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PER GESTUM RES EST SIGNIFICANDA MIHI:
OVID AND LANGUAGE IN EXILE

BENJAMIN STEVENS

OVID WRITES from his relegation at the edge of the Black Sea as if from at or even beyond the very edge of the world (*ultima terra*, *Tr.* 3.4.52).¹ In this space outside of civilization, normal social categories are inverted, such that Ovid, the urbane and civilized Roman, has become the barbarian (*barbarus hic ego sum*, *Tr.* 5.10.35–38).² An important part of this transformation is linguistic: in line with one traditional meaning of “barbarian,” someone whose speech is hardly language at all, Ovid is unable to make himself understood, and “the stupid Getae laugh at [his] Latin words” (*qui non intellegor ulli, l et rident stolidi verba Latina Getae*, 35–38).³ In their context they are right to, for the dark joke is on Ovid: for the “famous Roman poet” (*ille ego Romanus vates*, *Tr.* 5.7.55), among the greatest of his generation (*Tr.* 2.119–20, 4.10.125–28), to be cut off completely from audience and society is, as it were, to have his fluent native tongue cut out. As Ovid himself puts it, poetry, once his lifeblood (*impetus ille sacer, qui vaturn pectora nutrit*, *Pont.* 4.2.25), now offers only “cold comfort” (*solacia frigida*, 45). To put all this less poetically, Ovid regrets his relegation from the city, its society, and, especially, its speech community, laments the linguistic situation at Tomis, and, perhaps most strikingly, fears that his Latin and his poetry are adversely affected. These real and alleged linguistic experiences comprise a fundamental portion of Ovid’s presentation of exile, emphasizing how he has been separated from his identity and consigned to an early and cruelly appropriate social death.⁴

To suggest one of the ways this takes place in the exile poetry, I seek to build on Betty Rose Nagle’s seminal general reading of the poetry as an

1. On the vexed problem of why Ovid was exiled (his *carmen et error*, *Tr.* 2.207), see Green 2005, 44–59; Evans 1983; Syme 1978, 215–22; for a history of the problem, Verdière 1992 and Thibault 1964. On the publication and chronology of Ovid’s exile poetry, see Syme 1978, 37–47. Quotations from Ovid’s *Tristia* and *Epistulae ex Ponto* are from S. G. Owens’ OCT (1915).

2. Cf. *Tr.* 3.11.25: *non sum ego quod fueram*. Green 2005, 287: “the inversion is complete.” Ovid may have in mind, here and throughout the exile poetry, a change from love poet (cf. *Ars* 3.481–82; Williams 1994, 66: “traces of Ovid’s erotic Muse survive in suitably chastened form”). For the linguistic force of “barbarian” in Latin, cf. Varro *Ling.* 8.64: *non esse vocabula nostra, sed penitus barbara*; see generally Munson 2005; J. Hall 2002, 1997, and 1995; E. Hall 1989; and Dauge 1981.

3. On linguistic aspects of Ovid’s exile, see Davis 2002; Williams 2002, 238–39; Rochette 1997, 54–55 with nn. 29–31, and 84 n. 142; Doblhofer 1986; Dubuisson 1985, 127–28; Nagle 1980; Della Corte 1972; Gandeva 1969; Lozovan 1961 and 1958; Herescu 1959 and 1958; Favez 1951; and Gehman 1915.

4. On the exile poetry generally, see recently Williams 2002 and 1994.

innovative literary response to exile, and in particular to respond to her suggestion that "Ovid's insistence on th[ese] point[s] [sc. his linguistic experiences at Tomis] should not be interpreted as reflecting any ancient theory of linguistic interference" but rather, I take it, as only part of a complex poetic strategy putting traditional exilic themes and elegiac structures to novel uses.⁵ Part of Ovid's poetics in his "epic elegiacs" is of course strategic, attempting to secure from a notional audience, and from Augustus in particular, at least pity if not an actual return to Rome. As Nagle argues, this strategy hinges on alleged linguistic experiences that may best be interpreted symbolically:

[Ovid's c]laims about linguistic interference tend to confirm a symbolic interpretation of Ovid's development into a Getic poet. Ovid regards speaking or writing the local barbarian languages and speaking or writing Latin as mutually exclusive; he becomes a Getic poet because he can no longer be a Roman one. This transformation marks the end of his career as a major Roman poet.⁶

Nagle and others are right to read Ovid's representations primarily symbolically, as against the literal interpretations of earlier scholarship, since, despite Ovid's claims of sincerity (*Tr.* 3.1.5–10, 5.1.5–6; *Pont.* 3.9.45–50), the poems may not depict the situation at Tomis accurately.⁷ More importantly, Ovid's frequent claims of linguistic deterioration seem disproven by the quality of the poetry itself.⁸

In this mode, but moving the point of the exile poetry even further from factual or rhetorical *utilitas*, Gareth Williams has convincingly argued that to read these and other claims as factually inaccurate misses their intended point among sophisticated Roman readers:

Ovid's use of dissimulation . . . is neither malicious nor meant deliberately to deceive; after all, *dissimulatio* was perceived as an attractive, sophisticated and witty affectation in discourse, relying for its urbane, ironic effect on the dissimulator's ability to offer a transparent misrepresentation of reality which will only mislead the naïve.⁹

5. Nagle 1980, 133. Nagle argues that "[i]n the poetics of exile there seems really to be only one novelty. Ovid's transformation into a Getic poet is a unique symbol for the effect of estrangement from Rome" (169). Other scholars argue for the poetry as more broadly innovative, e.g., Claassen 1999 (32: "an invention without parallel").

6. Nagle 1980, 139.

7. Whether Ovid's representation of Tomis is factual or fictional is tangential to my argument, and I raise the question only as relevant in the notes. But I agree with the majority of scholars that, however literary the poems, the exile itself is no conceit (*contra*, e.g., Fitton Brown 1985; see Claassen 1999, 34). See Knox 2004; White 2002, 11–12, on Ovid's generally purposeful inclusion or "suppression of topical details . . . to direct attention instead to his literary engagement with poetic predecessors," seen, e.g., in how in the *Ars amatoria* "his scenography had altered markedly" from that of the *Amores*, "exud[ing] urban hipness [with] references to specific sites and institutions" (12); Williams 2002, 235; Habinek 1998, 158 and 219 n. 15, with additional sources cited there; and Williams 1994, 3–39.

8. On Ovid's perfectly fine exile poetry, see seminally Luck 1961; recently Green 2005, 350 ("[d]espite his own disclaimers, Ovid's poetic brilliance remained undimmed to the end"); Williams 2002 and 1994, 52 (internal evidence "suggests that his *ingenium* retains a capacity for poetic invention which belies any possibility of decadence or decline"); Claassen 1986; and Nagle 1980, 171: Ovid's claim of poetic deterioration "need no longer be taken literally . . . now we can realize that his self-criticism is strategic"; cf. 140.

9. Williams 1994, 102, with particular reference to *Pont.* 4.2 and citing Cic. *Brut.* 292 and *De or.* 2.269: *urbana etiam dissimulatio est, cum alia dicuntur ac sentias . . . cum toto genere orationis severe ludas, cum aliter sentias ac loquar.*

Ovid's intended Roman audience would presumably not have been misled, especially given their sophisticated awareness of advanced rhetorical techniques including, crucially, the figure of "ambivalent allusiveness," τὸ ἐσχηματισμένον.¹⁰ Quintilian suggests using this figure "if speaking *palam* is hardly safe" (*si dicere palam parum tutum est*, *Inst.* 9.2.66), a condition that applied to Ovid. Awareness of this figure and others allowed Roman readers to distinguish very finely, as does Quintilian (*Inst.* 9.2.65–68), among kinds of speech: obvious irony is distinguished (65) from the subtler differences between *dicere aperte*, "to speak openly to careful listeners," and *dicere palam*, "to speak plainly or bluntly." On this reading, Ovid's symbolic representations of linguistic experience are part of "a sophisticated form of literary contact with Rome which keeps . . . friendship[s] alive and a shared poetic sensibility mutually satisfied."¹¹

In addition to literary and social sophistication, the exile poems also offer valuable evidence for the ways in which Ovid, poetic traditions, and Greek and Latin literature more generally all conceptualize the experience of multilingualism and language contact, both in and out of exile, and their effects on individual identity and participation in society. I follow J. N. Adams' suggestion that while "Ovid's linguistic assertions . . . may be based on pure fantasy or fabrication . . . they do reveal a Roman's attitudes to the problems of communication in a foreign place and to the possibility of second-language learning."¹² I attempt to argue further that Ovid's assertions may fruitfully be interpreted with close attention to his verbal and thematic representations of particularly "linguistic" situations.

