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Ovid's Virgilian Career

INTRODUCTION

In his poetic autobiography, Ovid says that as a youth he re-
garded any older poets he met as if they were gods: *quotque ader-
ant uates, rebar adesse deos* (*Tr.* 4.10.42). He describes a sensation
familiar to many young artists, especially those fortunate
enough, despite the gulf of experience that separates master from
tyro, to befriend one or two of these divinities.[1] Ovid mentions
several (44-50) who became particular friends, and it makes sense
to assume that these personal comments possess some literary-
historical dimension as well. But in the same poem he famously
and tersely states *Vergilium uidi tantum* (51). The most influential
of Latin poets – influential not least on Ovid himself – was des-
tined to remain a distant and Olympian figure.

Whether in spite or because of this distance, Ovid invites direct
comparison between himself and Virgil, stating in the *Remedia
Amoris* that *tantum se nobis elegi debere fatentur/ quantum Vergilio
nobile debet epos* (395-396).[2] The contrast between epic and elegy
is crucial in a number of ways. But is the comparison merely a *jeu
d'esprit* or part of a more extensive strategy of self-representa-
tion? How important was the example of Virgil to Ovid's under-
standing of his own career? I believe that I can identify two key
elements of Ovid's Virgilian self-fashioning. These elements ap-
pear first in the middle of Ovid's career when, after writing the
erotodidactic works, he revised and reissued his *Amores*,[3] and

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1. The same might be said even of scholars. It is a pleasure to offer Michael Put-
nam this paper as a very small token of how much I have learned from him, and as a
continuation of recent discussions surrounding these two poets in which he has
played a key part. For Michael's own meditation on the shape of Virgil's career, see
The Virgilian Achievement, «Arethusa» 5, 1972, pp. 53-70 = *Essays in Latin Lyric, Elegiac,
and Epic*, Princeton 1982, pp. 329-346.

2. U. Schmitzer, *Zeitgeschichte in Ovids Metamorphosen: Mythologische Dichtung
unter politischem Anspruch*, Stuttgart 1990 (Beiträge zur Altertumskunde, 4), p. 111. At
Am. 3.15.7-8 Ovid states that his Paelignian *patria* will boast of him just as Mantua
does of Virgil and Verona of Catullus.

3. I agree with recent suggestions (A. Barchiesi, *Speaking Volumes: Narrative and
Intertext in Ovid and Other Latin Poets*, London 2001, pp. 159-161; B. W. Boyd, *Ovid's Li-
terary Loves*, Ann Arbor 1997, pp. 142-147; N. Holzberg, *Playing with his Life: Ovid's
"Autobiographical" References*, «Lampas» 30, 1997, pp. 4-19) that Ovid's stress on the

then reappear with new significance in the exile poetry. I discuss Ovid's treatment of these elements under the rubrics of *Initiation* and *Retrospect*.

INITIATION

Ovid comments on Virgil's career at the beginning of the *Amores*, his first major work. Here he represents himself as having intended to write epic – but not just any epic. The subject of the epic he wanted to write, and the first word of the collection that he did write, is *arma* – which is also, famously, the first word of the *Aeneid*. No one is unaware that Ovid is citing Virgil here: but *arma*, a perfectly reasonable word to begin an epic poem, is a bizarre beginning for a book of elegies. Only as an allusion to some recognizable model or counter-model does it make any sense. Thus the *Amores* open with an apologia for nugatory poetry after Virgil had re-legitimized high seriousness.

So much is often noted; the point I would add is this: Ovid's initiation scene invites not just contrast between the *Amores* and the *Aeneid*, but comparison between the two poets' careers as a whole. Because he has 'tried and failed to write epic poetry', Ovid has not merely shown himself unequal to the challenge of the *Aeneid*. In fact, he has done something quite different by striking exactly the pose that Virgil had affected at an analogous point in his own career. In other words, Ovid has not ceded supremacy to the greatest poet that Latin literature had yet seen, but rather has claimed, at least potentially, an equally exalted status by comparing himself to Virgil at the point when both were just starting their careers.

