H. A. Gärtner: Gorman, The Socratic Method in the Dialogues of Cicero


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Gaertner (hereafter ’G.’) has reworked and expanded his 2001 Oxford doctoral dissertation into a comprehensive commentary on the first book of Ovid’s Pontic

epistles, the first ‘full-scale’ commentary in English. It includes his own revision of aspects of J. A. Richmond’s 1995 Teubner edition of the text, with Richmond’s own subsequent emendations. A fairly literal prose translation accompanies the text on opposing pages, Loeb-style.

The work attests to meticulous and detailed scholarship. It aims to «explain the text of Ov. Pont. 1 and to advance our understanding of some connected broader issues, namely the relation of Ovid’s exile poetry to his pre-exilic works and its function within its historical context» (p. 1). G. does not mean to offer much in the way of literary analysis or comment, but has provided a vademecum for literary critics or readers eager to examine the lexical connotations of the exiled poet’s emotional outpourings. He offers an extensive philological examination of Ovid’s diction as compared to that of his day, and provides, in an extensive ‘Introduction’, an overview of matters relating to the text, but largely peripheral to the emotional thrust of the poetry.

The ‘Introduction’ runs to just over forty pages (pp. 1–41), starting with a short exposition of the author’s aims and method (p. 1). Next follows a discussion of the arrangement of the poems (pp. 2–6). Addressees and readers are briefly discussed (pp. 6–8). Vos, so often addressed by the poet, was more than the immediate addressee of a particular poem and his household. Vos may mean ‘all his friends at Rome’, indicating that the Pontic epistles are not merely private letters set to verse. Vos is also the general public, or any reader at any time. This «draw[s the reader] into the spell of the Epistulae ex Ponto» (p. 8). The third rubric (pp. 8–24) derives its title from Syme’s famous ‘History in Ovid’ (1978). It covers aspects such as ‘Rome under Augustus’. A long excursus on Clementia and Ira precedes discussion of emperor-worship, followed by an overview of the concepts crimen and poena. On the much-debated topic, what Ovid’s supposed ‘crime’ could have been, G. tends toward the general modern consensus: Ovid may have been a scapegoat in some crisis in ‘dynastic politics’ (Syme’s term) (p. 15). Poena is elucidated in the light of common Roman practice of Ovid’s day, and with copious reference to the poet’s own assertions.

A long discussion of Ovid’s place of exile (pp. 16–24), starts with a separate rubric for the geography, climate and vegetation of Tomis, followed by an exposition of its early history as gathered from both primary and secondary sources. Next G. considers Tomis during the conjectured time of Ovid’s stay (8 – 18 AD), with copious reference again to primary sources, but also to archaeology, epigraphy and numismatics. The discrepancy between archaeological and Ovidian information, G. stresses, should not «blind us to pieces of information of historical value» (p. 23). This rubric ends with the suggestion that Ovid’s palpable exaggerations and false statements about the barbaric state of Tomitan civilization (or lack of it) was never meant to deceive his Roman readership or

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1 The Black Sea letters have in general been scantily served. In English we have Green’s Penguin translation and literary commentary on both the Tristia and Ex Ponto (Ovid, the poems of Exile, 1994) and a commentary by M. Helzle on parts of Book 4 (Publīi Ovidīi Nasonis Epistularum ex Ponto Liber 4. A Commentary on Poems 1–7 and 16, Hildesheim 1998); the Italian commentary by L. Galasso on Book 2 (Epistularum ex Ponto Liber 2) appeared at Firenze in 1995; a Spanish commentary on the same by A. Pérez Vega at Seville in 1989, and a Würzburg diss., commenting on books 1–3 by U. Staffhorst in 1965.
cajole them into pitying the despairing exile. The poet intended «[to] render the epistles more captivating for his readership» (p. 24). This same intention would have underlain Ovid’s identification of Augustus with Jupiter: the hyperbole served to turn a simple enactment of relegatio into ‘an extraordinary event worthy and reminiscent of epic’ (ibid.). A reference to the commentary at 1.4.29 brings the reader to a succinct summary of the manner in which our poet combined «an autobiographical detail (Ovid’s banishment) and a historical fact (the various degrees of emperor worship) with the literary topos of divine anger…» as seen in the themes of the Iliad, Odyssey and Aeneid (p. 292).

Next the ’Introduction’ considers together in just over a page (pp. 24–25) what G. terms ‘non-autobiographical material’, including historical references, comparisons and digressions, material from philosophical consolations on exile and death, and myth. Discussion of myth is tantalisingly brief, especially as Ovid very frequently himself seems to enter that world, comparing himself favourably with the great travellers of myth. Equally brief is discussion of Ovid’s allusions to his own earlier poetry, when he compares himself in turn to a series of victims from the ‘Metamorphoses’. This short ’non-autobiographical’ rubric ends with the conjecture that Ovid’s allusion to Daedalus’ ‘ultimately unsuccessful plea to leave Crete’ indicates resignation to remaining at Tomis.

