1 ❀ *The False Applause of Fancy*

For many readers, the wit and comic irreverence of Ovid's *Heroides* have seemed either the unfortunate flaws of the collection or its all too sparse yet inexplicable delights. In either case, they seem transgressions which are glaring examples of the poet's infatuation with his own talent, his *amor ingenii sui.*[1] Moreover, they are stylistic aberrations which seem evidence of a native prolixity and instability of tone whose undisciplined indulgence becomes, in the *Heroides*, especially conspicuous because deplorably inopportune.

The Ovidian vagaries of mood and emphasis seem incompatible with the combined imperatives of his subjects and, despite its vaunted originality, his genre. They seem foreign to the decorum imposed on the poet by the near-tragic and almost hagiographic stature of his heroines, by the critical and often lethal circumstances which provide the immediate motive for their letters, and by the form of the verse epistle itself. This poetic form did, of course, allow the poet great latitude, and even license, for the exploration of individual psychology, sensibility, and emotion. Correspondingly, however, it should also have encouraged him—even at the risk of disrupting the intimacy and sympathy which were its greatest potential advantage—to treat his heroines less comically, less critically, less cruelly. Both subject and form should have obliged the poet to maintain, and certainly not vandalize, the various Chambers of Romance he might choose to occupy in the Districts of the Sublime. The province of the *Heroides* was, after all, more elite than the nugatory suburbs of the *Amores*. Here the condition of residence was the great treatment of great emotions, or at least some appropriately elegant alternative. But the characteristic Ovidian baggage was by no means left behind. As a result, the wit so obtrusive in these letters of betrayed or abandoned heroines has seemed to transgress upon, corrupt, or dispel utterly the persuasion and pathos of an imaginative illusion. Like so many garish and glittering rings and sixpences, the comic interventions of the poet into the letters of his heroines have seemed alien and inorganic. At their best they offer an amusing or charming but quite irrelevant surprise; but more commonly, and dangerously, their insidious function is to invite detachment, estranged reservation, second thoughts, and suspicions. A nice innuendo, a choice irony, a stunning elegance in the turn of a phrase—these might find their proper disposition in a heroine's plaint, and especially in her accusation. Not, however, malice. And certainly not the eloquence of indifference exercised at the expense of a heroine and at the cost of the reader's imaginative sympathy with her.

[1] Marcus Fabius Quintilian, *Institutio Oratoria*, ed. Henri Bornecque (Paris: Editions Garnier Frères, 1954), 10.1.98.

John Dryden's reluctant strictures against the poet remain the classic formulation in English of the traditional censure.[2] He speaks, in general, of that wit which "sometimes cloys [Ovid's] readers instead of satisfying them: And gives occasion to his translators, who dare not cover him, to blush at the nakedness of their father." In the preface to his English edition of Ovid's *Heroides*, Dryden speaks more particularly of the way in which Ovid's wit sometimes mars this collection, one which he nonetheless considers "the most perfect piece" to issue from the poet's hand. He suggests, first, that Ovid goes too far in his modernization of antique models:

> Perhaps he has Romanized his Grecian dames too much, and made them speak sometimes as if they had been born in the city of Rome, and under the empire of Augustus.

He praises the poet's imitation of nature which yields the accurate, even universal portrayal of the passions and their results, "those disorderly motions of our spirits":

> If the imitation of nature be the business of a poet, I know no author who can justly be compar'd with ours, especially in the description of the passions. And to prove this, I shall need no other judges than the generality of his readers; for all passions being inborn with us, we are almost equally judges when we are concerned with the representation of them: now I will appeal to any man who has read this poet, whether he finds not the natural emotion of the same passion in himself, which the poet describes in his feign'd persons? His thoughts, which are the pictures and results of those passions, are generally such as naturally arise from those disorderly motions of our spirits.

Still, Dryden is obliged to remark upon the sometimes unhappy effect of Ovid's excessive wit, and here his opinion coincides quite precisely with the modern objection that "Ovid's heroines are not too miserable to make puns." The poet's prodigality is strictly identified with the rhetorical point of his "feign'd persons":

[2] *Ovid's Epistles with His Amours* trans. John Dryden et al. (London, 1761), pp. i–xvi.

> Yet, not to speak too partially in his behalf, I will confess that the copiousness of his wit was such, that he often writ too pointedly for his subject, and made his persons speak more eloquently than the violence of their passion would admit: So that he is frequently witty out of season; leaving the imitation of nature, and the cooler dictates of his judgement, for the false applause of fancy.

I shall address the issue of the wit, parody, and irony which, so much more conspicuously in this collection than in the other works of Ovid, seem capricious violations of an obligatory decorum. I hope to show in the process how the forms and instances of Ovid's transgressions function as integral to both the motive and the significance of his *Heroides*. First, however, I should like to enter upon the subject by departing from it. What follows will be a digressive paradigm. I intend it to illustrate how Ovid's *Heroides* have and have not been read, and how, in the interest of the reader's most appropriate pleasure, they may and may not be read.

2 ❀ *The Beauty of Buttermere*

In his *Recollections of the Lakes and the Lake Poets*, Thomas De Quincey introduces into his semi-epistolary, obituary appreciation of Samuel Taylor Coleridge a fascinating, though to immediate appearances irrelevant, digressive anecdote—the story of "The Beauty of Buttermere":

> This was a romantic and somewhat tragical affair which drew the eyes of all England and, for many years, continued to draw the steps of tourists to one of the most secluded Cumberland valleys, so little visited previously, that it might be described almost as an undiscovered chamber of that romantic district.[3]

As De Quincey's story goes, a gentleman arrived in Keswick one day, a gentleman ostentatious and dashing in dress and manner who "met generally a good deal of respect and attention, partly on account of his handsome equipage, and still more from his visiting cards, which designated him as 'The Hon. Augustus Hope.' " The visitor was, it seemed, a "picturesque-hunter." But he was "not of that order who

[3] Thomas De Quincey, "Samuel Taylor Coleridge," in *Recollections of the Lakes and the Lake Poets*, ed. E. Sackville-West (London: John Lehmann Ltd., 1948), pp. 54–63. All further citations are from this edition.

fly round the ordinary tour with the velocity of lovers posting to Gretna, or of criminals running from the police; his purpose was to domicilate himself in this beautiful scenery." The gentleman's cards naturally inspired the unsuspecting dalesmen of the district to take this "patrician Scotsman" for a brother to Lord Hopetoun, one of the richest men of those parts. As a result, all doors flew open to him, many of them inviting entrance to establishments eager to extend financial credit.

To be sure, some persons of "discernment" were wary of the new arrival and suspicious of his claim to nobility, "for the man's breeding and deportment, though showy, had an undertone of vulgarity about it." Coleridge, who was then living in Keswick, entertained his own doubts about the Honorable Augustus Hope, doubts strictly due to that gentleman's linguistic laxity: "Coleridge assured me that he was grossly ungrammatical in ordinary conversation." Moreover, as contributor to a local journal, Coleridge did not communicate his suspicions to De Quincey alone. He published them for the benefit of an incredulous and irate community (many inhabitants of Keswick at that time being aspirants either to the society of the new arrival or to some profit from uninhibited expenditures). But whatever small reservations they entertained soon became a dead letter by virtue of the intelligence eagerly divulged by the town's postal employees:

> One fact, soon dispersed by the people of a little rustic post-office, laid asleep all demurs: he not only received letters addressed to him under this assumed name—*that* might be through collusion with accomplices—but he himself continually *franked* letters by that name. Now, this being a capital offence, being not only a forgery, but (as a forgery on the Post-Office) sure to be prosecuted, nobody presumed to question his pretensions any longer; and, henceforward, he went to all places with the consideration attached to an earl's brother: boats, boatmen, nets, and the most unlimited sporting privileges, were placed at the disposal of the "Honorable" gentleman: and the hospitality of the district was put on its mettle, in offering a suitable reception to the patrician Scotsman.