I suggest that Ovid, in addition to famously claiming that the exile affects his Latin, presents himself as undergoing a sort of second linguistic infancy (*infantia*), as being reduced to the prelinguistic state traditionally attributed to human prehistory, and even as similar to nonlinguistic animals—all states that, by lacking (ordinary) language, resist resolution by means of language (they are *infanda*, "unable to be spoken," if not also *nefanda*, "unspeakable"), and that as a result combine to form a linguistic situation that Ovid may describe but cannot write his way out of. The ways in which Ovid represents this situation have intriguing parallels in other authors, including ancient ideas and even "theories" about language acquisition, contact, and change. A renewed understanding of these themes will help to emphasize the centrality of language and "linguistics" to Ovid's poetic representations of exile.

10. Ahl 1984, 174–208.

11. Williams 1994, 102.

12. Adams 2003, 18; cf. 106: "The poems are of more interest for the linguistic concepts that they present than for their particular linguistic assertions"; Habinek 1998, 162: Ovid "represents the impact of the colonized on the colonizer as anxiety about the linguistic and literary corruption of the latter"; Green 2005, 283: although Ovid's Latin, to judge by the poems, seems unaffected by his surroundings, "nevertheless the *psychological* condition he describes sounds all too real" (emphasis in original; cf. Williams 2002 for the poetry as particularly psychological or emotional: Ovid paints a "hyperbolic picture of exile which is believable only at an emotional level" [344] and in which "the 'reality' or otherwise of his decline is of less interest than the neurosis symbolized by his pose" [360]); and Syme 1978, 164.

1. FROM ILLE EGO ROMANUS VATES TO PAENE POETA GETES

At *Tristia* 5.10.35–36 Ovid writes that, while his new neighbors “enjoy the commerce of shared language, [he] need[s] to make meanings known by gesture” (*exercent illi sociae commercia linguae: I per gestum res est significanda mihi*). This couplet, “inherently shocking and outrageous to the Roman reader,” is central to Ovid’s representations of his linguistic experience in exile: the cultured Roman, indeed “the famous Roman poet” (*ille ego Romanus vates*, *Tr.* 5.7.55), has become the linguistic barbarian (*barbarus hic ego sum, qui non intellegor ulli*, *Tr.* 5.10.37).¹³ An exploration of the couplet’s interpretive possibilities, in light of echoes within Ovid’s work and allusions to other authors, shows how complex are those representations, drawing not only on poetry and prose generally, and on that of exile in particular, but also on thought about language as well.

“Social” Difficulty: Loss of *commercium linguae*

Immediately, the couplet suggests that Ovid, by being unable to speak or to be understood, is unable to play a meaningful part in society as a linguistically competent adult (*sociae commercia linguae*). Already excluded from Rome, he feels balefully excluded also at Tomis, sure that the Tomitians “often speak badly of [him], openly and safely” (*meque palam de me tuto mala saepe loquuntur*, *Tr.* 5.10.39). Just as he cannot be understood except by gesture, they know that he cannot understand: in each case understanding is constrained, and the only meaning communicated is exclusion.

By contrast, the Tomitians of course understand each other, and thus enjoy the society that, to a Roman, is the natural consequence of shared language (that same *commercium linguae*, 35). I disagree with Williams’ reading of that last phrase as indicating that “[t]he language [the Tomitians] share is but a basic social expedient” and another example of how they “approach the bestial.”¹⁴ In context, that is in adversative asyndeton with the following crucial phrase describing the narrator himself (36), the point must be that the Tomitians, despite their uncivilized civilization, enjoy what Ovid does not: normal linguistic society. Thus, Williams rightly describes Ovid’s linguistic experience at Tomis as a “secondary form of exile” in that he is doubly excluded, isolated among the Tomitians as much as he has been exiled from his familiar Romans.¹⁵

13. Quoted material from Nagle (1980, 134), who compares *Tr.* 5.7.55–56 and *Pont.* 4.13.18, both discussed below. Ovid may present himself in part as regaining his former ability and role in the *Ibis*, where he again calls himself “that famous poet” (*ille ego sum vates*, 247).

14. Williams 2002, 349, cf. 1994, 24: Ovid presents “[t]he language which the Getae share [a]s a simple social expedient with no subtle application.”

15. “Secondary form of exile”: 2002, 339 (an “uncertain sense of Roman identity and ‘belonging’ at Tomis”), 349 (Ovid is doubly excluded since “on the Roman side, his waning linguistic powers transform him into a *barbarus* of sorts . . . and on the Tomitian side . . . because he cannot communicate in the local language with the Getae”), and 364 (“[t]he isolating effects of exile from Rome [are] compounded by Ovid’s secondary form of social and linguistic exile in Tomis”).

Ovid makes the importance of linguistic society clear by lamenting the lack of ordinary, face-to-face speech. Indeed, he describes the very moment of his leavetaking as involving an abrupt linguistic break: “there was no delay: I left unfinished the words of the conversation” (*nec mora, sermonis verba imperfecta relinquo*, *Tr.* 1.3.69; cf. 5.7.61, discussed below).¹⁶ At that moment, Ovid moves out of ordinary speech into a world of rare and slow epistles, incomprehensible local languages, and, as it were, inhuman silence.¹⁷ By contrast, ordinary speech, *sermo*, is a conventionally emphasized good. Ovid thus remembers bittersweetly his long conversations with Atticus: “often the hours seemed swift because of our long conversations, / often the day was shorter than my words” (*saepe citae longis visae sermonibus horae, / saepe fuit brevior quam mea verba dies*, *Pont.* 2.4.11–12). At Tomis the time drags, moving quickly only into Ovid’s old age (*Tr.* 4.8).

Ovid is in good company in his dislike of isolation. For Roman authors generally, lack of linguistic society means more than merely having no one to talk to. Reception of one’s language, whether written or spoken, by the appropriate audience was of the utmost importance; many Romans were oriented toward public life and thus, in the small elite society of which we know the most, toward a life of public discourse.¹⁸ Thus Cicero, for example, as Mary Beard puts it, “insist[s] on the centrality of *sermo* to full civic life (its absence signifying social death)”¹⁹ and characterizes exile by its lack of normal speech: “I am even now lying in the same place, without any conversation, without a thought in my head” (*ego etiam nunc eodem in loco iaceo sine sermone ullo, sine cogitatione ulla*, *Att.* 3.12.3). Separation from *sermo*, whether by exile or other absence, is inherently distressing: Cicero complains whenever he is away from the city and constantly asks his more fortunate friends for letters and communications about urban goings-on.

Ovid puts similar stock in letters, for “that is the exile’s voice: a letter gives [him] language, / and, if [he] is not permitted to write, [he] will be mute” (*exulis haec vox est; praebet mihi littera linguam, / et, si non liceat scribere, mutus ero*, *Pont.* 2.6.3–4). At the beginning of spring, when others at least may travel, he hopes for letters, news, and for sailors who speak Greek or Latin (*Tr.* 3.12.33–44).²⁰ But letters and even travelers are a meager substi-

16. Cf. Ovid’s description of Daphne fleeing Apollo and “leaving behind his unfinished words” (*fugit cumque ipso verba imperfecta reliquit*, *Met.* 1.526).

17. On silence and the voice, with its elegiac connotations of abandonment, see further below and Forbis 1997.

18. On orientation toward public life and discourse, see Krostenko 2001. Pliny emphasizes the generally civilizing force of shared language, in his view a positive effect of Roman political dominance: *tot populorum discordes ferasque linguas sermonis commercio contraheret ad colloquia et humanitatem homini daret* (*HN* 3.39).

19. Beard 2002, 133. On silence generally as signifying death, see Montiglio 2000, 213–51, esp. 228–33: “[aphonie] is the phenomenon that marks the transition from being ‘ill’ to being ‘dying.’ . . . [it] appears to [Hippocratics] as the most telling sign of death as well as of a pathological disturbance of the mind” (229). Lack of language also signifies animal as opposed to human status; see below, and, for the Greek evidence, Heath 2005.

20. Cf. Philoctetes’ relief at hearing Greek after years of isolation: “Oh well-loved language, can it be that I understand the speech of such a man addressing me after so long a time!” (ὦ φίλτατον φώνημα· φεῦ τὸ καὶ λαβεῖν / πρόσφθεγμα τοιοῦ δ’ ἀνδρὸς ἐν χρόνῳ μακρῷ; *Soph. Phil.* 234–35).

tute for *sermo urbanus*.²¹ However much the countryside may be idealized, for example, in bucolic poetry, in practice extraurban Latin is disparaged, thought to be marked by poor usage and uncouth pronunciation.²² Even discounting that stereotypically poor speech, there is a deeper problem: as Beard puts it, “[t]he exile is, by definition, completely at the mercy of the shifting temporalities that govern letters and letter exchange—his life being passed in ‘letter time,’ radically unsynchronised with the political life of ‘real-time’ Rome, from which he was forcibly excluded.”²³

Just as Cicero complains that his absence from Rome cuts him out of the linguistic loop, so do the exile poems present Ovid continuously hoping for their reception at Rome (e.g., *Tr.* 1.1, and *passim*), that is, the continued reception of his speech as a precursor to his own hoped-for return, and for responses in kind and in prose from his addressees.²⁴ Likewise, the fact that Ovid had an audience at Rome still, and that his poems were being received, is guaranteed by their survival and by internal references.²⁵ Ovid’s absence is, thus, like Cicero’s, an absence from *ordinary* linguistic society and its rhythms generally.

