

IN THE YEAR 8 AD, at the age of 50, Publius Ovidius Naso stood at the height of poetic ambition. Fêted and continuously successful for almost thirty years, Ovid had been without a rival since the death of Horace 15 years before. Surrounded by second-raters and nonentities, he was unquestionably the most famous poet in the empire. Rome was his oyster, and his poetry took the metropolis as inspiration and subject. His love poetry brought a cool passion to bear on the sophisticated life of the city, with its classy courtesans and new imperial pomp; his *Metamorphoses*, almost finished, made Rome the magnet that tugged all Greek mythology and art towards itself as the new centre of the world; and he was even now at work on an unparalleled creation, a poem on the Roman calendar that would make the ancient festival cycle the occasion for an inquiry into the city's religion and identity.

Something happened. Whatever it was, it was not a crime, but a 'mistake', an error. The poet saw something, something incriminating enough to make his friend Cotta Maximus groan when he heard of it. The ruling family was somehow involved, for Ovid was summoned to see the emperor, Augustus, and blasted by the septuagenarian despot's rage. The old man dug up a ten-year-old resentment, and threw the *Art of Love* into the indictment; he had stifled his indignation at the poem's smart-alecky smirking at decorum and the new Augustan morality when it first appeared, but under the spur of this new affront, whatever it was, he lashed out and added the poem to the charge. From now on, Ovid would always refer to the double charge against him, *carmen et error*, 'a poem and a mistake'. Untried and unsentenced, he was 'relegated', not 'exiled', by the mere authority of the emperor. He was never to see Rome again. He went to Tomis, a Black Sea port on the very edge of the empire, just south of the estuary of the Danube. Perhaps, as Robin Nisbet once suggested, the vindictive emperor was venting some learned spleen with this choice. Ovid had written a tragedy called *Medea*, the only work of his which did not survive to the age of printing. Augustus would have known that Tomis was said to have got its name from the barbarian witch's first major crime. Here she chopped up her brother to make her pursuing father slow down to gather up the bits; the *tom* in Tomis could look like the Greek word for 'cut' (*tomē*, as in 'appendectomy'). Let Ovid stew in the city he had glibly etymologised and mull over the cleverness of his literary heroine.

Tomis is the modern-day Romanian Black Sea summer resort of Constanta. Whatever its seasonal appeal now, in 8 AD it was a wretched place, a border-post clinging to the appurtenances of Hellenism, weeks of travel away from the metropolis that had been Ovid's milieu since adolescence. Scholars sometimes point out that Tomis wasn't all that bad: there were gymnasia, a theatre, inscriptions in Greek. Imagine an habitude of London or New York being 'exiled to' – insert your preferred provincial town here – and being told that the local art gallery has some surprisingly good works. Similarly, scholars sometimes say that the unpleasantness of its climate

and setting is greatly exaggerated by Ovid, pointing to Constanta's modern role as a resort and to the hyperbolically and conventionally grotesque language with which Ovid evokes a desolate landscape of unrelieved winter. Jan Felix Gaertner, in the introduction to his commentary on the first book of the second collection from exile, provides a full battery of sobering information to show that Ovid knew what he was talking about: the average temperature in January is below freezing, and it can get as cold as -20°C; the Danube freezes for weeks, as do the fringes of the Black Sea; it is a treeless place, with fogs, freezing winds, storms. The barbarian tribes of Getae and Sarmatians lived on the northern side of the Danube, and occasionally raided the Roman province, Moesia. Not exactly Fort Apache, but certainly a different world from Italy, and Rome.

