Time in Counterpoint: A Study of *Tristia* 1.3

In *Tristia* 1.3, the newly exiled Ovid recalls the fraught night of his departure from Rome and the twilight of his tenure as Rome's poet laureate. However, this so-called *supremum tempus*, 'final hour', is beset by striking shifts in chronology. In this paper, I argue that Ovid deliberately skews the contours of time in the poem in order to enact a cognitive dissonance endemic to the exile's subjective experience. As a framing device for my reading, I invoke Edward Saïd's model of 'contrapuntalism' – a temporal mode characteristic of exilic experience that encompasses one's native past and displaced present simultaneously. Saïd writes:

> For an exile habits of life, expression or activity in the new environment inevitably
>
> occur against the memory of these things in another environment. Thus both the
>
> new and the old environments are vivid, actual, occurring together contrapuntally
>
> … Exile is life outside the habitual order. It is nomadic, decentered, *contrapuntal*;
>
> but no sooner does one get accustomed to it than its unsettling force erupts anew.
>
> (Saïd 2002, 158-9; my emphasis)

Ovid too, I argue, enacts time in counterpoint. In so doing, I hope to build on the existing scholarship on unreality in Ovid's exile poems (Williams 1995, 1996) as well as subjective modes of temporality in ancient literature (e.g., Ancona 1994, Gardner 2013).

In order to demonstrate the foregoing claim, I consider three facets of the poem. First, I discuss how Ovid toys with time by constructing a spurious present. He deploys the present tense (he is beset, 'subit' (1), with the grim image and recalls, 'repeto' (3), the night) and temporal adverbs such as *nunc quoque* (4) that imply the vivid immediacy of his reverie. He likewise attests to a collapse of time in the moment itself in the following line: *nec spatium nec mens fuerat satis apta parandi: / torpuerant dempta pectora nostra mora* ('There had been neither sufficient time

nor presence of mind for preparing / my heart grew numb due to delay denied me,' 7-8). Here, Ovid attests to a subjective sense of the slowing of time's passage while the hours of the night speed past him. We are left with a temporal paradox whereby the soon-to-be exile is numb to external time, but sensible only to a clock that operates according to his affective state.

Secondly, I examine the circular chronology of the night of Ovid's departure. In lines 28-34, he reverses the course of the night, only to return to daybreak in line 47. His cycling between the time of composition and the night of his exile and from dawn to dead of night and back again finally culminate in an enactment of the poet's symbolic death at the end of the poem, which is also his birth into exile. Through the lens of memory and from the vantage point of exile, the poet imposes a fragmented time scheme on the night of his departure in order to demonstrate the traumatic and decentered nature of his experience.

Finally, I examine Ovid's coded references to his pre-exilic works. The poem begins with the vivid *imago* of the eve of his exile, which he describes as 'tristissima'—a superlative *sphragis* that invokes the title of the collection and stakes a claim to the primacy of the poem within it. The assertion that *Tr.* 1.3 is the *chef-d'œuvre* of the five books of the *Tristia* is girded by the repeated references to tearfulness throughout (*gutta* 4; *fluentem flens*, 17; *imbre cadente*, 18; *luctus gemitusque*, 21; *inque domo lacrimas angulus omnis habet*, 24; *singultu ... impediente*, 42). This imagistic pattern is itself a form of temporal play: it recalls the lovelorn missives of the *Heroides*, which are often described as blotted with their authors' tears, a nod to his literary feats at Rome. The image also aligns him with the epistolary heroines, figuring his departure from Rome as a bereavement or separation of two lovers. The *poeta exclusus* retrojects even further when he compares his tearful departure to the conquest of Troy (26), thus aligning his own plight with that of the national hero Aeneas. Ironically, this mythic figure occupies the same interstitial space that

Ovid does on the night of his departure: he is both founding hero and archetypal exile, while Ovid is the all-too-recent poet laureate of Rome and soon-to-be *persona non grata*.

Bibliography

Ancona, Ronnie. Time and the Erotic in Horace's Odes. Durham: Duke University Press, 1994.

Gardner, Hunter. *Gendering Time in Augustan Love Elegy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013.

_____. "Reflections on Exile." In *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002.

Williams, Gareth. *Banished Voices.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995.

_____. *The Curse of Exile: A Study of Ovid's Ibis*. The Cambridge Philological Society. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996.