VII ⊙ POSTSCRIPT IN LIEU OF PREFACE

Three Ways of Resurrecting Ovid

Oscar Wilde once said that "only an auctioneer can equally and impartially admire all schools of art." The critic whose taste is sufficiently catholic to allow him to discover, to discriminate, and then to publish, the literary virtues of Vergil's *Aeneid*, Propertius' *Monobiblos*, and Horace's *Epodes* will not expect his remarks to expose him almost axiomatically to a suspicion of tendentious bias or imposture. Yet, should Ovid's *Heroides* enter the list as a somewhat less than equal claimant for our interest, his remarks will perhaps be anticipated, if not finally judged, with some disquieting suspicion. Even the most closely reasoned and dispassionate argument for the poetic merit of Ovid's collection will whisper of the marketplace, the boutique for overpriced and at best second-rate antiquities. The critic's enterprise of adequate admiration will, in fine, hint at the artificed fever of the auctioneer.

It is only rarely, however, that classical scholars have engaged this risk. Critical efforts to assess the *Heroides* either with sympathy or without evident bias are the exceptions to the rule, and they have become the more conspicuous for their increasing rarity. Reluctance, uneasiness, uninhibited indifference, and even unsuccessfully repressed aversion have, in the last half-century, persistently haunted the attempt—an important attempt—to assess and to understand Ovid's *Heroides*, either for their particular contribution to the Latin elegiac genre or with respect to their status within the spacious oeuvre of their author. That author is one who remains himself always elusive, whose manner is, by a consensus both ancient and modern, marred by its errant prolixity, and whose influence on Western literature has nevertheless proved not only abundantly manifest but magically haunting, magically alive.

In 1934 T. F. Higham, with analytic rancour, wrote an obituary addendum to the most recent iterations of the poet's redundant demise:

> Ovid died, for at least the third time, in the nineteenth century, and was buried deep under mountains of disparaging argument to make a throne for Virgil.[1]

But if in the years since 1934 the poet has seemingly exhausted the various forms of literary revival, there is still that one work, his epistles of the heroines of myth, legend, and ancient poetry, which seems stubbornly to resist any final exhumation from the crypt of Ovidian

[1] T. F. Higham, "Ovid: Some Aspects of His Character and Aims," *CR* 48. no. 2 (July 1934), p. 120.

disrepute. L. P. Wilkinson, for example, the scholar most responsible for initiating the contemporary reappraisal of Ovid, reveals himself obliged by his learning to acknowledge both the originality and the influence of the *Heroides*. He is, however, no less obliged by his vigilant scrutiny of their past reputation to reveal his own skepticism of their literary quality. The need to offer a disinterested assessment of these poems will not so far overrule his scruples as to permit him to endorse, even by omission, what seems to him the peculiar misapprehension responsible for whatever popular or critical esteem they have enjoyed. The object of his censure is not, importantly, the popular distortion of the tone of Ovid's collection which encouraged such vapid exhalations of approval as Willa Cather's assertion that they are "the most glowing love stories ever told." Instead, Wilkinson's target lies exclusively within the academic domain. It is the *influential* misrepresentation that concerns him, for example (to cite a judgment he does not mention), the statement with which Mackail in his *Latin Literature* at once introduces Ovid's epistles and commends both himself and the poet's work to the scornful exasperation of a contemporary audience: "The Lives of the Heroines are the most elevated and refined in sentiment of all the elegiac compositions of the Romans."[2]

In reaction to such influential distortions, Wilkinson offers a description of his own complex response to the poems. By couching his account of their effect in the amusing yet telling metaphor of plum pudding, he raises to the surface the central issue which so often lies dormant, or latent, in critical discussions of the poems: the problem of taste and expectations, *our* taste and *our* expectations, a problem commonly glossed over by the conventional, even obligatory mention of Ovid's transgressions against decorum and good taste. In addition, Wilkinson's metaphor becomes a provocative description of the double effect characteristically produced by the poems: the dull satiety of overappeased appetite nonetheless goaded to artificial hunger by the vagrant, brilliant solicitations of surprise. Furthermore, and most important for our purposes, Wilkinson's metaphor is offered in the service of a caveat against dutiful and hence unexamined hypocrisy. This caveat would not only seem to class the modern enthusiast for the *Heroides* with his Victorian counterpart, the scholar-zealot whose God is The Classics, but also to class both of them, insofar as both are aesthetically evangelical, with Wilde's auctioneer:

> How shall we assess the *Heroides*? It is undeniable that they have

[2] J. W. Mckail, *Latin Literature* (New York: Pantheon, 1898), p. 137.

been highly popular throughout the centuries. "All the world loves a lover," concludes Showerman, "and all the world has for a long time loved most of the *Heroides*." And Shuckburgh says much the same. But taste has changed considerably in the past hundred and fifty years, and it is most important that traditional judgements should not be accepted without question. The classics have suffered because their exponents have too often felt it their duty to be propagandists, with the inevitable result that un-prejudiced readers are disappointed and become sceptical. The proof of the pudding is in the eating. To me the single *Heroides* are a uniform plum pudding with a fair mixture of glittering rings and sixpences. The first slice is appetising enough, but each further slice becomes colder and less digestible until the only incentive for going on is the prospect of coming across on occasional ring or sixpence. It seems a pity that so many schoolboys should first be introduced to Ovid through this work. Few of them can ever have been deserted by a lover, and one suspects that the choice is due to the unobjectionableness rather than the interest of the subject matter.[3]

