

Re-thinking Ovid in the New Millennium: The Exile of the Latin Poet in a Play by Mikhail Berman-Tsikinovsky

Maria Pia PAGANI¹

***Abstract:** The bimillenary of Ovid's death is the occasion for a rethinking of his fortune, with a special focus on his condition as a poet in exile. The play *The Land of Oblivion* written by the Russian-American dramatist Mikhail Berman-Tsikinovsky in 2007, tries to analyze the mysterious reason that caused Ovid's relegation on the Black Sea. His new hypothesis is very interesting, because is connected to the exile of many Russian intellectuals under the Tsarist and the Soviet rule. The play underlines the extreme cleverness of Ovid to live in Tomi: it was not a passive acceptance of a punishment, but a real metamorphosis – a dynamic adaptation with a constant attention for the cultural dimension of the everyday life. Only in this way Ovid's life could assume a different, but still positive, form: this can be the great lesson of the Latin poet in the New Millennium.*

Key-words: Ovid; Mikhail Berman-Tsikinovsky; playwriting; exile.

1. Introduction

Today, the bimillenary of Ovid's death is the occasion for a rethinking of his fortune. In *The Cambridge Companion to Ovid* (ed. Philip Hardie, 2002), we can find some interesting essays about the historical period and the cultural context in which the Latin poet was active, a focus on the themes of his main works, and the reception. The authority of Ovid is clear: his legacy is basic for the development of European literature, and the most important poets of consider him as a supreme model of style. In particular, for his experience of life, Ovid is also considered a spiritual guide for all the poets who lived the exile (for ex. Dante, Byron, Pushkin, Mandelshtam, D'Annunzio).

Exile is always a condition of the body and the soul. The forced removal from the native country creates a gap which is not a simple geographical distance: it is a complete revolution in the existence of a man, a total transformation in his intellectual and social life. Probably, for a poet in exile, the most terrible enemy is *nostalgia* – an invisible monster which is able to generate psychological alienation, but also unexpected forms of resiliency. Ovid had his “impact test” in Tomi (modern Constanta, Romania), and he had the strength to obtain a positive result. After Ovid, the poetic way to describe the sufferance of the expulsion in a foreign country was not the same: in fact, he demonstrated another possibility based on a creative dimension, avoiding a passive acceptance of his fate.

An update to the reception of the Latin poet in the New Millennium comes from Wikipedia. The article *Ovid* (Publius Ovidius Naso) quotes, in the section “Ovid's Influence -

¹ Department of Humanities, University of Pavia (Italy) mariapia.pagani@unipv.it

Literary and Artistic”, the play *The Land of Oblivion* written in 2007 by the Russian-American dramatist Mikhail Berman-Tsikinovsky. It was published in Russian by Vagrius Plus (Moscow) in 2008, in the third volume of his *Sobranie sochinenii*. The Italian translation was published in 2010 by L’Harmattan Italia (Turin) in the volume *Destini in scena tra Roma, Costantinopoli e Mosca*, and the English translation was published in 2013 by Aspekt Publishing (Boston) in the volume *To Touch the Sky*.

2. The Author

Ovid is one of the most influential poets of the antiquity and his works are emblematic, in order to understand ancient Roman culture and literature. Writing a play about him, is never simple – especially for the audience of the New Millennium. Born in Kharkov (present-day Ukraine) on 12th November 1937, Mikhail Berman-Tsikinovsky is a doctor-writer. He graduated from Kharkov Medical Institute as a Doctor of Medicine in 1961, and earned a Ph.D in Hematology in 1970. He came to the United States from the Soviet Union in 1978, during the so-called “first wave” of Jewish emigration. Since then, he has worked and lived in Chicago as a full-time practicing physician. His decision to leave Kharkov and to start a new life abroad, was prompted by having lived under Communist rule for forty years.