The catastrophe would have annihilated a lesser man, and Ovid at times wrote as if he were a lesser man and had been annihilated. But he kept writing until he died, some ten years after his banishment. Removed from his city, his wife and daughter, his circle of friends, he maintained a steady, though slower, rate of production, writing five books of *Tristia* ('Sorrow') and four of *Epistulae ex Ponto* ('Letters from the Black Sea'). Until recently, these poems were lucky to attract even condescending attention from Latinists, although the figure of the cosmopolitan poet in exile had attracted the attention of many non-professionals, most strikingly in the novels of David Malouf (*An Imaginary Life*, 1978) and Christoph Ransmayr (*The Last World*, 1988). Interest in exile as a subject has reinforced the relentless expansion of modern scholarship into former niche areas, and Ovid's exile poetry has now become one of Latin's take-off industries. Gaertner's massive and meticulous commentary is a seal of approval from the discipline, stamping the exilic corpus as entitled to the same degree of scholarly attention as Ovid's earlier work. Peter Green was in at the beginning of the boom when he published his spirited and sympathetic translation in 1994, now reissued with a new foreword and updated bibliography; any quotations from Ovid in this piece are taken from his excellent versions. Green doesn't just give a translation, but a rich introduction and copious notes, and his book is the obvious place for the Latinless to begin exploring Ovid in exile. Green's introduction covers a lot of ground, and in particular pinpoints with wonderfully economical insight the themes of exile which Ovid first embodies for us, especially 'the slow growth of paranoia and hypo-

chondria, the neurotic nagging at indifferent friends, the grinding exacerbation of slow and empty time, the fear of and longing for death'.

Exile could have smothered Ovid, but he retains his voice and integrity. In words from *Tristia* 3.7 that have been often quoted, he tells his daughter that his talent is one thing that the emperor cannot touch:

Look at me – I've lost my home, the two of you, my country, they've stripped me of all they could take, yet my talent remains my joy, my constant companion: over this, Caesar could have no rights.

Earlier generations could detect only abasement in Ovid's frequent addresses to Augustus pleading for permission to return, and it took the acuity of Ronald Syme in *History in Ovid* (1978) to perceive the self-assertion and protest behind the screen. Ovid knew that in Augustus he was dealing with a reader paranoid enough to beat any postmodern advocate of a hermeneutics of suspicion, but cumulatively over the years he constructs a narrative that reproaches the emperor's self-indulgent fury and vindicates his own status as Rome's greatest

poet. He knows that he will outlast Augustus, as indeed he has. He alludes to the epilogue to *Metamorphoses* when he writes, after the lines quoted above:

When I'm gone, my fame will endure, and while from her seven hills Mars' Rome in triumph still surveys a conquered world, I shall be read.

A major part of his strategy is to reproach the emperor by comparing his treatment with that of Augustus' long-dead favourites, Virgil and Horace. For most of his career, an important part of his self-definition had been precisely that he did not occupy the same official niche as these two, but in exile he keeps reminding us of how petty and vindictive and sheerly stupid it was to try to ban him from the canon as well as the city. When Virgil lay dying with the *Aeneid* not quite finished, so the story went, he had wanted to burn his masterpiece; but the emperor intervened, persuaded him to change his mind, and made sure that the poem was tidied up and published after Virgil's death. When Ovid suffered his own 'death' of exile, by contrast, he says that he burned his unfinished masterpiece, the *Metamorphoses*; luckily, there were other copies, but it had barely survived, and was banned from public libraries. While Augustus had exerted himself to save the *Aeneid* for posterity he was now wantonly destroying its finest descendant.

The other great favourite, Horace, had once written an 'Epistle to Augustus', and now Ovid wrote one too, which takes up the whole of the second book of *Tristia*. A surface reading yields a satisfactory antithesis: Horace had enjoyed the emperor's affection and trust as he bantered with him about the current state of literature; Ovid is forced to defend and justify himself against the

I shall be read Denis Feeney

OVID: THE POEMS OF EXILE
'TRISTIA' AND THE 'BLACK SEA LETTERS'
translated by Peter Green.
California, 451 pp., £12.95, March 2005, 0 520 24260 2

OVID: EPISTULAE EX PONTO, BOOK I
edited and translated by Jan Felix Gaertner.
Oxford, 606 pp., £90, October 2005, 0 19 927721 4