For the great modern poet, this is an absence from *literary* language and society in particular, inasmuch as the face-to-face society from which Ovid feels excluded is naturally represented by him as highly literary: “Rome [is] a literary hub” and “[t]he landmarks his poems most consistently evoke are her poets.”²⁶ It may be in order to emphasize this absent literary audience that Ovid represents himself, in advance of any return, as needing to guard against both real loss of linguistic society (discussed above) and a perceived loss of fluency (discussed further below). As Nagle and others have stressed, in part this is in order to excite the pity and advocacy that might make a return possible.

21. See Thraede 1970, 39–47 and 52–61.

22. For example, Cicero writes that urban Latin lacks “rustic roughness” (*rusticam asperitatem*), being smooth by implied contrast, as well as “foreign insolence” (*peregrinam insolentiam*, both *De or.* 3.160). Even a cultured vocabulary from careful study of literature will not mask rustic pronunciation (*De or.* 3.42). At *De or.* 3.45–46, Cicero describes rustic Latin as having *gravitas*, perhaps “slowness,” and as being spoken both *vaste*, “broadly,” that is with lowered vowels (e.g., *e* for *i*; cf. Varro *Rust.* 1.2.14), and *hiulce*, with a “disagreeable hiatus” or *concursum hiulcus* (cf. *De or.* 3.171, with Wilkins 1892, ad loc.). Other authors describe excessive aspiration (e.g., Varro *Ling.* 5.97: *hedus* instead of *aedus*; P. Nigidius Figulus apud Gell. *NA* 13.6.3: *rusticus fit sermo si adspires perperam*; Catull. 84, with Ramage 1961, 484–86).

23. Beard 2002, 129; cf., with reference to Ovid, Evans 1983, 163: “the contacts normally maintained between friends are impossible”; and Williams 2002, 356: “the timelessness of his living death is itself reflected in the frozen immobility of his Stygian landscape and in the monotone of his emotionally frozen persona.”

24. Ovid may not have known Cicero’s letters of exile; Melville thinks that it “is on balance unlikely, but the possibility that they were accessible in Ovid’s lifetime cannot be entirely ruled out” (1992, xvii n. 5). At the least there are close thematic correspondences, for which see Nagle 1980, 33–35, my n. 19 above, and further below. On Cicero’s letters themselves, see Claassen 1999, 27–28 and 105–10, and Hutchinson 1998, 25–48.

25. *Tr.* 3.14.25–26, 5.1.1–2, 5.12.65–66; *Pont.* 2.5.9–10 and 33–34, 3.4.3–6, 3.9.1–2 and 51–56, 4.6.17–20, 4.9.131–34, 4.16.1–4.

26. White 2002, 5, citing among “the many catalogs of Latin poets which Ovid offers” *Am.* 1.15.19–30, *Ars am.* 3.333–38, *Rem. am.* 763–66, and *Tr.* 2.359–60 and 423–66. As White notes, “[t]wo vignettes bracket his career in poetry”: *Tr.* 4.10.41–56 (Ovid’s appearance as an earlier generation of elegists disappears) and *Pont.* 4.16 (“all the poets he consorted with before his banishment”).

To these ends Ovid presents himself as practicing Latin on his own and thus changing, precisely and perversely, from lonely language user to both speaker and lone audience member in one (*Tr.* 5.7.61–67):

ne tamen Ausoniae perdam commercia linguae,
 et fiat patrio vox mea muta sono,
 ipse loquor mecum desuetaque verba retracto,
 et studii repeto signa sinistra mei
 sic animum tempusque traho, sic meque reduco
 a contemplatu summoveoque mali.
 carminibus quaero miserarum obliviam rerum.

In order not to lose the commerce of the Ausonian language, nor to let my voice become mute with respect to ancestral sound, I talk to myself and run through my unused words, and I watch out for the sinister signs of my effort: thus I spend my life and my time, thus I draw myself back from contemplation of my ills—I seek to forget my wretched situation in poetry.

Already a Latin speaker, Ovid figures himself also as Latin listener, that is, paradoxically as his own interlocutor. With this solitary practice, Ovid hopes to retain the possibility of precisely that *commercium linguae* from which he perceives himself to be doubly excluded.

Ovid does claim to have had a receptive and comprehending audience for at least one performance. After Augustus' death and apotheosis in 13 C.E., Ovid writes that he composed and recited a eulogy for the emperor in Getic (*Pont.* 4.13). According to Ovid, the recitation met with the approval (*placui*) of his local audience: "their heads and laden quivers all nodded, and there was a long murmur in the Getic language" (*et caput et plenas omnes movere pharetras, / et longum Getico murmur in ore fuit*, 35–36).²⁷ As a result he "beg[an] to have a reputation as a poet among the uncultured Getae" (*coepique poetae / inter inhumanos nomen habere Getas*, 21–22). As public recognition of his poetic accomplishments even at Tomis, he claims he was honored with a wreath (*tempora sacrata mea sunt velata corona, / publicus invito quam favor inposuit, Pont.* 4.14.55–56).²⁸

All of this positive metapoetry is, in context, ironic, for any sense of poetic accomplishment comes with a sense of being linguistically compromised. Ovid says that when he wrote Augustus' eulogy, which he calls "a little book in the Getic language" (*Getico . . . sermone libellum, Pont.* 4.13.19), he arranged its "barbarian words . . . according to [Graeco-Roman] meters" (*structaque sunt nostris barbara verba modis, 20*).²⁹ The interference is

27. Is the head nodding indicative of a reversal of barbarian and linguistically human, with Ovid's metrical composition in the native tongue being met only with inarticulate approval (*murmur*) and gesture (*movere*)? The image appears in Tacitus (*Ann.* 1.34.4–6): when Germanicus addresses his troops upon Tiberius' succession, they respond with "silence . . . or a moderate murmur" (*silentio . . . vel murmure modico*); see Habinek 1998, 161.

28. Green suggests (2005, ad loc.) that this was "Apolline laurel in tribute to him as a poet."

29. On this "climax" to "Ovid's claims that he is losing his Latin in Tomis," see Williams 2002, 239; and 1994, chap. 2. This passage has been taken to show that Ovid's language learning was of a local *lingua franca*, precisely the sort of simplified *koine* Greek "conquered by Getic sound." See Green 2005, 336 and 373: the eulogy's "genre is instantly recognizable in any language . . . a kind of missionary singsong . . . designed to impress simple fur-clad quiver-toting natives"; this suggestion might be strengthened by the anaphora of indirect speech (*esse . . . esse . . . esse*) listing what Ovid "taught" (*docui*) his audience.

“shameful” (*pudet*, 19), and Ovid hopes that any reader will not be surprised at flaws in such a compromised poem (*nec te mirari, si sint vitiosa, decebit / carmina, quae faciam paene poeta Getes*). Indeed, the interference is shameful even to mention (*Tr.* 3.14.45: *turpe fateri*), such that Ovid himself must ask forgiveness from the Muses, from poetry itself, since the inspired Roman *vates* cannot help but speak “Sarmatian” (*ille ego Romanus vates (ignoscite, Musae) / Sarmatico cogor plurima more loqui*, 5.7.55–56).³⁰ In other words, the image of Ovid composing not in Latin or Greek but in “Getic,” and speaking “Sarmatian,” is, as Nagle suggests, oxymoronic and shocking, “an only slightly indirect way of saying a Getic poet is a bad poet.” The passage may thus be read as a culmination or logical conclusion of Ovid’s attempts to express how, with his linguistic situation so dramatically changed, the famous Roman poet is simply not himself any longer.³¹

Solitary Practice of Poetic Composition

The claim of Getic poetry is only one example of Ovid’s ambivalence toward poetry in exile. The final line of the passage from *Tristia* 5.7 discussed above adds an important theme: the particular form assumed by Ovid’s solitary linguistic practice is poetic composition in general, which, in addition to helping Ovid maintain his Latin, is also an attempt at consolation: *carminibus quaero miserarum obliviam rerum* (67). This theme of composition as consolation, and thus of poetry as the exile’s sole true companion, pervades the exile poetry from beginning to end. For example, Ovid’s account of his emotionally and meteorologically turbulent sea voyage to Tomis includes hopeful writing: “all my anxiety about this concern was lightened . . . often part of the sea was in the boat, but nevertheless I myself would write out some poems or other with a trembling hand” (*Tr.* 1.11.12–18: *omnis ab hac cura cura levata mea est . . . saepe maris pars intus erat; tamen ipse trementi / carmina ducebam quali acumque manu*).³² Despite the frightful circumstance, Ovid continues (note the imperfective aspect of *ducebam*) to write poetry; indeed *because* of the circumstances, poetry takes on larger importance.

