PART I

Contexts

CHAPTER ONE

A Poet's Life

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Introduction

Late in his career, Ovid defined his place in recent literary history by drawing up a list of names (*Tr.* 4.10.41–54):

temporis illius colui fouique poetas,
quotque aderant uates, rebar adesse deos.
saepe suas uolucres legit mihi grandior aeuo,
quaeque nocet serpens, quae iuuat herba, Macer.
saepe suos solitus recitare Propertius ignes,
iure sodalicii, quo mihi iunctus erat.
Ponticus heroo, Bassus quoque clarus iambis
dulcia conuictus membra fuere mei.
et tenuit nostras numerosus Horatius aures,
dum ferit Ausonia carmina culta lyra.
Vergilium uidi tantum, nec auara Tibullo
tempus amicitiae fata dedere meae.
successor fuit hic tibi, Galle, Propertius illi;
quartus ab his serie temporis ipse fui.

The poets of that time I cultivated and cherished, and for me poets were so many gods. Often Macer, already advanced in years, read to me of his birds, of poisonous snakes, or healing plants. Often Propertius would recite his flaming verse, by virtue of the comradeship that joined him to me. Ponticus, noted for epic, and Bassus, noted for iambics, were sweet members of my circle. And Horace, he of the many numbers, held our ears in thrall, while he tuned his fine-crafted songs to the Ausonian lyre. Virgil I only saw; greedy fate gave Tibullus no time for friendship with me. He was your successor, Gallus, and Propertius his; after them I was fourth in order of time.

The climate for poetry in Rome during Ovid's lifetime was electric. Ovid places himself in distinguished company, including poets whose works, though lost to us now, were celebrated in their time: Aemilius Macer, the author of didactic verse

(Courtney 1993: 292–9; Hollis 2007: 93–117), Ponticus, an epic poet (Hollis 2007: 426), Bassus, writer of iambs (Hollis 2007: 421), and Gallus, celebrated by Virgil in his *Eclogues* and widely recognized as the first Roman elegist (Courtney 1993: 259–70; Hollis 2007: 219–52). The selection cannot be random, and is not likely to have been limited only to poets whom he had met or heard. These are the names that mattered to Ovid among his contemporaries, whose works influenced his own forays into epic, didactic, invective, and the verse epistle. But when it comes to classifying himself in this company he is an elegist, following in the footsteps of Gallus, Tibullus, and Propertius, the same company he cites in his apology to Augustus (*Tr.* 2.445–66) with the concluding remark (467), 'to these I succeeded' (*his ego successi*). In the process he defined the canon, for when Quintilian turns to the chief exponents of elegy in Latin, it is these same four whom he names and no others (*Inst.* 10.1.93): 'we challenge the Greeks also in elegy, in which Tibullus seems to me particularly polished and elegant, though some prefer Propertius. Ovid is more extravagant than both of them, just as Gallus is harsher.' It is telling that Ovid thus classifies himself as an elegist, even after the achievement of his *Metamorphoses*, for the background of elegy informs even his hexameter epic: it is the wellspring from which he draws inspiration in all his manifold creative endeavors.

In His Own Words

Ovid is himself the source for most of what we think we know about his life; indeed, he provides more information about himself than most ancient poets. It is always hazardous to infer too much or too confidently from such references in a poet's own work: as Ovid himself avers (*Am.* 3.12.19), *nec tamen ut testes mos est audire poetas* ('nor is it the custom to listen to poets as if they were courtroom witnesses'). It is nonetheless possible to glean some data about his background and career, not only from the long autobiographical poem composed toward the end of his life during his exile on the Black Sea (*Tr.* 4.10), but also from numerous revealing remarks scattered throughout his works. His hometown was Sulmo (*Tr.* 4.10.3 *Sulmo mihi patria est*), now called Sulmona, situated in a well-watered valley in the Abruzzi of central Italy, and in Ovid's time one of the chief towns of the tribe known as the Paeligni. He was born Publius Ovidius Naso on 20 March 43 BCE. The significance of this date was not lost on Ovid later in life, for as he notes (*Tr.* 4.10.6) it was in this year that the two consuls Hirtius and Pansa both fell in the campaign against Mark Antony at the head of the last army of the Roman Republic. Most of the poets Ovid names in his autobiography began their careers in the confused circumstances of the civil wars that followed Julius Caesar's assassination. Virgil, who released his *Georgics* in 29 BCE in the immediate aftermath of Octavian's victory at Actium, had earlier composed his book of *Eclogues*, in which the tenor of the times is refracted through the lens of Theocritean bucolic. Horace's book of *Epodes*, probably published near the end of the Triumviral period, also meditates on the fears and apprehensions of that era. At about the same time, Ovid's two surviving predecessors in elegy, Tibullus and