In 1974 Howard Jacobson published the most ambitious and searching reappraisal of Ovid's *Heroides* to see the light in the last two centuries. That work was met with a review which echoes, in another vein, Wilkinson's strictures against the misguided piety of the scholar-zealot who advances Ovid's *Heroides* as a collection of *poetic* merit sufficient not only to deserve extensive critical elaboration but also to requite the attention of an audience whose expectations are consequent upon such professional recommendation.[4] The reviewer, Oliver Lyne, expounds the danger courted by the "revivalists" engaged in "assiduously unburying" Ovid, scholars seduced into an "overreaction which has sometimes led to absurdities of overestimation." The result Lyne envisions is not unlike Wilkinson's unpleasant anticipations. The efforts of some "resurrectionists" lead "not only to misconceived books, but to boring books—about one of antiquity's most appealing authors; and readers of classics are not so numerous that we have to scare them off."

What is most important about Lyne's remarks is that he would not class the current modes of Ovidian exhumation as manifestations of that auctioneering tolerance which can "equally and impartially ad-

[3] L. P. Wilkinson, *Ovid Surveyed* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1962), pp. 42–44.

[4] O. Lyne, "Ways of Resurrecting Ovid," *Times Literary Supplement*, 7 March 1975.

mire all schools of art." On the contrary, neither of the two principal paths taken by the critical works of revival would fall under the huckster's aegis. Lyne discriminates those two paths in the following way. The first path starts by "giving Ovid full chance *on his own terms*" and generally ends by giving the reader the "impression that Ovid is somehow intensely and brilliantly Ovidian—an insight which has its limitations." This first path, I would add, rarely attempts to search out any *new* terms by which to understand Ovid "on his own terms." (There are, however, significant exceptions.) Instead, the traditionally understood Ovidian "vices" are now tricked out as the poet's "intention." The wit, sophistication, and detachment, earlier tagged as blemishes, a blight upon the radiant standard of classical decorum, are now made the necessary instruments of a rationalism aimed solely at "sophisticated intellectual pleasure." Readers are encouraged to understand that Ovid's intention was, purely and simply, to entertain—and entertainment by definition excludes profundity.

The devices of style which violate decorum by inevitably diverting attention from the subject to the manipulative surface of language proclaim the poet's Alexandrian and mannered detachment, and they command a like detachment in his audience. Ovid's intellectual sophistication, interpreted as an exclusive allegiance to the intellect, is held to be manifest in his handling of the elegiac couplet: by ruthlessly eschewing almost every metrical device employed by Vergil in the service of suggestion and retardation, his couplet becomes an "allegory of control." But that allegory for Ovid's metrics becomes generalized into an allegory for poetic intention as well as poetic sensibility. Ovid not only evades "profound metaphysical problems" but empties them of substance or indiscriminately annihilates them, even when the subject would seem to lead directly to a confrontation with precisely such problems:

> The sole agent in these portraits, such as that of Narcissus, is intellect. It can brilliantly and analytically lay bare the many strands of human motivation but in the process deprive them of their existential mystery.[5]

If this first path insists on Ovid's superficiality, the second discovers, and insists upon, "profundity." According to Lyne, it "confronts head-on the charge of general 'superficiality' implied in the comparisons

[5] G. Karl Galinsky, *Ovid's Metamorphoses: An Introduction to the Basic Aspects* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975), p. 23.

with Vergil, and often enough expressed, and finds 'profundity.' . . . While Path One avoids the implications of the comparison with Vergil, Path Two in effect accepts the fallacious premises of the Vergil idolators." To this, exponents of Path One would add in counterattack that the recuperation of Ovid which insists upon his "seriousness" is too often, and quite mistakenly, accomplished at the expense of his most salient characteristics: his wit, his irreverence, his *non serviam* independence from the mighty imperatives of Classical Decorum. Further, the tendency to rescue Ovid by challenging the accuracy and the emphasis of the ancient detractors of his unseasonal wit derives, Karl Galinsky has argued, its own profound and all too latent motive from "the scholarly mentality":

> That tendency is to make the *Metamorphoses* and Ovid more profound than they are. Making a writer profound often is confused with profound criticism. . . . There are profound reasons why [Ovid] did not want to be profound and they are susceptible to profound critical analysis.[6]

The "two paths" Lyne discriminates offer, in my judgment, a fair and accurate description of the major trends of contemporary Ovidian criticism. Significantly, these paths converge upon Ovid's *Heroides*, and converge most conspicuously upon that aspect of the poems which has been the emphasis of this book: their wit, their unseasonable wit, those vagaries of emphasis and tone almost protean in unpredictable variety yet sufficiently stable, by virtue of their common effect, to reduce the welter of reproaches to one axiom universally and massively invoked: Ovid is *nimium amator ingenii sui*. Rarely do the *Heroides* escape the censure of excess of some sort, and almost all such excesses are naturally subsumed under the aegis of wit, Ovid's willful yet erratic indulgence of his *ingenium*. It is that inexplicably exhibitionist yet so characteristically Ovidian license which, by an almost universal consensus, transgresses upon the one standard common to critics of the most divergent tastes and methods: decorum, what Milton called "that grand masterpiece to observe." By that poetic flaw, so unpredictable and so intransigent, the fact of language, intrudes on the poetic illusion. The shadow of words—mere words—effects an eclipse of life.