Keswick lay near the lake of Buttermere, and nearer that lake was a sleepy village, marked, De Quincey says, with a "wild, pastoral character, almost savage" and ornamented with a single inn. "Hither, however, in an evil hour for the peace of this little brotherhood of shepherds, came the cruel spoiler from Keswick." The Honorable Augustus Hope was not, as it turned out, exclusively intent on fishing

for the char available only in Buttermere Lake. "Whatever had been his first object, *that* was speedily forgotten in one more deeply interesting": the innkeeper's daughter, Mary, a fine young woman of eighteen:

> It could be no blame to a shepherd girl bred in the sternest solitude which England has to show, that she should fall into a snare which many of her betters had not escaped.

Mary of Buttermere showed herself in no time at all attentive to the extravagant charms and potentially lucrative flatteries of Augustus Hope. Assisted by the solitude of the situation, and seizing upon the unlimited facilities offered to him for enjoying her company, Hope easily recommended himself to her favor, with the result that she very soon "gave her hand in marriage to the showy and unprincipled stranger." The lovers were married in the local chapel of Buttermere. Or were they?

Here De Quincey must interrupt his narrative. His scrupulous doubt as to whether the local chapel was really the scene of the marriage (the mere name of "chapel" does not necessarily imply whether it has the power to solemnize a marriage) prompts him to further, more imaginative speculation. How would that chapel, at first sight, impress a stranger?

> I know not whether the marriage was, or could have been, celebrated in the little mountain chapel of Buttermere. If it were, I persuade myself that the most hardened villain must have felt a momentary pang on violating the altar of such a chapel; so touchingly does it express, by its miniature dimensions, the almost helpless humility of that little pastoral community to whose spiritual wants it has from generation to generation administered. It is not only the very smallest chapel by many degrees in all England, but is so mere a toy in outward appearance that, were it not for its antiquity, its wild mountain exposure, and its consecrated connection with the final hopes and fears of the adjacent pastoral hamlet—but for these considerations, the first movement of a stranger's feelings would be towards loud laughter; for the little chapel looks not so much a mimic chapel in a drop-scene from the Opera House as a miniature copy from such a scene; and evidently could not receive within its walls more than half a dozen households. From this sanctuary it was—from beneath the maternal shadow, if not from the very altar,

> of this lonely chapel—that the heartless villain carried off the flower of the mountains.

The newlyweds were not to enjoy either their domestic condition or its pleasures for very long. Fate, in her most judicious guise, intervened. "Officers of justice" appeared. They took the reluctant Augustus Hope off to Carlisle, where he was tried for forgery, found guilty, and summarily hanged. The trial produced something of a sensation, for the fact emerged that the bridegroom had made a regular habit of irregular nuptials. The status of the Buttermere chapel proved immaterial. Mary of Buttermere was no bride at all.

On the day on which "Hope" was sentenced to death on the gallows, Wordsworth and Coleridge journeyed to Carlisle. There they petitioned to be admitted to the impostor's cell. Wordsworth was granted an interview, but Augustus Hope, alias Hatfield, staunchly refused to see Coleridge. He perhaps remembered Coleridge's published slurs against his general style of conduct and, in particular, against his inadequate command of English syntax. Denied access to the ungrammatical villain, Coleridge solaced his renewed curiosity in another fashion. He examined not the man, but his papers. These documents, at least, did not inspire Coleridge's literate contempt. Rather they recommended themselves to his highest and most compassionate indignation. And by virtue of their resemblance to Ovid's *Heroides*, they recommend themselves to some consideration here:

> These were chiefly letters from women whom he had injured, pretty much in the same way and by the same impostures as he had so recently practiced in Cumberland; and, as Coleridge assured me, were in part the most agonizing appeals that he had ever read to human justice and pity. The man's real name was, I think, Hatfield. And amongst the papers were two separate correspondences of some length, from two young women, apparently of superior condition in life (one the daughter of an English clergyman) whom this villain had deluded by marriage, and after some cohabitation, abandoned—one of them with a family of young children.

Thus far the situation resembles a nineteenth-century English version of the setting of not a few of Ovid's *Heroides*. The letters themselves, however, show a more interesting correspondence:

> Great was the emotion of Coleridge when he recurred to his re-

membrance, and bitter, almost vindictive, was the indignation with which he spoke of Hatfield. One set of letters appeared to have been written under too certain a knowledge of his villainy to whom they were addressed; though still relying on some possible remains of humanity, or perhaps (the poor writer might think) on some lingering relics of affection for herself. The other set was even more distressing; they were written under the first conflicts of suspicions, alternately repelling with warmth the gloomy doubts which were fast arising and then yielding to their afflicting evidence; raving in one page under the misery of alarm, in another courting the delusions of hope, and luring back the perfidious deserter—her resigning herself to despair, and there again laboring to show that all might yet be well.

The persuasive and presumably literate pathos of these epistles contributed a new dimension to Coleridge's ready contempt for Hatfield. The man's irregularities of verbal expression were now eclipsed by the unspeakable cruelty of his erotic conduct. He had not simply assaulted the invincible laws of English syntax; he had violated the vulnerable trust of English women:

> Coleridge said often, on looking back upon that frightful exposure of human guilt and misery,—and I also echoed his feeling,—that the man who, when pursued by these heart-rending apostrophes, and with this litany of anguish sounding in his ears, from despairing women, and from famishing children, could yet find it possible to enjoy the pleasures of a Lake tourist, and deliberately to hunt for the picturesque, must have been a fiend of that order which fortunately does not often emerge amongst men.

The result of this "romantic and somewhat tragical affair" was not at all tragic, and less than romantic. Her immediate notoriety may well have been personally unpleasant, sordid, or even brutish, but the innkeeper's daughter was to some extent compensated for her pain—as was her entire village. The affair procured for all its victims an unpremeditated, even lavish access to that universal emollient, oil of gold: Buttermere was transformed overnight into a fashionable rural spa. The indolent rich and the novelty-hungry upper-middle classes could afford to overlook the poor accommodations. The town offered abundant facilities of another order: it promised the sedated recreational thrills of sentimental voyeurism. Mary, meanwhile, under the name of "The Beauty of Buttermere," became an object of interest

not only to the adventurous patrons of her father's meagre inn but to all of England:

> Dramas and melodramas were produced in the London theatres upon her story; and for many a year afterwards, shoals of tourists crowded to the secluded lake, and the little homely cabaret, which had been the scene of her brief romance.

Perhaps more important, Mary became a subject for poetry to William Wordsworth. Her story, a "drama of living men and recent things still warm to life," was introduced into *The Prelude*.[4] Buttermere's "dramatic incident / Divulged by Truth, and magnified by Fame" was now divulged in verse by the great Romantic poet, who here joined company with hordes of London hacks. And if in Wordsworth's poem the number of Hatfield's bigamies suffered the diminution of poetic tact, Mary's seduction and betrayal showed a commensurate magnification in local pathos and local color. Her calamity told

> a story drawn
> From our own ground—the Maid of Buttermere,
> And how, unfaithful to a virtuous wife,
> Deserted and deceived, the spoiler came
> And wooed the artless daughter of the hills,
> And wedded her, in cruel mockery
> Of love and marriage bonds.

