ERROR AND THE IMPERIAL HOUSEHOLD: AN ANGRY GOD AND THE EXILED OVID’S FATE*

by Jo-Marie Claassen
(University of Stellenbosch)

Where in the past critics have tended to take at face value most of what the poet chose to write from exile, recent criticism has shown an increasing awareness of Ovid’s propensity for irony, also during exile. Central to the interpretation of the Tristia and Epistolae ex Ponto lies the question of the relationship between the exiled poet and the emperor. It can possibly be considered the chief topic of the exilic works, and where it is not, it is still the raison d’être for the poems. The topic may be approached with reference to the past, that is, the reason for exile, the present, involving the degrees of sincerity or irony in his adulatory approach to the emperor, and the future, which is frequently touched upon in the exile’s requests for clemency.

The exiled poet’s relationship to the imperial family is also involved. Allusions to Livia and Tiberius need to be judged on the level of ‘sincerity versus irony’. Germanicus appears in the last book of the Pontic epistles as the central object of appeal. None of these personages seems ever to react to the exile’s almost endless appeals. Finally, judgement of both the initial ‘error’ 2 and the poet’s attitude to the imperial family needs to take into account personages not mentioned by the exile, who on occasion seem to loom large in the consciousness of the poet, viz., the exiled members of the imperial family. Here, more than in any other aspect of the poetry, one must try to form a picture of the degree of irony involved.

Stylistic considerations, and the poet’s particular use of traditional material, as well as the attitude to the emperor evinced in other parts of his oeuvre, 3 can serve as pointers for the judgement of irony. If one first tries to distinguish between creator-poet, suffering man, and heroic exile, while assuming that the three personalities are not always identical, or that they diverge to a varied extent in different parts of the exilic oeuvre, and if one then attempts a synthesis of these diverging elements, one may, ultimately, gain a more balanced impression of the realities of exile and of the poet’s achievement. A preliminary distinction between ‘exile’ and ‘poet’ can act as a tool in the disentangling of a complexity of attitudes.4 Continued awareness of the poet’s penchant for irreverence aids in putting the exile’s most abject pleas into perspective. In, for instance, Tristia 2, ostensibly humble pleading often shades off into either tactless gaucherie or apparently deliberate irony. A shadowy figure appears to be standing behind the exile, saying ‘So, Augustus, you wanted celebration in poetry? Here is the celebration of your much-vaunted ‘clementia’ — with a vengeance!’
This paper therefore will attempt to determine the exile's attitude to the emperor and his family which the poet portrays, and to judge the exiled poet's intention with this portrayal, and its possible effect on his contemporaries and on posterity.

It is illuminating to take into account the chronology of composition of the exilic works. The exile's attitude to his 'error', and to the emperor, appears to change considerably during the course of his exile. It is unsafe to assume consistency in a notoriously elusive poet, and even more dangerous to quote indiscriminately from poems separated by as many as eight years, when trying to build up a picture of the exile's attitude to the emperor and his family. A convenient means of comparison is to divide the exilic works into five 'phases of composition', based on both chronology and conjectured unity of publication. A comparison of changes from phase to phase gives a basis for observation of developments in attitude. Use of, for instance, distinctive vocabulary may be treated statistically, with reference to total output, and these statistics may be employed as a pointer to the exile's changes of attitude.  

Phase one comprises the exile's journey and poet's defence, i.e. T1 and T2. The first two years of exile saw the completion and publication of T3 and T4, which I consider as phase two. The third phase comprises a single book, T5, apparently published during AD 13. Its composition may have proceeded concurrently with that of the Ibis, and perhaps some of the poems of the next phase, which are distinguished by the naming of the exile's addressees. The first three books of the Pontic epistles appear as a unit, both in form of arrangement and conjectured date of publication. The year of their composition, which can be established by internal evidence to have been from October AD 12 to about December AD 13, was the most productive. These poems comprise phase four. The last phase runs from about AD 14 to the poet's death, presumably in AD 17.

It is not the intention of this paper to review conjectures about the nature of the 'error' for which the poet was exiled. These conjectures have in the past connected Ovid and Julia Minor more explicitly than the poet himself does. Of greater interest is the manner in which the poet refers to his 'error', and the information which the exile gives. Here the question of the degree of irony or, at least, of playful irreverence, may partly be solved by recourse to an analysis of style, including the poet's choice of vocabulary.

Cursory references to the exile's 'fault' or 'mistake' become consistently fewer from first to last through the years of exile. The poet's use of the words 'crimen', 'error', 'culpa' and 'fateor', show a decrease in relative frequency, from the first to the last phase.  The exile's allusions to his 'error' and culpability decrease in frequency and vehemence during the years of exile. This may appear as only natural, the result of the passage of time, but it does seem to point to a certain reservation on the part of the poet in his apparently humble acceptance of the justness of Augustus's punishment. It may also indicate that when the exile has become convinced that his pleas for recall are in vain, he simply ceases to admit to feelings of guilt that he never really experienced.
A problem that seems to elude all solution is whether these poems (which, as many critics appear to forget, are not real 'letters', but literary productions) were ever read, or meant to be read, by Augustus himself. Albertus Lueneberg long ago pointed out that the poet has two different ways of referring to the 'error'. Cursory, passing allusions tend to show certain common elements, e.g. 'lumina viderunt'; 'inscia lumina'; 'error . . . causa exsilii mei'; 'non facinus . . . sed . . . error'; 'perii culpa'; 'non scelus'; 'negabis . . . mali' etc. Longer, more extensive explanations, of which Lueneberg discusses three, differ most in their details. Common elements are 'rogare desine', and references to the 'vulnera' or 'dolor' of Augustus. It should be noted that the technique of praeteritio actually revives these painful memories every time the poet pretends not to want to do so. This technique may have been employed simply in order to titillate the curiosity of a general readership, or amuse those friends of the poet who were privileged to circulate the poems privately.