The reproach of excessive ingeniousness of preciosity, Ovid's unwillingness or inability to stop, was until recently the hallmark of

[6] Galinsky, *Ovid's Metamorphoses*, p. viii.

Ovidian literary-critical scholarship. It was the stamp of censure, faint or bold in proportion to the critic's hostility or favor, by which the poet was assigned the image of a superb wastrel, the prodigal son of Augustan letters.

The *Heroides* have been *a fortiori* more exposed to the conventional censure than Ovid's other works. As dramatic monologues abstracted from situations critical or hopeless, almost all shadowed by suicide, death, or coercion, they would seem to require *treatment* commensurate with the high seriousness of their occasions, not that trivialization of the human predicament which is more appropriately the province of comedy. Furthermore, the two fundamentally related problems of aesthetic expectations and Ovidian unconventionality are exacerbated by the erratic character of Ovid's supposed transgressions. In the *Heroides*, as E. K. Rand says, Ovid had mastered the trick, learned from Horace, of "satirizing the third person in the first." He had also embroidered that mannerism of comic irreverence on situations fraught with suffering, pain, pathos, and tragedy, on subjects that had acquired an almost hagiographical literary stature. Moreover, despite his unconventional element of literary and moral parody, an element which is itself varying in tone, range, and depth, he had further complicated his collection, and its transgressions, by its uncannily residual perfection: more often than not, his heroines speak to us as though they *were* real, with pathetic indignation, pretentious vulnerability, estranged self-knowledge, effortless confusion, and useless ingenuity.

The manner in which Ovid produces this effect has not, I think, been adequately explored or described. Erich Auerbach, by way of a brilliant *obiter dictum*, provides an economical, if only preliminary, avenue of access:

> The sublime is intended to carry the reader away, to overpower him; rhetorical devices may be employed, but then in such a way that the overpowering quality of the whole prevents the listener from singling them out and relishing them as such.
>
> The middle level, on the other hand, is meant to be quietly diverting; here the rhetorical devices should be so distributed that the reader can dwell on them: here wit, psychology, elegant sensibility, and charming detailed descriptions are in order. . . . Rhetorical excesses are very dangerous in the treatment of the passions and the sublime; it destroys all immediacy and movement, especially when the reader has the feeling that it did not spring of a single impulse

but was carefully pieced together with the help of traditional devices.[7]

In the *Heroides* Ovid subjects traditionally lofty subjects to the "middle level" of style, and the result proves "very dangerous" to his subject, a subject by definition in the arena of "the passions and the sublime." Noticing the failure of sustained pathos in the *Heroides*, some critics have located its cause in the poet's crippling detachment from his subject and have dismissed the collection summarily: "Ovid did not fully enter into the spirit of these exercises." Others merely nod in passing with Palgrave, noting how all too clear it becomes in the *Heroides* that Ovid is "amongst world-famous poets, perhaps the least true to the soul of poetry."

That the middle style Auerbach describes as so "dangerous in the treatment of the passions and the sublime" does not, curiously enough, prove lethal is evident in the disconcerted and essentially ambivalent reaction of Ovid's partisans, whether the mode of their "revivalism" finds them in the first path or the second. Their ambivalence manifests itself in an attitude whose paradigm is the judgment of Quintilian: *lascivus quidem in herois quoque Ovidius et nimium amator ingenii sui, laudandus tamen in partibus* (Ovid is playful even when he writes heroic verse, and too infatuated with his own talent, but still, in parts of his work, worthy of our praise).[8] The critical methodology consequent upon this judgment is a form of winnowing—an attempt to sift the good from the bad, the charitable from the ludicrous, the sincere from the bathetic—both within individual poems and within the entire collection. This attempt, I must add, has not been marked by placidity. It is sometimes accompanied by an expressed groan at Ovid's incapacity to sustain a lyric and romantic vein and, less frequently, by an almost inaudible sigh that he did not have what it took to shake the shackles of convention and to slip, for once, into *pure* comedy, travesty, or burlesque.

The remarks of Wilkinson and E. K. Rand, even when they seem most censorious, are the best illustration of the disequilibrium, the mixed state of amusement, sympathy, and irritation which is, I think, the appropriate response to the mixed stylistic levels of Ovid's poems. Wilkinson first lists a few of Ovid's incorrigible witticisms, examples of "verbal jugglery" which "we can admire (not without a smile)." He then mentions some conceits which "can be incongruously ab-

[7] Eric Auerbach, "Camilla, or the Rebirth of the Sublime," in *Literary Language and Its Public* (Liverpool: University Press of Liverpool, 1965), p. 91.
[8] Quintilian, *Institutio Oratoria* 10.1.88.

