nuance of “barbarity” stemming from the poet's descriptions and meditations on his life in exile. In the end, the place of exile as borderline between civilization and barbarity will reveal itself more elusive than what initially seemed to be.

Keywords: Ovid, exile, civilization, barbarity, Tomis

Ovid's *Tristia* and *Pontica*¹ tell the story of the poet's abrupt banishment from Rome², of the trip and of the years spent in exile at Tomis (nowadays Constanța, Romania), a remote place, located at the edge of the Roman world, a town founded by the Greeks as a colony probably around 600 BC. Tomis came under Roman rule in the 1st century BC. Ovid was exiled at Tomis from 8 AD until his death, which happened in 17 or 18 AD. It was a definitive exile. He never returned to Rome nor did he succeed in leaving his place of exile. His poems are the only remnants of his personal experience while in exile. Alongside the identity crisis occasioned by his separation trauma (Newlands 2015, 138 ff.), we may also find more or less obvious literary, political and mythological allusions in the subtext of these letters³. With his *Tristia* and *Pontica*, he essentially establishes the genre of exile literature, as some critics argue (Newlands 2015, 124).

The exile poems, written as letters generally dedicated to friends and family, contain a narrative of events, Ovid's own lamentations, a description of his state of mind, his tribulations, and a powerful portrayal of places and people. The intention of the poems is basically a plea for forgiveness to the ruler, Augustus – until his death in 14 AD, a forgiveness for “two crimes”, a “poem” and a “blunder” (*carmen et error*, *Tristia* II.207), that “brought” him

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“ruin”.

In *Amores* I.iii.35, on the other hand, which is an early work, the Latin *error* is a companion of “Love”, alongside “madness” (*errorque furorque*). “Barbarian” and “madman” are here names only associated with the lover (*Amores* I. vii. 19: “*demens!... barbarea!*”). Also, in *The Art of Love*, when describing jealousy, he confesses love as a form of “savagery”: “my love is full of savagery (*barbaria noster abundat amor*)” (*Artis amatoriae*, II. 552). The “barbarian lover” motif as depicted in the love poems has already been elucidated by Ramsby (2001). Actually, Ramsby identifies the motif of the “barbarian” as a constant presence throughout Ovid’s works, from the “barbarian in the bedroom” as indicated by the love poems to the “mythological barbarians” of the *Metamorphoses* and the emergence of the motif in the *Fasti* (Ramsby 2001, v).

Later in the *Tristia*, Ovid will return to love, but with a different eye. He will cherish the real love of his wife (“I need not thy death, but thy love, thy faith”, *Tristia* V. xiv. 41), but he will reject and bemoan the “fictitious love” fancied by his poems, the “songs of youth”. In *Tristia* II, Ovid writes an apology for poetic licence, seeking to distance himself from his writings: “I assure you, my character differs from my verse (my life is moral, my muse is gay), and most of my work, unreal and fictitious, has allowed itself more licence than its author has had. A book is not evidence of the writer’s mind, but respectable entertainment; it will offer many things suited to charm the ear.” (*Tristia* II. 355-358). However, he will keep deploring the fatality of his poetic genius: “what have I to do with you, ye books, ill-starred objet of my toil, – I, ruined and wretched through my own talent? (...) verse caused Caesar to brand me and my ways by commanding that my ‘Art’ [*Ars amatoria*] be forthwith taken away. Take away from me my pursuit and you will take away from my life also the charges against it. I lay the charge of guilt against my verse. This is the reward I have received for my work and my wakeful toil: a penalty has been found for my talent.” (*Tristia* II. 1-5).