Berman-Tsikinovsky’s literary career is extremely productive and his erudition is extraordinary. The publication of his poems started in Chicago, in the 1980s; he became a playwright in the 1990s, immediately garnering international attention and success. His dramas have been staged worldwide, and his works have been translated and published in Italy, France, Germany, Canada and the United States. His experience of exile from the USSR, and his life as a Soviet immigrant in Chicago, are the main autobiographical elements of his works.

He analyzed the exile in contemporary society with the so-called “migration plays”, which were successfully staged in Paris, Chicago, St. Petersburg, Moscow, Kharkov: *Chekhov on Devon* (1997), *Mediterranean’s Paradoxes* (1998), *The Time Machine* (1999), and *The Return* (1999). Then, he considered the question on the historical perspective, in Roman and Byzantine society, with *The Pisonian Conspiracy* (2000), *The Land of Oblivion* (2007) about Ovid, and *Deus Conservat Omnia* (2009). A new recent phase, based on another form of recovery of the past, is with the plays *Rina* (2012) – premiering in Wuppertal in 2014 and successfully staged in St. Petersburg in 2015 – and *The Miracle* (2016).

According to Wikipedia, *The Land of Oblivion* is a play based “on author’s new hypothesis unrevealing the mystery of Ovid’s exile to Tomi by Augustus.” The reason of this exile is not clear and is still an enigma; there is only an allusion in *Tristia* (2, 1, vv. 207-208): “*Perdiderint cum me duo crimina, carmen et error / alterius facti culpa silenda mihi.*” On the stage, Berman-Tsikinovsky tries to discover the poem (*carmen*) and the mistake (*error*) that caused Ovid’s exile on the Black Sea.

With this play, Berman-Tsikinovsky offers a deep psychological analyses of Ovid’s feelings in front of the radical change provoked by the exile. His love for the native country is counterbalanced by the fear for future: Tomi was considered a foreign and barbarian land, so he would be banned from the brilliant cultural life of Rome, and it would be a terrible damage for his reputation and his literary production. His sorrow is mainly expressed in *Tristia* and

Epistulae ex Ponto: he was progressively conscious that he was condemned to die far from Rome, but the positive element is the Latin civilization of the local people in Tomi.

Thanks to Ovid, Berman-Tsikinovsky shows the process of re-construction of a new existence abroad with the problem a different language, the homesickness, the struggle to maintain a link with the native country and its traditions. Nobody can predict the effect of the exile on the human soul: it is a dynamic and individual process. Especially in his first period in Tomi (the most difficult for the rooting in the new country, when he was also forced to communicate by gesture), the life of Ovid was complicated by the vivid memory of Rome and the fiery desire to come back. When he realized that the return in Italy was only a mental illusion, he demonstrated his heroism accepting the situation: in this way, his life maintained a still positive meaning.

Writing *The Land of Oblivion*, Berman-Tsikinovsky was conscious of the difficult survival of the historical plays in contemporary theatre. But – in this case – the historical distance from our time is not perceived as obsolete, and the remote events are not mere questions of the past: the play conquers the audience with the moral strength of Ovid, reflecting the problems of the educated migrants of our society. Although historically, this poet lost his battle against tyranny, and the moral victory will forever be on his side. Resiliency is the great virtue of Ovid, and the play offers a renovating vision of his figure in the New Millennium.

3. New Hypothesis (Act 1)

The Land of Oblivion is a drama in 2 acts and 10 scenes. The action takes place at the beginning of the 1st century AD in Rome, the Isle of Elba, and the town of Tomi. In Act 1, Scene 1, Ovid is in his villa in Rome, with his granddaughter Julia. The little girl reveals some details about the clandestine use of *Metamorphoses* at school, with the Grammarian Quintillius, in order to avoid the problems of censorship: Berman-Tsikinovsky describes the secret diffusion of Ovid's work with a strategy near to Russian samizdat. In this way, he creates a link with the exile of many Russian intellectuals under the Tsarist and the Soviet rule – in particular with Pushkin, who lived a period of exile on the Black Sea, and Mandelstam, who wrote a collection of poems entitled *Tristia*.