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emperor's misreadings. A second reading shows that Ovid picked up on many of the disturbing elements in Horace's charting of his relationship with Augustus and with Roman literary history. Horace represents himself as unappreciated and misunderstood by contemporary taste; he is weak because poets are not thought to count in Rome, but strong because he and Augustus know that the emperor's posthumous reputation is in the poets' hands more than in

anyone else's. Ovid looks as if he is arguing from a position of complete impotence, yet has unexpected reserves of power to pit against the bludgeoning of Augustus. He, like Horace, has the power to shape his own posthumous fate, and that of others.

Exile, then, did not crush Ovid as the emperor may have hoped, but Ovid went one better than simply escaping that outcome. Somehow he capitalises on his stock of experience to make exile work for him as a

subject. The author of the *Metamorphoses* has undergone a total transformation, and this gives him an unwanted but unrivalled viewpoint for exploring many of the questions that had intrigued him in his earlier masterpiece. What continuity is there across the bridge, or chasm, of metamorphosis? What is the 'same' about the transformed person, and how does metamorphosis define the difference? Again, Ovid's relationship with Virgil's *Aeneid*, always crucial to his work, is

now redefined in the light of exile. Ovid had always known that the *Aeneid* was all about an exile trying to establish a new life in a strange land, but now he was able to flip Virgil's poem, mining it brilliantly to depict himself as an inverse Aeneas and his voyage from Rome to the Black Sea as a topsy-turvy mini-*Aeneid*. Instead of a hero going from east to west to found a new civilisation, we have his vulnerable inheritor forced to retrace those steps and leave behind the fruits

At the Movies

THERE ARE all kinds of differences between movies and television, and one of them is that TV thrives on situations, faces, interruptions and short-term drama, which is why games, soap operas and interviews make such ideal material for it. What TV doesn't seem to need is a world, a created visual space with its own aura and co-ordinates. The world it has is enough, our world caught on a camera; or no world, just the set or the simulation where the conversations take place.

When directors like Michael Mann, whose movie version of *Miami Vice* has just opened, say they want to make episodes of television series as if they were movies, they mean, among other things, that they want to create a world, a location which is a kind of character. This is as true of TV shows like *Hill Street Blues*, *LA Law* and *NYPD Blue* as it is of *Miami Vice*, of which Mann was the executive producer and stylistic mind, and which ran from 1984 to 1989. Of course the places in question are not quite Chicago, Los Angeles, New York or Miami, they are invented versions of those places, rather in the way that Nabokov said he was 'faced by the task of inventing America' in order to write *Invitation to a Beheading*. After a while, of course, the actual places do start to imitate the inventions, and invention in these cases is perhaps always a matter of finding and highlighting details rather than frankly making things up.

So it becomes hard to tell whether *Miami Vice* is the least gritty of all these series or Miami is the most unreal of all these cities. Critics call the series neo-noir, which is not a bad hint at the genre, but if we are going to be literal about it, noir, or even rouge, is the last thing *Miami Vice* is. Mann went to great lengths to find pastel shades for everything, from T-shirts to hotels to cars to weather, and sometimes the colour-coding is even more striking than the soundtrack. Legend has it that the series was born from a studio memo that read simply 'MTV cops', and certainly the episodes often look like music videos, an effect enhanced by guest appearances from Phil Collins, Willie Nelson, Little Richard, Miles Davis and many others. But the other, complementary theory of the series' origin names a news story about vice cops using repossessed goods as a glossy cover for their assumed criminal characters. This is why Don Johnson drives a Ferrari and has two fancy boats.