It also became a poetic occasion for rehearsing anew Wordsworth's intimacy with Coleridge:

> These words to thee
> Must needs bring back the moment when we first,
> Ere the broad world rang with the maiden's name,
> Beheld her serving at the cottage inn,
> Both stricken, as she enter'd or withdrew,
> With admiration of her modest mien
> And carriage, mark'd by unexampled grace.
> We since that time not unfamiliarly
> Have seen her—her discretion have observed,
> Her just opinions, delicate reserve,

[4] William Wordsworth, *The Prelude*, bk. 7, *Residence in London*; quoted and discussed by De Quincey, *Recollections*, pp. 59–60.

Her patience and humility of mind,
Unspoiled by commendation and the excess
Of public notice—an offensive light
To a meek spirit suffering inwardly.

What did that "meek spirit" suffer? De Quincey remarks upon the happy accident of Mary's country origin and upon the charity of her fellow citizens:

> It was fortunate for a person in her distressing situation, that her home was not in a town: the few, and simple, neighbors, who had witnessed her imaginary elevation, having little knowledge of worldly feelings, never for an instant connected with her disappointment any sense of the ludicrous, or spoke of it as a calamity in which her vanity might have cooperated. They treated it as unmixed injury, reflecting shame upon nobody but the wicked perpetrator.

The same parochial fellow-feeling which spared the native sent the stranger to the gallows, punishing not his crime but his criminal insult to countrywoman, and to county. De Quincey reports that the jury at Carlisle which tried Hatfield had declared itself reluctant to condemn a man to hanging merely for the forging of a frank. Neither that forgery nor the man's brash transgression upon hereditary class privilege was sufficient to persuade the jury to send him to the scaffold. Only the shocking disclosure of Hatfield's "unmixed injury to their countrywoman" convinced the citizens of Carlisle that his had been indeed a capital offense, one perhaps the more harmful to local pride by virtue of its similarity to the several earlier escapades in other, dissimilar counties. The official punishment thus took on something of the color of a provincial vendetta.

De Quincey does not conclude his digression upon "The Beauty of Buttermere" at what might seem its logical terminus. Instead, he extenuates it by adding a most peculiar consideration of an apparently trivial issue. Was Mary of Buttermere quite precisely the woman Coleridge and Wordsworth took her for? More specifically, first, Was she really *that* beautiful?

> I . . . shall here say a word upon her personal appearance, because the Lake poets all admired her greatly. Her figure was, in my eyes, good; but I doubt whether most of my readers would have thought it such. She was none of your evanescent, wasp-waisted beauties; on the contrary, she was rather large in her way; tallish, and proportionately broad. Her face was fair, and her features feminine; and, unquestionably, she was what all the world would have agreed to call "good-looking." But, except in her arms, which had something of a statuesque beauty, and in her carriage, which expressed a womanly grace, together with some degree of dignity and self-possession, I confess that I looked in vain for any *positive* qualities of any sort or degree. *Beautiful*, in any emphatic sense, she was not. Everything about her face and bust was negative; simply without offence. Even this, however, was more than could be said at all times; for the expression of her countenance *could* be disagreeable. This arose out of her situation; connected as it was *with defective sensibility and a misdirected pride*. Nothing operates so differently upon different minds and different styles of beauty as the inquisitive gaze of strangers, whether in the spirit of respectful admiration or of insolence. Some I have seen upon whose angelic beauty this sort of confusion settled advantageously, and like a softening veil; others, in whom it meets with proud resentment, are sometimes disfigured by it. In Mary of Buttermere it roused mere anger and disdain; which, meeting with the sense of her humble and dependent situation, gave birth to a most unhappy aspect of countenance. (My emphasis)

After this disquisition on Mary's appearance, De Quincey at last concludes his narrative of calamitous seduction and imposture. He ends the digression by reporting a thirdhand, hearsay vignette concerning Mary which would seem to confirm his own earlier—and now more reluctant and entirely provisional—judgment on the woman's "defective sensibility" and "misdirected pride." Scrupulous to the last, De Quincey refuses to enlarge the innkeeper's daughter into a conventional figment of the sentimental imagination, a creature both ethically delicate and poetically thin:

> One lady, not very scrupulous in her embellishments of facts, used to tell an anecdote of her which I hope was exaggerated. Some friends of hers (as she affirmed), in company with a large party, visited Buttermere within one day after that upon which Hatfield suffered; and she protested that Mary threw upon the table, with an emphatic gesture, the Carlisle paper containing an elaborate account of his execution.

Despite De Quincey's emphasis on his informant's propensity for distortion and on his own charitable reluctance to believe so ill of

Mary, this anecdote stands as a euphemistic diminuendo to a trenchantly particular narrative. Its effect is Tacitean: if not malice, then provocative innuendo. Couched in the double disclaimer is the suggestion that on the very day of Hatfield's execution Mary may well have been guilty of a vindictive thought—one not unnatural, but also not flattering—and guilty as well of a callous gesture expressive of that thought. The formal niceties proclaiming strict authorial disengagement become an invitation to endorse the likely validity of a judgment which the author himself explicitly offers as mere possibility, not probability. That judgment against Mary is anything but kind. The whole vignette is powerful, even decisive. It stands in powerfully distinct contrast to the Romantic coloring with which the writers contemporary to De Quincey, especially Wordsworth, limn the features and the life of the Beauty of Buttermere.

3 ❀ *Mistress Ugliness*

> The poets loved by E. P. are tired of Beauty since they have met it so often. . . . I am tired of Beauty my wife, says the Poet. But here is that enchanting mistress Ugliness. With her I will live, and what a riot we shall have. Not a day shall pass without a fresh horror. Prometheus leaves his rock to cohabit with the Furies.
>
> —from a letter of John Yeats to his son, William Butler Yeats[5]

The letters written to Hatfield by his abandoned "wives" bear a resemblance to Ovid's fictive epistles apparent to anyone who has once read the *Heroides*. They exhibit (at least according to De Quincey's description of them) what has come to seem the formal signature of Ovid's collection: the cognitive irresolution, the vacillating emotions, the debates between desire and dread. The letters written "under too certain a knowledge of his villainy to whom they were addressed" might be said to bear a distinct resemblance to, for example, the letter of Medea to Jason, *Heroides* 12. Medea, her knowledge of Jason's infidelity notwithstanding, relies irrationally upon "some possible remains of humanity or perhaps on some lingering relic of affection for herself." Similarly, the letter which Coleridge found especially "distressing," one "written under the first conflicts of suspicions," might be said to describe Hypsipyle's epistle to that same Jason. Much like Hatfield's "wife," Hypsipyle in *Heroides* 6 may be seen

[5] John Yeats' letter is quoted by Richard Ellmann, *Eminent Domain* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1965), p. 62.

> alternately repelling with warmth the gloomy doubts which were fast arising and then yielding to their afflicting evidence; raving in one page under the misery of alarm, in another courting the delusions of hope, and luring back the perfidious deserter,—here resigning herself to despair, and there again laboring to show that all might be well.

Perhaps the greatest, and surely the most original, achievement of Ovid's letters is the impression they create of psychological authenticity, of convincing fidelity to the private perspective of a speaker caught in a double process of intentional persuasion and unintentionally revealing self-expression. Certainly the formal apparatus whose devices convey such self-disclosure from within the rational process of persuasion is the most immediately appropriate basis for comparing Ovid's epistles to the letters Coleridge read. Yet the similarity in formal structure does not yield an effect in the *Heroides* comparable to that experienced by Coleridge in his reading of the documentary history of infamy and bigamy contained in Hatfield's private correspondence.