In earlier works, he already mentions “genius” and “wit”, not only as man’s utmost faculties, but also as the root causes of his own fall: “thine own genius, O human kind, hath been thy foe, and thy wit o’er great to thine own undoing” (*Amores* III.viii. 45). The poet himself laments his own weakness (*Amores* III. 1. 42: “myself am not stronger than the theme I sing”), but he also sees his erotic verse sometimes as a form of *hybris* and as a bringer of misfortune upon the author himself: “whether verses are good for aught, I doubt; they have always been my bane, and stood in the light of the good” (*Amores* III.xii. 13-14). The same motif appears in *Tristia*, where the poet acknowledges that “my own wit has brought me exile” (I.i.56).

Our study explores the role of exile – particularly, of the place of

exile – as an occasion for Ovid’s poetry to forge, to cast, a representation of the “barbarian” as, this time, the real other, emerging, apparently, as contrary to what he views as civilization, a civilization supposed, in this case, to be personified by Rome⁴. First, a general survey on how Ovid sees “barbarian” life on the fringes of the Empire will be offered. Secondly, our study will try to elaborate, in the light of Ovid’s own experience, on the particular nuance of “barbarity” stemming from the poet’s descriptions and meditations on his life in exile.

Accordingly, what Ovid will reveal in his poems is not just a representation, a disengaged portrait of the “barbarian” at the margins of the Roman world somewhat from the perspective of an observer, but a detailed description of his entire experience of exile as well, as a stepping into something different and new. It is a slow and painful encounter not only with a new land, but with a new stage in his existence, which he often describes as the work of “fate”. It is a double challenge: a new place to live and a new identity emerging. His new life will include a clashing with and a slow and painful discovery of an entire way of being, vastly estranged from what he saw as familiar in Rome. The place itself, where he eventually lived for about nine years, plays thus a tremendous role upon his portrayal of this traumatic and highly personal encounter with otherness. It will also be an encounter with his new identity, as a human being and as a poet as well. The verses are witness to that. They will confess the birth of his own new status. The verses will shape his new poetic self as well: “since I have fallen I act as herald of my sudden fall, and I myself provide the theme of which I write (...)” (*Tristia* V.1.9-10). His new poetry will be, undoubtedly, a fruit of his new existence: “yet is someone of you asks why I sing so many grievous things – many grievous things have I borne. This verse I compose not by inspiration, not by art; the theme is filled with inspiration by its own evils (...) nor are these words mine; they belong to my fate” (V.i.25-28; 38). His experience truly transforms him: “I am not what I was (*non sum ego qui fueram*)” (*Tristia* III.xi.25). He will become aware that “the Pontus, falsely called Euxine [*hospitable* gr.]” will “possess” (*Tristia* III.xiii.28) him⁵. He will slowly and painfully begin to realize that he is changing: “again when I bethink me that, through change of fortune, I am and what I was (...)” (*Tristia* IV.1.99-100). The verses also witness the ways in which he is trying to cope with his trauma, by finding comfort in writing: “I am an exile; solace, not fame, had been my object – that my mind dwell not constantly on its own woes (...) me also the Muse comforted while on my way to the appointed lands of Pontus; she only was the steadfast companion of my flight” (*Tristia* IV. 1. 3-20).

In *Tristia* I.ii, even before his arrival at Tomi or Tomis, Ovid announces his destination: “the Sarmatian land, the object of my voyage”