How exactly is this so? To begin with, the Virgilian allusion that opens the *Amores* extends beyond *arma*, and so beyond the *Aeneid* as well. As is well known, there are two points in a poetry book or a multi-book *corpus* that are most appropriate for programmatic statements, namely, the beginning and the middle of the collection.[4] Virgil in *Eclogue 6* gives an example of the 'proem in the middle' that remains as fascinating to scholars as it was influential on the poet's contemporaries and successors. As the poem opens, Tityrus remembers that he was about to sing

idea of a second edition has important metapoetic implications, but I do not think it is necessary to assume that the first edition is a fiction.

4. G. B. Conte, *Proems in the Middle*, «Yale Class. Stud.» 29, 1992, pp. 147-159.

reges and *proelia* when Apollo ordered him to sing a *deductum carmen* instead. Virgil's source, as is well known, is the prologue of Callimachus' *Aetia*, which he alters in several respects, giving Ovid an opportunity to restore the *status quo ante* in at least two senses. It is in the middle of his *Eclogue* book that Virgil alludes to the beginning of Callimachus' poem; Ovid then 'restores' the passage to its "proper" place at the beginning of his own *Amores*. Similarly, Callimachus had presented his apologia at the opening of a *magnum opus* written in the elegiac meter. Virgil then adapted Callimachus' words to suit his essay in the bucolic epos. Ovid, once again, 'restores' something of the Callimachean frame of reference by emphasizing that his poetry is elegiac. The *Amores*, then, begin with an (apparent) restatement of Callimachean fundamentalism in a post-Virgilian mode.[5]

It is possible, however, to consider *Eclogue* 6 not just as the 'window' through which Ovid alludes to the *Aetia* prologue and as an 'epic' foil to Ovid's elegiac frame of reference, but as a positive model for the *Amores* as a whole. The passage clearly establishes an analogy between Virgil and Ovid as they publish the first official works of their increasingly ambitious careers. It makes sense that Ovid should want to draw this analogy. The *Aeneid* represented a substantial challenge to Virgil's followers. Ovid meets this challenge by modeling his own poetic initiation on that of Virgil, suggesting that he begins not where Virgil had left off, but exactly where Virgil himself had begun, being turned by a god from epic to some 'humbler' task.

This is the first major point: the *Amores* begin by asserting a contrast between Ovid at the beginning of his career, and Virgil at the end of his, but also a similarity between both poets when they were just starting out. We should also bear in mind that Ovid knew as he wrote these lines that Virgil, even if he did not really begin his career by trying to write an epic, ended by doing just that. The allusion to *Eclogue* 6 – which itself concludes with questions about traditional epic themes[6] – thus involves Ovid's future as well as his notional past and actual present undertakings. Does Ovid, then, by starting where Virgil had started, signal an intention to follow a Virgilian 'ascent'?

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5. The theme of *arma* remains important in the *Amores* and throughout Ovid's oeuvre, so that the 'fundamentalism' of these lines is only apparent.

6. I discuss this issue in *Vergil's Georgics and the Traditions of Ancient Epic*, New York 1991, pp. 291-314.

To answer this question thoroughly would take time, but the main outlines of an answer can be sketched swiftly. It may have been important to Virgil even at the beginning that his pastorals were composed in the epic meter; certainly, as his career and then the *idea* of his career evolved, this fact assumed crucial importance. For Ovid it was equally crucial that his own commission involved a formal exchange of the epic for the elegiac meter. Accordingly, since the second stage of Virgil's career takes him into the didactic poetry of the *Georgics*, Ovid takes a similar step while staying within the metrical and generic boundaries of elegy, becoming the *praeceptor amoris*. In doing so he draws clear parallels between his own 'ascent' and that of Virgil. In the *Remedia*, as we have seen, the comparison is very direct, if rather general. The opening of *Ars* 2 is a bit more complex:

> Dicite 'io Paean!' et 'io' bis dicite 'Paean!'
>   Decidit in casses praeda petita meos;
> laetus amans donat uiridi mea carmina palma,
>   praelata Ascraeo Maeonioque seni.