Miami Vice, the title, sounds more like the name of a rock group or a basketball team than a police department, but the series has its interesting undertow, and there is a wonderful moment in the

pilot where Johnson, as Sonny Crockett, ex-football star, now insubordinate but ultimately loyal cop, has to pull his gun, show his badge and make an arrest. 'Miami,' he says. And then after a very short pause: 'Vice.' It's as if a pun had been taken apart into its discrete components, but only to remind us how the pun works, since we have already learned that Crockett's job is an addiction and has ruined his marriage. 'You're all players, Sonny,' his wife says. 'You get high on the action.' The vice squad, she says, is just 'the flip-side of the coin of those dealers you're always masquerading around with'. Sonny's vice is Miami Vice, but there is plenty of other vice around.

Although not as much as there seems to be. The man Crockett is arresting in the above scene is a New York detective, Rico Tubbs, played by Philip Michael Thomas, and about to become Crockett's partner. He's after the same drug lord as Crockett is, so that in the previous encounter to set up a supposed deal, three out of the four players were undercover agents. Generally in this series there are so many agents making actual drug commissions to establish their criminal credentials that you begin to think the trade could probably do pretty nicely on the attempts to stop it, without any real action of its own.

This is just where the movie begins, with deals and simulated deals. But the pastel shades are gone, and the visual domain is that of Mann's *Heat* (1995) or *Collateral* (2004), full of reds, golds, dark blues and deep shadows. Those two films, however, were sumptuous hymns to Los Angeles, city of illuminated night, and the new work is dedicated to a floating realm of risk and glamour, which includes Haiti, Colombia, the Brazilian border, and Geneva – any place where drugs are loaded or transported or drug money deposited. Miami, we might say, is the home port, the imaginary centre of these voyages. Everything looks great, from the recurring, crowded space of the dancefloor to the wide skies and seas full of racing planes and speedboats; this is the kind of movie in which you slip over to Cuba for a drink. But what is all the glamour about?

Not money, and not drugs. These are the means of the action, not the action itself. The totally confusing plot doesn't tell us much, although its confusion is of course part of the pleasure, even the glamour – when did you last enjoy a thriller you thoroughly understood? No, the action has to do with disguise, with masquerading around, as Crockett's wife put it in the TV series.

The forces of order are not doing well at the beginning of the film. A raid on a club has been aborted, and elsewhere a drug deal has gone sour. More precisely, a sting

has been discovered, and the FBI agents have been blown away. Crockett and Tubbs arrive on the scene, because a previous informant of theirs has been involved and is now dead, along with his girlfriend. The two partners, aghast at this mess and the incompetence it implies, agree to go undercover once again and clear things up. Is there a leak in the police department? What is the link between the sinister José in Haiti and the sinister Jesus in Paraguay? The rest of the movie, like so much of Mann's work, involves several long face-to-face conversations where much is implied and almost nothing is said. This calls for well-judged ham acting of the kind impeccably displayed by Al Pacino and Robert de Niro in *Heat*; and in *Miami Vice* both José (John Ortiz) and Jesus (Luis Tosar) make a fair show of being as sinister as they are supposed to be. The problem is that Colin Farrell, as Crockett, is not up to this kind of self-parody, and Jamie Foxx, as Tubbs, who probably is up to it, doesn't get a chance to try.

The movie has done some odd things to the two main characters of the series. Johnson had a touch of sleaze and defeat about him which it would be hard to duplicate; and Thomas shifted from genial to threatening and back with astonishing grace. Above all, they were a team, and their partnership was what made the series work. It is not for nothing, as they say, that Mann wrote the first four episodes of *Starsky and Hutch*. In the movie, having given Farrell a version of Crockett's hair-do and subtle and cast a black actor as Tubbs, Mann seems to have abandoned the idea of a partnership, and gone all out for a double plot which separates the characters as much as possible. Each cop has a romantic entanglement that finally puts the guns and cars and boats and planes in the shade, and after the obligatory shoot-out – the bad guys are blown away this time, and the good guys, or some of them, are still standing – the film closes with some elaborate cross-cutting between the two romances. Will Trudy, Tubbs's friend, played by Naomie Harris, survive the bomb blast that threw her into a coma? How do we feel about Crockett's having fallen in love with Isabella, even though she is Jesus's mistress, the smartest person in the movie and obviously the mind behind most of the crime going on? She's played by an enigmatic Gang Li, which helps a lot. He allows her to escape and that's where the criss-cross starts. Shot of unmoving hand on hospital bed. Shot of Isabella's drawn face, torn by complicated tensions: she is glad to get away from the law, desolate at leaving Crockett. Now back to hand on hospital bed. And so on. This is all very effective, but what hap-

pened to the buddy movie and the idea of disguise?