Propertius, were producing books in which the harsh realities of the time impinge on their idealized visions of the life of love. Ovid, so far as we can tell, was touched by none of this. His career belongs entirely to the early Empire, a time of peace at least on the domestic front, and the great matters treated in his works are affairs of the heart and of character, rather than of state.

His first literary performances probably took place several years after the battle of Actium and the fall of Alexandria, perhaps around 25 BCE. The date can only be approximate, deriving as it does from information given by Ovid himself (*Tr.* 4.10.57–8):

> carmina cum primum populo iuuenalia legi,
> barba resecta mihi bisue semelue fuit.
>
> When I first read my youthful songs to the public, my beard had been cut but once or twice.

We may suppose that Ovid was no more than about eighteen years old when this took place (Wheeler 1925: 11–17), but precision on this score is unimportant: the point that Ovid makes is about the precociousness of his venture into a life of poetry.

His family presumably preferred a different career path. As the second son of an old, equestrian family of considerable standing in the community, Ovid might have been expected to pursue a career in public life, where opportunities beckoned under the new regime in Rome. As recently as during the Social War of 91–89 BCE, Sulmo had aligned itself with the rest of the Paeligni against Rome, but there was a long tradition of alliance. In his move to consolidate power Augustus sought to draw on such communities throughout Italy to recruit new magistrates and senators. From Ovid we learn that he embarked on just such a course: he studied rhetoric in Rome and Athens, the traditional route to a political career (Wheeler 1925: 4–11). He held two positions on boards of magistrates, as one of the *tresuiri capitales* (*Tr.* 4.10.33–4; Kenney 1969b: 244), who exercised police functions in the city. And later he informs us (*Fast.* 4.383–4) that he held a seat among the *decemuiri stlitibus iudicandis* ('Board of Ten for Judging Lawsuits'), an important judicial post that was commonly a precursor to seeking the quaestorship and a senatorial career. On Ovid's testimony his earliest recitations of poetry took place at the very time when he was ostensibly embarking on a life in law and politics. He ironically remarks that his father had hoped for a more lucrative livelihood:

> saepe pater dixit 'studium quid inutile temptas?
> Maeonides nullas ipse relinquit opes.'
>
> Often my father said, 'Why do you attempt a useless pursuit? Homer himself left no wealth.'

Perhaps his father might have gotten the joke, but if Augustus ever noticed this poem, he would not have been amused. Ovid abandoned public office for the life of letters, but his choices in that field were not bound to win him favor.

During the first twenty-five years of his career, a period extending roughly from the mid-twenties BCE to 2 CE, Ovid was occupied exclusively with elegy, issuing a stunning series of works: *Amores*, *Heroides*, *Ars amatoria*, and *Remedia amoris*. To this period too belong most of the lost works (Chapter 15), among which the tragedy *Medea* may be reckoned the greatest loss. The exact sequence of the release of these works is unclear and much disputed. The matter is complicated in the first instance by the fact that his earliest collection, the *Amores*, survives only in a three-book edition, which, Ovid asserts, has been reduced from an original five-book collection. There is no consensus about the date of either edition, or about the nature of the revision effected upon the earlier work, but opinions generally divide between those who argue that Ovid's final edition collects the best poems from the first edition without the addition of new poems or extensive revision (Cameron 1968) and those who contend that the three-book edition was essentially a new work (McKeown 1987: 86–9). Ovid himself seems to suggest the former, when he describes his earliest work in the autobiography from Tomi (*Tr.* 4.10.61–2):

> multa quidem scripsi, sed, quae uitiosa putaui,
> emendaturis ignibus ipse dedi.
>
> I wrote a great deal indeed, but what I considered defective I myself gave to the flames for correction.