Ovid's claim to Hesiod's crown is justified by the fact that the *Ars* is formally a didactic poem. But there is nothing very Hesiodic about Ovid's erotodidactic work. It probably makes more sense to take this reference to the *Ascraeus senex*, as pointing towards Virgil's boast in *Georgics* 2 that he is singing an *Ascraeum carmen*. A similar signal occurs at the end of *Ars* 2, where Ovid tells his readers

> Arma dedi uobis; dederat Vulcanus Achilli:
>   uincite muneribus, uicit ut ille, datis!
> Sed quicumque meo superarit Amazona ferro,
>   inscribat spoliis 'Naso magister erat.'
> Ecce, rogant tenerae, sibi dem praecepta, puellae:
>   uos eritis chartae proxima cura meae!
>
>   (*Ars* 2.741-746)

The «arms» that Ovid has given his readers are, clearly enough, the instruction that these two books contain. But the opening phrase, *arma dedi uobis*, could have a secondary, metapoetic referent. The context is that of a *sphragis*: Ovid names himself in line 744. If we bear in mind the 'georgic' program of *Ars* 1-2, we may remember that Virgil, too, closes his didactic poem with a *sphragis* in which he names himself and quotes the first line of his earlier work, the *Eclogues*. Is Ovid following suit when he says, «I

gave you *arma*» – *arma* being the first word of *Amores* 1-3? If we are meant to detect a structural congruency between *Ars* 1-2 and the *Georgics*, then the proem to *Ars* 2 has its own role to play. It is another 'proem in the middle', and the *Georgics*, too, has a very prominent proem of this sort in book 3. There Virgil meditates on a future heroic project; and this fact may be relevant to Ovid's claim at the beginning of *Ars* 2 to have equaled not just Hesiod, but Homer as well.[7]

It is obviously unlikely that Ovid clearly foresaw or intended from the beginning that his career would unfold along Virgilian lines. This raises the question not only of when his Virgilian ambitions arose, but also of when *Amores* 1.1 was actually written.[8] In the epigram that precedes that poem, we hear that *Amores* 1-3 is a second edition, and that the first extended to five books.[9] This information invites the reader to think of the revision mainly as a winnowing process.[10] But it is clear that some poems were added as well. Almost everyone agrees that one such poem was 2.18, in which Ovid reviews his career to date, stating that he is by now the author of the *Ars Amatoria* and at least some of the (single) *Heroides* in addition to the *Amores*.[11] The poem thus places *Amores* 1-3 at an advanced point in Ovid's career, and so gives the collection an uncertain status. On the one hand, 'the *Amores*' are clearly meant to stand as Ovid's first canonical work. On the other, even if *Amores* 1-5 was indeed Ovid's first major production, *Amores* 1-3 was perhaps his fifth or sixth.[12] The later edition probably includes some work from as early as 25 BC, but other material could

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7. The appearance of the muse Erato and the designation of what follows as *magna* (*Ars* 2.16-17) point to the 'proem in the middle' of *Aeneid* 7 as well (and to its prototype in Apollonius, *Arg.* 3). Limitations of space do not permit me to discuss the *Aeneid* as a model for Ovid's twin masterpieces, the *Metamorphoses* and the *Fasti*, but fortunately this is already an active area of research.

8. J. C. McKeown, *Ovid: Amores. Text, Prolegomena and Commentary in Four Volumes*, vol. 1, *Text and Prolegomena*, Liverpool 1987 («ARCA Classical Texts and Monographs» 20), pp. 74-89.