The explanation of the 'error' at Pl.6.19-25 lays most emphasis on the stupidity and culpability of what the exiled poet did, and that it is neither 'breve nec tutum' to write down what the origin was of his 'peccatum'. The reference to 'danger' seems to depict Augustus as vindictive, but in view of the relative stations in life of emperor and exile, it is merely a statement of the obvious. Here it is the exile's wounds that 'fear to be touched'. The word order of the central couplet (vv. 21,22) is singularly prosaic. Its starkness seems to indicate intensity of feeling:

\[ \text{nec breve nec tutum peccati quae sit origo scribere; tractari vulnera nostra timent.} \]  
\[ (\text{vv. 21, 22}) \]

The exile's explanation of the 'error' at P2.9.67-76 denies his having 'mixed poison' for anyone, or having committed forgery. The central statement, which is pointed by means of homoioioteleuton (feci . . . mihi), denies that any law has been broken. The poet appears to be criticising the sense of justice of a ruler who could exile a Roman citizen for something other than a legal transgression:

\[ \text{nec quicquam, quod lege veter committere, feci:} \]  
\[ (\text{v. 71}) \]

The hint of 'something else to be confessed to', in the pentameter of this couplet is not amplified in any way. The next two couplets refer cryptically to the Ars Amatoria, indicating that the poem is only part of the reason for his exile, but that the other part does not bear close enquiry.

Finally, in a demonstrably ironic depiction of the apparition of Amor (P3.3.67-76) the ragged god swears a solemn oath by his weapons, by Venus and by the head of Caesar, exonerating the Ars from containing any 'crime', and then expresses the cryptic wish that the 'other reason' for the poet's punishment could be so easily vindicated. Here culpability is imputed to the exiled poet and he is reminded that, although he might wish to hide his 'crime' under the 'mask of error', the anger (of his antagonist) was not greater than he deserved. In the unreal context of a grotesque apparition, the accusation loses its force.

From all these hints the reader becomes no wiser as to the nature of the 'error', but gains a strong impression that it was something personal that affected the emperor (or his household), that it was not illegal, and that the emperor had a
personal and possibly vindictive reason for inflicting such a heavy punishment on his hapless and inadvertent antagonist.

The most consistent recent study of the exile's implicit attitude to the emperor is that of M. Drucker (1977), who sees the treatment of the emperor by the poet as strongly critical. The tone is set in poem T1.2.1–4, where the hapless exile calls on the gods of sea and sky not to subscribe to the greater god's ire. Drucker, pp. 20–50, points out that allusions to a life spared evidence not so much gratitude as acknowledgement of Augustus' power over life and death. Fear of his 'ira' points to an angry god. Mythological exempla (Phaeton, Niobe, Odysseus) indicate the persecution of a human by a god because of real or imagined injuries to that god.

The exile has a very particular way of alluding to the emperor throughout his exile. Vocabulary counts of the words for 'gods' or 'a god', 'Jupiter', 'deus' and 'numen' show a decrease from the first to the last phase. Almost all these words are applied, not to the Roman pantheon, but to Augustus and his family. Identification is not absolute in all cases, but wavers between simile and surrogate. In certain poems the allusions are extensive. In the largest proportion of the exilic poems there is at least one allusion to the emperor as a divinity. If one counts T2 (in which the divinity of the emperor is assumed throughout) as one poem, 75% of the poems of the first phase exhibit this characteristic. The distribution of poems displaying this assumption, throughout the following four phases, is 75%, 93%, 77% and 69%. One might have expected that the last phase, which partly reflects the years after Augustus' death, should show the smallest figure, but here divinity is transferred to his successor, in those cases where the death, and therefore final apotheosis, of the emperor is not explicitly mentioned.

M.H. Thomson points to the difficulty which the poet apparently had in citing instances of the emperor's 'clementia'. The 'god' is most often an 'angry god'. The positive terms 'elementia', 'iustitia', 'iustus', 'moderator', 'pater patriae', 'pares', 'mitis', 'lenis', show in combination a relative distribution of 1,3; 1,0; 1,6, 1,5, 1,9 occurrences per hundred verses. Some of these refer not so much to factual attributes as to hoped-for but never attained favours.

In context the relationship of words for 'divinity/providence/fate' and words for 'anger' are grammatically so closely intertwined, most often by means of nominative-genitive phrases, that one can conclude that use of the divine terminology implies a largely negative attitude. The terms most frequently employed are variations on 'numinis ira', 'Caesaris ira', 'ira dei', 'ira laesi dei'. This negative terminology, however, shows a decreasing frequency from first to last, with minor fluctuations, i.e. 8,4; 6,4; 7,8; 6,8; 5,2 occurrences per hundred verses. These words colour the exile's approach to the emperor, both with reference to his 'error' and in his hyperbolic depiction of his own present state as the thunder-struck victim of an angry god, who exacts a terrible vengeance for an unspecified wrong.

Bland acceptance of absolute divinity is not only a reductio ad absurdum of the
careful approach to Hellenistic flattery in other authors, but points strongly to the hollowness of Augustus’ claims of having restored Roman religion. The emperor has usurped the very position that he sought to restore to the ancient gods of Rome. Every vain appeal, throughout eight long years, adds one more facet to the picture of the capricious ruthlessness of a man-god who sways the world with his nod.

This man-god has swept the Roman divinities from the board. Allusions to the divinity of the emperor almost wholly supersede references to the Roman (or Greek) pantheon, except by implication and with reference to the relationship of emperor and exile. This aspect of the exilic oeuvre may be seen as an extension of the lampoon quoted by Suetonius (Aug. 70) which was in circulation after a blasphemous ‘divine banquet’ perpetrated in his youth by Augustus and five male and six female companions.

The ‘gods’ of the exilic works are Augustus and his family, spelled out as such in, for instance, P2.8, an elaborate and possibly ironically meant poem, thanking the poet’s friend Cotta Maximus for the gift of silver portraits of the imperial triad, which the exile promises to set up for daily worship in a magnificent shrine, for all the Pontic land to see. R. Schilling, who finds in this adulation a sincere attempt on the part of the poet to find some kind of religious fulfillment, deduces that, when the imperial divinities failed him, the exile finally resorted to the support and consolation of a more satisfactory deity, his Muse. Against this one may counter that the poet himself states that ‘poetry creates gods’, i.e. that the gods need poetry to write them into existence (P4.8.29–64).