Even if this inference is correct, it is not entirely clear where in the chronological sequence to date the release of the *Heroides*, a collection that itself raises intractable questions about composition and publication. The dates given above in the Chronological Table are thus tentative at best.

By the time Ovid completed the *Remedia amoris*, the last of his amatory elegiacs, in roughly 2 CE he was probably already deeply involved in the composition of his two large-scale narrative poems, the *Fasti* and the *Metamorphoses*. It is clear that he had not completed the *Fasti* by the year 8 CE, when his life changed drastically with the issuance of a decree of relegation by the emperor. Ovid himself refers to twelve books (*Tr.* 2.549–50), but only six survive and there are clear signs of revision to the existing poem during the period of exile. There is no reason to believe that the remaining six ever left the poet's hand, and the poet's words here carry no more weight than his assertion that the *Metamorphoses* was unfinished (*Tr.* 2.555–6):

> dictaque sunt nobis, quamuis manus ultima coeptis
> defuit, in facies corpora uersa nouas.
>
> And though this work lacked final revision, I also told of bodies that changed into new shapes.

The composition of this masterpiece was surely the preoccupation of the years immediately preceding his exile.

We will never know what led Augustus to send Ovid into exile, or what sense of irony or private joke led him to choose the venue for Ovid's relegation, remote and inhospitable Tomi on the shores of the Black Sea. The reason famously given by Ovid

(*Tr.* 2.207), 'a poem and a mistake' (*carmen et error*), may invert the sequence, a *hysteron proteron* of sorts, if, as many scholars believe, the poem, which Ovid identifies as the *Ars amatoria*, was brought into the indictment later to provide cover for some other offense, the *error* that Ovid never explains. Many scholars cannot escape the suspicion that Ovid's relegation was somehow related to the disgrace of Augustus' granddaughter Julia, exiled on a charge of adultery in the same year (e.g. Syme 1978: 215–29). Others incline to a scandal of a more personal nature (e.g. Goold 1983), or attempt to relate the exile to changes in the climate for literature during Augustus' dotage (Knox 2004). The consequences for Ovid were tragic, but did not sap his creative powers. A stream of innovative new works flowed from his stylus while he lamented life on the Roman frontier: the *Tristia* in five books composed during the journey to Tomi and in his first years there; that bizarre display of erudite invective known as the *Ibis*; and four books of epistles to friends and acquaintances, his *Epistulae ex Ponto*, the last book of which probably contains his final works. A common thread uniting all the works of exile is Ovid's return to the elegiac mode, the measure in which he began his career and by which he defined himself. Ovid began writing just a few years after Octavian assumed the title by which he is best known to history, and his death came only a few years after the emperor's. Ovid, perhaps the most Augustan poet and certainly the last, died at Tomi sometime during the winter of 17–18 CE.

FURTHER READING

Still fundamental for basic information and collection of the evidence about Ovid's career are surveys such as Wheeler (1925), Martini (1933), or Kraus (1968). In the absence of new evidence, there is always a place for re-evaluation and recontextualization. For instance, Kenney (1969b) investigates Ovid's use of legal language against the background of his public career, while Syme (1978) attempts to review Ovid's network of friends and associates within the changing political landscape of Augustus' later years. The subject of Ovid's exile continually attracts new speculation: in addition to the works surveyed by Thibault (1964), papers by Goold (1983) and Knox (2004) may be consulted for recent attempts to set the relegation within the context of the times.