Somewhere along the way, Mann, who wrote as well as directed the film, must have reached two conclusions, perhaps because of the cast he had or perhaps for quite different reasons. First, that the men were not interesting enough on their own. Isabella, with her smart suits and clipped English and Spanish accents, is undoubtedly the most surprising and haunting character in the movie. How could she fall for Crockett, or for this Crockett? It's not that Farrell isn't attractive, it's that he has cop written all over him, in a way Don Johnson never had. Perhaps Isabella is indulging in a bit of reverse moral slumming.

What I think is Mann's second conclusion is implied in the first. Disguise is more appealing as an idea than a practice, and works best when it fails. So Crockett and Tubbs don't need to deceive anyone; they need only to be seen playing the game of deception. Everyone enjoys the game, and in the movies there is no point in being a cop or a drug lord, undercover or out of cover, if you can't overact the part and get away with it.

Miami Vice is not in the same class as the same director's *Manhunter*, a wonderfully creepy film in which Brian Cox plays Hannibal Lecter and William Peterson (now seen on television every other hour in *CSI*) is a disturbed detective; or as *Collateral*, in which a grim and edgy humour alternates with terrific suspense. These qualities in the latter movie almost certainly have to do with the writer Stuart Beattie, who is also credited for work on the *Pirates of the Caribbean* films. Except that there the jokes tend to go coy and get lost among the make-up and special effects, and in *Collateral* they are part of a disciplined design that brings style and violence into a strange collusion. As if it were natural for violence not to be as ugly as it ought to be. Or for violence and wit to go together.

If you haven't seen *Collateral*, look out for the scene in which Tom Cruise, as a hitman doing his night's rounds, is reproached for killing a person he didn't even know. 'What?' he responds. 'I should only kill people after I get to know them?' He wonders why anyone would worry about the planned death of a single criminal when we are all so indifferent to the mass murders in Rwanda. 'Nobody's killed people that fast since Nagasaki and Hiroshima.' A Michael Mann movie, with the possible exception of *The Last of the Mohicans*, is always worth watching. You come away with your head full of images, and ready to go back for more.

Michael Wood

of Aeneas' work – Rome, Italy and civilisation. Some fifteen hundred years later, the Renaissance scholar Marullus was able to reverse Ovid's reversals, drawing heavily on Ovid's exile poetry to deplore the fact that he had to leave Constantinople, the heart of civilisation and empire, when it was sacked in 1453, and travel to exile in the uncouth West, in Italy.

Exile unexpectedly revived another of Ovid's earlier works, the *Heroides*, a series of letters from mythical heroines to their lovers, along with a few paired letters between the heroines and their heroes. The problems of absence and presence which concerned him in the earlier collection now acquire a sharper and directly personal edge. His poems from exile are almost all epistolary, and the form allows him to capitalise even more poignantly on the tantalising immateriality of the contact provided by letters. Especially in the letters to his wife, who stayed behind in Rome to lobby for his recall, Ovid created a memorable sequence of reflections on the way letters both provide a tangible physical link and highlight the gulf between author and addressee. One of the finest poems in the *exilic corpus* begins with Ovid imagining the constellation of the Bear looking down simultaneously on his wife and on him, providing a common vector for the pair, but one which is as inaccessible as their bodies are to each other.