surd": "There are indeed plenty of examples of kakozelia, what we should consider bathos or bad taste, if we were to take these letters seriously." Citing the disruption of the dramatic illusion of despondence, he adds, "The heroines are not too miserable to make puns." And he explains that disruption as the poet's *amor ingenii sui*: "I feel sure that in the *Heroides*, Ovid, a baroque spirit before his time, was prepared to risk seeming comic if only he could seem clever." Wilkinson does acknowledge moments of unadulterated lyricism in the poems. He does not see them as the result of deliberate artistry, however, but rather as isolated incidents, moments of spontaneous remission in Ovid's fever of poetic narcissism: "Here and there amid the desert of debating points we do come across cases of what seem genuine feeling or pathos, when the poet forgets himself and his audience." Yet Ovid does not nod for long: "One can scarcely imagine Ovid sustaining or wishing to sustain such a level of romantic and lyrical beauty throughout a whole piece. His genius was for wit." After all the tiresome afflatus of marred sublimity, Wilkinson finds a breath of fresh air in the consistent wit of the Phaedra epistle:

> It is not surprising that we feel a certain relief when we come upon a piece in the *Heroides* which is not one more version of the now familiar complaint. If we cannot be moved, we may perhaps be amused. The specious arguments of Phaedra designed to allay the scruples of Hippolytus (a real *suasoria* this) are worthy of the bawd Dipsas in *Amores* I.8. Ovid is here once more in his element, the poet of amorous intrigue, of brazenness and *nequitia*.[9]

Rand displays a similar desire for unity of tone in the poems or, failing that, a felicitous harmony of incongruities: "The strands of grave and gay fail to unite in the *Heroides*, when gaiety brings us from the Heroic age plump into that of Augustus."[10] Like Wilkinson, Rand appreciates the humor of the Phaedra epistle. But unlike Wilkinson, he is sensitive to an irritating failure of comic finality in her epistle. This failure is to my mind produced by the poem's ironic and ultimately tragic framework, and by a cumulative impression within the poem of wasted ingenuity, of the final fragility of an art which cannot heal itself. Phaedra is, after all, far from the uninvolved Dipsas. Yet Rand objects to the very complication of tone which gives the epistle its depth: "Ovid does not quite turn Phaedra's appeal into comedy. Would that he had done so." In the Briseis epistle, Rand finds a balanced

[9] Wilkinson, *Ovid Surveyed*, p. 42.
[10] E. K. Rand, *Ovid and His Influence* (Boston: Marshal Jones, 1925), p. 21

mixture of contrarieties and, for once, a successful mingling of gravity and gaiety: "Humor plays delicately on the surface of pathos, dangerous skating, which Horace would have applauded." But the Laodamia epistle evinces no such harmony. It shares the disturbing Janus-featured complexity of the Phaedra epistle: "Laodamia is treated with a freer hand. She well nigh becomes matter for comedy. All this would turn the lament into burlesque, if this were all." And like Wilkinson, Rand exhibits examples of true pathos. But the bulk of the poems leaves him waiting for what he wants, what he somehow expects but what never comes, a literary resort in the districts of romance: "Elsewhere in the *Heroides* one waits in vain for the thrill of tragic pity and fear."

What is most illuminating in the comments of Wilkinson and Rand is the way in which both scholars, by the very formulation of their objections, not only respond to but actively reduplicate and even recreate the superbly disconcerting wit of Ovid's epistles. (Significantly, the absence of this aspect distinguishes the Path Two mode.) Rand, for example, offers the following description of the Aeneas who emerges from the epistle of Ovid's Dido, *Heroides* 7:

> Incidental to Ovid's plan is a certain depreciation of his own sex. There is material for a comic Aeneas in Dido's letter. His is fickle, rock-hearted, short-sighted, perjured, superstitious, ungallant, and somewhat naive; he thinks that after seven years of miscellaneous buffetings on the deep he is the darling of the gods. . . . He owes his safety to her, not them; she saved him from a watery grave and gave him food and clothes. His eye is on the main chance and his great mission is the love of war for war's sake. He is bellicose but not heroic. Above all,—here *is* a slam at Virgil—he is fickle and feminine.[11]

Similarly, in his comments on the double epistles, Rand is encouraged to sympathetic participation in their comic dimension by the absence of an encroaching shadow of death or suicide about to befall the fictive authors, that shadow which would otherwise call into question the decorum of an elaborate jest. As a result, he gives an account of the letters exchanged between Paris and Helen which is the most provocative offered by any critic in this century. He concludes:

> Incomparable audacity, the radiant attendants of Helen in the *Iliad* degraded to the circle of Corinna's maids! It were unforgivable were it not a logical conclusion from the Homeric Helen's acts. Something like this happened in Sparta. Ovid is thinking out ancient history, the part that the historians do not record. Following Euripides, once more, he has transposed heroic lovers, playthings of the gods, into human beings, and solved a human problem in a perfect work of art.[12]

[11] Rand, *Ovid and His Influence*, p. 25.

There is, of course, no reason why Rand's description of Ovid's method in the Paris and Helen epistles might not apply as well to the other *Heroides*. One "waits in vain for the thrill of tragic poetry and fear" in all the epistles, unless perhaps we find it in Sappho's letter, *Heroides* 15. As Rand's own amusing and often astonishing analyses show, the reader has better things to do than wait vainly.