(I.ii.82). He is slowly setting the stage, so to say, for his experience. He is bound to “reach the wild shores of ill-omened Pontus (*fera litora Ponti*)” (I.ii.83). He knows that a “part of [his] punishment consists in the place of it” (I.ii.90). He later suggests again that his place of exile is truly a “land of punishment” (*poenae tellus*, *Tristia* III.ii.18): “I, after traversing seas whole constellations apart, have been banished by Caesar’s anger to the bays of the Getae” (*Tristia* I.v. 61-62). In the *Epilogue* to *Tristia* I, not having reached the shore yet, he is already frightened by what he might encounter: “should I reach the harbor, the very harbor will affright me: there is more to dread upon the land than on the hostile sea.” (I.xi. 26-27). His state of mind is riddled with dread, guilt, hope and despair. His “ruinous mistake” (*Tristia* II.109) is already haunting him. He feels cast away to the edge of the world: “how near to me is the margin of the world (*ultima terra*)” (*Tristia* III.iv.52). It is the edge of the world, at least according to astronomical knowledge: “a land next the stars of the Erymanthian bear holds me, a region shriveled with stiffening cold. Beyond are the Bosphorus and the Tanais and the Scythian marshes and the scattered names of a region hardly known at all” (*Tristia* III.iv.47-50). This world is to him an unknown world - *in extremis ignoti (...) orbis* (*Tristia* III.iii.3) - a world where he will be a “stranger forever among barbarians” (III.iii.64). He writes: “here is the end of Rome’s domain on the ill-omened Euxine’s shore; hard by the Basternae and Sauromatae hold sway. This land comes last of all beneath Ausonian law, clinging with difficulty to the very edge of thy empire (*in imperii margine terra tui*)” (*Tristia*, II. 198-200). The climate and the place are very inhospitable, the weather is gruesome and the people lack the skills necessary to make life bearable in the town: “There is no house here well suited to a sick man, no beneficial food for him, none to relieve, with Apollo’s art, his pain, no friend to comfort, none to beguile with talk the slow-moving hours. Awearry I lie among these far-away peoples in this far-away-place (*in extremis iaceo populisque locisque*)” (*Tristia* III.iii.10-13). In the description of the “barbarity” of the place itself, besides the weather, he does not forget to mention the lack of sustained agriculture (*Tristia* III.x.70), especially the lack of “vine” (*Tristia* III.xii.14), and, complementary, the lack of books and educated conversation, as indelible marks of “civilization”: “Not here have I an abundance of books to stimulate and nourish me: in their stead is the rattle of bows and arms. There is nobody in this land, should I read my verse, of whose intelligent ear I might avail myself, there is no place to which I may withdraw. The guard on the wall and a closed gate keep back the hostile Getae.” (*Tristia* III.xiv. 37-42). To complete the picture of “uncivilized” life, he indicates the barbarians’ appearance (*Pontica* IV.ii.2), their feral nature (*Tristia* V.vii.45-46), their uncouth language (*Tristia* V.xii.55-56), a permanent state of war and uncertainty (*Tristia* V.vii. 47-48), no laws (*Tristia*

V.vii.47), general lack of civil justice (*Tristia* V.x.43-44).

He is already terrified by the thought of being buried in this “barbarian land (*barbara terra*)” or, as he puts it, of being “an exile even in death” (III.iii.64): “but without funeral rites, without the honour of a tomb, this head shall lie unmourned in a barbarian land!” (*Tristia* III.iii.45-46). He is aware that his life as an outcast is tantamount to an “earlier” death: “when I lost my native land, then must you think that I perished; that was my earlier and harder death” (*Tristia* III.iii. 53-54).

In the *Pontica*, his account of coping with his new kind of life continues. He is still torn between utter dread for the place and being resigned to his fate: “Yet I neither hope nor pray for anything further than the opportunity to escape from this uncivilized place” (*Pontica* I.ii.63-64). When describing the “barbarians”, probably those who lived outside the cities sited on the shores of the Pontus, he remarks their utter opposition to the lifestyle held dear by Rome: “What is better than Rome? What worse than the cold of Scythia? Yet hither the barbarian flees from that city” (*Pontica* I.iii.37-38). But the *Pontica*, generally, witnesses his sense of despair and anguish diminishing, as he becomes more and more aware of his fate: “I shall die in this land, if the weighty wrath of the injured god [the Emperor] persists.” (*Pontica* I.iv.43-44). He starts to seriously wonder about his attachment to his new place of living and about the importance of this attachment to his life as an author: “Is the place a token of the author (*indicat autorem locus*)?” (*Pontica* I.vii.3). He thus realizes that, if he is still a *voice*, than he now is a “voice” from exile: “an exile’s voice is this (*exhulis haec vox est*)” (*Pontica* II.vi.4). In a poem addressed to Atticus (*Pontica* II.vii) he begins to tell, not without deep sorrow, the realization of his destiny: “Already it is clear to me that fate, keeping the course begun, will continue always to run in a familiar path; the gods are watching that no kind concession be made and I think Fortune can scarcely be cheated. She is working to destroy me – she who used to be fickle, is now steadfastly and with determination injuring me” (*Pontica* II.vii.17-22).