The causes of the discrepancy in effect do not lie in any presumed predispositions of the Romantic sensibility, predispositions from which, in fact, the Romantic De Quincey is at pains to disassociate himself. Instead, the two factors most responsible for the divergence are stylistic ones. The first is that crucial dimension of Ovid's heroines which Hatfield's victims do not share: their mythological prehistory and literary ancestry. The second is more obviously a function of the verbal texture of Ovid's poems: the language whose wit, comedy, parody, and malice so often subject the melodramatic and pathetic exhibition of the poet's heroines to seemingly gratuitous interventions and intermissions, moments which jeopardize the very effect of "natural" passion upon which the fame of the collection rests. As a result of these two qualities of Ovid's epistles, the reader familiar with the tradition within which the *Heroides* take their place, and alive to the oddities of tone which might challenge that tradition, will rarely find the letters of Ovid's heroines so immediately "convincing" as the letters Coleridge read. The Ovidian aftereffect will often prove to be a disequilibrium which persists and insofar as it is not dispelled, occasions in the reader his own echoing irresolution. The "embalmed" paragons of virtue who speak in the pages of Ovid's collection will not elicit an unequivocal sympathy.[6] Nor will the conventional villainesses of the

[6] "Embalmed" is the word used to describe Penelope by Howard Jacobson, *Ovid's Heroides* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1974), p. 249. Jacobson's chapter on *Heroides* 14 (pp. 243–76) is, in my view, superb. See especially his remarks on the

Greek and Roman tradition simply reawaken an axiomatic reflex of disapproval or trenchant moral condemnation.

Many of the devices Ovid employs in representing the irrational mind engaged in passionate thought and rational second thought were inherited from the great dramatic soliloquies in the plays of Euripides. But these devices were both strengthened in potential impact and qualitatively altered in potential effect by the enclosing frame of the epistolary fiction. As Ovid must have foreseen, the epistle can combine, often in radical tension, the privacy of the interior monologue and the publicity of would-be persuasion. This combination simultaneously encourages rhetorical and expressive motives, providing scope for greater complexity of development than does the soliloquy or monologue of drama. Furthermore, the combination of motives increases their potential for interpenetration and, of course, for collision. And even in those instances in which Ovid displays what seems to be an exclusive dependence upon a single literary prototype (such instances are rare), the epistolary fiction imposes upon the reader a kind of vigilant scrutiny very different from the kind of attention exacted by the monologue or soliloquy in the theater: the reader can never be certain whether the authoress is telling the truth as it was, or the truth as she saw it or remembers it, or the truth as she has adjusted it to the rhetorical motive forced upon her by her circumstances. Indeed, sometimes the epistolary revelation will conceal more than it reveals and raise more questions than it answers.

In addition, because the fictive epistle is read over the shoulder, as it were, of the imagined addressee, the reader is in a position comparable to that of the intended recipient of any "real" letter. Either he will accept the writer's words as genuinely sincere—though perhaps mediated by rhetorical design—or he will be obliged, insofar as he can, to read between the lines in order to assess the writer's inexplicit motives. The first alternative is rarely a firm option in the *Heroides*, principally because Ovid's heroines often seem to offer a view of events either incompatible with the tradition or drawn from two or more incompatible traditions. And when those traditions are not vague mythic constellations but specific literary exemplars, exemplars invoked by unmistakable reference and yet challenged by unmistakable deviation, the problem of an epistle's "truth" content becomes particularly acute. As a result, it is rare that a reader of one of the *Heroides* will experience

"other" tradition of the "wanton" Penelope and on the sexually evocative language employed throughout the poem.

a reaction so conspicuously vacant of doubt and confusion as was Coleridge's response to the letters written by Hatfield's victims.

As we have already had occasion to note, Wordsworth's portrayal of the Beauty of Buttermere in *The Prelude* is selective: chaste, discreetly laundered, even bleached. Mary becomes a suggestive, almost immaterial presence. She does not, to be sure, emerge as the wasp-waisted theatrical clone of the popular London stage. She instead becomes something far more interesting. Not a heroine of drama, she is a scenic prop emanating lyric associations, pregnant with the palpable innocence and latent tragedy of the rural Cumberland world. No less a "speaking monument" than the "rocks / immortal, and overflowing streams," her story voices the two dimensions of Wordsworth's contemporary Arcadia, its sensual fecundity and fearful, troubled grandeur. Her betrayal becomes one among many images evocative of "danger and distress, / Man suffering among awful Powers and Forms." However, if the emblematic Mary is to speak, Hatfield must correspondingly be silenced. He becomes a mute foil for Mary; a vacant image of infidelity, he is neither sinister nor predatory. Wordsworth does not even allude to his imposture, his crime, his trial, or his execution. And the major fact of Hatfield's erotic career is suppressed, that fact the potentially macabre proliferation of his prior nuptials. Wordsworth's Arcadia is not Sidney's: Wordsworth's shepherd will, in the heat of noon, "lie down upon some shining rock and breakfast with his dog." But the Bride of Buttermere exhibits no comparable license: she makes no picnic with parvenu bigamy.

Wordsworth's suppression of the seamier side of Hatfield's existence does not originate in moral scruples but in poetic tact, the "dark inscrutable workshop that reconciles discordant elements, makes them cling together in one society." The literary bias whose standard for decorum explains and recommends Wordsworth's Romantic mendacity is a bias by no means exclusive to the Romantic period of English literature. The double standard for consistency in tone and for balanced propriety in the adjustment of style to subject matter had an even more restrictive counterpart in both the Augustan period of English poetry and the distant Augustan era in which Ovid wrote. Furthermore, despite the apparent reversal of aesthetic values in our own contemporary literature, a mutant version of that standard persists as a living, if moribund, legacy. It shelters a living, if tacit, bias. But neither that legacy nor that bias remains quietly sedated when the object of contemplation is "classical" literature. In fact, it would be artificial not to read Ovid's *Heroides* without an awareness of the

aesthetic canon whose values and expectations are necessarily called into play by the poet's very subjects, and against whose conventions his style so frequently and intrepidly transgresses.

It is with respect to the "dark inscrutable workshop" of Classical Decorum that De Quincey's account of the Buttermere scandal yields its most comprehensive digressive introduction to the *Heroides*, for De Quincey includes in his narrative a passage which might well be adopted as an analytic metaphor for the effect of Ovid's fictive epistles. The passage is De Quincey's description of the Buttermere chapel, a description which includes his speculation on the response it would arouse in a "stranger," should he, for the first time, stumble upon it unprepared.

His diction archly floral, De Quincey tells us that it was the Buttermere chapel from which "the heartless villain carried off the flower of the mountains." So small was that chapel, so "mere a toy" in its outward appearance, that it seemed less a "mimic chapel in a drop scene from the Opera House [than] a miniature copy from such a scene." Should a stranger chance upon it unprepared for its dwarfed dimensions, "the first movement of [his] feelings would be toward loud laughter." The stranger to Ovid's *Heroides* might well experience a comparable sensation, and for comparable reasons. At first glance, the women of the *Heroides* all too naturally strike the reader as "mere toys" reduced to a scale incommensurate with the operatic grandeur of their predominantly epic and tragic predecessors. Insofar as they voice concerns or summon memories which are incongruous with the world in which tradition locates them, they seem miniatures at once pretentious and comically degraded. Homely mutations, they are either too inconsequential or too oddly individual to occupy their proper place on the universal stage where Hamlet rambles, Lear rages, and swift-footed, brilliant Achilles, by withdrawing from war, wins honor from Zeus.