The Scene 2 is always set in Rome, at the house of Caesar Augustus and his wife Livia. During their dialogue, she expresses her troubles for the clandestine circulation of the *Metamorphoses*, because the work can be extremely dangerous – even immoral, with dirty insinuations – for their reputation. This is the most ambitious work by Ovid: his catalogue about the transformations in Greek and Roman mythology is aimed to the deification of Julius Caesar. Livia is worried because the poet compares the Golden Age of the distant past, crowned by peace and happiness, to the Age of Augustus. But the comparison is not positive, because now there are only violence and destruction.

Caesar Augustus cannot ban a poem that contains no specific attack on the regime, its high metaphoric level is not a plausible excuse to chastise the author. In her obstinate desire to punish Ovid, Livia wants to accuse him of something that has nothing to do with the book. Caesar Augustus doesn't want to kill him, but the plan of his wife is another and very shifty: she wants to officially invite the poet at their home, creating an embarrassing situation for him.

In Scene 3, Ovid goes to the house of Caesar Augustus. The emperor is busy, so the poet has to wait and decides to spend some time in the Guest Pool. At this point, Livia's trap – inspired by the historical episode of Bathsheba – is described with precise stage directions, which underline Berman-Tsikinovsky's clever use of the theatrical space:

Ovid enters the house that is presented on the stage in a sectional view. Inside, Ovid changes his clothes, then comes out and walks along the hall. As he opens one of the doors, steam rushes out. A woman screams, "Shut the door!!", then a male voice, "Shut the door!!" Ovid steps back, runs half-naked along the hall to the exit, leaps outside.

(Berman-Tsikinovsky, *To Touch the Sky*: 139)

In Scene 4, Ovid is again in his villa in Rome, barefoot and half-naked. His wife Fabia understands the seriousness of the situation, and accepts his decision to stay for some weeks at the Isle of Elba visiting the friend Messalinus Cotta. In his opinion, it is the only solution for this difficult moment.

In Scene 5, Fabia announces to the couriers of the emperor that Ovid is away, accepting his toga and sandals left at the house of Caesar Augustus. She tries to be calm, but the strategic absence of the poet is transformed into a scandal in Rome.

In Scene 6, the audience discovers the gravity of this scandal. In fact, Messalinus Cotta reveals to Ovid the gossip in Rome about the moral behavior of the poet, and the public opinion related to his work:

COTTA. When a celebrity disappears so suddenly, what do people think in the first place? That this man, who used to be a guest at the Caesar's house, has done something wrong, some kind of blunder. Moreover, this happens right after Julia the Younger, the Caesar's granddaughter is exiled, and they say you were friends with her, belonged to the same circle. So of course the first thought is, you have been busted along with her.

OVID. This is nothing but gossip, hearsay. Do they have anything more concrete on me?

COTTA. More concrete – these lines, for example, are circulated all over town as epigrams that they say you wrote about Caesar's wife, Livia. As if you are suggesting she was involved in the death of Augustus's two grandsons from his second marriage, murdering them to clear out the competition so that her son Tiberius is now the only heir and successor to Augustus. For Augustus is as mortal as anyone else. Get it? So now you've done it with this line of yours: "Horrid step dames mixed the deadly henbane..."

OVID. But I wrote these lines before Lucretius and Gaius died! Long before that! Do you understand – way before then! (*Screaming*) These lines have absolutely nothing to do with Livia! Gods Almighty! How should I prove it? It's as clear as day!

(Berman-Tsikinovsky, *To Touch the Sky*: 146-147)

Under the Roman rule, adultery and conspiracy were crimes. Finally, Ovid realizes that his distance from Rome is just a sort of anticipation of the final relegation in Tomi. (In a wider historical perspective, his period on the Isle of Elba can be also a foreshadowing of Napoleon's exile). He is a victim of the personal revenge of the emperor, and the idea of being far from home makes him very sad: in fact, he was sure that he could not survive without Rome. In Act 2, Ovid's resiliency generates another situation of life.