Wilkinson's censure is more vehement than Rand's. But insofar as he departs from Rand's emphasis on wit as formal principle of structure, focusing instead on the specific linguistic texture of individual verbal conceits, his censure is the more brilliantly responsive. One is almost tempted to assert that the poet in him assents, in laughter, to the very thing the critic so severely suppresses, the disconcerting temptation not to take these poems quite so "seriously" as they somehow ought to be able to be taken:

> But such conceits can be incongruously absurd, as when Medea complains that, though she could put a dragon to sleep, she cannot put herself: and we can only laugh outright when Ariadne says she is not surprised that the horns of the Minotaur (whom she insists on calling her brother) could not pierce Theseus' breast, his heart is so hard.[13]

Auerbach had described both wit and psychology as proper to the "middle level" of style. Like many other critics, Rand had found some compensation or consolation for Ovid's many transgressions against the decorum of the Sublime Style, the great treatment of great emotions, in the poet's compelling depictions of "woman's moods":

> The poems of the *Heroides*, despite their artificiality and lapses in taste, and the presence of jocoseness where one looks for grief, are alive today for the reason that Ovid has accomplished the chief

[12] Rand, *Ovid and His Influence*, pp. 31–32.
[13] Wilkinson, *Ovid Surveyed*, p. 39.

> purpose for which he wrote them. . . . We should regard them not as unsuccessful attempts at tragic monologue but as thoroughly competent studies in woman's moods.[14]

He had, indeed, transformed that consolation into a rebellion against the rigidity of those generic expectations which, by their monolithic appeal to the "serious" subject matter of the poems and to the "serious" status of the heroines, axiomatically overrule any lively participation in the disconcertingly mixed generic strands of the epistles:

> If we remove the *Heroides* from the realm of tragedy to that of psychology and allow Ovid's wit a wider range than first appeared appropriate, we shall better understand his heroical letters and their writers.[15]

Ironically, it is that same appeal to psychology which allows Jacobson to advance the *Heroides* as worthy of our complex scrutiny and, at the same time, obliges him to rehearse the retrograde objections to Ovid's unseasonable wit, one of the poet's "congenital" faults. Jacobson's insightful emphasis on the role of individual perspective in Ovid's collection, by virtue of its bias for a contemporary, neo-Freudian profundity, affords no commensurate scope to the poet's wit, which becomes by definition "obtrusive or, at the least, uninteresting." The poet's wit and parody are both "unintentional and infelicitous" when they are "obtrusive," that is, when they distract or divert us from the impression of a heroine's singular perspective. Thus they force upon us an awareness of a point of view, not strictly indentifiable with the heroine's own:

> In a manner of speaking, the *Heroides* are the turning of the "empathetic" technique (to use Otis' fruitful phrase) in upon itself: *the poet does not read his character's mind, he becomes it.* There can be no question that much of the wit and parody that is present—*though subservient to more important considerations*—is often the function (sometimes, I feel, unintentional and infelicitous) of this split.[16] (My emphasis)

Jacobson's numerous objections to Ovid's wit, rhetoric, and parody, his expressions of discomfiture at their inexplicably obtrusive effect,

[14] Rand, *Ovid and His Influence*, p. 20. [15] Rand, *Ovid and His Influence*, p. 29.
[16] Jacobson, *Ovid's Heroides*, p. 6.

are themselves the function and, I believe, the symptoms of an emerging third path in Ovidian recuperation. Jacobson introduces his chapter on the "role of perspective" in the *Heroides* with the following remarks:

> The *Heroides* are subjective poetry as is perhaps no other work of antiquity. Although it is commonplace to call Latin erotic elegy subjective, in fact we mean little more than personal. But Ovid's introduction of mythic material within the exclusively first-person format creates the necessary duality: "objective" events and individual perspective. The role of narrative is transformed. Formerly the province of the poet at one remove from his characters, once the objective mode of literature par excellence, Vergil had infused it with a degree of subjectivity and empathy. But in the *Heroides* Ovid radically transformed it into a mirror of the relative nature of reality. The world of myth is no longer reality or a symbolic reflection of reality, but to a large degree projections or extensions of individual minds. This is why Ovid chooses to create a work in which very similar situations, indeed, the very same myths recur again and again. For, given the insight that mind is itself a part of reality, one and the same event becomes a multi-faceted thing depending on who sees, experiences, and recounts it. Now all this does not make Ovid a profound or conscious philosopher, an ancestor of Kant or Berkeley. But when we consider all the philosophical schools of antiquity which in one way or another disputed the existence of a stable reality or distinguished between the real and the seemingly real or denied that knowledge was possible (e.g., Heraclitus, the Eleatics, Plato, the Academics), it is not surprising to find in Ovid an awareness of the problem.[17]

In the course of his argument that Ovid, by his use of perspective, shifts the cognitive or epistemological issue of the reality of reality to the emotional arena, Jacobson cites—with an approbation that is, to my mind, too comfortable—several instances in the poems guaranteed to impress the reader with the "relative nature of reality." Deianira's description of her rival, Iole (9.123–30), unprecedented in the literature, raises questions which are unanswerable, with the result that "as often, nothing allows for the 'truth' to be established." Briseis' expansion of the Homeric depiction of the two heralds who carried her off to Agamemnon leaves us "unsure as to whether the heralds so