The theme is given particular force in *Tristia* 4.1. After begging his reader’s pardon for any errors, since as an exile he seeks via poetry only respite, not fame (*exul eram, requiesque mihi, non fama petita est*, 3), Ovid goes on to write that his “Muse does relieve [him] as [he] seeks out the places ordered . . . [since] she was the only one to come forth in [his] being driven to flight, the only one who is unafraid” of the various dangers of voyage and destination (*me quoque Musa levat Ponti loca iussa petentem: / sola comes nostrae*

30. Williams sees in this passage a “reluctance to learn the local languages in the first place,” refuting any literal reading of Ovid’s claim to have learned Getic, in that *cogor* “hardly suggests a polyglot’s thirst for learning a new tongue” (2002, 92 with n. 90). For perhaps similar lack of control over language learning, cf. *Lucr.* 5.1028–29: *at varios linguae sonitus natura subegit / mittere* [sc. *genus humanum*].

31. Nagle 1980, 138; generally 133–40 and 167; cf. Williams 2002, 349; the “*barbara verba* . . . culmination in his writing of a Getic poem in Latin meter”; *pace* Herescu 1959.

32. These lines hint that even those first compositions might be illegible (literally and, therefore, figuratively): they are composed “with a trembling hand” (*trementi . . . manu*).

perstitit illa fugae; / sola nec insidias, Sinti nec militis ensem, / nec mare nec ventos barbariamque timet, 19–23). Just as writing shaky lines while on board helped take his mind off the storm (*Tr.* 1.11.12: *cura levata mea est*), so here does the Muse herself lighten (*levat*) Ovid's load during his journey. The repetition of *sola* suggests that, by contrast, other ostensible sources of support have been less: his *only* real comfort may come from poetry. At the same time, the phrase *sola comes* may hint at a pun which, drawing on its other contexts, makes of that comfort an emotionally complicated thing (below).

At *Tristia* 4.1.87–92 Ovid expands on the need for poetic consolation in terms that draw on the basic image of his linguistic experience outlined above, namely absence of even ordinary conversation, not to mention a literary audience:³³

et tamen ad numeros antiquaque sacra reverti
sustinet in tantis hospita Musa malis.
sed neque cui recitem quisquam est mea carmina, nec qui
auribus accipiat verba Latina suis.
ipse mihi (quid enim faciam?) scriboque legoque,
tutaque iudicio littera nostra suo est.

My Muse, although a stranger amidst such great evils, nevertheless seeks to return to meters and to her sacred ancient practices. But there's no-one to whom I can recite my poems or whose ears can comprehend Latin verse. Myself, to myself (what else could I do?)—that's how I write and read aloud, and my writing is safe since I'm the judge.

Although Ovid's writing is "safe," *tuta*, because of local incomprehension (and thus similar to the Tomitians' speech being "safe," *tuto*, because of Ovid's incomprehension, at *Tr.* 5.10.39, above), it is also implied to be fruitless (perhaps ironically so) since its reception is severely limited: as above, Ovid claims that the only person in the audience is the poems' author himself.

Poetry as "Cold Comfort" (*solacia frigida*)

Ovid thus turns for consolation to poetry both seemingly sincerely, given its undeniable importance to him, and self-consciously, using real and imagined difficulties of composition to excite sympathy by carefully drawing attention to the physical difficulties and deficiencies of his situation. Although the latter skilfulness does in a sense disprove Ovid's claim to have lost his touch, it should not be allowed to obscure what was, in fact, an emotionally trying situation. That "dissimulation" is not always or even primarily to be identified with "disingenuity" may be seen in how Ovid approaches the topic of poetic composition with deep ambivalence: if poetry may make up in some ways for loss of *commercium linguae* (and, at the same time and despite Ovid's claims, aim toward the conventional reward of immortality in culture), that solitary practice seems also to have been sincerely frustrating, feared as possibly fruitless, and, above all, approached complexly, even ruefully, since poetry provides only "cold comfort" (*solacia frigida*, *Pont.* 4.2.45).

33. On the alleged lack of local Latin speakers, cf. *Tr.* 3.14.39–40 and 5.12.53–54.

On the one hand, it is only natural that poetry would be emphasized in this position by Ovid, the self-professed natural poet. In the seemingly autobiographical *Tristia* 4.10 he claims that, when “attempt[ing] to write prose, a poem appeared of its own accord in the appropriate meter, and what I was trying to say became verse” (*scribere temptabam verba soluta modis. / sponte sua carmen numeros veniebat ad aptos, / et quod temptabam dicere versus erat*, *Tr.* 4.10.24–26). As a result, “what else could [he] do” (*quid faciam?*, *Tr.* 4.1.29, 91) but write poetry? The natural poet cannot stop composing, the place and his despair notwithstanding: “despite it all, to tell you the truth, my Muse can’t be stopped from writing poetry” (*nec tamen, ut verum fatear tibi, nostra teneri / a componendo carmine Musa potest*, *Tr.* 5.12.59–60).³⁴

On the other hand, the same poems also express Ovid’s ambivalence about his poetry’s potential success in achieving either his hoped-for return or, tellingly, the immediate goal of consolation in exile. Ovid may turn to poetry naturally, but he needs to turn to anything at all in part because of his poetry: famously and obscurely, he was exiled because of *carmen et error* (*Tr.* 2.207, 3.1.51–52, 3.5.45–52, 3.6.25–26). There may thus be detected, in the phrase *sola comes nostrae perstitit illa fugae* (*Tr.* 4.1.20, above), a slender pun on the word Ovid uses elsewhere to describe the purpose of his exile poetry, *solacia* (e.g., *Pont.* 2.7.81: *nec vos parva datis pauci solacia nobis*). I have tried to accomplish this in English by “the only one to com(e) forth,” that is, “to provide com(e)fort.”

The pun may be strengthened, as the theme certainly is, by the close association of poetry (*Musa*), *comes*, and *solacia* in a passage of similar appreciation of poetry in *Tristia* 4.10.115–18. There Ovid writes that his survival is “thanks to you, Muse: for you provide comfort, you are respite from worry and medicine for my veins. You are my leader and my companion” (*quod vivo . . . / gratia, Musa, tibi: nam tu solacia praebes, / tu curae requies, tu medicina venis, / tu dux et comes es*).³⁵ The Muse is not only companion but also leader, whom Ovid must follow into exile in the first place: “cold comfort,” indeed. If this passage and others like it are accepted as the basis for *Tristia* 4.10.20’s slender pun, then already in these passages, seemingly appreciative of poetry, Ovid complicates the relief he finds in composition. Over the years of exile, this ambivalence becomes deepened bitterness: “you [Muses] are the main reason I’m in exile” (*vos estis nostrae maxima causa fugae*, *Tr.* 5.12.46).

This ambivalence toward poetry also informs the striking images that pervade the poems. As visible signs of incomprehension and absence of audience, the poems may be imagined as having various defects. These

34. Williams 1994, 56: “The poems . . . bear witness to the soul-searching tension and despair which made them at the same time necessary and yet apparently impossible to write.” Ovid draws on a long tradition of consolation and comfort in song: *Tr.* 5.12 echoes Catullus 65 and 68 in particular; see Williams 1994, 55–58.