This ‘process of creation’ would apply as much to the imperial gods of the poems of exile as to the Graeco-Roman pantheon. The poet’s creative power is at work in the rounded-out persona in which he presents the emperor. The gloomy and terrifying figure of the relentlessly silent thunderer, who struck once, and may strike again (e.g. T2.179–80), is a poetic creation, which may have very little relation to the reality of an ageing emperor beset with imperial and dynastic problems, of which moral reform and the propagation of a national cult formed but a small part. The apparently all-powerful figure is at the same time shown to be less powerful than he himself has claimed to be. The poet’s consistent portrayal of the warlike aspect of the place of exile, which does not share in the pax Augusta, not only negates many of the emperor’s political claims made in the Res Gestae, but perhaps also shows his powerlessness to implement peace in his capacity as saviour-god of the Roman state.

The poet has not lost his sense of humour. The inconsistency of the picture of divinity on the one hand, offset, on the other, by frequent prophecies of apotheosis, announced with the fervour of a ‘vates’, ‘speaker of divine truth’, is part of what may well be a vehicle of ridicule rather than of adulation (e.g. T5.11.25). He appears deliberately to exploit this embarrassing dichotomy inherent in all Hellenistic ruler-panegyric. It has frequently been noted that the imperial apotheoses in M15 compare unfavourably with the poet’s own claim to immortality. So too the final statement of Augustus’ (re)apotheosis (P4.13.23–38)
is set in the ridiculous framework of an alleged *recitatio*, held in their own barbaric tongue before quiver-bearing savages, who clash their arms and growl their approval, whereas the poet's statement of the immortality conferred on him by his Muse (P4.16) is couched finally as a powerful rebuttal of the power of 'Livor'.

Studies of the treatment of Augustus in T2 have suggested that both in its aspect as *controversia* and as *recusatio* the judgement of the emperor by the poet is negative and critical. Also as a prayer for clemency the approach in T2 may be considered possibly to be critical, verging occasionally on irony or even satire. It is in this poem where the appeal is first extended beyond the emperor to his family. *Tristia* 2.161ff, with its possibly barbed references to the emperor's conjugal relationships and rather precarious allusions to his dynastic and personal disappointments, is one of the passages in the exilic oeuvre where it is difficult not to feel that there is a tension between ostensible and real meaning. The blandly ingenuous *captatio benevolentiae* may be considered both stylistically (with reference to excessive anaphora and alliteration) and generically (as prayer) to be so carefully, over-elaborately contrived as to give rise to some doubts as to the exile's intentions with his adulatory hyperbole.

A. W. J. Holleman considers that in T2.161ff Ovid, in a feat of masterly double entendre, exalts Livia far above the emperor, a portrayal of the imperial consort as the 'power behind the throne'. The passage is perhaps rather tantamount to an elegiac inversion of the woman to a position far above that of her 'lover'. The picture of the emperor as 'elegiac lover', but at the same time faithfully and single-mindedly married to a 'univira', the mother of his stalwart sons, without whom he would have had to remain celibate, strikes one as incongruous at various levels.

A modern reader need only reflect on Augustus' own various marriages, those of his sister Octavia, his daughter Julia, and on the cavalier coercion of Agrippa and Tiberius into divorce and remarriage for the sake of dynastic policy, to see the hollowness, if not downright immorality, of the Augustan idea of marriage, and to read irony in for instance T2.233-4:

*urbs quoque te et legum lassat tutela tuarum et morum, similis quos cupis esse tuis.*

Whether any Roman, even Ovid himself, would have interpreted the policy as immoral, is open to conjecture. However, the exile's picture of his own married fidelity, as reflected in his loving outreach to his wife in various letters (e.g. T3.3), emphasises the superiority of private emotion above public affairs.

It was Hellenistic practice to equate the wives of rulers with goddesses, sometimes openly, and sometimes as allegory. Ovid's treatment of Livia as the Juno-consort of Augustus-Jupiter appears fraught with innuendo. In the Julio-Claudian web of propaganda, various goddesses were honoured, beside Venus as mother of the Julian line, and Juno as the protectress of the sanctity of marriage. Of these, the most important were: Vesta, goddess of the home, the Magna Mater, as a syncretic conflation of various matronly goddess-figures, and
Concordia, to whom Livia dedicated a shrine. In this connection, the Fasti serve as an interpretative model for much of the adulatory tone of allusions to Livia. The reader's recollection of the poet's ironical treatment of Concordia (F6.1–100), who disagrees with Juno and Hebe about the naming of the month of June, adds piquancy to the allusion, in T3.1, to the library housed in this shrine, which the 'little book' could not enter. Tiberius, on his return from Rhodes, brought a statue of Hestía-Vesta to place in the shrine (Dio 55.9.6). This fact seems to be the basis of another allusion in P4.13.29.

Ex Ponto 1.1, with its extensive allusions to the cult of Isis and the Magna Mater, appears to endorse Livia's known favouring of this largely composite divine figure, but the irreverent tone of the whole excursus undercuts any serious interpretation of the poem as honouring Livia, either as Isis or as the Magna Mater. Furthermore, the exile claims that he 'jingles the Julian names like a rattle before him' (P1.1.45–46). The tone is bland, but the possibility of irony should not be discounted.

Winniczuk (1974) conjectures that Ovid's tale, in F4.85f, of Juno giving birth to Mars without Jupiter's aid, as a result of jealousy of Jupiter's similar progeniture of Minerva, is a figment of Ovidian irreverent imagination. Verses 293–300 of T2 list a series of mythical sons born of divine mothers. Irreverence is possible at every level. Innuendos about Tiberius' 'looking and acting just like his father' (P2.8.31,32, P4.13.27), appear as a rather cruelly tactless allusion to his late adoption by his stepfather into dynastic and familial succession.

An innuendo coupling the statues of Venus Genetrix and Mars Ultor (T2.295–6) refers to the old Homeric tale, but, if the divine metaphor that pervades the poem is extended logically, allusions made earlier in the same poem, to Tiberius as Augustus-Jupiter's martial counterpart (T2.165–178), and application of this martial role to his position as Livia's son, turn the joke here into a vicious inversion of the Homeric tale. Venus-Julia left Mars-Tiberius out in the cold, while she consorted lewdly on the forum. Only if one refuses to entertain all possibility of any consistent web of divine allusion to the imperial family, can one accept adulation of these divinities at face value. 'Cross-referencing' leads to an awareness of possible irreverence, even if the reader finds it difficult to believe that the poet had a polemical intention. For the rest, except for one reference to Livia (at over sixty) as a goddess, 'sharing the beauty of Venus' (P3.1.117, 'Veneris formam mores Iunonis') and Amor's oath by his mother, at P3.3.68, the Julian Venus seems deliberately to have been avoided in the exilic poems.