[17] Jacobson, *Ovid's Heroides*, p. 349.

responded. Is this 'fact' or 'interpretation'? The question is unanswerable; which is precisely Ovid's point."[18] Dido's mention of her possible pregnancy similarly affords what seems, for Jacobson, the pleasure of epistemological doubt: "Once more the lines between objective reality and subjective truth are nowhere to be discerned."[19] An indication as to why Jacobson is obliged to disapprove of the "obtrusive" presence of the poet's parody and wit,[20] so often expended at the cost of an individual poem's commanding expression of a single, personal, and oblique perspective, is found in his summary of Ovid's form:

> The form precludes any sense of objective truth such as might be produced by the presence of an external commentator who directs and establishes "reality" (e.g., the poet in epic), or by the interaction of voices (as in drama).[21]

The "reductionist" technique by which Ovid exploits individual perspective in the *Heroides* thus becomes the poet's mode for the "elevation" of heroic myth. It does so by its "translation" to a dimension whose "seriousness" lies in its capacity to challenge the "absolute" character of facts and events and, by extension, to challenge not only the "absolute" values presumably endorsed by Vergil's *Aeneid* but by the tyrant himself, Augustus:

> The reductionist tendency, so to speak, is not the result of the transference of epic and dramatic material to elegy, a genre—one often hears—incapable of sustaining the broader scope and implication of the serious subject matter. This is to confuse cause and effect. Ovid's treatment is not a degradation of heroic myth. In one sense, it is an elevation of it; or better, it is a translation of it to a completely different dimension. For the *Heroides* set all-importance in the individual, the seemingly insignificant individual who is obscured by the dazzling glare of massive events and great principles. But when the validity, indeed, the very reality of these events is made contingent on the perspective of the individual we can understand that it is with the individual that significance really rests. Historically, this view takes on extra importance when we place the *Heroides* against the backdrop of Augustus and Vergil's *Aeneid*, a

[18] Jacobson, *Ovid's Heroides*, p. 350.
[19] Jacobson, *Ovid's Heroides*, p. 351.
[20] Jacobson, *Ovid's Heroides*, p. 8.
[21] Jacobson, *Ovid's Heroides*, p. 352.

> world in which the individual is a mere sacrificial lamb on the altar of community and principle.[22]

What is most disconcerting in Jacobson's recuperation of the *Heroides* is not so much the manner in which he establishes their status as "serious" literature by attributing it largely to the unorthodox epistemology their unorthodox use of perspective presumably implies. Rather, it is the fact that Ovid *is* recuperated. It is precisely Ovid's unorthodox literary mode which rescues the poems by converting them to an exemplar of what has become the New Orthodoxy of contemporary antimimetic literature and literary criticism. As Gerald Graff argues in his *Literature Against Itself*, "Underlying our programmatic skepticism there is frequently a programmatic *moralism* that assumes man is somehow demeaned if he imitates nature or takes his cue from sources outside his own mind." Graff's description of the New Romanticism might have been written as a footnote to the bias of Jacobson's New Ovid:

> This romantic view, which has its principal origins in Kant, Hegel, and Blake, heralds the subjection of all thinking to a simple political analogy: insofar as man tries to make nature the reference point and motive of his thought (and his art), he is enslaved to a tyrant outside himself—either a theocratic authority or an empiricist order of material objects; insofar as man creates his own world of culture, independent of pre-established nature, he is free. The half-truth that "man creates his own reality," with its assumption that freedom consists in the elimination of external determinants, informs most of the anti-mimetic literary doctrines of our day.[23]

Graff's subsequent discussion of Said's observations on the two rival approaches to textual interpretation illuminates Path Three taken by Ovidian "revivalists":

> One approach, resting on "the idea of a 'classical text,' " sees this text as a "system of boundaries and inner constraints, held intact by successive generations," which is to say, as a pre-established object that controls and determines the responses of the interpreter. The other kind views the text as "an invitation to unforeseen es-

[22] Jacobson, *Ovid's Heroides*, p. 354.
[23] Gerald Graff, *Literature Against Itself: Literary Ideas in Modern Society* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), p. 22.

trangements from the habitual, an occasion for unconditional voyages into what Conrad so aptly called 'the heart of darkness.'" Already one can see that a morality play is being organized in which the forces of smug Classical Order will line up against the forces of the unforeseen, the unconditional, and the risky. Classical Order will be routed, but apparently not so thoroughly that we shall not have to guard vigorously against its return.[24]

Jacobson's Path Three is, evidently, "the honorable road to the heart of darkness." Insofar as that road, now apparently Ovid's road, represents for contemporary readers the New Orthodoxy, and insofar as Ovid becomes the exemplar of a stable moral standard, stable only by virtue of its insistence on instability, Ovid comes to represent the heroic assassin of the old hierarchy. But in our contemporary world, that hierarchy is either dead or pursues its moribund obsolescence in the dark corners of American departments of classics. That means, in effect, that it *is* dead. As a result, Path Three—as well as the resuscitated Ovid it discovers at the end of its venue—becomes a medium for haute couture rebellion, the socially approved beating of an expiring horse. To present so modish an Ovid, the glass of contemporary fashion in the mold of an antique form, is to look on perversion through the lens of fashion, with placidity. It is thus not only to distort the effect of Ovid's poems but to strip the Ovidian poetic mode of the dimension whose preservation is essential to its continued life: the dangerous edge of travesty and transgression.