35. The Muses, plural, are Ovid’s “anxious companions in exile” also at *Tr.* 4.1.50 (*sollicitae comites ex Helicone fugae*). For the limits of the “comfort” provided by poetry, see Strohm 1981, 2644–49, and Lieberg 1980 (20 n. 138 for references).

include illegibility from tearstains (*saepe etiam lacrimae me sunt scribente profusae, / umidaque est fletu littera facta meo*, 5.10.95–96), inkblots (*Tr.* 1.1.13 and 3.1.15–16), or Ovid's own "trembling hand" (*trementi manu*, *Tr.* 1.11.17–18, discussed above), and paper that is shaggy (1.1.12) or rough (3.1.13). In *Tristia* 4.1, Ovid's hope is that what little poetry does arrive, bedraggled and "flawed" (*vitiosa*, 1) may be received with some pardon (*cum venia*, 104), since that physical appearance is a perfect indication of Ovid's own lamentable condition: "as my situation is lamentable, so is my poetry, with the writing matching the subject matter" (*flebilis ut noster status est, ita flebile carmen, / materiae scripto conveniente suae*, *Tr.* 5.1.5–6).³⁶

In between such claims of deterioration and the actual transmission of the poems there is room for Ovid to maneuver via additional emotionally charged imagery. In anticipation of his physically and artistically poor poems being received badly, if at all, they might be destroyed by being cast into the fire (*manus . . . misit in arsueros carmina nostra focos*, 5.10.101–2).³⁷ Elsewhere (*Tr.* 3.7.47–54), however, he reverses the image by commanding the elegy in question to "avoid the pyres as best [it] can" (*effuge venturos, qua potes, usque rogos!*, 54) in order that the poetry will outlive its author and thus cause him to be read as long as Rome stands (*quilibet hanc saevo vitam mihi finiat ense, / me tamen extincto fama superstes erit, / dumque suis victrix omnem de montibus orbem / prospiciet domitum Martia Roma, legar*, 49–52). The reversed fire imagery serves to reverse as well Ovid's claim to be seeking via poetry only *requies* and not the conventional poetic reward of immortality in literary culture (*Tr.* 4.1.3, quoted above). The reversed image is in line with the passage generally, a famous sequence "much cited as Ovid's most defiant statement of spiritual freedom in exile,"³⁸ and with a Roman literary sensibility favoring *dissimulatio* over naked admission, as discussed above.

The image of poems consigned to the flames, with only scraps perhaps reaching Rome, recurs in the bitter *Tristia* 5.12 in a way that precisely emphasizes Ovid's ambivalence toward poetry. Having described the Muses as "the main reason [he is] in exile" (*nostrae maxima causa fugae*, 46), Ovid goes on to write (63–68):

36. On the physical appearance of Latin poetry book-rolls, see Williams 1992. The phrase *materia . . . conveniente* appears metapoetic in the exile poetry; it is used at the beginning of the *Amores* (1.2: *materia conveniente modis*), and returns in a variant at *Pont.* 3.1.23–24: *tristia per vacuos horrent absinthia campos, / conveniensque suo messis amara loco*.

37. The images of the poems marred by tears and destroyed by fire add a funereal note to the exile poetry; see generally Nagle 1980, 22–32 and 35. For writing and tears in exile, cf. *Cic. Fam.* 14.2.1 (*non queo sine plurimis lacrimis scribere*) and *Q Fr.* 1.3.3 (*haec ipsa me quo fletu putas scripsisse?*). The image of poems burned appears frequently but, as Green points out (2005, 271), in Ovid "only . . . in the exilic poems": e.g., *Tr.* 1.7.15–20 (Ovid burnt the *Metamorphoses* before leaving for exile, with allusion to Vergil's deathbed request that the *Aeneid* be burnt; see Evans 1983, 43–44 and 185 n. 27; Grisart 1959); 4.1.101–2 (out of anger); 4.10.61–62: "I wrote a lot, sure, but let the fire be the editor of anything I thought defective" (*multa quidem scripsi, sed, quae vitiosa putavi / emendaturis ignibus ipse dedi*); 5.12.59–66. Nagle (1980) reads these and other moments as part of an Augustan or Horatian preoccupation with revision; the preoccupation may have reached its height in Ovid, who "was unique among the Augustan poets in periodically recasting his poetic canon" (White 2002, 6).

38. Williams 2002, 371 n. 121, citing further Evans 1983, 17–19 and 182 n. 20.

nec possum et cupio non nullos ducere versus:
 ponitur idcirco noster in igne labor,
 nec nisi pars casu flammis erepta dolove
 ad vos ingenii pervenit ulla mei.
sic utinam, quae nil metuentem tale magistrum
perdidit, in cineres Ars mea versa foret!

I can't write and yet I long to write some verses: for this reason my efforts go into the fire, and nothing of my creation reaches you unless snatched from the flames by chance or trick. I wish that my Ars, which destroyed its entirely undeserving master, had turned to ash that way!

The symbolic consigning of certain poems to the fire (here the *Ars am.*, at *Tr.* 1.7.35–40 the *Metamorphoses*, which otherwise would have been emended by an epigraph more appropriate to Ovid's changed situation) is echoed in Ovid's claim to have abnegated his former role as the chief exponent of elegy after Gallus, Tibullus, and Propertius (*Tr.* 4.10.53–54 and 5.1.19). That the abnegation, like the image of poems burnt, is symbolic or strategic is confirmed by the fact that Ovid's output from exile is entirely, if innovatively, elegiac.³⁹ Love elegy it is not, but the distance (and monotony) of theme serve to embody the central paradox of an incessant poet (*nec possum et cupio non nullos ducere versus*, with pointed echo of Catullus' *odi et amo*) finding that his ideally consolatory poetry is made difficult by awful circumstance it has in fact helped to bring about. "What else could I do?" Ovid asks, again, for "[t]he very force of the sacred practices holds me, I love poetry, insanely since poetry's done me harm" (*sed nunc quid faciam? vis me tenet ipsa sacrorum, / et carmen demens carmine laesus amo*, *Tr.* 4.1.29–30).⁴⁰

"Linguistic" Difficulty: Linguistic Interference and Loss of Latin

Ovid's linguistic practice is thus difficult socially, due to lack of local audience and to the agonies of "epistolary time"; and emotionally, due to the close connection between poetry and exile: he writes as often as ever, always alone, and with great ambivalence. He must write poetry ("what else could I do?") but not only because he always has. He feels he must write not only in order to hold open or even encourage the possibility of return to Rome, but also to guard against loss of Latin. If Ovid's exile poetry is generally motivated by social and personal-political concerns, this last reason is presented as properly linguistic, and may be read in the light of other thought about language in Latin literature.

Such is the specifically linguistic force of the exile, with pressure exerted by the local languages and by the great vacuum of Graeco-Roman literary culture, that Ovid fears his native language is disappearing word by word (*Tr.* 3.14.43–46):

39. Thus Williams (2002, 373): "the elegiac tension between love and hate, *odi et amo* . . . resurfaces in Ovid's exilic relationship with the Muse"; and further, 1994, 150–53.

40. Cf. *Tr.* 2.14–15: *si saperem, doctas odissem iure sorores, / numina cultori pernicioiosa suo*; and, by extension, *Pont.* 4.14.40: *obfuit auctori nec fera lingua suo*.

saepe aliquod quaero verbum nomenque locumque
 nec quisquam est a quo certior esse queam.
 dicere saepe aliquid conanti (turpe fateri)
 verba mihi desunt dedidicique loqui.

Often I try to find some word, for a thing or a place, but there's no one around who could tell me. Often when I'm trying to say something (it's shameful to admit) the words abandon me and I've forgotten how to speak.

These four lines encapsulate the emotionally fraught linguistic situation elegantly. By admitting an inability properly to describe where he is (*quaero nomenque locumque*), Ovid suggests that the place and thus the experience of exile is somehow unspeakable.⁴¹ In part, this comes from having no one to speak with (cf. 4.1.89: *neque cui recitem quisquam est*) or turn to for answers (*nec quisquam est a quo certior esse queam*), such that all of Ovid's language is his own continued attempt (*dicere saepe aliquid conanti*) to make up for missing words (*verba desunt*).⁴² But in part, too, the absence of words is worryingly internal, and any attempt to fill it inherently vain—Ovid worries that, in the end, he is simply forgetting how to speak (*dedidicique loqui*).

The passage makes deteriorating language an inherent part of the exile, by connecting Ovid's feared aphasia strongly to place: *locum* and *loqui* are similarly and emphatically at the ends of their lines. This link is pervasive in the exile poetry, with Ovid famously, if falsely, claiming that the place and its languages affect his poetry: "if any of my words seem not Latin in form, the land where [I] wrote them was barbaric" (*siqua videbuntur casu non dicta Latine, / in qua scribebat, barbara terra fuit*, Tr. 3.1.17).⁴³ *Barbara* refers both to the land's "barbarous" local culture and its corollary, the non-Graeco-Roman languages. Ovid is amazed that Greeks ever came to this bleak part of the world: "So there were Greek cities here, too (who would believe it?), among the names of uncultured barbarity?" (*hic quoque sunt igitur Graiae (quis crederet?) urbes / inter inhumanae nomina barbariae?*, Tr. 3.9.1–2).

The amazement comes because, to Ovid's ears, what Greek there is has been "barbarized": "in a few people traces of Greek remain, but these also have been barbarized already by the Getic sound." Moreover, "there is not one person among these people who could say a single word of Latin" (*in paucis remanent Graecae vestigia linguae, / haec quoque iam Getico barbara facta sono. / unus in hoc nemo est populo, qui forte Latine / quaelibet e medio reddere verba queat*, Tr. 5.7.51–54). The idea occurs also at 5.2.67–68: "Greek speech, too, has been conquered by Getic sound" (*Graecaque quod Getico /*

41. On the other hand, Ovid describes the place vividly, if inaccurately, including a "fanciful and aptly cruel etymology for" its name (Claassen 1999, 192), derived from Medea's "cutting apart" (Gk. τέμνω) of her brother (Tr. 3.9).