De Quincey introduces his digressive ecphrasis on the impression produced by the Buttermere chapel with a somewhat sanctimonious observation. He remarks on the one feature of the chapel which would inevitably serve to check the hypothetical stranger's first reaction. That feature would not only suffice to repress in even "the most hardened villain" the immediate reflex of contemptuous disdain but also force him to suffer a "momentary pang" at his own intended act of desecration. The perception to which De Quincey refers is, ironically, the mirror image of the perception which would evoke the stranger's scorn. The features of the chapel which would check the stranger's first response and produce a second more sympathetic one are "its antiq-

uity, its wild mountain exposure, and its consecrated connection with the final hopes and fears of the adjacent pastoral hamlet." The immediate impression of the material form is qualified by an act of imaginative recognition which calls into play its immaterial significance, actually enriching its miniature scale with the pathos of "helpless humility." Thus the first impression of comic incongruity—the perception of the dissimilar in the similar—is, in terms of affect, reversed. It is reversed by a second but different perception of incongruity—of the similar within the dissimilar—by which the comic yields to the pathetic. The second perception no less than the first acknowledges the context which endows the chapel with its traditional emblematic value. Insofar as sympathy intervenes, it both adjusts and enriches that value. In other words, it so enlarges the significance of the chapel as to permit it to include within its orbit of assigned "meaning" something unexpected, something deviant and even alien in its specificity and integrity, something, in fine, comically small.

Here we may begin to approach the complex effect produced by the wit, comedy, and parody of Ovid's *Heroides*. That effect is, to be sure, a disturbing one, an effect of particularly Ovidian disequilibrium. It is the effect which Coleridge singles out as the signature of the comic mode, a mode by which "the great is made small, and the small great, because both equal with respect to the infinite."

What De Quincey describes as the stranger's immediate reaction to the dwarf and mimic chapel—"loud laughter" and hence detached amusement, derision, or contempt—is subsequently overruled by another order of recognition. That second recognition checks the expression of the first and, by reversing the effect from comic to pathetic incongruity, reverses the stranger's response from estrangement to sympathy. It is precisely this alternation which is so often produced in the individual poems of Ovid's collection. But there are distinctions to be made. In the *Heroides* the sequence of effects does not necessarily occur in this order. And even when the order is the same, there is no single and decisive alternation and thus no resolution in the domination of one impulse over another; on the contrary, there are frequent unpredictable alternations in tone and effect. Furthermore, the appeal to context—to antiquity, to literary tradition, to myth and to legend—is often conveyed in the *Heroides* at the expense of a heroine's credibility or at the cost of the reader's imaginative sympathy for her. But the vehicle for such allusion is that medium of verbal wit and structural irony whose poetic effect is comic or ironic incongruity. Its result is the reader's disengagement or critical detachment. The fictive speaker thus becomes, through her own words, the involuntary and

unconscious victim of the poet's authorial and often allusively literary parody.

It does not seem to have been Ovid's purpose in his *Heroides* to advertise an undiscovered locale in the topography of melodramatic sentiment or sublime pathos. Still, the aptitude for the inflexible apprehension of The Picturesque is a familiar form of tourism which has its literary counterpart in the realm of aesthetic judgment, in the triumph of expectations over unexpected poetic actuality. It is a kind of willful credulity from which Ovid's *Heroides* have unfortunately profited, earning, for example, the endorsement of Willa Cather, to wit: "These are the most glowing love stories ever told."[7]

Ovid's oddities of tone and irregularities of emphasis have not, however, escaped comment or censure. Readers deficient in the benign inattention of the literary tourist have registered the poet's unseemly detachment, his ironies, and his intrusions of skeptical wit. Indeed, they have apprehended these violations of decorum with painful clarity, disappointment, and even indignant derision. The poet's recognized idiosyncracies have often been misapprehended as failure and deemed either indecent lapses in poetic integrity or deliberate transgressions against propriety, evidence not of negligence but oddly intentional poetic ineptitude. Indeed his reputation has suffered some features of the judgment against the unfortunate Hatfield. Ovid has seemed, to some, a villainous impostor, a pretender to an inheritance not his own. To others he has seemed a talented fool rather than a villain, less the injudicious scribbler of crude forgeries than the cocky and pretentious poseur. He has aroused immediate but enduring suspicion among an initiated few, those who, like Coleridge, have taken obligatory delight in the penetration of parvenu fraud, not on the evidence of a brilliantly vulgar cravat or too ostentatious cuff link, but on the unimpeachable testimony of orthodox poetic convention: here the contortion of an abused idiom, there a wanton apposition, elsewhere an inopportune aside, and all overworked, elaborated to distraction, and all at last sent to the scaffold erected in the name of poetic justice—a name known to some as Vergil, to others as Horace, but to all, in the end, as Decorum.

In De Quincey's tale of the Beauty of Buttermere, we can persuade ourselves to discover correspondences with Ovid's *Heroides*, as well as fanciful counterparts to some of Ovid's readers and even to the poet himself. But a comparison of the *authors* of the letters written to the "cruel spoiler from Keswick" with the fictive authors of Ovid's

[7] Willa Cather, *A Lost Lady* (New York, 1939), p. 81; quoted by Jacobson, *Ovid's Heroides*, p. 3.

epistles will perforce seem grotesque. No one of Hatfield's victims can be measured against the gracious Lemnian queen, Hypsipyle. Nor, of course, can any be measured against such a creature as Medea, perhaps the most singular archetype of the villainous, jealous woman in literary antiquity. It is precisely the traditional lack of anonymity, though, which is the brilliantly back-lit scrim against which Ovid's characters seem dwarfed caricatures, reproductions of great originals disfigured by their very "reality" and reduced into triviality. Ovid's characters can never finally be charged with anonymity. Their past fame haunts their utterances, not simply as absence or a minus-function but also as a shadow of provocative disequilibrium, a standard not only for deviation but also for repudiation and decline.

Ovid's *Heroides* are a collection guaranteed to challenge the reader who expects, or hopes, to find an assemblage of heart-rending apostrophes, tender litanies of anguish indited in the throes of despair by abandoned maidens or wives. However suitable for high drama, or melodrama, so many of his subjects may have been, Ovid does not always display the charity of the "few and simple neighbors" of the Beauty of Buttermere. Nor does he exploit or elicit such charity in his readers. Instead, as often as not, Ovid's treatment of his heroines invites a disengagement and skepticism comparable to De Quincey's. He connects a "sense of the ludicrous" to the disappointment of his heroines and forbids us to understand their plight as an "unmixed injury." All too often it appears that vanity, erotic delusion, and the mind's passive collusion with the heart's impossible desire have cooperated in their calamities.

It gradually becomes apparent that of all the heroines included in the collection, those who finally exert the richest claims upon our compassionate regard are those who would seem the least deserving of it: the villainesses of antiquity, Phaedra and Medea. On the other hand, those who least requite our sentimental and sympathetic expectations are the exemplary victims of ancient literature: the chaste and patient Penelope, the innocent and trusting Ariadne, the accommodating and hospitable Hypsipyle. It is this problem of expectations which remains to date most crucial to the critical reappraisal of Ovid's *Heroides*. It is, understandably, a neglected problem. The treatment of expectations and their role in shaping the unwritten, affective dimension of a poem raises questions which can only be addressed by an appeal to effect, a criterion for literary judgment more subjective than most, and one fraught with danger to the most objective critical method. There are, however, degrees of subjectivity, just as there are degrees and varying modes of dispassionate critical appraisal. There

will be no *summa* adequate to Ovid's poetic effects. Nevertheless, a plausible treatment of the vein of intentional comic idiosyncracy in the *Heroides* has yet to appear. This book is intended as a beginning.