4. New Hypothesis (Act 2)

In Act 2, Scene 1, Ovid is resigned to his doom and his life is totally changed. Now he is in Tomi, in the office of Centurion Livius Flaccus – the head of the Roman garrison. The travel from Rome to Tomi was long and dangerous, but Ovid's punishment is not the most severe for the Roman rules: in fact, his relegation is by the exclusive intervention of Caesar Augustus, but he keeps the rights of a Roman citizen.

Ovid never considers suicide, as a possible solution for his tragic situation. In the first period of his life in Tomi, he hopes to return at home, and has a regular correspondence with his family and friends in Rome. But also the writing of a letter has precise rules of prudence, because there is a strict control: he has to avoid the mention of the names of the people in Tomi, and anything specific – for ex. what they have for dinner, drinking etc. All these changes provoke a total revolution in Ovid's life, and he is immediately aware of it:

FLACCUS. [...] And, coming back to your future correspondence, I'd like to mention that both your complaints and praises will only do harm, to you and to me. You must have many enemies and ill-wishers in Rome, otherwise you wouldn't be there. In order to survive, an exile has to adapt, to change.

OVID. To undergo a metamorphosis.

FLACCUS. Yes, you are more literate than I am – what's that word?

OVID. Me-ta-mor-pho-sis (*speaking in separate syllables*).

FLACCUS. That's right, a metamorphosis. Your letters will be the only source of information in Rome about you. Remember this, Publius Ovidius Naso.

(Berman-Tsikinovsky, *To Touch the Sky*: 151)

In Tomi, Ovid lives a real *metamorphosis*, and not the mythical one described in his literary works. Now he is far from the Roman splendor, and the people around him have a low cultural level: the most part of them, speak the local dialect and ignore Latin. Also poetry is completely forgotten, and his glory as a Latin poet is neglected: "In my line of work, I'm not supposed to read any poetry. My subordinates would've made fun of me", says Centurion Livius Flaccus to Ovid.

But, in this hard condition, a miracle happened: Ovid is still able to compose works of literary level. The sorrow for his condition as an exiled intellectual has not kill his soul. In fact, also far from Rome, his poetic vein has not died and he feels its vital strength again.

This revelation is the first step of Ovid's personal metamorphosis. In Tomi, he lives in the house of a Sarmatian widow, Ananta; her son Daren is a chief of the Sarmatian unit defending the town from the attacks of nomadic tribes. After some years spent there, Ovid can

give a realistic comment on his new life, far from the native country: “It’s not bad, but it was much better in Rome.”

After the death of Caesar Augustus, the project to go back to Rome is definitively abandoned. The risk to be killed by Tiberius is too high: paradoxically, is better to stay in Tomi as an exiled poet, than in Rome as a regular citizen.

In Scene 2, Ovid’s nostalgia is increased by the memory of his past life and the comfort of his villa in Rome, but the mention of the thermal baths is directly connected to the embarrassing episode at the house of Caesar Augustus. In Tomi, this Roman custom is only a sweet remembrance for the poet: the climate is different and – above all – his existence is different.

With Ananta, Ovid has lived a great cultural exchange: he has taught her Latin, and she has taught him the Gothic dialect. His skill is demonstrated by some poems written in Gothic. Finally, thanks to Ovid, Ananta has learnt Latin. In this way, the exiled intellectual has helped the local people to increase their cultural level, transforming the relegation into an educational mission:

ANANTA. In these six years, you’ve taught me how to read and write in your language. There are no books here, no books at all. Now I can’t understand how people live without books. You’ve showed me a whole new world, my lord!
(Berman-Tsikinovsky, *To Touch the Sky*: 154)

In Scene 3, Centurion Livius Flaccus reveals to Daren his personal cultural improvement. This is the sign that the presence of the exiled poet has provided a very positive benefit:

FLACCUS. I just finished reading his *Metamorphoses*. I read it for two years, in secret, at night by lamp. A few days ago I finished it. And here you are telling me he’s dying. I keep the book in my safe.
(Berman-Tsikinovsky, *To Touch the Sky*: 157)

Ovid’s serious illness is not a strong enough reason for the end of his relegation: he is condemned to die far from Rome. Paradoxically, considering the new political situation with Caesar Tiberius, this is the best solution for him.