Ovid is now forced and enabled to open up epistolarity even further, for letters from an exile create yet more lines of fracture in conventions of reading. The curious status of these letters as both private and public is

often a topic here. They are letters, yet also books, to be read by people other than the addressee. But if they are books, they are banned books: Augustus banished Ovid's work from the public libraries, and Ovid regularly refers to the discomfort the addressees may have at being named. The pressure mounts in the second collection, when he starts naming addressees, having identified only his wife, his daughter and the emperor as addressees in *Tristia*. People who would once have been delighted to have a poem from Ovid addressed to them were now squirming in anxiety that a mis-sive from the Black Sea might be circulating the city with their name on it (Ex Ponto 4.3 is a fine example). Again, the apparently abject poet has more power available to him than his enemies may think.

I should say something about Ovid and convention, for this relentlessly self-conscious literary processing of his experience of exile is often misunderstood. It's not just that Ovid can play on convention and make it work for him, as in his poems about the coming of spring, for example, where much of the effect derives from the audience's knowledge that a 'proper' spring poem should have something to say about the beginning of the sailing season – a topic that cannot be exploited by the exiled poet, who has to stay where he is. Ovid's interest in convention goes much deeper than this kind of trick, and provides an answer to the criticisms that can be laid against the overt way the exile poetry plots his predicaments onto pre-existing literary templates. Gaertner's commentary tabulates the stylised representations of barbaric landscape and

frozen winter which Ovid recycles from Virgil, Horace and his own earlier poetry, and it strikes many readers as odd that Ovid's direct experience of these conditions should apparently elicit the conventional lore of the poetic and ethnographic tradition. The profoundly 'pre-written' nature of his descriptions has even prompted the view that he never really went to Tomis at all, but diverted himself by inventing a new genre of barbaric exile so that he could ring some new changes on old commonplaces. Only a Latinist could think of something like that.

Still, such complaints miss the point that Ovid's writing had always been about convention. He didn't just use conventions and traditions, or allow himself to be used by them; rather, his writing took the interplay between convention and experience or originality as its subject. His *Art of Love*, which so enraged the emperor, takes the very idea of a didactic poem on love as its enabling paradox: if love is natural, how come you can teach it? The poem reveals the sedimented layers of convention through which sexuality is constructed and experienced – layers of convention so deep we cannot recognise them as conventions. When something so terribly real as physical displacement to a truly godforsaken place happens to Ovid, the spectacle of the poet falling back on his databank of literature in order to make sense of his experience is at first a little baffling, then amusing and finally extremely moving. These are the only resources he has, and he cannot be stripped of them; at the same time, he keeps their inadequacy to his crisis before the reader

as a theme. The sameness of the recurring tropes reinforces the unrelieved sameness of his predicament at Tomis, and its difference from anything any previous Roman poet had endured. This is a hard thing to pull off, but when it works, it generates real power. In *Tristia* 3.14 Ovid complains that 'misfortunes have broken my talent... here there's no wealth of books, for my nurture and stimulation.' These words rework the lament of Catullus in Poem 68, writing from Verona, complaining that he has no books with him to feed his inspiration; yet Catullus could drift down to Rome at will, while his greatest successor as the poet of Roman love will always be confined.

Another reason life in Tomis has an unreal tinge in Ovid's writing is that, for him, real life is happening somewhere else – in Rome. Ovid keeps imagining festivals and ceremonies he cannot see, parties he cannot attend, friends he cannot meet. Significant events and dates are marked in Rome, while Tomis is somehow always the same. Ovid's birthday comes around, but there is no point in celebrating it; winter doesn't return, but remains. The geography is formless, the landscape treeless, and the Black Sea isn't even a proper sea, since ice forms around its coast. As the landscape blurs into sameness towards the horizon of the steppe, so one year blurs into another, robbed of its meaningful Roman contours. Ovid is on the edge of Roman space and Roman time, clinging to a vicarious participation in the only life that has ever meant anything to him, the life of the city that the Romans didn't need to name, but called simply *urbs*, 'city'.

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