At the same time, his beliefs about the “barbarians” living at the edge of the “civilized” world undergo a transformation. When he sees consideration on the part of the “barbarians”, he starts to view the “Getae” not only as a barbarian race: “No race in the wide world is grimmer than the Getae, yet they have lamented over my misfortunes.” (*Pontica* II.vii.31-32). He stops at blaming the inhabitants of Tomis for all their miseries. He accepts that they cannot grow their crops properly because of attacks: “the Pontic land lies exposed to a neighbouring foe. ‘Tis pleasant to spend one’s time in tilling the fields; the barbarian foe permits no sod to be turned.” (*Pontica* II.vii, 68-70). He is even becoming acquainted with the local language: “for I have learned how to speak Getic and Sarmatian” (*Pontica*

III.ii.40). His suffering is also slowly fading away: “My grief has already become a habit; as the falling drops by their constant force hollow the rock, so am I wounded by the steady blows of fate until now I have scarce space upon me for a new wound.” (*Pontica* II.vii.39-42).

In one of the final poems in the *Pontica*, he describes how the “barbarians” have treated him: “Here I am not hated, and indeed I do not deserve to be, and my mind has not changed along with my fate. That tranquillity which you were wont to praise, that wonted modesty still abides as of old upon my countenance” (*Pontica* IV.ix.89-92). He admits that the people of Tomis have shown his kindness, respect and hospitality, even if, to Rome, he was an outcast, an exile: “Such is my bearing in this far land, where the barbarian foe causes cruel arms to have more power than law, that tis’ impossible now these many years, Graecinus, for woman or man or child to make complaint of me. This it is which brings me the kindly attentions of the Tomitae in my wretchedness. Because they see that it is my wish they would like to have me depart; yet for their own sake are eager to have me remain. And trust not me for this: they are extant upon the wax decrees praising me and granting me immunity [from taxes]. And though it be not fitting for the unfortunate to boast, the neighbouring towns grant me the same favour.” (*Pontica* IV.ix. 93-104)

His confession, near the end of his *Pontica*, about writing as a true painkiller for his anguish may also be read as an unintentional admission of the fact that his sorrow has diminished because he himself is feeling less and less estranged from his new, “uncivilized” existence: “I have gained release in writing this from my accustomed grief and have lost the feeling that I am among the Getae (*in mediis nec nos sensimus esse Getis*)” (*Pontica* IV. x. 69-70). In *Pontica* IV.xiii he boasts, not without irony, of his newly-conquered fame as a poet amongst the Getae. He even reveals that he has written a poem “in the Getic tongue”: “Nor should you wonder if my verse prove faulty, for I am almost a Getic poet. (...) I have even written a poem in the Getic tongue, setting barbarian words to our measures: I even found favour – congratulate me! – and began to achieve among the uncivilized Getae the name of poet.” (*Pontica* IV. xiii. 17-22).

In a poem addressed to Tuticanus (*Pontica* IV.xiv), Ovid reveals that he had to face another accusation due to his verses, this time from the inhabitants of Tomis themselves, angered by his verses that, they thought, discredited them. Ovid blames it on a “perverse interpreter” of his poems: “but against me a perverse interpreter rouses the popular wrath, bringing a new charge against my verse” (IV.xiv. 41-42). He defends himself by rejecting the accusation that he showed disdain for the inhabitants of Tomis: “but I have committed no crime, I am not at fault, Tomitae, for you I esteem, though I detest your land (...) a loyal people would not be

attacked by me. Your gentle harbouring of my fate, Tomitae, shows how kindly are men of Grecian stock. (...) I am as yet the only one immune [from taxes] upon your shores, those only excepted who have the boon by law. My brow has been veiled with a sacred chaplet which the popular favour placed there all against my will. Wherefore dear as is to Latona the land of Delos, which alone offered her a safe place in her wandering, so dear is Tomis to me; to me exiled from my native abode it remains hospitable and loyal to the present time.” (IV.xiv. 23-60).