4 ❀ *The Role of the Reader*

Our interest's on the dangerous edge of things.
The honest thief, the tender murderer,
The superstitious atheist, demirep
That loves and saves her soul in new French books—
We watch while these in equilibrium keep
The giddy line midway: one step aside,
They're classed and done with. I, then, keep the line
Before your sages,—just the men to shrink
From the gross weights, coarse scales and labels broad
You offer their refinement.
—Robert Browning, "Bishop Blougram's Apology"

It may seem gratuitous to elaborate the contrast between Ovid's legendary heroines and the anonymous victims of a briefly notorious confidence-man and bigamist. And it will surely seem perverse to elaborate a comparison between Ovid's highly artificed verse epistles and the mutely inked cries and pleas discovered in Hatfield's private papers. Yet to suggest that the poet Ovid was, in a way, the ur-author of those epistolary cries and pleas is neither idle nor precious. If perverse at all, that suggestion adopts its perversity on the model so characteristically assumed by the caprice of Nature and History.

De Quincey describes the letters of Hatfield's deceived victims in a manner evoking Ovid's *Heroides*, a manner which seems to duplicate almost deliberately that "disorderly motion" of the passions to which Ovid's collection owes its fame and its influence on English literature. It is difficult to believe that De Quincey's account is not more indebted to Ovid's artifice than to his own accurate memory of Coleridge's accurate report. De Quincey, of course, knew Ovid's poems well and in the original Latin. He was himself a literary critic who had written an ambitious treatise on rhetoric, one whose foundation is the close mastery of Greek and Latin rhetorical theory. In that work, as elsewhere, De Quincey mentions Ovid frequently, fluently, and with the highest praise. And even had he never read a word of Latin verse or seen a translation of Ovid's poems, one could still be justified in assigning the genesis of his description of Hatfield's correspondence to Ovid's collection.

Ovid's *Heroides*, "naturally a part of the educated man's Latinity" and inevitably "more popular and more readily perused for pleasure than drier works,"[8] were translated into English by Turberville in the sixteenth century, by Wye Saltonstall in the seventeenth, and by Dryden, Pope, and other eminent authors as well. Dryden's edition of 1680 was immediately and widely popular. It was popular among readers and, more to the point, among writers who were prompt to perceive and exploit the enormous advantages of the letter fiction. Those writers, however, were by and large authors of prose, not poetry. Collections of verse epistles did, of course, appear; but they were usually on the model of Lyly's famous *Portuguese Letters*, a series of letters supposedly exchanged over a period of time by two characters, and principally a vehicle to document the shifting course of a love affair from the perspective of the two lovers. But the Ovidian verse epistle was most avidly adopted by writers of romances and novels. Thus, as a genre it was entirely transformed. In its transformation the letter fiction became ancillary to the "Ovidian wooing story,"[9] to the heroic romance, and finally to the eighteenth century "novel." It engendered, moreover, the novel told wholly in letters, such as *Clarissa* and *Les Liaisons Dangereuses*.

It has been claimed, with some justice, that Ovid is the "father of epistolary, sentimental, and psychological fiction," the progenitor of "the subjective or psychological narrative, in which the speeches, sentiments, and reactions of the characters vie with or surpass the action in importance, detail, and extent."[10] But the ironic fact remains: the single verse epistle, or the collection of individual verse epistles written by fictive characters traditionally unrelated to each other and unknown to each other, seems to have expired, as it was born, with the *Heroides*.

It is probably fair to assume that those advantages of the epistolary fiction which explain the immense influence of Ovid's *Heroides* on the narrative art were in part the same advantages which attracted Ovid himself. Those advantages have been accurately and succinctly enumerated by R. A. Day:

> Revelation rather than description in depicting character and motive.
>
> The opportunity to analyze and portray emotion and feeling at length without exceeding the privileges of the "omniscient author."

[8] Robert A. Day, *Told in Letters: Epistolary Fiction Before Richardson* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1966), p. 13.
[9] Day, *Told in Letters*, p. 11. [10] Day, *Told in Letters*, p. 17.

> The ability to color the whole narrative with subjectivity, personality and intimacy, since the letter-writer will usually be writing to trusted friends, and will tell the story in his own characteristic way.
>
> The ability to present a rounded picture of an event by recording it from several contrasting points of view—the method of *The Ring and the Book*.[11]

(It will become apparent that the fourth aspect applies to the *Heroides* only in a special and limited sense.)

Day adds to his list two other advantages which have proved especially important for their bearing on twentieth-century fiction and for their relation to the post-Kantian epistemology impinging upon contemporary narrative art. The first of these is "immediacy," the immediacy of the limited perspective which allows the author "to disrupt an organized relation in which everything is properly subordinated and arranged (the method of autobiographical narrative) in order to present action in the chaotic and unfinished manner in which we ordinarily see it in real life." The second advantage is precisely that aspect of the *Heroides* which Dryden praises and which in twentieth-century criticism has been considered the redeeming virtue of Ovid's collection:

> The author may let his characters think on paper; he may try to show the actual motions of the mind, its veerings and incoherences, the shape which thoughts take before they are arranged for formal presentation: inchoate ideas, when the mind is tugged this way and that from its intended course by emotions and small happenings, or is wholly carried away on a new track in spite of itself. This method, now removed from the less "realistic" convention of the letter, is called interior monologue or stream-of-consciousness technique.[12]

In Day's admirable summary, all of these technical features share one particularly important consequence—the tendency to heighten the imaginative participation and active, even creative engagement of the reader:

> All of these technical contributions of the letter to fiction tend in the same direction—toward vivifying the static, formal nature of

[11] Day, *Told in Letters*, p. 7.

[12] Day, *Told in Letters*, p. 8.

> composed, objective, third-person narrative in the past tense and bringing it into closer contact with the reader. The novel, while retaining its form of words on paper, addressed to the single reader, and requiring no additional medium for presenting its artistic effects, attempts to engross the qualities of the spoken drama. . . . The reader need not be told directly what a character thinks or why he does something, but may be invited to participate in the creative work of the story by finding out for himself, so that the fictional impact on him gains in vividness and comprehensiveness. There is a simultaneous triple action: that of the story, that of the letter writer who renders it, and that of the reader who grasps it and takes his individual sight both upon it and upon the rendition.[13]

If at this point we return to Dryden's preface to the 1680 translation of the *Heroides*, it will be evident that what Dryden perceives as the greatest virtue of the collection is precisely the characteristic responsible for the literary-historical repercussions immediately following its vernacular popularity. This characteristic is the convincing imitation of the "discorded motions" of the passions, those "motions" rendered in all their variety and complexity, their intimacy and immediacy, their seeming artlessness and spontaneity, by the agency of the "subjective style." The convincing idiosyncracies of personality and emphasis attained by this style are a natural consequence of the letter fiction: its limited perspective. In the *Heroides* that limitation derives additional scope for convincing authenticity and intensity from the jeopardy of the writer's situation and from the urgency and seeming impetuosity of the emotion which often so powerfully intervenes.

