

## OVID AND THE MODERNS

ZIOLKOWSKI (T.) *Ovid and the Moderns*. Pp. xvi + 262, ill. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2005. Cased, US\$39.95, £22.95. ISBN: 0-8014-4274-5.

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As Ziolkowski explains in the Preface, *Ovid and the Moderns* complements his earlier monograph, *Virgil and the Moderns* (1993). His premise is that the two poets represent incompatible positions, and that the periods in which Ovid has been most influential alternate with those when Virgil has held sway. But of course times (or writers) cannot simply be labelled Virgilian or Ovidian, and Ziolkowski offers a subtle and convincing taxonomy of multiple twentieth-century Ovidianisms, identifying a range of varied, even opposed, impulses behind different writers' responses to his works.

For example in the 1930s, an age of urgent bipartisan political activism, the apparently apolitical Ovid was likely to be seen as frivolous and irrelevant, if not blindly irresponsible. This perspective is well illustrated by Geoffrey Hill's poem 'Ovid in the Third Reich' (1964) where the poet becomes a kind of Furtwängler figure who privileges aesthetics over morality:

I love my work and my children. God  
Is distant, difficult. Things happen.  
Too near the ancient troughs of blood  
Innocence is no earthly weapon.  
I have learned one thing: not to look down  
So much upon the damned. They, in their sphere,  
Harmonise strangely with the divine  
Love. I, in mine, celebrate the love-choir.

In a more sceptical climate, by contrast, when authoritarian regimes of any complexion are viewed with far more distrust, Ovid is allowed to emerge as an attractively subversive figure with more integrity than either Horace or Virgil. Thus in *Staschek, oder Das Leben des Ovid* (1972) Hartmut Lange (an East German living in West Berlin) uses the story of Ovid's exile to criticise both capitalism and Stalinism, presenting him as 'a prototype of the poet who refuses to subjugate his art to the demands of either an Eastern totalitarian regime or a rebarbarised Western public' (p. 136). Both types of regime turn writers into exiles.

Z.'s analysis of different treatments of Ovid as Ur-exile is particularly illuminating. After a useful brief survey of pre-twentieth-century responses to the theme (Pushkin's elegy 'To Ovid' and Delacroix's *Ovide chez les Scythes*, for example) Z. describes a range of very different modern responses to Tomis. For the many Modernists who were voluntary expatriates – Joyce, Pound, Eliot – exile had a spiritual significance. As the century progressed, however, exile became a more pressing concern. This transition can be seen within the works of a single writer, Osip Mandelstam, who, as a non-religious Russian Jew, experienced a sense of exile both from his own marginalised community and from the political centre, and alludes to Tomis in his poetry long before his own eventual exile to Siberia. For other writers the significance of exile is religious rather than political, and many responded to the medieval construction of an *Ovidius Christianus* who was converted and baptised by John on Patmos and became a missionary among the Getae. This is the focus of two

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Romanian novels, Vintila Horia's *God was Born in Exile* (1960) and Marin Mincu's *The Diary of an Exile* (1997).

Tomis naturally has a special resonance for writers from Romania, and Z. devotes a chapter to a fascinating survey of this topic. Not surprisingly, these writers see Ovid's exile in an unusually positive light and sometimes co-opt the poet as a precursor of Romanian nationalism. In Vasile Alecsandri's drama *Ovidiu* (1885) Ovid prophesies the fall of the empire and the rebirth of a new Rome in Dacia. A similarly patriotic impulse presumably led the writer Marin Mincu to present the poet's 'exile' as a voluntary relegation – he has come to Tomis in search of a simpler life, having become disillusioned by the corruption of life in the capital. Ovid's plaintive *Tristia* are in fact a ruse – a trick to ensure none of his depraved friends will be tempted to visit.

A similarly unconvincing and dreary portrait of *Ovidius rusticus* is offered by David Malouf in *An Imaginary Life* (1978). Ovid first of all becomes accustomed to the rhythms of nature, learning to weave and hunt, and then bonds with a feral child who strangely resembles a wild boy whom he saw, or imagined he saw, as a small child in Sulmo. Here too exile is presented in a positive light. However, in this instance there is no patriotic motive – Malouf is a Lebanese-born Australian – and Z. finds an explanation in the *Zeitgeist*: 'the exiled Ovid flees with the feral child into a kind of spiritual Woodstock in the uncivilized realm beyond the Danube' (p. 164).

In the final chapters Z. discusses the impact of a postmodern aesthetic on the later twentieth-century reception of Ovid. A key text is Ransmayr's *The Last World* (1988). Although this striking novel takes exile as its starting point – the central character, Cotta, is searching for traces of the poet or his *Metamorphoses* in Tomis – the real focus is not on the biographical or political implications of exile but on how Ovid can be used to interrogate more elusive boundaries, between fiction and reality or between the present and the past.

We are told in the blurb that 'Theodore Ziolkowski approaches Ovid's Latin poetry as a comparatist, not a classicist', and there is comparatively little direct engagement here with some of the most recent criticism on Ovid by Classical scholars such as Philip Hardie and Stephen Hinds. But on balance Z.'s background in European literature, his ability to recontextualise twentieth-century Anglophone literature within a wider European framework of works (critical and creative) which are inaccessible to most of his readers, is this impressive volume's greatest strength. And as well as being an important and scholarly work of literary history, *Ovid and the Moderns* is a consistently readable and absorbing book.

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## METAMORPHOSIS IN OVID'S WORKS OF EXILE

TOLA (É.) *La Métamorphose poétique chez Ovide: Tristes et Pontiques*. (Bibliothèque d'Études Classiques 38.) Pp. viii + 445. Louvain, Paris, and Dudley, MA: Éditions Peeters, 2004. Paper, €65. ISBN: 90-429-1407-6 (Belgium), 2-87723-767-2 (US).

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Éléonora Tola has reworked her 2000 Sorbonne dissertation as a monograph. She explores the dissolution of Ovid's exiled self and its recreation through his writings. Her central thesis, that this poetic metamorphosis is conveyed by a deliberately

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