Stylistic considerations seem consistently to point to the possibility that P2.8 is strongly ironical. The fulsome gratitude of the exilic for the gift of silver representations, whether statuettes, medals or coins, of the emperor and his wife and adopted son, shifts into a prayer, addressed in turn to the members of the imperial triad. Verses 29,30 repeat the innuendos of T2.161, with a ridiculous sexual double entendre in (Livia) 'cui maiestas non onerosa tua est'. In a rather charming conceit the angry visages of the divine triad soften during the course of the poem. The poem is a playful display of the once familiar Ovidian sense of fun.
The most extensive treatment of Livia occurs in P3.1, which can be interpreted as an ‘Ars precandi’. Here the preamble is longer than the body of the poem. For more than 100 verses the poet has first sketched his position, then called upon his wife to aid him, then explained what he wanted and praised her fitness to do his bidding, then given mythological exempla of virtuous wives to inspire her to the task. Finally in a masterly example of praeteritio (vv. 119–124) the empress is likened (negatively but with positive force) to a series of seven monstrous females from myth. The approbation of Fortuna that she enjoys (v. 125) is another negative characteristic. In v. 152 the animosity of fortune is spelled out: ‘hostem fortunam sit sa tis esse mihi’. The capricious fickleness of Fortuna is a topos frequently exploited by the poet, even where it is not specifically equated with Augustus as the exile’s persecutor.

The elaborate directions for choosing just the right moment to approach the august lady, are evocative of instructions to an elegiac pupil on how to approach his mistress. Davisson (1983) has shown that the poet is emphasising the need for the assumption of an artificial role when approaching the Caesars. Tears and prayers will prevail. Capriciousness, which is a playful aspect of amatory intrigue, appears as monstrously irresponsible rigidity in the grande dame of the state. The equation Livia-Juno is completed at v. 145. The expression ‘non mortales . . . pedes’ (v. 150) strikes the modern reader as incongruous, but would appear to be in line with the terminology of Hellenistic ruler-panegyric.

Tiberius seems in general to be more elusively designated. His ability as general is touched on in various instances, particularly in the allusions to his triumph, in the first half of P3. The ‘prophecy’ of the triumph in P3.3 is, however, placed in the mouth of the sorry-looking and bedraggled ‘Amor’, who has flown from Rome to Tomis in order to vindicate the exile’s earlier works. The incongruity of the poet’s bedroom as setting for divine epiphany, and the ridiculousness of the exchange between the erstwhile ‘praeceptor amoris’ and his divine ‘pupil’ undercut the solemnity and ostensible earnestness of the ‘prediction’. Such instances can be multiplied.

The allusion to Tiberius’ imperial accession in P4.13.27,28 appears to parallel Tacitus’ version of the event so closely that one wonders whether Tacitus perhaps had the passage in mind when he wrote Ann. 1.12. When examined in context, the Ovidian passage loses its impact because of incongruity of setting. The exile claims to have held a recitatio in Getic, attended by quiver-bearing savages, who clashed their arms and growled in barbaric approval. The poet avers that he explained to the Getae: (. . . Tiberium)

esse parem virtute patri, qui frena rogatus
saepè recusati cepérunt imperii.

It is noticeable that the poet’s appeals to Messallinus and Cotta Maximus, known to have been close associates of Tiberius, cease in the last four years of exile, except for an allusion in P4.16 to Cotta as poet. In the last book the exile turns to the coterie of Germanicus. Green (1982) points out that the various appeals to Germanicus (P2.1, P2.4, P4.8, P4.13) show warmth and liking, and he
guesses that Ovid’s natural sympathies were always rather Julian than Claudian. 39

There is the common tie of poetry (P4.8.67) but also, in an earlier book, the exile has prayed for Germanicus to succeed to imperial rule (P2.5.75), perhaps a rather dangerous prayer for the disgraced exile to make. At P4.5.26 and also in P4.8, Germanicus is alluded to as a god, in the second case very specifically in the plural, as ‘the gods’. The exile addresses his wife’s son-in-law, Suillius, who was Germanicus’ quaestor, exhorting him to ‘prayer’. Verse 23a reads almost as prose and has an awkward plural-singular coupling. It strikes by the bare boldness of its appeal: ‘di tibi sunt Caesare iuvenis. tua numina placa’.

D’Elia (1955) points out that Germanicus ‘became a myth’ after his death in AD 19. It would appear that Ovid aided the process. It may of course be argued that if appeals to Augustus are to be treated as ironical, as I have sought to do, these appeals should also be reinterpreted. The poet, however, neither harmed nor was harmed by Germanicus, and so their relationship was not as complex as that of offender and judge, or of victim and persecutor.

G.K. Galinsky considers that the earlier triumph poem, T4.2, is a recantation of the light-hearted approach to national themes in the Ars Amatoria and Amores. 40 It refers in passing to various members of the imperial family, including Germanicus, and the younger Drusus, the son of Tiberius, at whose expense his father had been coerced into adopting the ‘Julian’ Germanicus, the son of the elder Drusus. 41 Here, however, the allusion to the female members of the imperial household is more significant:

cumque bonis nuribus pro sospite Livia nato
munera det meritis saepe datura deis. (T4.2.11,12)

In the ornamentally elegant hyperbaton of the hexameter we can discern an allusion to Tiberius. The prominent phrase ‘cumque bonis nuribus’, referring presumably to Agrippina, wife of Germanicus, and Livilla, wife of the younger Drusus, carries with it, by contrast, the reminder of ‘nurus’ that have proved not ‘bonae’. 42