42. Cf. *Pont.* 3.7, where Ovid connects "missing words" with the monotony of his constant request for the same thing: *verba mihi desunt eadem tam saepe roganti* (1). Here and elsewhere he registers apparent complaints about, and asks pardon for, the monotony of his subject matter (cf. *Pont.* 3.9, 4.15).

43. Although Ovid's claims to linguistic deterioration may be rejected, they may yet be emotionally sincere and certainly reflect a deep-seated concern on Ovid's part about public perception of his identity as a Latin language user. Williams (2002, 344 and passim) sees a "hyperbolic picture of exile which is believable only at an emotional level."

victa loquela sono est).⁴⁴ Ovid emphasizes this idea with a powerful image: even Homer himself, had someone located him at Tomis, would have been barbarized by the local languages (*si quis in hac ipsum terra posuisset Homerum, / esset, crede mihi, factus et ille Getes, Pont. 4.2.21–22*).

If the greatest epic poet would have seen his Greek succumb, Ovid and his Latin must be pardoned for giving way: he asks forgiveness for becoming “almost a Getic poet” (*paene poeta Getes, Pont. 4.13.18*). Surrounded by the sounds of “Thracian” and “Scythian,” Ovid feels himself to be changing (“I seem to be able to write in Getic meter”) and fears a contamination of his poetry visible to his readers: “I tell you, I am afraid that there are Pontic words mixed in, that you will read them mixed in with my Latin writings” (*et videor Geticis scribere posse modis. / crede mihi, timeo ne sint inmixta Latinis / inque meis scriptis Pontica verba legas, Tr. 3.14.47–50*).⁴⁵ Ovid comes to profess certainty about the place interfering with his poetry and language generally: “I do not doubt that there are more than a few barbaric words in this little book” (*nec dubito quin sint et in hoc non pauca libello / barbara, Tr. 5.7.59–60*). He concludes that later poem, hopeful and desperate, by echoing *Tristia* 3.1 and 14: “blame belongs not to the man, but to the place” (*non hominis culpa, sed ista loci*).

Like Ovid’s painfully beloved poetry, which, as partial cause of his exile, provides in that exile only “cold comfort” (*solacia frigida*), the blame-worthy place itself is presented as bitterly cold (*Tr. 3.10* and *5.10.2; Pont. 4.10.38*) and barren of everything but proverbially bitter wormwood (*absinthium* [*Tr. 5.13.21*], called not only *amarum* but also *triste* [*Pont. 3.1.23–24* and *8.15–16*]).⁴⁶ This sort of linguistic infertility or impotence is strengthened by the line’s parallel with *De rerum natura* 5.1057, where Lucretius defines humankind as that “species in which voice and language thrive” (*genus humanum, cui vox et lingua vigeret*, with relative clause of characteristic). Instead of thriving, Ovid’s tongue has grown cold.⁴⁷ This is because of the perceived linguistic interference but also, of course, because poetry has done him a disservice: “what’s left except the Muses, a cold comfort, the goddesses who did not do well by me?” (*quid nisi Pierides, solacia frigida, restant, / non bene de nobis quae meruere deae?, Pont. 4.2.45–46*).⁴⁸

44. The actual historical situation at Tomis may have been quite different: “there is no evidence to suggest that [Tomis’] Greek language and culture . . . were fatally eroded by the crude Getic presences which [Ovid] describes” (Williams 2002, 235). If Pabón (1939) is right in identifying Greek as the language of Romans’ emotional lives, the barbarization of Greek would have taken just as hard as the absence of Latin. For the idea of one language being “barbarized” or “corrupted” by another, cf. Dion. Hal. *Ant. Rom.* 1.29.4 and 1.89.3 (where it is “amazing” [θαυμά] that the proto-Roman Greeks were not “thoroughly barbarized” [ἅπαντα ἐξέβαρβαρόθη] by their neighbors in early Italy), and Liv. 5.33.11: *Alpinis . . . maxime Raetis, quos loca ipsa effecerunt ne quid ex antiquo praeter sonum linguae nec eum incorruptum retinerent*.

45. The intermingling of Latin and Getic may be reflected in the confused word order.

46. See Evans 1975. The connection between a frigid and stereotypically infertile place and abundant sad or bitter poetry is richly imagined in a series of references to sad or bitter “wormwood” (*Tr. 5.13.21, Pont. 3.1.2–4* and *8.15–16*), references I hope to explore elsewhere.

47. Like Virgil’s Orpheus, Ovid is left with little but his “voice itself and a cold tongue” (*vox ipsa et frigida lingua*, Verg. *G.* 4.525).

48. Ovid’s approach to the Muses must mirror his approach to Augustus: just as the latter is responsible for Ovid’s relegation but must be persuaded to recall him, so are the former responsible for the reported

Should even Homer himself have been at Tomis, he would have lost his native language—but the image offers comfort as cold as Ovid's poetry itself. Despite the blame properly assigned to the responsible Muse and to the awful place, in the end Ovid worries that the difficulties are only his own. All of the difficulties are represented as "shameful" (*turpe fateri*, *Tr.* 3.14.45; *a pudet*, *Pont.* 4.13.19) because they reveal the powerlessness of language alone and the helplessness of the lone language user. This voicelessness, an elegiac sort in which words are uttered often self-consciously in vain, is all the more striking from the mouth of the "greatest living poet" (*Tr.* 2.119–20, 4.10.125–28) for whom the Latin language had always been easy and rewarding.

2. WITHOUT LANGUAGE:

OID AS INFANT, PRIMITIVE, AND ANIMAL

Exiled from the city, excluded at Tomis, deeply ambivalent toward his inherent poetry, and fearful of linguistic interference, including losing his native Latin altogether, Ovid reports having to resort to gesture to make his meanings known: *per gestum res est significanda mihi* (*Tr.* 5.10.36). This idea, of naturally meaningful language necessarily replaced by more limited gesture, is, as discussed, central to Ovid's representation of his linguistic experience in exile. The idea also finds Ovid in good company, such that his particular representation takes on additional resonance in the light of other authors' discussions of gesture. I focus on Lucretius.⁴⁹

Although some authors apparently believed that a language of gesture was universally available and comparable to spoken language in expressive power,⁵⁰ more often it was attributed to the mute and, thus, especially to infants, paradigmatically and literally those "unable to speak."⁵¹ Lucretius writes that "the inability to speak seems to lead children to gesture, when it

half of the cause and yet, in their role as inspiration for his life's work, must be asked for forgiveness; cf. 1.11.11–12, 1.5, esp. 7–8 and 28–34; and *Tr.* 5.12.3–4: *difficile est quod, amice, mones, quia carmina laetum / sunt opus, et pacem mentis habere volunt*.

49. Similarities with Lucretius, a well-preserved source, may obscure possible similarities with Stoic thought on language, less easy to reconstruct. Nonetheless Ovid's basic ideas are similar to the Stoic ideas that communication is the natural function of language (see Allen 2005) and that sound production without λόγος is not adult language but the province of children and animals (see Sluiter 1990, 204–7). There are also similarities with Dionysius of Halicarnassus' ideas on language change resulting from culture contact (*Ant. Rom.* 1.29, 89–90).

50. E.g., Quint. *Inst.* 11.3.87: *omnium hominum communis sermo*; see Gera 2003, 189 and 196–97; Corbeill 2003; Lateiner 1995; Graf 1991; Arnould 1990; and Sittl 1890. Formal and informal gestures were a part of many discourses, but Lateiner's article in the *OCD* surely exaggerates in regarding Ovid's example as "emblematic sign-language . . . between strangers employing different tongues" alongside his *Met.* 6.579; the latter example is Philomela's mute request that her tapestry be brought to Procne, and has more in common with Ovid's pointed isolation than with *lingua franca*. Some things of course could not be simply pointed out: e.g., Cic. *Rep.* 8.26: *non ea figura quae digito demonstrari potest* ("an image that cannot be pointed out by a finger").