The map which emerges from this rough sketch of the three paths of Ovidian resuscitation is, with respect to the issue of Ovid's wit, as follows. The critics who took Path One (represented here by Rand and Wilkinson) characteristically deplore the obtrusive wit of the *Heroides*. Either such wit is excessive insofar as it disrupts the pathetic or tragic illusion, or it is insufficient insofar as it fails to establish adequately the poems' successful domination by a comic or parodic interest. What is desirable in either case, generally deficient in both cases, is a stable tone or, failing that, a harmonious resolution of discordant elements. Both are necessary to establish a firm frame of reference within which the heroine's epistle functions and to which it appeals, thereby yielding what may equally be called the poet's intention or the poem's "serious meaning." More recent critics who take Path One adopt a more radical stance, proposing (as Galinsky does in his treatment of the *Metamorphoses*) that Ovid's intention was

[24] Graff, *Literature Against Itself*, p. 23.

simply and purely to amuse and to entertain. To seek out the "serious" or "profound" significance of his works is to fail to apprehend his fundamental allegiance to amoral, sophisticated, intellectual pleasure.

Critics who take Path Two discover "serious" significance in Ovid's *Heroides*. They do so by reaffirming the epistles' pathetic or tragic tenor or their sympathetic exploration of particular psychological and emotional configurations. Such an approach is taken at the expense of traditional considerations—intolerant either of the wit that confuses the poems' dominant tonality or of the rhetoric that calls attention to itself and to the surface of the language itself.

Critics who take Path Three or combine Paths Two and Three locate Ovid's field of significance or "serious" meaning in his extraordinary exploration of the discrete, or limited, individual perspective. In its epistemological implications (particularly for the relative, inaccessible, or unreal nature of Truth, Reality, or Coherent Meaning), the result of Ovid's method becomes a value-laden variant on a contemporary orthodoxy. It thereby becomes established by virtue of its imputed antagonism to the prevailing Augustan and Vergilian political, moral, and aesthetic orthodoxy—as an unorthodox but nonetheless "serious" locus for meaning. Thus, Jacobson offers a rhetorical query on the Briseis epistle and then promptly answers it: "Is this 'fact' or 'interpretation'? The question is unanswerable; which is precisely Ovid's point."[25] This assertion attributes a tendentious "point" to the poet at the same time as it exalts the "real" poetic courage which dares to present a world so relative, so arbitrary, or so inimical to the validity of *any* assertion as to render such a "point" paradoxical.

Worse yet, one might generalize (encouraged by Jacobson) from this "point" to the larger meaning of each and every poem in the collection. Since they all raise questions similarly unanswerable, the final "serious" meaning of each of the individual poems would be the same. The different but intermediate seriousness of each poem, however, would be located in the degree to which it yields a convincing portrait of "psychopathology." And such a portrait by definition can only convince or be evaluated by reference to an implied standard of Truth or of the coherent vagaries found in multiple, differentiated psychological configurations, each of which posits as its referent an authentic or "stable" self.

What is really at issue here is the implied standard of aesthetic value that emerges as common to all three modes of Ovidian resuscitation. Ovid is either "serious" or "profound" in his intentional "meaning,"

[25] Jacobson, *Ovid's Heroides*, p. 350.

or he is "amusing" and "entertaining" by virtue of his intellectual "detachment" and intentional "superficiality," or he is aesthetically dissatisfying and disconcerting insofar as he proves himself unable or unwilling to adopt one mode to the exclusion of another or at least "to unite the strands of grave and gay." Lying behind all this, but nonetheless clearly discernible in it, is the inevitably value-laden opposition between the two functions of imaginative literature: *aut doceat aut delectet*. This is an opposition which has not yet suffered its last obsequies, even in the era of "the irreality of reality."

The kind of knowledge we derive from poetry is the knowledge we warily, gingerly locate in a poem's "meaning." Warily and gingerly, indeed. It is a delicate business to distinguish "meaning" from "significance," and more delicate still to establish the connection between "meaning," "significance," and "intention." Such discriminations have always plagued us. But now more than ever, the compelling and even natural hunger for meaning has come to signify a rather canine critical consciousness. A literary "meaning" will always be distasteful to those who see it imposed upon, even supplanting, its full verbal context. No student or teacher can easily ignore T. S. Eliot's contemptuous remark that a poem's "meaning" is like "the piece of meat the burglar throws the watchdog" to keep him harmlessly preoccupied.