9. I discuss the epigram more fully in the following section.

10. Alan Cameron, *The First Edition of Ovid's Amores*, «Class. Quart.» 18, 1968, pp. 320-333.

11. A. S. Hollis, *Ovid, Ars Amatoria, Book 1*, Oxford 1977, pp. XII, 150-151.

12. *Amores* 1-5 was probably not, in fact, a single publication. Cameron, *First Edition*, p. 324 correctly points out that virtually all Latin *corpora* of several books were not first published in individual *libri*; cf. F. Munari, *P. Ovidi Nasonis Amores*, Firenze 1959³, p. x, n. 5. The only counterexample that Cameron cites, Horace *Odes* 1-3, has now been pretty well eliminated by the arguments of G. O. Hutchinson, *The Publication and Individuality of Horace's Odes Books 1-3*, «Class. Quart.» 52, 2002, pp. 517-537.

not have been written much before 1 BC.[13] The curious result is
that our *Amores* is simultaneously the earliest of Ovid's works
and also a product of the middle part of his career.

Because it mentions the *Ars* and other works of the middle
phase, *Amores* 2.18 must have been added to the original collec-
tion, and it is manifestly about the poet's career. This theme ap-
pears in other elegies as well. We cannot assume that all such po-
ems were added to the second edition. We can however con-
clude that the theme of the poet's career could not (on the evi-
dence of poem 2.18) have been fully developed before the second
edition. And it certainly makes sense that this element of *Amores*
1-3 should be bound up with the same forces that produced the
Ars Amatoria and other works of Ovid's middle career, when
some sense of generic 'ascent' had begun to manifest itself.[14]

RETROSPECT

Amores 1.1 thematizes the trajectory of Virgil's career, even going
beyond the canonical works by adopting the fiction of an early,
failed attempt at epic. G. B. Conte, without mentioning the idea
of the literary career, has suggested that Ovid's design is more
elaborate still.[15] The epigram that introduced *Amores* 1-3 sketches
the editorial history of the collection:

When Ovid published *Am.* 1-3 he was already the author of the *Heroides* (*Am.* 2.18.21-
26, single epistles only), the tragedy *Medea* (*Am.* 2.18.13-14) and the *Ars* (*Am.* 2.18.19
with J. C. McKeown, *Amores* III: *A Commentary on Book 2*, Leeds 1998, pp. 385-386), and
possibly of the *Medicamina Faciei Femineae* as well (*Ars* 3.205-206; but cf. G. Rosati,
Ovidio: I Cosmetici delle Donne, Venice 1985, pp. 42-43), but not yet of the *Remedia
Amoris* (AD 1-2: A. A. R. Henderson, *P. Ovidi Nasonis Remedia Amoris*, Edinburgh 1979,
pp. XI-XII).

13. At *Ars* 1.177-212 Gaius Caesar is readying a campaign against the Parthians. Ac-
cordingly *Ars* 1-2 is assumed to have appeared shortly before 1 BC, the date of this
campaign; and since *Am.* 2.18 mentions the *Ars*, *Amores* 1-3 can hardly be earlier and
may well be a bit later.

14. On the intertextuality between the *Georgics* and the *Ars* see E. W. Leach, *Geor-
gic Imagery in the Ars Amatoria*, «Trans. and Proceed. of the Amer. Philol. Assoc.» 95,
1964, pp. 142-154; Hollis 89-93; J. B. Solodow, *Ovid's Ars Amatoria: The Lover as a Cultu-
ral Ideal*, «Wiener Studien» 90, 1977, pp. 106-127; M. Steudel, *Die Literaturparodie in
Ovids Ars Amatoria*, Hildesheim 1992; A. Sharrock, *Seduction and Repetition in Ovid's
Ars Amatoria 2*, Oxford 1994; A. Dalzell, *The Criticism of Didactic Poetry*, Toronto 1996,
pp. 147-148.

15. *The Rhetoric of Imitation: Genre and Poetic Memory in Virgil and Other Latin Poets*,
Ithaca 1986, pp. 84-87.