The final three rubrics of the Introduction are centrally important for the approach of G.’s commentary: ’Diction and Style’ (pp. 25–34), ’Metre and Versification’ (pp. 34–38) and ’Transmission, Text and Translation’ (pp. 39–41). ’Diction’ includes vocabulary, grammar and syntax, stylistic devices and imagery. G. asserts (p. 25) that Ovid’s diction in the exilic poetry is generally more prosaic and colloquial than in his earlier works, as would be required in letters. However, there are «different levels of speech to suit the respective context» (p. 26). G. takes trouble to refute those critics who still consider that the colloquial feel of the exilic poetry indicates a decline in Ovid’s genius. Sub-divisions of this rubric refer the reader to three Appendices (A: ’Poetic words’, ‘~ usages’ and ‘~ iuncturae’, pp. 329–31; B: Prosaic words, forms or usages and iuncturae, pp. 332–4; C: ’Imagery’, pp. 535–6).

The rubric on metrics treats of prosody, with interesting figures (p. 35) for the frequency of elision and prodelision in the Ex Ponto as compared to Ovid’s other works or to those of other authors. Next G. in turn considers Ovid’s hexameters and pentameters, and the frequency of monosyllables (pp. 36–8), often an indication of colloquial style. Ovid’s more frequent use of polysyllabic pentameter endings here is not a sign of ‘weakening powers’ in our poet, as some assert. The last rubric covers text transmission and reception and G.’s use and adaptation of Richmond’s edition and sigla (provided as ’Sigla Codicum’, pp. 45–6). G. conjectures (p. 40) that the hyparchetype of our modern editions is no earlier than the fourth century.

The text is mainly Richmond’s. G.’s apparatus criticus is thorough, incorporating both recent and ancient text-criticism and sources. His translation reflects his own suggested emendations, as his suggested nimis hoc seu vis for vis hoc seu vis, ad 1.3.31, translated (in its context) as «Whether you want to call this too loyal or womanish…» (p. 63). It is G.’s stated intention (p. 41) to offer a translation that is ‘literal rather than literary’, and which can clarify questions not
treated in the commentary. Hence the translation is adequate, but not exciting. Occasionally a more colloquial translation (e.g. 'bore / bears' for 'carried / carry'; for talis, i.1.26, / fert, id. 35) would have been more appropriate.

G. is bold in proposals for deletion, and acceptance of those of others. For example, from poem 1 he proposes to excise verses 41–4, first suggested by Merkel. Earlier English editors Postgate and Owen do not consider this, and Green's Penguin 'Translation and Commentary' (1994) argues against it (citing Némethy, Wheeler-Gould, Richmond). The passage adds illegal remuneration of worshippers of Roman Diana to an example citing reward for the followers of the Magna Mater. Next follow two verses likening the Julian names to a rattle or Phrygian flute. The whole passage is redolent with subtle subversion. Reference to the unnamed divine power that moves men to action carries political as well as religious implications, so Green (p. 295). G. (p. 115) accepts Merkel's deletion on lexical grounds: the words satanator, ipsa, credulitate are 'oddities' indicating late interpolation, also, the rhetorical thread between verses 37–40 and 45 is broken by this passage. Yet rhetorical overkill is a frequent Ovidian device: the verses complete a common Ovidian over-extension of examples. At 1.4.15–18, with no precedents, G. proposes deletion, arguing (p. 282) that the verses are 'internally feeble' (with lexical justification), that the extension of a series of exempla (here termed 'similes') from agriculture to horse racing and shipping is 'strange'. He ignores the Ovidian penchant for over-indulgence in illustration and for intertextual nuancing (boating and racing as metaphors predominate in the Ars Amatoria (the exemplum of over-use occurs in AA 3.81–2). Elsewhere (ad 1.2.148) G. (p. 221) rejects a suggestion by Heinsius that a verse is spurious, arguing that both its form and sense are plausible.

Commentary comprises the largest part of the work (pp. 93–527), some thirty pages for each of ten poems. A short general introduction is followed by detailed comment, either an introductory paragraph to a passage comprising a number of verses, followed by discussion of its parts, or line-by-line commentary, depending upon need or context. Comment is mainly lexical and comparative, categorising words or phrases as poetic or prosaic, citing other occurrences in Ovid, most often followed by parallels in other authors, sometimes with references to secondary literature. Literary comment is also comparative or lexically-based (e.g., the apparent self-deprecation of 1.1.4 is compared with Catullus' similar 1.8–9, secrecy and fear are hinted at by choice of words like audient, latere, tutius, p. 98).

Occasionally comment appears laboured; for example, (ad 1.1.11) ‘nullo for nemine is poetic (1.3.38=)’ (p. 101). Reference to the latter produces ‘nulli: the present usage of nullus for nemo is absent from Cicero, but occurs in other prose writers...’ etc. (p. 267) and we are referred back to 1.1.56: ‘nemo is generally avoided in poetry.... Interestingly, it is used more frequently in Ovid's exile poetry’ (p. 255). Why not say of the first nullo at 1.1.11: 'a poetic abbreviation for the usual prose nullo homine; nemine is very rare?'

Minor details aside, this is a thorough, useful work. It is rounded off with a 'Select Bibliography' of over three hundred titles, a twelve-page 'General Index', a two-page, double columned 'Greek Index', a similar, twenty-two-page 'Latin Index' giving all the words commented upon singly (for nullus we have two of the three references discussed above). Finally, an Index of eleven double-columned pages facilitates reference to individual passages, from Ovid's other works or other authors, these usefully linked to G.'s commentary on the particular poem and verse that each entry relates to.

Stellenbosch

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