The importance of Eliot's statement must not be minimized. It is symptomatic of a revolution in literary standards, a revolution oddly demotic and elite. This revolution embodies, in part, a recognition of the traditionally privileged status of literature as an instrument of knowledge and a powerful arbiter of standards and values. It acknowledges, for example, the power of words to shape and to confine man's understanding of his own political existence; it also acknowledges his vulnerability to myths which can justly be said to represent "aristocracy's dream of its own social function and the idealized acts of protection and respect it invokes to justify that function." In times when "truth" seems visibly fugitive and relative and almost inevitably suffers the orthographic embrace of quotation marks, it would seem hazardous to demand from "serious" literature its time-sanctioned function, its obligation to "produce illustrations of higher truths, to persuade the emotions to align themselves with the reason and so act on the brain."[26] Eliot's statement clearly rebels against what Frye calls "the Platonic hierarchy of verbal structures." It attacks the stubbornly persistent "Platonic mind" of those critics who discover in the most "nonserious" literature the "moral platitudes" which will justify their

[26] Northrop Frye, *The Secular Scripture: A Study of the Structure of Romance* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press), p. 27.

calling and who persist in attaching "what for them are the real values of literature to something outside literature which literature reflects."[27]

There have been, to be sure, countless attacks upon the classical opposition between the two functions of literature. It is an opposition which not only dies hard but becomes increasingly difficult to locate, and thus to address, in a period which, by seeming to render it obsolete and immaterial, has in fact preserved its life and sheltered its hidden quiescence. I am not prepared, here or at all, to lead it to its quietus. I raise the issue principally because I believe it has been the hidden imperative which most obscures the role of wit, parody, and irreverently detached "rhetoric" in Ovid's *Heroides*. Its tacit directive especially insofar as it remains tacit, obliges the critic to invoke one of two terms, "serious" or "amusing." Each term trails its constellation of related and no less tacit terms and values and imposes them upon a collection of poems which perhaps more than most ancient poetry refuses to surrender itself, indeed cannot deliver itself up with full integrity, to a reader who is caught by those terms, and who entrusts himself to Ovid's poems on the assumed reciprocity of such conditions. Such a reader will either fail to make his peace with the poet's comic and parodic bravado, or he will impose a curfew on the poet's wit. To the degree that Ovid's *Heroides* break that curfew, the affront to authority offered by such violations will oblige the critic to silence the voice of the poet in the epistles of the heroines, by retaliatory censure against it, by a plain refusal to hear it, or by an edict discrediting its claim to its own authority and power.

Thomas De Quincey, himself more powerfully taken captive by the poisonous fascination of a real impostor, the Honorable Augustus Hope, than by the fictive heroine of that effete melodrama "The Beauty of Buttermere," distinguishes between "the literature of knowledge" and "the literature of power." His circuitous efficiency can become a path for our own entry into a world of wonderful consternation, the imaginatively empiric world of Ovid's *Heroides*:

> Books, we are told, propose to *instruct* or to *amuse*. Indeed! However, not to spend any words upon it, I suppose you will admit that this wretched antithesis will be of no service to us. And, by the way, let me remark to you, in this, as in other cases, how men by their own errors of understanding, by feeble thinking, and inadequate distinctions, forge chains of meanness and servility for themselves. For, this miserable alternative being once admitted, observe what follows. In which class of books does the Paradise Lost stand?

[27] Frye, *Secular Scripture*, p. 33.

Now, if a man answers among those which instruct, he lies; for there is no instruction in it. . . . But, if he says, "No; amongst those which amuse," then what a beast must he be to degrade, and in this way, what has done the most of any human work to raise and dignify human nature. But the truth is, you see, that the idiot does not wish to degrade it; on the contrary, he would willingly tell a lie in its favour, if that would be admitted; but such is the miserable state of slavery to which he has reduced himself by his own puny distinction; for, as soon as he hops out of one of his little cells, he is under a necessity of hopping into the other. . . .

. . . In that general social organ which, collectively, we call literature, there may be distinguished two separate offices that may blend and often *do* so, but capable, severally, of a severe insulation, and naturally fitted for reciprocal repulsion. There is first the literature of *knowledge*; and, secondly, the literature of *power*. The function of the first is—to *teach*; the function of the second is—to *move*: the first is a rudder; the second, an oar or sail. The first speaks to the *mere* discursive understanding; the second speaks ultimately, it may happen, to the higher understanding or reason, but always *through* affections of pleasure and sympathy. . . .

The *knowledge* literature, like the fashion of this world, passeth away. . . . But all literature properly so called—literature κατ' ἐξοχήν, —for the very same reason that it is so much more durable than the literature of knowledge, is (and by the very same proportion it is) more intense and electrically searching in its impressions. . . .

. . . all works in this class, as opposed to those in the literature of knowledge 1st, work by far deeper agencies, and 2dly, are more permanent; in the strictest sense they are κτήματα ἐς ἀεί: and what evil they do, or what good they do, is commensurate with the national language, sometimes long after the nation has departed. . . . At this hour, one thousand eight hundred years since their creation, the Pagan tales of Ovid, never equalled on this earth for the gaiety of their movement and the capricious graces of their narrative, are read by all Christendom. This man's people and their monuments are dust; but *he* is alive: he has survived them, as he told us that he had it in his commission to do, by a thousand years; "and *shall* a thousand more."[28]

[28] "The Literature of Knowledge and the Literature of Power," in *Thomas De Quincey*, ed. Bonamy Dobree (New York: Shocken, 1965), pp. 181–85.

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OVID'S TOYSHOP OF THE HEART:

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