51. Gesture is also characteristic of outsiders and other marginal peoples, e.g., Aesch. *Ag.* 1050–51 (Cassandra as characterized by Clytemnestra) and the "dog-headed" people of India described by Ctesias, who are intelligent but, because of their dog heads, able to communicate only via gesture (*FGrH* 688 F 45.37 and 40–43; see Gera 2003, 184–87, and Romm 1992, 78–80). For *infans* as "unable to speak" see Néraudau 1984, 53–56; for the Greek νήπιος as having similar meaning, "even if perhaps a false etymology," see Heath 2005, 92–96.

makes them point out what is present with their finger" (*ipsa videtur / pro-trahere ad gestum pueros infantia linguae, / cum facit ut digito quae sint praesentia monstrent*, 5.1030–32). In this context, Ovid's recourse to gesture is, literally, "infantile": he needs to point, like a baby who has not yet learned to speak.⁵²

This reading may be strengthened by a possible echo of the Latin term for "baby talk," *infracta loquela* or *vox* (literally, "broken speech"). *Infractus* in general tends to apply to vocal sounds like *murmur* and *vox*: Cicero, for example, describes certain men's speech as *infracta et amputata* (*Orat.* 170), where the hendiadys highlights the image of babbling speech as stubby; and Tacitus offers an example close in content to Ovid's description of his Getic audience: after Germanicus' troops have listened to a speech of his, "there is produced in particular a roughness of sound and a broken murmur" (*adfec-tatur praecipue asperitas soni et fractum murmur*, *Germ.* 3.1).⁵³ That *in-fracta loquela*, literally "broken speech," means "baby talk" is made clear by Lucretius, who writes that as "the various flocks and herds and wild beasts grow up [. . .] they need neither rattles nor a nourishing nursemaid's sweet broken speech" (*at variae crescunt pecudes armenta feraeque / nec crepita-cillis opus est nec cuiquam adhibendast / almae nutricis blanda atque in-fracta loquela*, 5.226–28);⁵⁴ and by Porphyry in his commentary to Horace's *Satires*: "those talking sweetly to infants tend to break their language as if they were imitating them" (*blandientes infantibus infringere linguam solent ut quasi eos imitentur*, ad *Hor. Sat.* 1.3.47).⁵⁵

Ovid does not use the term directly but he may allude to it. At *Tristia* 1.5.53–56, he draws on an ancient topos to suggest the unspeakable magnitude of what he endures: "if I had an unbreakable voice, if my heart were stronger than bronze, / and if I had more mouths with more tongues, / still I couldn't encompass everything with words, / since the subject matter sur-passes my abilities" (*si vox infragilis, pectus mihi firmitus aere, / pluraque cum linguis pluribus ora forent, / non tamen idcirco complecterer omnia verbis, / materia vires exsuperante meas*, *Tr.* 1.5.53–58). The passage depends on the famous topos (from *Il.* 2.488–90, alongside other imitations), and indeed it has been argued that *infragilis* was "specially devised to render the Homeric term" ἄρρηκτος.⁵⁶ But in the context of Ovid's linguistic imagery

52. Cf. Varro *Ling.* 6.52: "a human being speaks for the first time when he utters a meaningful sound" (*significabilem vocem*), prior to which children are called *infantes*.

53. Cf. Vergil, who likens the noise of bees setting out for battle to "a voice . . . imitating the broken sounds of trumpets" (*vox / auditur fractos sonitus imitata tubarum*, *G.* 4.71–72), and describes Aeneas and his companions as "hear[ing] a huge moan from the sea, and struck rocks from a distance, and cries broken against the shore" (*gemitum ingentem pelagi pulsataque saxa / audimus longe fractasque ad litora voces*, *Aen.* 3.555–56). Ovid himself links "a huge noise and pipes of broken horn" (*ingens / clamor et infracto Berecynthia tibia cornu*, *Met.* 11.14–15).

54. On the rattle and education for younger and older children, see Arist. *Pol.* 1340b26–32.

55. In this passage Horace implies that broken language could be used for purposes other than educating or wheedling a child: *strabonem / appellat paetum pater, et pullum, male parvos / scuti filius est, ut abortivus fuit olim / Sisypheus; hunc Varum distortis cruribus, illum / balbutit Scaurum pravis fultum male talis*, *Sat.* 1.3.44–48.

56. For the topos in Latin, see Hinds 1998 and Skutsch 1975, 627–29. On *infragilis*, see Williams 1994, 111 with n. 18.

and allusions, and of his self-presentation as a linguistic infant, the phrase is suggestive of precisely that *loquela* or *vox infracta* of “baby talk”: Ovid’s language skills are like an infant’s, not up to the tasks at hand (*materia*, with echoes of metapoetic passages like *Tr.* 5.1.5–6 and *Pont.* 3.1.23–24, discussed above).

The suitability of the image for Ovid’s situation is strengthened by its connection with elegiac concerns and thus with the basic mode of Ovid’s exile poetry. *Infracta loquela*, idiomatically “baby talk,” means literally “broken speech.” At root, this theme, with its central image of stuttering or babbling and a broken tongue, is related to traditional descriptions of the symptoms of both love and illness. Lucretius writes that a creature in love “sweats and pales all over its body, its tongue breaks and its voice catches, its eyes darken, its ears ring” (*sudoresque ita palloremque existere toto / corpore et infringi linguam vocemque aboriri, / caligare oculos, sonere auris, succidere artus*, 3.146–48).⁵⁷ Taken further in this direction, *fractus* may refer to impotence; this potential meaning is even clearer in an alternative to *infracta*, *amputata*; both suggest infertility due to physical damage.

Thus although Ovid does not represent himself as using “baby talk” as such, there is a strong implication of it in his term *infragilis* and in his own repeated invocation of the traditional elegiac theme of loss of voice as a symptom of abandonment and change: “this is the exile’s voice: a letter gives [him] language, / and, if it is not permitted to write, [he] will be mute” (*exulis haec vox est; praebet mihi littera linguam, / et, si non liceat scribere, mutus ero*, *Pont.* 2.6.3–4). Via his letters as voice, Ovid “will be heard beyond this land, across the high seas, and great will be the voice of [his] wailing” (*trans ego tellurem, trans altis audiar undas, / et gemitus vox est magna futura mei*, *Tr.* 4.9.23–24).⁵⁸ The image thus supports Ovid’s persistent claims about his poetic impotence and its grounding in the barren land of Tomis: place, voice, and alleged poetic deterioration are all connected in the image of infantile (lack of) speech.⁵⁹

Although thus compared to an infant, Ovid is arguably worse off than an ordinary infant, whose eventual participation in society, via first-language acquisition, is a foregone conclusion.⁶⁰ First, Ovid’s gestures, his only mechanism for meaning, may be misunderstood: at one point he describes how nods of assent are taken for negation and vice versa (*utque fit, in me aliquid ficti, dicentibus illis / abnuerim quotiens annuerimque, putant*, *Tr.* 5.10.41–42).⁶¹

57. Cf. *Lucr.* 5.1326, where “broken spears” are *tela infracta*.

58. *Gemitus* seems to be inarticulate wailing or groaning; cf. *Lucr.* 5.990–93: “each one of them seized at that time provided living food for the beasts, being gutted by their teeth, and filled the woods and mountains and forests with groaning, seeing their living entrails entombed in a living grave” (*unus enim tum quisque magis depressus eorum / pabula viva feris praebebat, dentibus haustus, / et nemora ac montis gemitu silvasque replebat, / viva videns vivo sepeliri viscera busto*).

59. Likewise, in line with the ancient idea that climate affects character and behavior, Ovid hears the harshness of the place echoed in the “harsh voices” of the Getae (*vox fera*, *Tr.* 5.7.17). Ovid also describes other aspects of their appearance, including “savage expressions” (*trux vultus*, *ibid.*), bristly hair and beards (*non coma, non ulla barba resecta manu*, 18), and long pants (*braca*: 49; cf. *Tr.* 3.10.19, 4.6.47), all implicitly linked to their “hard” character. On this sort of environmental determinism, see Tuplin 1999, 63–69.

60. The thematic connections between Ovid’s exile and stories of feral children or foundlings are explored by Malouf 1996.

61. See Hauben 1975.

Ovid is not unlike the isolated children of Psammetichus' famous experiment (Hdt. 2.2).⁶² The isolated children progress from "insignificant babbling" (τῶν ἀσήμων κυζημάτων) to meaningful utterance ("bread," βεκός), but simultaneously make their desire known via gesture: they "reach up with their hands" (ὀρέγοντα τὰς χεῖρας). Like these children Ovid is isolated by the highest political power and, more importantly, his eventual production of meaningful language is not guaranteed.⁶³

Second, and more seriously, language acquisition is crucial to ordinary participation in society. For Lucretius, friendship (*amicitiem*, 5.1019) and neighborly life (*finitimi inter se nec laedere nec violari*, 1020) both first emerged "when [primitive men] haltingly indicated, by means of speech sounds and gesture, that it is right for everyone to pity the weak" (*vocibus et gestu cum balbe significarent / imbecillorum esse aequum misererier omnis*, 1022–23).⁶⁴ If Ovid has this passage in mind, his recourse to gesture is all the more obviously an attempt to excite pity. Whether or not he has it specifically in mind, in this second context his speechlessness is like that of primitive humankind, and thus, again, like a baby's: primitive language is "halting," or includes mixed media, just as "baby talk" in Latin is "broken language," *infracta* (or *amputata*) *loquela*, including stammering and gesture.