> <u>Qui</u> <u>modo</u> Nasonis fueramus quinque libelli,
>   tres sumus; hoc illi praetulit auctor <u>***opus***</u>.
> <u>Ut</u> iam nulla tibi nos sit legisse <u>uoluptas</u>,
>   <u>at</u> leuior demptis poena duobus erit.
>
> ***Arma*** graui numero...

Conte suggests that this is modeled on another famous 'pre-
proemium', the one that Servius tells us was removed from the
beginning of the *Aeneid* by Virgil's literary executors:[16]

> Ille ego <u>*qui*</u> <u>*quondam*</u>, gracili modulatus auena
> carmen et egressus siluis uicina coegi
> <u>*ut*</u> quamuis auido parerent arua colono,
> <u>gratum</u> <u>***opus***</u> agricolis; <u>at</u> nunc horrentia Martis
> ***arma*** uirumque cano...
>
> (*Aeneid* 1.1a-e)

This ingenious suggestion has met with both cautious assent and
strong disagreement – understandably, since Conte's arguments
are suggestive rather than conclusive. It is also true that the con-
tested status of the Virgilian preproemium greatly complicates
the situation. This is hardly the place to rehearse the entire con-
troversy, but the case that Ovid cannot be alluding to Virgil here
has to be addressed. It has been argued most recently by
Leopoldo Gamberale, on the following grounds: The pre-
proemium begins with a phrase, *ille ego qui*, that Virgil never uses
but that occurs many times in Ovid. The phrase is therefore char-
acteristic of Ovid rather than of Virgil. Accordingly, the lines
must be a post-Ovidian forgery.[17]

This bald summary does not do justice to Gamberale's learned
paper, which makes a proposal that is by no means impossible,
and that has won some acceptance.[18] But it cannot be regarded as

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16. Servius, *in Aen. praef.*; cf. *Vitae Vergilianae Antiquae*, eds. G. Brugnoli and F. Stok, Rome 1997, p. 287, s.v. *Versus in principio Aeneidis*. In an appendix to this paper I deal briefly with the historicity of this story and with the question of when it became current.

17. L. Gamberale, *Preproemio dell'Eneide*, in *Enc. Verg.*, 4.259-261, and *Il cosiddetto preproemio dell'Eneide*, in *Studi di filologia classica in onore di Giusto Monaco*, eds. Antonio Butteto and Michael von Albrecht, Palermo 1991, pp. 963-980.

18. N. Horsfall, *A Companion to the Study of Virgil*, Leiden 1995 («Mnemosyne Suppl.» 151), p. 24; echoed by M. Geymonat on pp. 299-300 of the same volume. A very similar argument is made by O. Zwierlein, *Die Ovid- und Vergil-Revision in tiberi-scher Zeit*, Bd. 1, *Prolegomena, Untersuchungen zur antiken Literatur und Geschichte*, Berlin and New York 1999, pp. 31-34; cf. pp. 331-333.

the last word on the subject. While it is true that Ovid frequently uses the formula *ille ego (qui)*, one might draw the opposite conclusion to that of Gamberale. Why, after all, would a forger wishing to pass off the preproemium of the *Aeneid* as Virgil's own work begin it with a signally Ovidian phrase? On the other hand, if we examine the Ovidian passages in which this phrase occurs, we find that they all make excellent sense as references to an existing passage – whether or not it was actually written by Virgil – that sum up the entire trajectory of Virgil's career and allude to his posthumous status as a canonical author.

I return to Ovid's autobiographical poem with which I began. The poem begins with these words:

> **Ille ego qui** fuerim, tenerorum lusor amorum,
> quem legis, ut noris, accipe posteritas.
>
> (*Tr.* 4.10.1-2)

Some scholars have identified the first three words as a quotation, and a number of points support this idea.[19] They introduce an opening sentence that is remarkably contorted for Ovid, whose Latin is normally as limpid as can be; and the contortion arises precisely from the occurrence of the first three words in this particular order. We can avoid the difficulty in any language but Latin, translating the period more or less as, «Receive [this story of mine], future readers, so that you may know who I was, the famous trifler in delicate love poetry, whom you are now reading». That is, one has to take the first word, *ille*, as attributive to the *lusor*, the sixth word in the period – hardly impossible, but hardly the most natural way to understand the opening phrase on a first reading.[20] There must be a reason why Ovid was willing to sacrifice his normal clarity and immediacy in order to begin the poem in this way. A good one would be the desire to quote a well-known source; and the *Aeneid* preproemium is the obvious candidate at the beginning of a poem in which Ovid tells the story of his own career.