A problem of Ovidian criticism is that one is often influenced by preconceptions. One assumes that, as the poet ‘must have been writing these poems in order to achieve his recall’, therefore allusions to the imperial household ‘cannot have been other than positive’. The critic who reads these allusions as negative, tends to start doubting the evidence of his senses, or thinks that he has an incomplete impression of the temper of the times. Why would the poet have risked his chance of recall by treating the emperor and his family in this way — why should he be compounding his ‘error’, so to speak? Flippancy would have been grossly irresponsible, and an indictment of the emperor as a cruel despot would have been dangerous, if Ovid had really been trying to end his exile. In the end the critic distrusts his own powers of observation or fears that he will be accused of literary irresponsibility. 43

Furthermore, the bland assumption that the poet, in his appeals, of necessity had to resort to elegiacs, the vehicle of the poetry that brought about his downfall, needs qualification. The talented author of the Metamorphoses had
shown himself versatile enough in another medium, which might have lent itself more easily to earnest appeal. In fact, there was no reason at all that these appeals should have been couched in poetic form. Simply to assume that the exiled poet could not do otherwise, or that his apparent flippancy was an automatic, unintentional and ineradicable feature of his style, is to deny the greatness of the poet’s achievement in the rest of his oeuvre. This continuation of his essentially non-serious approach must be interpreted as deliberate, a method of demonstrating to Augustus that the playfulness of the poetry which had originally offended, was a matter of style rather than attitude.

Various other conjectures may be essayed to explain the exile’s irreverent and often apparently vindictive attitude to the imperial family. The first of these is that the poet may have felt that his appeals were flattering and adulatory enough at the first level of interpretation, so that he could risk some heady fun, always with the possibility of retreat to the surface level, if taxed with his irreverence. Second, the poems may have been sent to Rome for private circulation, and never really intended for the emperor’s perusal (as, for instance, it may be doubted whether P2.9, tactlessly complimenting King Cotys on his ‘remarkably good poetry for a barbarian’, was ever read by the Thracian monarch). It is also possible that the poet knew that the emperor did not normally take notice of lampoons, and assumed that negative or flippant aspects of these poems would be similarly ignored, if Augustus did become aware of them.

Fourth, one might surmise that the exile soon realised that his sentence would never be repealed and so consoled himself by means of barbs only half-hidden in ostensibly guileless appeals, appeals which he knew would be fruitless. It is noticeable that after P3.7, the exile, having long before ceased referring to the possibility of his return, and appearing resigned to asking for relegation to a ‘safer’ area, no longer appeals to his wife.

A recurring theory, which is generally not accepted, but which would neatly endorse the interpretation of the poems of exile as a vigorous indictment of the emperor’s policies of literary censure, is the theory of the fiction of exile. According to the various independent exponents of this theory, Ovid was never really exiled at all, or if he was, not to the Black Sea. The poems of exile would then have been fictitious, perhaps invented when the poet’s books were banned during the Julia Minor debacle of 8 AD. Association of poet and poetry, as depicted in T1.1 and T3.1, where the ‘little books’ go to Rome as the exile’s ambassadors, should be reinterpreted as the ‘exiled poet’ speaking for his ‘banned books’.

Although the theory is attractive, there is no conclusive evidence for it, and much to be said against it. The most important argument against it is perhaps the intensity of emotion expressed in the poet’s autobiographical poem, T4.10. The theory eventually falls down when its various exponents try to explain why our poet should have devised such a ‘fiction’, and why he should have sustained it for so long. Fitton Brown’s exposition of its humorous possibilities is more persuasive than Janssen’s bland acceptance of another, more demonstrably fictional, of the
poet’s literary ploys, the poet’s own recusationary protestations about diminishing productivity and diminished talent.46 Janssen’s explanation that ‘Ovid invented exile in order to disarm criticism of his waning genius’, can be dismissed as patently absurd.

More acceptable is an explanation which in a sense accommodates and extends the first four: interpretation of Ovid’s exilic poems as the creation of the myth of exile.47 The heroic exile partakes of the heroic propensities of all mythical heroes, standing alone in a mythical world where malevolent nature conspires with a relentlessly angry god to persecute him. The hero is comforted and sustained by an all-powerful goddess, his Muse. This is essentially a literary approach. One needs to remember that for Ovid the poet, literature was life. In the poetry of exile this fusion is shown at its most complete. At this level it is immaterial whether the exiled poet had resigned himself to non-recall, or whether the author of books banned through imperial moral zeal, had decided to retaliate by means of his poetry. He has created the myth of exile, and by so doing has also created the genre of exilic autobiography.48

A last consideration may or may not have been part of the poet’s original intention, and is perhaps rather part of the subliminal synergetic effect of the literary activities of a truly great artist. Segal (1969) points out that the Metamorphoses is essentially about victims. The exilic poetry is equally about victims. For the modern reader, who has close on two millennia of hindsight on which to base his judgement, the voice of the exile carries with it echoes of the other voices of Augustan victims, from the early victims of political give-and-take on the proscription lists of the second triumvirate (of whom Cicero is the prime example), to the victims of early jealousy (Gallus)49 and early dynastic rivalry (Sextus Pompeius, called in RG 25 a ‘pirate’), to the later victims of imperial power-struggles (Mark Anthony, a ‘faction’ in RG 1.1, and possibly too his son Iullus Antonius, the ‘lover’ of Julia Maior),50 to the pitiful victims of Augustan dynastic aspirations.

The loneliness of a Vipsania, divorced from Tiberius that he might marry Julia, and of Tiberius himself, fleeing from an uncongenial marriage and apparently upstart stepsons, had never been given public expression,51 nor had the much earlier suffering of Scribonia, put away for producing a daughter, and because she herself had political connections that rendered her, in Ovid’s phraseology, ‘nec digna nec utilis’. She had later joined her disgraced daughter on Planasia, to share the loneliness of her exile. A Roman reader might not immediately have thought of either Julia, when he read the heartfelt cry ‘Parce, pater . . .’ (T2.179,181), but the modern reader remembers that the two Juliae were as much the victims of Augustan moral legislation and perhaps also of imperial autocracy as ever the poet was, and the appeal takes on the piquancy of double entendre.

The loneliness of Agrippa Postumus, exiled close to the Italian mainland, but unable to reach Rome, and finally, all the longings and heartaches of the other victims of the aged despot, appear, to the modern reader, to have gained a voice.
The embodiment of this voice could not have endeared himself to the emperor by this means. Even the memory of the child of Julia Minor, exposed as an infant in AD 8, may, by an effort of the reader’s imagination, be read into the poet’s playful personification of his works. The mourning of a mother over the death of her child, illegitimately brought forth against laws promulgated by its great-grandfather, may be found vaguely embodied in the words of the poet mourning over his ‘children’ that harmed him (T1.7.20 ‘viscera nostra’, a term normally applied to the fruit of the womb).