In the play, Livius Flaccus always underlines the positive aspects of Ovid’s situation in his exilic reality: relegation is a cruel way to punish a man, but it is better than death. If the exiled man has the strength to react, living his personal metamorphosis, there is still hope. And life can assume a different, but still positive, form:

FLACCUS. [...] You can’t get *Metamorphoses* in Rome’s libraries, they say it’s been banned... And what do the locals think of him?
DAREN. They like him. The city elders issued a decree freeing him from taxes. They help my mother to take care of him, bring over food.
FLACCUS. So he’s stopped dreaming about Rome?
DAREN. He’s gone through some sort of change.
FLACCUS. Metamorphosis.

DAREN. Yes, some sort of metamorphosis. He didn't just accept his fate as old people often do – he's a changed man. He came to love our land and the people, really love them...

(Berman-Tsikinovsky, *To Touch the Sky*: 157)

The play underlines the extreme cleverness of Ovid to live his exile, and the miracle of his resiliency: it was not a passive acceptance of a punishment, marked by dark sadness and suicidal purpose, but a dynamic adaptation with a constant attention for the cultural dimension of the everyday life.

In Scene 4, at the end of the play, Ovid is dying and narrates to Ananta a premonitory dream: he had a vision of Rome, but distant and remote as the years spent there. Moreover, he communicates his last will:

OVID. [...] All my things, my signet ring, all the jewelry in my box, all the money – you take it.

ANANTA. Maybe I should sent it to Fabia?

OVID. No. Daren must take to Centurion Flaccus only my papers. Over there on the table (*shows*), bring me these two folders. (*Ananta brings him the folders*). This one, marked with the letter "R", I leave to Rome. Daren must take it to Flaccus. And this one, marked with the letter "F" – for "flamma", fire in Latin – should be burned. These are the letters written to me. You must burn them right now while I watch. (*Ananta starts the fire in the stove*). Should anyone find these letters, I don't want my wife and friends to suffer.

(Berman-Tsikinovsky, *To Touch the Sky*: 158-159)

Ovid dies holding the hand of Ananta, while the fire is destroying the letters from Rome. Probably, in the final moment of his life, he has considered himself as a lucky Roman citizen, because his death was not sanguinary.

As in the literary meaning of the word "metamorphoses", he has changed the form of his existence: in this way, he has found the best strategy for living again in a foreign country, far from Rome. As a poet, he has conquered the eternal life with his works, whose value is finally recognized also in Tomi: "We'll all die like Ovid, but his poems will stay", says Centurion Livius Flaccus.

5. Conclusions

With this play, Berman-Tsikinovsky has used the figure of Ovid as a positive model for the people who experienced exile: far from the native country, the poet is transformed into a new creature – with a new life of high moral and cultural values. For Ovid, death is only the last metamorphosis of the earthly life. And after, there is eternity.

The emotional impact of this play is increased by another literary piece written by Berman-Tsikinovsky, entitled *To Ovid 2000, Years Later (A Road Tale)*, and published in 2013 in the volume *To Touch the Sky*. According to Wikipedia, "it was the breathtaking description of author's visits of Ovid's places of his birth and death".

Berman-Tsikinovsky was a fifteen years old boy, when he heard for the first time the name of Ovid. He was still in Kharkov, and was involved in a school celebration dedicated to the 115th anniversary of Pushkin's death (1952): in the program there was a performance based on a famous poem, *The Gypsies*, and he had the occasion to learn something about the exile of the poet on the Black Sea. Many years later, he visited the places where Ovid spent his life: Sulmona, the town of his birth; Rome, the town of the consecration of his literary career; Constanta, the town of his death.

The play *The Land of Oblivion* is a sincere message for contemporary theatre, and its staging – with the music of the composer Ilya Levinson – will be useful for the posterity, in order to celebrate Ovid in the New Millennium.

6. Acknowledgements

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