If the impact of Ovid's *Heroides* coincided precisely in emphasis with the aspects of the *Heroides* singled out by Dryden, that same coincidence to some extent explains the fact that Dryden identified the psychologically mimetic properties of the collection with the poetic intention of Ovid's poems, with "the business of the poet." Furthermore, Dryden's censure of the poet's too copious, too intrusive wit is an inevitable consequence of this mistaken identification: wit inevitably indicates a kind of detachment incommensurate with the heroine's unmediated or insufficiently mastered "violence of passion." Furthermore, if the language of the poem is throughout intended as mimetic or realistic, that is, intended to reproduce the language as well as the sentiments of the poet's "feign'd persons," then to whom but to the speaker herself is the reader to attribute the unlikely detachment of

[13] Day, *Told in Letters*, p. 8.

the wit which surely mars the presumably intended effect of an internally consistent, linguistically mimetic dramatic illusion?[14]

If literary history were evidence of an invisibly guided, obscurely designed eschatology, then Richardson's *Clarissa* would mark the perfection, first realized in prose fiction, of that tendency of which Ovid's epistles might be termed the inchoate *primum mobile*. In the preface to *Clarissa*, Richardson offers his own analysis of the advantages of the letter fiction. He describes the effects of the cleverly exploited and sustained use of the letter fiction:

> All the letters are written while the hearts of the writers must be supposed to be wholly engaged in their subjects . . . so that they abound not only with critical Situations, but with what may be called *instantaneous* Descriptions and Reflections. . . . "*Much more* lively and affecting, says one of the principal characters . . . must be the Style of those who write in the height of a *present* distress; the mind tortured by the pangs of uncertainty (the Events then hidden in the womb of Fate); than the dry, narrative, unanimated Style of a person relating difficulties and dangers surmounted, can be; the relater pefectly at ease; and if himself unmoved by his own Story, not likely greatly to affect the Reader."[15]

The effects as described by Richardson were no less available to the verse epistles of the *Heroides* than to *Clarissa*. Indeed, they are the characteristics which have come to seem the signature of Ovid's collection. Nevertheless, if these properties and their effects are mistaken for the guiding intention and commanding aspiration of Ovid's collection, they are the very properties and effects which would be entirely

[14] Dryden, *Ovid's Epistles*, p. 8, attempts to make a case for linguistic differentiation between "higher" and "lower" characters such as Oenone and Hero. He writes that Ovid, in these epistles, "has kept close to nature, in drawing his images after a country life." Compare T. S. Eliot, *On Poetry and Poets* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1965), p. 104: "The poet, speaking, as Browning does, in his own voice, cannot bring a character to life: he can only mimic a character otherwise known to us. And does not the point of mimicry lie in the recognition of the person mimicked, and in the incompleteness of the illusion? We have to be aware that the mimic and the person mimicked are different people: if we are actually deceived, mimicry becomes impersonation. . . . when we read a dramatic monologue by Browning, we cannot suppose that we are listening to any other voice than that of Browning himself. In the dramatic monologue, then, it is surely the second voice, the voice of the poet talking to other people, that is dominant. The mere fact that he is assuming a role, that he is speaking through a mask, implies the presence of an audience: why should a man put on fancy dress and a mask only to talk to himself?"

[15] Samuel Richardson, *Clarissa*, Shakespeare Head Edition, vol. 1 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1929–31), p. xiv.

ruined by the wit which has equally come to seem the signature of the *poet* who authored the collection. On these grounds, the poet must be understood as having created a genre antipathetic to his own poetic style, a genre which then becomes an edifice vandalized by the very hand that made it in the very act of its creation. This seems a paradox indeed, an enigmatic literary-historical oxymoron worthy of Ovid, yes, but inadequate to account for the poetic character and intention of the *Heroides*. It is, however, an only apparent paradox, an enigma which can be dispelled.

It is not difficult to discover why it was that Ovid's *Heroides* enjoyed such immediate popularity in vernacular translations, spawned so many imitations, and led to repercussions so important as to impinge decisively on the changing shape of European prose fiction. Richardson offers the obvious clue and accurate key to the issue when he speaks of the "relater, perfectly at ease and . . . himself unmoved by his own story, [who is] *not likely greatly to affect the reader*." Every technical contribution of the letter fiction to prose narrative serves the same end, which is a more active participation of the reader in the text:

> The reader need not be told directly what a character thinks or why he does something, but may be invited to participate in the creative work of the story by finding out for himself, so that the fictional impact on him gains in vividness and comprehensiveness.[16]

Yet these same technical contributions are precisely the elements which explain the demise of the genre Ovid invented. The effect of Ovid's epistles cannot be appraised independent of the traditional literary or legendary context of familiar events in which his heroines participate. It is only against the backdrop of an *implied* world—a world nevertheless vividly present to the reader's imagination—that Ovid's treatment of his heroines, his manner of evoking their living presence, will invite the creative participation of his readers. Unless the single verse epistle can presume upon the implied presence of the character's world, a world which the reader, in the act of reading, supplies,[17] then the

[16] Day, *Told in Letters*, p. 6.

[17] For a discussion of the "virtual" dimension of the text, see Wolfgang Iser, *The Implied Reader* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974), "The Reading Process: A Phenomenological Approach," pp. 274–94 *passim*, and p. 42: "The form, then, of this unwritten text, becomes apparent to the reader as he reads, and so he begins to uncover what we might call the virtual dimension of the text. Virtual, as it is not described in the text; a dimension, insofar as it balances even if it cannot reconcile the two conflicting, mutually negating poles. The virtual dimension is brought about through our forming the 'gestalt' of the text; here we establish consistency between contrasting

verse epistle can have no immediacy of effect comparable to that of fiction enclosed within an "objective" context. It is within this implied world that the reader's imagination must actively struggle to define, understand, and judge the character whose subjective voice is gradually revealed to him. The particular has meaning as the particular only in relation to an implied whole, however shadowy, however elusive that whole may be.

It is evident that for Dryden, as for the other translators with whom he collaborated, the implied totality against which Ovid's heroines were to be measured and which they so accurately represented was that universal component of the human soul vaguely comprehended under the aegis of "the passions": " . . . for all passions being inborn with us, we are almost all equally judges when we are concerned with the representation of them. Now I will appeal to any man who has read this poet, whether he finds not the natural emotion of the same passion in himself which the poet describes in his feign'd persons?" That Dryden and his collaborators did act as judges and did indeed *banish* from Ovid's poems any expression of the "natural emotions" which they would judge unnatural in themselves or, especially, in women is evident from the ladylike, tranquilized, refined "disorder" which emerges from the pages of their edition.

It is indisputable that Ovid did, in his *Heroides*, strive for and achieve the effect of psychological verisimilitude in the representation of the passions. The verisimilar effect he achieved can be described as a kind of disorder. It is a disorder, however, apparent to the reader and yet not apparent to the "feign'd creatures" whose letters exhibit an erratic interplay of volition and confusion, deliberate persuasion and involuntary self-expression. Such disorder is only interesting insofar as it is coherent to the eye of the reader, insofar as it exhibits the logic of an ethos. This logic cannot be intelligible to the reader by virtue of what he invariably already knows—or believes he knows—prior to his experience of the poem. The disorder of each of Ovid's heroines (so many of them in similar circumstances) will seem convincing and coherent only to the extent that it emerges from the poet's present treatment of her personality and is thus not explicable by reference to the actions and circumstances assigned to her by tradition. She will emerge as a convincing, original, seemingly authentic voice only against

positions; this is the configurative meaning of the text, where the unformulated becomes concrete; and finally this is the point at which the text becomes an experience for the reader." See also Wolfgang Iser, *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), especially "How Acts of Constitution are Stimulated," pp. 180–231.

the backdrop supplied by the reader, with emphases guided by the poet. If the poem is to be interesting, this backdrop cannot "explain" her, but it must be constantly present to the poem as the standard to be at once evoked and eroded,[18] the norm to be violated, the judgment to be suspended. Wit, in this instance, is the agency for exactly that conflict between moral or literary normic preconception and present poetic revelation. And the reader must experience this conflict if he is to penetrate to the unpredictable, often prerational depths of individual character from which the tangled complexities of motive and desire emerge as coherent discord and convincing disorder.

The medieval definition of the letter as a *sermo absentis ad absentem* emphasizes the great advantage, in terms of psychological exploration, of the Ovidian fictive epistle. The writer is herself alone, absent from her addressee. Her condition of lonely separation becomes fertile ground for the kind of self-exploration or involuntarily revealing self-representation which the act of writing fosters, and which the act of speech, coupled with the presence of a listener, would naturally inhibit. There is, however, one other genre of verse composition to which the Ovidian fictive epistle, despite its differences, may be compared. That genre is the dramatic monologue; the best exemplars, the poetry of Browning and Tennyson. Like other instances of first-person verse narrative, the dramatic monologue includes a nonauthorial speaker, an implied listener, some implied or anticipated interaction with that listener, and an occasion sufficient to evoke the response which is the poem itself. But while the dramatic monologue shares all of these characteristics with various other kinds of first-person narrative, what distinguishes the form is the characteristic effect which most allies it to the Ovidian genre of the fictive verse epistle.

An abbreviated description of the kinds of demands placed on the reader by the dramatic monologue and the kind of effects it yields will, I think, offer some advance clarification of the function of wit in Ovid's *Heroides*. Robert Langbaum, in his book *The Poetry of*

[18] For this necessarily double apprehension, see S. Freud, "Wit and Its Relation to the Unconscious" (1905), in *The Basic Writings of Sigmund Freud*, trans. A. A. Brill (New York: Random House, 1938), p. 790: "The occasion for releasing comic pleasure vanishes when the attention is directly fixed on the comparison which is capable of giving rise to the comic. Under such circumstances the comic force is lost from that which is otherwise sure to produce a comic effect. A movement or a mental activity cannot become comical to him whose interest is fixed at the time of comparing this movement with a standard which distinctly presents itself to him. Thus the examiner does not see the comical in the nonsense produced by the student in his ignorance; he is simply annoyed by it, whereas the offender's classmates who are more interested in his chances of passing the examination than in what he knows, laugh heartily over the same nonsense."

Experience,[19] has advanced four assertions about the form of the dramatic monologue as employed by Browning (e.g., "My Last Duchess") and Tennyson (e.g., "Simon Stylites") which should prove relevant. First, the "key to the form of the dramatic monologue" is the fact that "sympathy is the necessary condition for reading it." Such sympathy is the reader's act of imaginative identification with the gradually revealed, singular ethos of the speaker; it is an act of imaginative participation in that speaker's singular values and singular view of the world. Second, that sympathy is responsible for a "meaning not inherent in the content but determined by the treatment," that is, a meaning which is a product of the reader's gradually unfolding response to the poem. This response is characteristically marked by an activity of simultaneous sympathy and resistance, a disequilibrium resulting from the felt inadequacy of the reader's normative or moral judgment upon the speaker. Such judgment proves inadequate either to comprehend the speaker or to control or check the reader's own sympathetic imaginative apprehension of his palpable vivacity. Third, that the reader should experience such resistance is a function of the fact that "most successful dramatic monologues have speakers who are somehow reprehensible." In Browning, the speaker will characteristically exhibit an extraordinary or novel moral position, one which nonetheless becomes a trap for our fascination. In Tennyson, the speaker will exhibit an "emotional perversity bordering on the pathological." In either case, whether the speaker embodies extreme emotions or exhibits an extreme moral position, he will be, in the light of convention, an aberration, a misfit. As a result, the reader's *moral* judgment upon the speaker will be the least appropriate, least interesting response to the poem, especially since the poem will often provide the grounds for such judgment in its first few lines. Fourth, the reader's experience of the poem and of the character whose voice it represents will be an experience whose intensity is a direct function of his realization of the degree to which he has, through imaginative identification with the speaker, departed from the conventional norms which have shaped his own understanding. In this instance, those norms will have proved inadequate to contain or explain the encounter with sheer human life which he, in his experience of the poem, has experienced in himself. Thus the reader's conventional or moral judgment upon the speaker is present, in his reaction to the poem, precisely as the thing which is suspended. That the reader may, however, be fully aware of the deviation and disequilibrium into which the poem has

[19] Robert Langbaum, *The Poetry of Experience* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1957), especially "The Dramatic Monologue," pp. 75–108.

seduced him, the poet must be present in the poem as implied artificer, present as a consciousness beyond the speaker's own, an awareness beyond what the speaker can logically or historically lay claim to. In this way, the poet becomes a counterpoise, himself a pole for "sympathy" and, insofar as his artifice reveals the limited perspective of the speaker, an agency of inhibition and further disequilibrium. The poet thus guides the reader in his complex imaginative creation of the speaker. The reader is seduced by the process of reading into entering an outrageous perspective, but those emphases of the poet which exhibit a consciousness larger than the speaker's are a constant spur to the reader's own consciousness of his engagement in the act of sympathetic imagination.

The most salient feature of the dramatic monologue is the natural capacity of the form to evoke and exploit the abnormal extremes of character and emotion—to adopt the voice of the criminal, the madman, the misfit, and to explore the unlit pathological recesses of aberrant emotion and motivation. This aspect of the form would, at first glance, seem to be the one which most emphatically distinguishes it from the form of the verse epistle represented by Ovid's *Heroides*. Ovid's collection is praised for its verisimilar "psychology," but inevitably accompanying that praise, and often inseparable from it, is the complaint that Ovid has normalized and even trivialized the heroines of antiquity: they are domesticated, familiar, vulgar, even debased reproductions of their great legendary and heroic prototypes. Furthermore, one characteristic stylistic reflex of Ovid's reductive tendency is the wit which violates the intimacy of the form and interrupts the reader's process of sympathetic rediscovery. Nevertheless, the aspect of the dramatic monologue which most likens it to the Ovidian verse epistle is precisely that capacity of the form to engage the reader in an experience of imaginative transgression which short-circuits conventional values, and which defies modes of apprehension that otherwise disarm logical and moral contradictions.

The women of Ovid's *Heroides* are convincing as psychologically "real" characters precisely because they are not indentured to Classical Decorum. The sensibilities they reveal are convincing insofar as their characters become coherent but autonomous forces defiant of the categories to which tradition assigns them. They are convincing sensibilities insofar as their utterances force us to deviate from our own preconceptions of them, to endure the dissolution of their conventional "meaning." If we read the letters of Ovid's heroines with that imaginative sympathy which is the necessary precondition of the epistle form, no less than of the dramatic monologue, they force us to jettison

the orthodox logic of perception which subordinates character to action and to question that decorum properly defined as "an appropriate response to an objective reality which combines fact and value." The rule of Ovid's *Heroides* is the rule of indecorum, of wit in conception no less than in language, a wit which is not his heroine's own but the token of the poet's creative presence in the poem. Its dispassionate, intellectual, emotionally anaesthetizing presence is a constant reminder of how far we, in our sympathy for a heroine, have departed from the traditional view of her situation, and it is a constant goad to the dissociation of emotional appreciation from formal articulation. It is the medium by which our understanding of Ovid's heroines becomes psychologized and historicized, the medium by which their speech becomes present as the empiric fact which inevitably overflows the confines of stable categories. Ovid's heroines become "real" insofar as they become convincingly enigmatic, their truth accessible only as fact enclosed in the wayward, often comically unorthodox fact of their words alone.

II ⊙ JASON'S TWO MEDEAS: *HEROIDES* 6 AND 12

OVID'S TOYSHOP OF THE HEART:

Epistulae Heroidum

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