In the playful personae of the poet’s ‘little books’ and in his hymn to his transcendent Muse we hear the voice of literature and a literary consciousness that would not be stilled. If Caesar-Livia and the ‘Livor’ of P4.16 were truly one, then in the eyes of posterity the subtle retaliation by the exiled poet has defeated their mordant bite. The poet has created a monument that celebrates the power of poetry to transcend totalitarian oppression.

Finally, if the exilic poetry is essentially about victims, also the victims of loneliness, then it does not only show Ovid the poet as the victim of the emperor Augustus, but is also shows the emperor (and his wife and stepson) as the victims of Ovid the poet. It is a commonplace of criticism to say that Virgil demonstrated that the achievement of Aeneas could be reached only at the cost of much personal suffering. Augustus as the embodiment of Aeneas had experienced much suffering and was in his old age disappointed, in many ways embittered, at having outlived those upon whom he had pinned his hopes. The loneliness of outlived hopes is perhaps no easier to bear than the loneliness of exile, and it has no voice.

The loneliness of perhaps unjust accusations, to which the ruler could give no other answer than a dignified silence, is conjectural. At the remove of two millennia one cannot judge finally what Augustus’ feelings could have been when he read, for instance, T2, if indeed he did read it. One is simply aware that the subjective filter of a perceptive and talented genius has stained one of the last deeds of the emperor a questionable colour from which not one assertion of moral rectitude in his own Res Gestae can cleanse it. In the end, perhaps, the emperor’s ‘error’ was greater than that of the poet.

NOTES

* Gratitude is expressed to the University of Stellenbosch for sabbatical leave during 1985, and to the Universities of Texas at Austin, USA, and Cambridge, England, for hospitality to a visiting scholar, and the use of their extensive library facilities. Thanks to the HSRC for financial assistance.

1. See discussion by Jo-Marie Claassen, *Poeta, exsul, vates: a stylistic and literary analysis of Ovid’s Tristia and Epistolae ex Ponto* (Diss. Stellenbosch, 1986), Sections 2, 8.4 and 15. This work will hereafter be referred to by author and date, as will the following: H. B. Evans, *Publica carmina: Ovid’s books from exile* (Lincoln, 1983); B. B. Ford, *Tristia II: Ovid’s opposition to Augustus* (Diss. Rutgers, 1977); M. Drucker, *Der verbannte Dichter und der Kaiser-Gott: Studien zu Ovids späten Elegien* (Diss. Heidelberg, 1977); Salvatore D’Ela, ‘L’esilio di Ovidio e alcuni aspetti della storia augustea’, *AFLP (Napoli)* 5 (1955) 95–157; Mason Hammond, ‘Plato and Ovid’s


4. Equally, in *Heroides* 15, the creator-poet Ovid can be distinguished from the ostensibly articulate poetess in his use of echoes from Sappho's own works to express the sufferings of the deserted woman. The illustration holds good even if the authenticity of H15 is doubted. The commentaries of Dörrie (Berlin, 1971) 287–311, and Jacobson (Princeton, 1976) 277, n. 2., accept the poem as genuine. See Claassen (1986) Section 9.4.6, also Godo Lieberg, Poeta creator: Studien zu einer Figur der antiken Dichtung (Amsterdam, 1982).

5. There has been some doubt whether the poet was exiled in AD 8 or 9. That it was before the Varian disaster in 9 became generally known, may be deduced from the tone of T2. Arguments for the later date need not be excluded. See extensive discussion of chronology and probable dates of publication, with references, in Claassen (1986), Section 4.1.

6. See De Ferrata, *A concordance of Ovid* (Hildesheim, 1939, repr. 1969), ad locc., passim, and also Claassen (1986), Table 1, and discussion in Section 5.2.1, for detailed statistics.

7. Albertus Lueneberg, De Ovidio sui imitatore (Diss Berlin, 1901). Lueneburg quotes T2.207,208; T3.1.51,52; T3.5.51,52; T3.6.25,26; T3.11.33,34; T4.1.23,24; T4.4.37,38; T4.10.89,90; T5.4.18; T5.8.23,24; P1.6.25; P1.7.39,40; P2.2.15,16; P2.2.55; P4.8.19,20.

8. Drucker (1977), and also W. Marg, 'Zur Behandlung des Augustus in den Tristien', Atti del Convento II (Sulmona & Rome 1958) 345–354, and R. Marache, 'La révolte d'Ovide exilé contre Auguste', *Ovidiana* (Paris 1958) 412–419, exhibit too little awareness of the whimsicality of some of the allusions. Drucker's analysis shows that the relationship Augustus-Ovid is depicted in the following divine and heroic terms: Poseidon (Neptune)—Odysses (Ulysses); Iuno—Aeneas; Achilles—Hector; Alexander—Cleitus; Diana—Actaeon. Further the Jupiter—Callisto theme is consistently obtrusive and is emphasised by astronomical references. Also see Claassen (1986), Section 8.5.

10. The only poems that do not refer to the divinity of the emperor in some form or other, are: T1.7; T1.8; T1.11; T3.2; T3.3; T3.10; T4.4; T4.7; T5.13; P1.3; P2.4; P2.6; P2.10; P2.11; P3.5; P3.8; P4.1; P4.2; P4.7; P4.10; P4.16.


12. Augustus (RG 34.2) mentions these as his especial attributes. The cult of the ‘clementia Augusti’ formed a part of the imperial propaganda. The words ‘mitis’ and ‘lenis’ in some cases are applied to the exile’s friends.


15. Compare the views of G. Maurach, ‘Ovids Kosmogonie, Quellenbenutzung und Tradition­stiftung’, Gymnastium 86 (1979) 131–148, with those of M.K. Gamel, ‘Baucis and Philemon: paradigm or paradox?’, Helios 11 (1984) 117–131. Also see K. Scott, ‘Another of Ovid’s errors?’, CJ 26 (1931) 293–296, on Ovid’s treatment in T2.481–2 of Augustus’ predilection for gaming. Evans (1983) p.30 considers that these references cannot be interpreted as polemical, as such an interpretation is ‘not supported by the evidence’. However, see note 3 above.