At the farthest extreme, Ovid's aphasia makes him inhuman, for in Graeco-Roman thought generally to be human is to be able to speak. In particular, whereas humans speak, animals do not.⁶⁵ In Lucretius, this difference is semiotic: animal vocalization is merely indexical (*voces varias . . . ciere*, 5.1060; *varias emittere voces*, 1088), while human language (*varia res voce notare*, 1058) or "to mark things now with one sound, now with another" (*alia atque alia res voce notare*, 1090), by definition, is fully symbolic.⁶⁶ Thus although both animals and humans have *vox*, "the voice," each group uses it differently, and although both also have literal *lingua*, "the tongue" (*catulos blande cum lingua lambere temptant*, 1067), only humans have figurative *lingua*, "language" as such.⁶⁷ In exile, Ovid's tongue has grown

62. On the experiment, see Lloyd 1994, ad loc., and Gera 2003; see also Vannicelli 1997; Genette 1995, 123 and 367 n. 20; Katz 1981, 134–35; and Salmon 1956.

63. A connection may also be made with Homer's description of Odysseus when washed up on the Phaeacian shore "breathless and speechless," ἄπνευστος καὶ ἀναυδός (*Od.* 5.456), which Boedeker (1984, 67–70) reads as a return to "infantile status," and with Hesiod's description of gods who violate a Stygian oath being rendered, again, "breathless and speechless," ἄπνευστος καὶ ἀναυδός (*Th.* 797) and then condemned to nine years in exile (see Heath 2005, 61).

64. In Lucretius, these developments all occur after the discovery of fire; cf. Vit. *De arch.* 2.1: having discovered fire, primitive humans "add wood to it and, thus preserving it, bring it to others and, pointing with their nods, show what uses they might have from it" (*ligna adicientes et ita conservantes alios adducebant et nutu monstrantes ostendebant quas haberent ex eo utilitates*).

65. See Heath 2005 and Gera 2003. The gods, and beings affected by them, comprise a complicated *tertium quid*; see Lau 2003.

66. See Stevens 2008. See *OLD*, s.v. *notare*, as marking something to distinguish it from other similar things. Cf. Cic. *Rep.* 3.3: "the infinite sounds of the voice are all signified and stamped out with a small number of invented marks" (*vocis . . . infiniti soni paucis notis inventis sunt omnes signati et expressi*); and Hor. *Sat.* 1.3.103–4: "[primitive humans discovered] words and names with which they could note their vocal sounds and sensations" (*verba quibus voces sensusque notarent / nomina invenere*).

67. Cf. Campbell 2003, ad 1057: "there is no qualification of humanity as there is in 925 '*genus humanum . . . illud*,' and the first humans are possessed of the same vocal abilities as modern humans." The explicit distinction between these terms goes back to Aristotle ("such as have speech also have voice, but such as have voice do not all have speech," ὅσα μὲν γὰρ διάλεκτον ἔχει, καὶ φωνὴν ἔχει, ὅσα δὲ φωνὴν,

too cold to articulate (*frigida lingua*), and his native language is in any case not understood at Tomis: as a result he must refer to things (*res*) not with the voice but “through gesture” (*per gestum*). This oxymoronic signification, a meaning making that is not really meaningful, in a sense means that Ovid is not properly human. For “making meaning,” *significare*, as done by human language involves almost literally “coining” terms: both *notare* and Lucretius’ *expressit* (5.1029) can be used of stamping, such that words are figured as tokens for social exchange (*sociae commercia linguae*).⁶⁸ From this meaningful exchange infants, primitives (including barbarians), and animals are all, by definition, excluded. And it is as a member of those three categories—infant, primitive human, animal—that Ovid represents himself in exile linguistically, that is, as anything but the adult language user and preternaturally natural poet he had always prided himself on being.

CONCLUSIONS

In a famous passage written late in his exile (*Pont.* 4.2.29–34), Ovid regrets his linguistic isolation generally, and his betrayal by poetry in particular, in strikingly metaphorical terms.⁶⁹ While once poetry was Ovid’s lifeblood, the “holy force that nourishes the poet’s breast” (*impetus ille sacer, qui vatum pectora nutrit*, 25), now it provides little pleasure:

parvaeque, ne dicam scribendi nulla voluptas
est mihi, nec numeris nectere verba iuvat,
sive quod hinc fructus adeo non cepimus ullos,
principium nostri res sit ut ista mali:
sive quod in tenebris numerosos ponere gestus,
quodque legas nulli scribere carmen, idem est.

I take little or no pleasure in writing, and I take no joy in weaving words into meters, whether because I have thus far reaped no rewards from it, such that it has become the reason for my ills; or because to dance in the dark and to write a poem that you may read to no one is the same thing.

The point is clear. As discussed throughout, Ovid is deeply ambivalent toward both the composition of poetry in exile and its possible receptions, both because of its deepening compromise by the local languages and, as here, because of the lack of competent audience.⁷⁰

The passage thus offers a pointed formulation for one of the principal themes of the exile poetry: engage as Ovid might in solitary Latin practice

οὐ πάντα διάλεκτον, *Hist. an.* 536b2–3) and finds nascent forms as early as Homer and Hesiod (opposing αὐδή, the capacity for meaningful speech, to φωνή, any vocal sound whether meaningful or not; see, e.g., *Il.* 19.407–17 with Heath 2005, 41–47; Gera 2003, 15–16; Pelliccia 1995, 105–8; Yamagata 1993; and Johnston 1992; see also Hes. *Op.* 61–81; contra West 1966, ad loc.; cf. Leclerc 1993, 31–48).

68. See Leonard and Smith 1942, ad *Lucr.* 5.1029: “Image seems to come from coining money”; cf. Lewis 1986, 166–68 (on Catull. 65.16): “In a practical sense, the word *expressa* is used as the equivalent of *translata* or *versa*, but in a more artistic sense, it conveys the idea that . . . the poem has been “sculpted” . . . with some effort and physical strain.”

69. Green 2005, 352: “no one capable of coining a phrase like this can convincingly claim poetic exhaustion.”

70. *In tenebris* seems to echo Lucretius again, when he writes about how “children tremble and are afraid of everything in the blinding darkness” (*pueri trepidant atque omnia caecis / in tenebris metuunt*, 2.55–56).

as in poetic composition, he feels the linguistic deprivations and contaminations as a central component of the exile. The vague *numerosos ponere gestus* compounds this: is Ovid really dancing, as in the usual translation? Or is he gesturing as would any recipient of oratorical training, or imagining himself writing “history” (*res gestae*)?⁷¹ Or, finally, is he composing poetry, with the *gestus* intended to be the poems themselves, and their invisibility ambivalent, a blessing in that no one will see their defects, a curse in that no one will see them?⁷²

Ovid’s relegation to Tomis seems especially suited to producing these feelings of linguistic isolation and of poetic futility. For a prolific and self-professed “natural poet” to be cut off from his audience and literary society, to have his Latin mocked, all but his most basic meanings missed, and his poetry itself affected—all of this is as chilling as the winters that lay siege to Tomis from the steppe. In just this way, in an early exile poem Ovid writes, metaphorically but precisely, that it is the “terrible North Wind,” the wind that brings cold, that “tosses [his] words about” (*Tr.* 1.2.15: *terribilisque Notus iactat mea dicta*).⁷³ Indeed, but the force is more than literal, shading into and commanding the “linguistic” as well, that is, with what I hope to have shown are poetically complex, deeply resonant representations of language.⁷⁴

Bard College

71. According to the elder Seneca, “Ovid participated in the performances of improvisational oratory regularly put on by professional and amateur disclaimers” (White 2002, 8; cf. *Sen. Controv.* 2.2.8–12).

72. Two passages strengthen the suggestion that *numerosos gestus* refers, possibly among other things, to poetry: *Tr.* 4.1.87 and 4.10.25; cf. *Tr.* 4.10.49; *numerosus Horatius*; and *Am.* 2.4.29: *placet gestu numerosaque brachia ducit*. Earlier, Cicero distinguishes “merely” *numerosus* speech from “poetry” as such: *non modo numerosa oratio sed etiam versus efficitur* (*Orat.* 166).

73. Other lines in the poem repeat the image of meaning and identity lost to wind and water (14: *ipsa graves spargunt ora loquentis aquae*, and 53–56; cf. 1.1.42 (*me mare, me venti, me fera iactat hiems*). Winter weather is ubiquitous and linked closely to the general theme of alienation; cf., e.g., 1.11.39–44 and 3.10: *tristis hiems*; cf. White on the cruel fit of Ovid’s exile: “an outpost that exquisitely revenged the glamorization of swinging Rome in the *Ars*” (2002, 17).

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