INTRODUCTION

THE REDRESS OF EXILE

mitia ius Vbris si modo fata darent,
quaeque mihi sola capitur nunc mente voluptas,
tunc oculis etiam percipienda foret.
non ita caelitibus uisum est, et forsitan aequis:
   nam quid me poenae causa negata iuuet?
mente tamen, quae sola loco non exulat, utar
praetextam fasces aspiciamque tuam.

“If only the gentle fates would give me the right to be in Rome, the pleasure I now take from my mind alone would then be taken in by my eyes as well. The gods have decided otherwise, and perhaps they are just. For how would I benefit from denying that there is a reason for my punishment? Yet I shall use my mind, which alone is not in exile, and behold your consular robe and fasces.”

Pont. 4.9.36–42

In these verses, among the last he ever wrote, Ovid contemplates the justice of his exile even as he finds a way to overcome it: he lays claim to the power of his imagination to return to Rome and watch the poem’s addressee, Graecinus, assume the consulship.1 By setting his own poetic capacity over against imperial authority the poet offers an implicit challenge to the legal right of the Roman emperor to censor his writing and ban him from the city. Such a challenge makes up only part of Ovid’s lengthy and variegated literary response to his exile, but it is perhaps the most important and the one that relates most closely to what the Irish poet Seamus Heaney has called the “redress of poetry.”2 By casting the poetic act as a mode of redress, that is, as a corrective and remedy for suffering, Heaney credits poetry with the capacity to respond to injustice, right a wrong, and offset the burden of

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1 The poem dates to late 15 AD, Evans 1983, 154; or early 16, Syme 1978, 43–44.
political oppression both immediately and in the future. Nearly all the poems Ovid writes in exile are in some fashion concerned with poetry’s redressive capacity as such and thus invite an interpretive approach that draws on Heaney’s “idea of counterweighting, of balancing out the forces, of redress—tilting the scales of reality towards some transcendent equilibrium.”3 This study explores the notion of poetic redress in Ovid’s Tristia and Epistulae ex Ponto by analyzing the poet’s representation of himself and the princeps, Augustus Caesar, against the historical background of Roman religion, law, and poetry.

From the start it is important to note that Ovid’s relationship to Augustus on view in these poems depends on the problem of power. The question of who wields it and how it is exercised gives rise to the dynamic tension between poet and emperor that effectively sustains Ovid’s creative output in exile. It would be misguided, however, to assume that Ovid openly opposes Augustus, an opposition that would have been pitifully one-sided and perhaps historically inconceivable.4 The poet’s position is in fact more precarious and nuanced here, as Ellen Oliensis has noted in her analysis of “Ovid’s will to power” on display in Metamorphoses 6 and Tristia 4.5 “In place of dissent and resistance (and the “Augustan” hierarchies those terms presuppose),” she writes, “I will be looking for envy, aggression, exaltation, and abasement: the see-saw rhetoric of an Ovidian game designed for two symmetrically confronted players.”6 Oliensis has found, I believe, a compelling approach to reading these poems that has also helped to shape the readings offered here. Yet as I see it, the prevailing “rivalry” she identifies lies just beneath the surface of an apparently abject submission on the part of the poet to the overwhelming power of the emperor. Their relationship is not so much symmetrical as imbalanced, and this

3 Heaney 1995, 3, where the remark stems from his reflection on Simone Weil’s Gravity and Grace.
4 Raaflaub and Samons 1990, 448–454, on the notion of “political opposition” generally, 448: “neither the Greeks nor the Romans even had a term for [political opposition]; and in political life there was no proper place for it,” and under Augustus in particular, 454: “contrary to all expectations, opposition to Augustus was scattered, isolated, ineffective, and, overall, minimal.” Cf. Little 1982, 343–344, 350.