16. The number of allusions by name to the Olympic gods, other than the Augustus-Jupiter equation, is small: Venus (5), Apollo (5), Juno (4), Ceres (2) and Vesta (2). These allusions are incidental, acting either as exempla, or as metonymy for their divine or geographical spheres. Minerva (3) also has a poem (T1.2.10) addressed to her. T5.3 is addressed to Bacchus as Liber, who also appears in a single exemptiam. See Claassen (1986), Section 8.5, and the concordance of Deferrari et al., ad loc.

17. These ‘portraits’ have been variously interpreted as medallions or figurines. I suggest that they were silver coins, exhibiting the imperial family on the obverse and reverse, of a kind known to have been minted at Lyon late in Augustus’ reign, and continued into the reign of Tiberius. The poet is thanking his friend for a gift of money.


19. Augustus’ claims in RG 12 and 13 to having established the Pax Augusta seem to be willfully countered by most of the poet’s depictions of life at Tomis. Augustus’ claims, of RG 30.2, to having suppressed a ‘Dacorum exercitus’, and of RG 31.2, to having achieved the friendship of ‘Bastarnae’, ‘Scytha’ and ‘Sarmatae’ (inhabitants of far-flung stretches of southern Russia), are refuted by the exile’s every statement (e.g. T4.8.16) about the unfacilitated state of Tomis and the constant threat of marauders from across the Ister.

20. See for instance Curran (1972). Lily Ross Taylor, writing The divinity of the Roman Emperor (APA Monographs 1 1931) in an era when Ovid was generally misjudged, thought (Ch. VIII) that Ovid’s adulatory stance could not have worked as a ‘potent vehicle of publicity’. 44
21. The acoustic equivalence of ‘Livor’-‘Livia’ should be noted in any consideration of the poet’s defiance of ‘carping Envy’, for instance in T4.10 and P4.16. Ovidian penchant for paranomastic homoioteleuton may also be at work here, with a fleeting echo of the prosodic equivalent ‘Caesar’ in the ending of the key word.

22. See Ford (1977) and also Claassen (1986), Sections 9.4.9 and 9.4.10.

23. E.K. Rand, *Ovid and his influence* (London, 1928) p.98 points out that ‘the poet could hardly have expected a reprieve for an appeal like this’.


26. This seems to echo and conflate, perhaps also mock, Augustus’ statements in *Amores* 1.3 Ovid is obliquely criticising Augustus in his picture of Jupiter as ‘desultor amoris’.

27. An interesting light is cast on Ovid’s view of his place of exile if one notes Horace’s animadversions on divorce (*Carm.* 3.24). He says the ‘Scythians and rigid Getae’ have a better idea of women’s rights than the Romans do. Ovid echoes the phrase in T5.1.46: ‘rigidos . . . Getas’.


30. See R.J. Littlewood, ‘Poetic artistry and dynastic politics. Ovid at the Ludi Megalensis’, *Fasti* IV.179–372, *CQ* 31 (1981) 381–395, on Ovid’s treatment of the Julio-Claudian connection with the cult of the Magna Mater, and P. Ferrarino, ‘Laus Veneris (*Fasti* 4.91–114)’, *Ovidiana* (1958) 301–316, on Ovid’s treatment of Venus in *Fasti* 4. The most fanciful theory, to date, as to Ovid’s ‘error’ is that of L. Herrman, ‘Ovide, la Bona Dea e Livie’, *AC* 44 (1975) 126–140, who suggests that the poet, in his research for book 12 of the *Fasti*, secretly violated the rites of the Bona Dea, and ‘saw a naked Livia performing the sacred rites’. Almost equally fanciful is Horvath’s suggestion, ‘Impius Aeneas’, *Acta Ant. Hung.*, 6 (1958) 385–393, that Ovid saw Livia preparing poison. It takes some ingenuity to connect this with his further suggestion that H7, which attributes ‘impity’ to Aeneas, was the originally offensive ‘carmen’. A.W.J. Holleman, ‘Ovid *Met* XV 622–872 (*Carmen et error*)’, *Latomus* 28 (1969) 42–60, provides the missing link with his suggestion that Livia, privately incensed with the poet, ‘poisoned Augustus’ mind’ against the poet. Of these theories, only the last has any cogency. It would explain both the ambivalent attitude of the poet to Livia, and the continued implacability of Tiberius and Livia towards the exile.

31. Winniczuk (1974) also points to the picture in F2.170 of Mars trying to attribute the *Matronalia* to himself to show his equality with Minerva. A similar emulatory motive is ascribed to Livia’s restoration of the temple of Bona Dea in F1.237, which would offer an earlier identification of Livia with ‘Livor’ (envy).

32. See note 17 above.

33. See discussion of this important poem in Davison (1983) and also Claassen (1986), Section 9.4.8.

34. Addresses to Livia in other poems (e.g. the prophecies of Tiberius’ triumph in P3.3.87, P3.4.95–112) appear to have no special significance.

35. See Ronald Syme, *Danubian papers* (Bucharest, 1971), for military excursions in the north-eastern empire and D’Elia (1955) on the necessity which Augustus felt to keep the command of
the army in dynastic hands.

36. Possibly, too, because Augustus had banished amorous play.

37. The possibility of factual, common knowledge should obviously not be ignored.

38. That is, believing the ‘Julian’ Germanicus against the ‘Claudian’ Tiberius. See discussion by Green (1982) notes 58 and 59. Cf. also the rededication of the Fasti (F1.3–6) and the inclusion of much astronomical material, considered by C. Santini, ‘Motivi astronomici e moduli didattici nei Fasti di Ovidio’, GIF 27 (1975) 1–25, as a probable compliment to Germanicus.

39. That is, favouring the ‘Julian’ Germanicus against the ‘Claudian’ Tiberius. See discussion by Green (1982) notes 58 and 59. Cf. also the rededication of the Fasti (F1.3–6) and the inclusion of much astronomical material, considered by C. Santini, ‘Motivi astronomici e moduli didattici nei Fasti di Ovidio’, GIF 27 (1975) 1–25, as a probable compliment to Germanicus.

