

The Winter of Discontent: Climate and Interiority in Ovid's *Tristia*

In 8 A.D., the Roman poet Ovid was banished from Rome for *carmen et error*, to invoke his abstruse phrase. One of his chief complaints about his exilic environs is the insufferable Pontic climate. In *Tristia* 3.10, Ovid embarks on an extended excursus, describing in what many consider hyperbolic detail the nature of the perpetual winter into which he is banished. He describes a snow that defies melting for years on end (3.14-16), northern gales so powerful they sweep away rooftops (3.18), a freeze so piercing that wine congeals (3.24), and Getic natives shrouded in furs revealing only their faces, their beards clotted with frost (3.19-22). Given this vivid description, scholars who have treated this poem have largely focused on the historical and geographical (in)accuracy of the wintry clime that Ovid evokes. Gahan argues that the degree to which Ovid repeats his claims elsewhere in the *Tristia* and *Ex Ponto* is indicative of their truthfulness (1978). Others have compared ancient and modern accounts of weather on the Black Sea in an attempt to determine the extent of Ovid's embellishments – and outright fibbery (e.g., Fränkel 1945; Wilkinson 1955; Danoff 1962). Evans examines what the elegy stands to gain through intertexts with Vergil's "Scythian Digression" in the *Georgics* (Evans 1978). In this paper, I argue that Ovid's description of the Pontic's glacial clime is instead part of a composite portrait of the exilic condition. That is to say, what is at stake is not so much the verisimilitude of the poet's description of his physical surroundings, which is both definitively indeterminable and comparatively uninteresting, but the ways in which this pathetic fallacy is symptomatic and indicative of the the exilic state of mind of his poetic persona. Ovid's *tristis hiems* is best read as a *hiems mentis*.

In order to explore and defend this premise, I make two points. The first is that Ovid's *Kunstichtung*, regardless of its literal verisimilitude, is psychologically accurate. That the harsh

and alien Pontic climate is diametrically opposed to that of the familiar Mediterranean, thus underscoring his physical isolation, is clear. His likely hyperbole speaks accurately and precisely to the experiential truth of being an exile in this alien and hostile land. The landscape is dysmorphic: the land and sea are indistinguishable when the sea freezes over, and rivers become roads. When nature and civilization are not so utterly confused, the former threatens to upend the latter (e.g., Aquilo threatens to raze towers and roofs, the frozen sea traps fish and even ships within its concretized mass). He cannot get his bearings from stars that never touch the sea due to his extreme northerly location. Time and the seasons that mark it are distorted: the winter is said to last indefinitely. His imagined epistolary interlocutor is said to lack credulity when it comes to his description of this nonsensical and hostile land, a sign not that Ovid expects to be believed, but feels isolated from his readers' sympathies by his singularity of experience.

The second point I make is that Ovid's winter is a metaphor for the "freeze" on poetic *ingenium* at Rome in the face of the centralized semiotic control exerted by Augustus. Throughout the *Tristia*, Ovid compulsively conjures his home city: the travails of his *liber* (qua surrogate for the self) in its journey to and from Rome (1.1., 3.1), the poignant description of his final night in the city (1.3), etc. One might say that Rome is, psychologically speaking, still very much his center of gravity. His centripetal poetics are revealed in his description of the Pontic winter's *marmoreo ... gelu* (3.10.10; *gelu marmore* 45) and the frosty beards of the Getic people, which evoke the marbled city and hoary statuary of Romanitas. So too his claim that the narrow straits would not permit Leander's deathly swim. The "narrow straits" of the official rhetoric at Rome were not permissive of Ovid's erotic and mythological poetry. Thus, the Pontic tribes that are "unworthy of his ingenium" (2) are, post-exile, no worse than his homeland. Through this

reading, I hope to show that Ovid's out-of-proportion feelings of alienation and identification with Rome are given voice through his pathetic fallacy.

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