What we have seen so far is that, near the end of his *Pontica*, the conventional “barbaric” trope begins to unravel. The violence of descriptions from *Tristia* concerning the barbarity of the place of exile loses its grip. We are able to observe a metamorphosis⁶ in the poet and a change of tone in his poetry: the “barbarian” trope does not seem so barbaric anymore. On the contrary. It seems that the “barbarians” in Tomis have shown his more kindness and consideration than his fellow Romans did: “No race in the wide world is grimmer than the Getae, yet they have lamented over my misfortunes.”⁷

All this also opens up the possibility that the place of exile as borderline, seen as a limit between civilization and barbarity, might be ambiguous and volatile. Ovid’s life in exile, his personal experience, registered by his poems, reveals, ultimately, that there might be no strict and straightforward demarcation line between “civilization” and “barbarity” in this case. The poems of exile play thus an ambiguous role: they are instrumental in creating and at the same time in destroying the hard limit between civilization and barbarity. Ovid is slowly embracing his own “barbarity”, so to speak, which is his new identity, as a poet of exile – an identity forged at the contact with exile. He is also able to see the “barbarity” of the “barbarians” in exile with fresh eyes. He is compelled to admit that it is possible that “civilization”, as he initially branded it, is a problematic trope and that his investigations into the “barbaric” way of life may also pertain to something more, to a questioning of the notion of “civilization” itself⁸.

In conclusion, we are able to see, throughout Ovid’s poetry of exile, that his representation of the “barbaric” life, highly conventional seemingly at first, is a cliché fashioned by his beliefs, his literary background⁹ and by the rhetorical intentions of his poems – that should have provided him with an apology. We are also able to perceive that what initially appears as an unproblematic representation of the other as “barbarian” develops ultimately into a questioning of the underlying polarity, that between “civilization” and “barbarity”.

Notes

- ¹ Throughout this paper, I will quote Ovid from the Loeb Classical editions.
- ² A discussion about the reasons for Ovid's banishment appears in Marinescu (1957).
- ³ Cf. Newlands 2015, Ch. VI; Morgan 2020, Ch. 6; Habinek 1998, Ch. 8.
- ⁴ A highly informative account of Ovid's portrayal of the land and people of Tomis can be found in Lascu (1957).
- ⁵ See also *Pontica* II.vii.66: "the remotest land, the remotest world possesses me".
- ⁶ Actually, a direct reference to his *Metamorphoses*, Carole E. Newlands argues, and particularly to the myth of Actaeon (*Metamorphoses* III. 131-255), may suggest his experience of exile as "a form of psychological metamorphosis" (Newlands 2015, 141-142). Actaeon, as a "hybrid figure", would portray the "indeterminate status of Ovid in exile, a Roman citizen with full rights, except the right to live in his native land" (142). This indetermination would also touch upon his uncertain status "between civility and savagery" (*ibid.*). Ovid's insistence upon losing his original poetic voice in exile, even though a "rhetorical strategy", would indicate, Newlands argues, the poet's endeavour to "reinven[t] in exile" and also his "reluctant attempt at a degree of cultural assimilation" (143).
- ⁷ Quoted above.
- ⁸ Newlands (2015, 143) argues: "(...) sometimes the view from the margins of the empire raises the question of who are the true barbarians."
- ⁹ Newlands discusses the possibility that Ovid's conventional portrayal of his place of exile may be part of a wider, pre-existent, literary tradition (2015, 127).

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