40. That is, favouring the ‘Julian’ Germanicus against the ‘Claudian’ Tiberius. See discussion by Green (1982) notes 58 and 59. Cf. also the rededication of the Fasti (F1.3–6) and the inclusion of much astronomical material, considered by C. Santini, ‘Motivi astronomici e moduli didattici nei Fasti di Ovidio’, GIF 27 (1975) 1–25, as a probable compliment to Germanicus.

41. That is, favouring the ‘Julian’ Germanicus against the ‘Claudian’ Tiberius. See discussion by Green (1982) notes 58 and 59. Cf. also the rededication of the Fasti (F1.3–6) and the inclusion of much astronomical material, considered by C. Santini, ‘Motivi astronomici e moduli didattici nei Fasti di Ovidio’, GIF 27 (1975) 1–25, as a probable compliment to Germanicus.

42. S.G. Owen in the Introduction to his edition of T2 (Oxford, 1924) discusses the allusion to ‘neptesque piis’ in P2.2.73 in much the same terms, but he cannot believe that the poet means to refer to Julia, realising that the concept of ‘the wayward Julia’ as ‘piis’ is laughable. He does not seem to consider that either ridicule or criticism may be involved. From Enrico Cocchi, ‘La relegazione di Ovidio a tori ovvero la censura artistica sotto il regno di Augusto’, Atti della Reale Acad. di Arch., Lett. e Belle Arti 23 (1902) 1–145, to K. Marot, ‘L’esilio di Ovidio’, A. Ant. Hung. 3 (1955) 223–232, to B. Levick, ‘The fall of Julia the Younger’, Latomus 35 (1976) 301–339, to T.D. Barnes, ‘Julia’s child’, Phoenix 35 (1981) 357–363, there has been some slight development in critics’ view of the connection between ‘carmen et error’ and the women of the imperial household. Green (1982) summarises the general trend of thought that connects a political ‘error’ with the political relationships of the Juliae, and interprets ‘carmen’ as a ‘camouflage’. The poet, however, never relates the two concepts in this manner in his own explanations of his exile.

43. I wish to thank an anonymous reader of an early draft of this paper for pointing this danger out to me in criticism passed on by Dr J. Peradotto of SUNY at Buffalo. During the course of my research, an accumulating weight of evidence, from which I have selectively quoted above, virtually forced me to revise my original ‘face-value’ acceptance of the exile’s protestations.

44. See H. Fugier, ‘Communication et structures textuelles dans les Tristes d’Ovide’, Revue Romane 11 (1976) 74–98, on the real and ostensible levels of address in the exilic poetry.

45. This theory was apparently first mooted by J.J. Hartmann in 1905, discussed and rejected by various scholars, including F.W. Lenz, and again evolved independently by O. Janssen, Uit de Romeins Keizerijd (The Hague, 1951) and A. Fitton Brown, ‘The unreality of Ovid’s Tomitan exile’, LCM 10.2 (1985) 19–22.

46. See my argument against this assumption, Coll. Latomus, Studies in Roman History and Latin Literature 5, forthcoming.

47. Cf. the hitherto unpublished paper read by me at the CASA Conference, Stellenbosch, Jan. 1987, entitled ‘Poeta, exsil, vates: the creation of a myth and the triumph of poetry’. Also see J.U. Jacobs, ‘Breyten Breytenbach and the South African prison book’, Theorya 68, Special Issue (Dec. 1986) 95–105, on the deliberate fictionalisation, by various South African authors, of their experiences in prison (also a form of ‘exile’) in order to lend universality to autobiography. This ‘metafiction’ helps the protagonist to understand his own suffering, and himself. Jacobs cites studies by Dr L.J. West of what he terms the ‘D D D Syndrome’, or the phenomena of dread, debility and dependency, resulting from detention and interrogation. The Roman poet’s reactions to exile, and to the originator of his misery, exhibit largely similar psychological characteristics, tempered, as with Breytenbach’s oeuvre, with humour, which ranges from the playful to the satirical.

48. See, for instance, J.J. Gahan, ‘Seneca, Ovid and exile’, CW 78 (1985), 145–147, on Seneca’s depiction of Corsica in Ovidian terms, as cold, barren and treeless.

and ‘The emperor’s displeasure and Ovid’, *TAPA* 97 (1966) 373–378. On Ovid’s persistent revival of the memory of Gallus, see Claassen (1986), Section 9.3.


51. Cf. Dio 55.10.19 on Gaius’ cavalier treatment of Tiberius at Rhodes.

52. F. Barrone, ‘Carmen et error’, *Ovidianum* (1976) 137–154, avers that ‘what Ovid wrote at Tomis really gave offense’.

53. The topic is extensively treated by Barnes (1981) and Levick (1976), note 42 above.

54. R.C. Elliot, *The literary persona* (Chicago 1982) 57, puts it thus: the literary persona ‘is the “I” of agonised personal experience, but also the “I” representative of an age’.

55. See Hammond (1958) on Augustus’ Platonic attempts at literary ‘thought control’ as redolent of the era of Cato the Elder.

56. The poet’s consistent use of medical imagery, both in relation to his own suffering and his ‘error’, reminds one of Augustus’ references to Agrippa Postumus and the two Juliae as his ‘three boils’ or ‘running sores’ (Suet. *Aug.* 65).

57. D’Elia (1955) ascribes the older man’s harshness to the series of calamities and deaths in his circle: in 23 BC Marcellus, in 19 Virgil, in 12 Agrippa, in 11 Octavia, in 9 Drusus, in 8 Maecenas and Horace. In 6 Tiberius left for Rhodes, in 2 Julia Maior was exiled and her son Lucius Caesar died. In 4 AD Gaius Caesar died, after which, in 8, Julia Minor was banished and her child exposed. The date of her husband’s death is uncertain. In 9 the Varian disaster took place. Even the enforced mitigation, by means of the *lex Papia Poppeia*, of the original *lex Julia de mariandis* must have disappointed some of the emperor’s fondest ideals.
Acta Classica

Acta Classica is published annually by the Classical Association of South Africa. The journal has been in production since 1958. It is listed on both the ISI and the SAPSE list of approved publications.

For further information go to: