CONCLUSION

THE EXILE’S LAST WORD: POWER AND POETIC
REDRESS ON THE MARGINS OF EMPIRE

fleque meos casus: est quaedam flere uluptas;
expletur lacrimis egeriturque dolor
And weep for my troubles: there’s a certain pleasure
in weeping; grief is sated and worked out by tears.
Tr. 4.3.37–38

Thus far I have presented arguments to show that in the Tristia and
Epistulae ex Ponto Ovid lays claim to the immortalizing power of poetry
over against the exiling power of the princeps. My analysis of the terms
fas, ius, lex, and uates in the fifth chapter, for example, shows that,
while Augustus controls the legal right to ban citizens from Rome
(ius-lex), Ovid still maintains the ability to speak in accordance with
a divine right (fas) granted to poets and, especially, to uates. In the
immediate sequel, the poet is grossly overmatched and easily outdone,
and the mere fact of his exile testifies to the very real power of a
legal control that ultimately depends on the exercise of brute force.
But poetic power in Ovid’s day was measured in terms of posterity,
that is, in terms of general readers and future writers to come after the
poet and the princeps. The power of Augustus, Tiberius, and emperors
to follow, by contrast, resides in the mutual understanding between
Rome’s “first citizen” (princeps) and the rest of the empire that the
emperor retains the right to condemn to death.1 Inevitably, this power
is bounded by time and ends with the end of his rule; it is thus offset
by the basic premise under which Ovid and virtually all ancient poets
operate. The convention among the ancients holds that the poetic act

1 Cf. Pont. 4.5.31–32: ‘uiuit adhuc, uitemque tibi debere fatetur, / quam prius a miti Caesare
manus habet,’ “‘he’s still alive and admits to owe you his life, which he holds first as a
gift from a clement Caesar.’” Ovid hopes his addressee, Sextus Pompeius, will speak
these words to Germanicus on his behalf; cf. Tr. 1.2.61–64; 2.129–130; 4.4.45–46; 5.2.55:
ira quidem moderata tua, [Caesar], uitemque dedisti “your anger, Caesar, has been moderate,
and you have allowed me to live;” 5.4.21–22; 5.9.13; Pont. 4.15.3–4.
transcends time and can rightfully lay claim to an immortality not bestowed on physical objects or, for that matter, on political power.² In Ovid’s particular case, the art of poetry provides the exile with the power to speak after death and always gives him the last word.

This word is of course the sum of words contained in his poems, which made Ovid’s predicament in exile knowable to all in Augustan Rome and which continue to be read today. Having the final say will never give the poet victory; for there was never any actual contest or prize to be won. Instead, Ovid’s exilic voice simply abides, and its abiding presence serves to balance out the inexorable force of history that had him physically banned from Rome. Herein lies the most compelling link between the exile poetry and what Seamus Heaney has called “the redress of poetry.” For Heaney, the practice of poetry under the kind of conditions Ovid writes about in exile is fundamentally tied to “the idea of counterweighting, of balancing out the forces, of redress—tilting the scales of reality towards some transcendent equilibrium.”³ Heaney’s notion of poetic redress has informed the present study from the start because it contains the implicit recognition that Ovid’s frequent appeals to the immortality of verse are not merely perfunctory nods to poetic convention.⁴ Rather, they make up an essential part of a pointed and enduring response to the poet’s immediate circumstances in exile.

As carefully constructed responses from a particular place and time, these poems also address specific historical changes brought about by the princeps—for example, to Roman legal procedure (Ch. 2), poetic convention (Ch. 3), and religious ritual throughout the empire (Ch. 4)—that helped to make the poet’s banishment possible at all. There is no ambiguity in the Tristia and Epistulae ex Ponto about who determined Ovid’s exile and in whose hands the matter of a reprieve rested: Augustus was both the primary cause of what he alone could solve. By linking the emperor so closely to the reasons behind his exile, Ovid attempts to offset the oppressive burden of the historical situation and create, as

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² On this convention in Greek and Latin poetry, see above Ch. 4 n. 61; in Ovid’s exile poetry, see Ch. 6 nn. 34–35; and for Ovid’s treatment before the exile poetry, cf. Ov. Am. 1.15, on which see McKeown 1989, 387–389; Met. 15.871–879, with Bömer 1986, ad loc.
³ Heaney 1995, 3.
⁴ Tr. 1.6.35–36; 3.3.77–78; 3.4a.45–46; 3.7.49–54; 4.9.19–26; 4.10.2, 127–132; 5.14.5–6, 33–42; Pont. 2.6.33–34; 3.2.29–30; 4.7.53–54.