This interpretation is supported by the fact that Ovid fre-

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19. Most recently S. Koster, *Ille ego qui. Dichter zwischen Wort und Macht*, Erlangen 1988 («Erlanger Forschungen» A, 42), pp. 31-47.

20. Prior to this passage *ille ego qui* always means «I am the one who...» The entire line virtually quotes the 'epitaph' included in *Tr.* 3.3, which begins *hic ego qui iaceo tenerorum lusor amorum / ingenio perii Naso poeta meo* (73-74), and which itself seems related to the *ille ego qui* conceit.

quently uses *ille ego (qui)* in contexts that concern his own career. The first occurrence is the opening of *Amores* 2, a passage rife with Virgilian references:

> Hoc quoque composui Paelignis natus aquosis,
>> **ille ego** nequitiae Naso poeta meae.
> Hoc quoque iussit Amor – procul hinc, procul este, seuerae!
>> non estis teneris apta theatra modis.

(Am. 2.1.1-4)

Again the phrasing of *ille ego* is slightly odd, as if the point were to use just these words rather than to be as straightforward as possible.[21] Line 3 concludes with a near-quotation of *Aen.* 6.258 (*procul, o, procul este, profani!*) that no one could possibly miss, and a passage that shortly follows (11–14) recalls the epic – a Gigantomachy, as it turns out – that Ovid once 'tried to write' – i.e. it alludes to and glosses the Virgilian *Dichterweihe* of *Amores* 1.1.[22] Our phrase occurs a second time in the *Amores* (3.8.23, *ille ego Musarum purus Phoebique sacerdos*) in a context where a Horatian frame of reference comes into view, but where allusion to the *Aeneid* is once again very much in evidence.[23] These two passages from the *Amores* may be felt to support Conte's hypothesis that Ovid alludes to the Virgilian preproemium in the epigram that introduces *Amores* 1-3. But whether or not one follows Conte, it is easy to believe that Ovid quotes the preproemium in the other two *Amores* passages, as well as in *Tristia* 4.10.

We can therefore extend our earlier argument. In comparing his career to Virgil's, Ovid drew not only on the canonical text of Virgil's oeuvre, but on at least one unauthorized element in the alternate or 'original' opening lines of the *Aeneid*. It is impressive that Ovid in *Amores* 1-3 – i.e. at about the midpoint of his long career – should allude to a passage in which Virgil speaks as if from beyond the grave as he makes public the work that capped his career. It was, after all, a bit early for Ovid to perform this retrospective gesture. At the same time, reference to the preproemium is appropriate because it puts into play the idea of the

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21. Does *ille* go with *Naso* («I, the famous Naso, poet of my own debauchery») or with *poeta* («I, Naso, poet *par excellence* of self-indulgence»)?

22. There is an equally unmistakable reference to *Aen.* 4.23 (*agnosco veteris vestigia flammae*), in line 8 (*agnoscat flammae conscia signa suae*).

23. With *Musarum purus Phoebique sacerdos* cf. *Musarum sacerdos* (Hor. *Carm.* 3.1.3); in line 19 (*cerne cicatrices, veteris vestigia pugnae*) Ovid alludes once again to *Aen.* 4.23 (see the previous note).

poetic career in its entirety as constituting a work of art. This idea returns with a vengeance in the exile poetry.[24] In *Tristia* 4.10, though Ovid speaks with an undeniable sense of self-pity about his relegation, reference to the Virgilian preproemium suggests that his career-long program of emulating Virgil has succeeded in some important sense. But in some of those other passages written in exile, the phrase *ille ego (qui)* emblematizes the absurdity of Ovid's situation. Having completed his Virgilian *cursus*, he is not honored with the glittering literary afterlife that he deserves, but instead is forced to continue living in bizarre and degrading circumstances. In one passage he famously laments his life among a Latinless people, where he must speak the local vernacular and, as a result, is forgetting his own Latin. To heighten the absurdity of this situation, he refers to himself as *ille ego Romanus uates* (*Tr.* 5.7.55-56). Against the sound of the 'Virgilian' *ille ego*, the hollowness of this vaunting titulature underscores the misery of life under relegation, in sharp contrast to the comically overbearing pride that the phrase had earlier embodied. Ovid occasionally uses the phrase when poetic reputation is not explicitly at issue.[25] But in the exile poetry even these passages seem part of Ovid's obsessive concern with current status and posthumous reputation. In *Ex Ponto* 1.2, a letter to Paullus Fabius Maximus, we find passages such as this:

> *Ille ego* sum lignum <u>qui</u> non admittar in ullum;
>   *ille ego* sum frustra <u>qui</u> lapis esse uelim.
>
> (28-29)

and this:

> *Ille ego* sum <u>qui</u> te colui, quem festa solebat
>   inter conuiuas mensa uidere tuos,
> *ille ego qui* duxi uestros Hymenaeon ad ignes
>   et cecini fausto carmina digna toro,
> cuius te solitum memini laudare libellos
>   exceptis domino qui nocuere suo,
> cui tua nonnumquam miranti scripta legebas,

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24. The vengeance is quite literal in *Ibis* (247): Ovid reports Clotho's prediction that a poet would sing the doom of the poem's addressee and then intones, *ille ego sum vates*: ominous and impressive, but not specifically Virgilian.

25. *Ars* 2.452, *Her.* 16.246, *Met.* 1.757, 4.226, 15.500, *Tr.* 4.5.12; only the first passage is in the poet's voice. *illa ego* at *Her.* 12.109 does not involve Medea's status as a writer.

ille ego de uestra <u>cui</u> data nupta domo est.

(129-136)

These passages outline a remarkable engagement with the Virgilian significance of the *ille ego qui* formula as a marker of posthumous literary fame.[26] The first two occurrences have to do with exile as a kind of living death.[27] When the phrase returns a third and fourth time, it represents Ovid not as a great author but as a kind of parasite at Paullus' table, useful in certain ways, and eventually as an in-law as well. With line 131 poetry does indeed return to view; but it does so in the form of occasional verse, a wedding hymn for Paullus and his wife Marcia. It is a measure of Ovid's degradation that he now bases his attempts to obtain recall on personal favors performed for the great and powerful, rather than on the enduring importance of his life's work as a whole; and it is a measure of his self-degradation that he acknowledges the gap between these strategies by reminding the reader of his earlier Virgilian pretensions.

In the last book of letters from Pontus Ovid takes the same tack that he used in the letter to Paullus, but with more hyperbolic effect. In this collection as a whole he revises, for the most part, the strategy he had used in the *Tristia*, that is, leaving his addressees unnamed. In one poem, however, he returns momentarily to his earlier policy. He emphasizes this change, wondering as the poem opens whether to indict his addressee by name, and then deciding to leave him anonymous. The addressee's crime is that he is a fair-weather friend. When Ovid's fortunes were at their height, this person was ever at his side, but now he pretends not even to recognize the poet's name:

Dissimulas etiam nec me uis nosse uideri
   quisque sit audito nomine Naso rogas.
Ille ego sum, quamquam non uis audire, uetusta
   paene puer puero iunctus amicitia,
ille ego qui primus tua seria nosse solebam
   et tibi iucundis primus adesse iocis,
ille ego conuictor densoque domesticus usu,
   ille ego iudiciis unica Musa tuis,

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26. Within the collection of *Epistulae ex Ponto*, *ille ego (qui)* also refers to the 'title' of *Tr.* 4.10, and is thus emblematic of the poet's *apologia* as well as of the implied comparison between his career and Virgil's.

27. G. D. Williams, *Banished Voices: Readings in Ovid's Exile Poetry*, Cambridge 1994 («Cambridge Classical Monographs»), pp. 12-13, with further references.

ille ego sum <u>qui</u> nunc an uiuam, perfide, nescis,
    cura tibi de quo quaerere nulla fuit.

                            (*Pont.* 4.3.9-18)

Here the ironic insistence hammered home by the repetition of
the introductory phrase bitterly underlines the contrast between
public recognition and personal betrayal. Even in exile, Ovid is
capable of boasting that he would ultimately be judged by his
work, which would outlast the humiliation of his final years. But
a dominant theme of the exile poetry is that the anticipation of
posthumous renown is of little comfort to someone dragging out
a debased existence in the here and now. Here, then, is another
reason why the Virgilian, or quasi-Virgilian, formula appealed so
greatly to Ovid. Despite its association with Virgil and his illustri-
ous career, *ille ego (qui)* is, in fact, quite a prosaic phrase.[28] As
such, it is in keeping with the tone of this passage, where the lan-
guage is plain and unadorned. And, of course, one important
strategy of the exile poetry is to represent the poet as having lost
his power to write decent poetry, or even (according to some
passages, including one that we have discussed) decent Latin.
Still, it is strange that Ovid should repeatedly, even obsessively,
return to this prosaic phrase unless it had some special reso-
nance. I suggest that it is in the specific provenance of the phrase,
and the possibility of ironically alluding to that provenance, that
this resonance consists.

CONCLUSION

If we look at the entire trajectory of Ovid's career, it is clear that
in the pre-exilic period the phrase *ille ego (qui)* is used as part of a
general strategy emulating Virgil. In the *Tristia*, however, these
allusions take on a new dimension as an echo of the first words
that Virgil spoke from beyond the grave. The comparison is es-
pecially appropriate because of the fictional death that Ovid
claims to have undergone by suffering relegation, and perhaps
also because of the suspect status of the Virgilian quotation,
given Ovid's meditations in the *Tristia* upon the mutability of for-
tune and even of the specific works that the dead author be-
queaths to posterity. But having made this point, Ovid moves on

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28. The normal prose order is *ego ille* (*ThLL*, 5.2: 275.78); *ille ego* occurs in comedy
as well as dactylic poetry (e.g., Tib. 1.5.9, 1.6.31, 3.4.72).

in the *Epistulae ex Ponto* to emphasize the prosaic quality of the emblematic Virgilian tag in a way that supports Ovid's contention that he has lost his ability to write poetry at all.

We may infer that Ovid played an important part in objectifying Virgil's career and in making it a point of comparison for later poets. It is characteristic of him to have done so in a much less straightforward way than we see in, for instance, the poets of the English Renaissance. Rather than merely claiming a status comparable to that of Virgil, as they would do, Ovid at the end of his career took the further step of ironizing comparisons that he had made in his earlier works, and did so in such a way as to maintain the conceit that his own career continued to parallel that of Virgil, even after he had written his masterpiece(s). More could be said both about Ovid's representation of his career and about the effect that this representation has on our perception of Virgil's achievement as well. I will close by observing that Ovid's strategy of self-representation, both in the more ludic early phase, when he would vaunt himself explicitly as the elegiac Virgil, and in the later, more rueful phase that hovered between posthumous fame and humiliation in the here-and-now, represents not only what is probably the earliest, but also one of the more complex reactions to what has been seen as the simple, ideal pattern of Virgil's career.

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APPENDIX

There are one or two issues touching on the "preproemium" that de-
serve brief mention.

About the authenticity of the "preproemium" I can add little to what
others have written, beyond stating for the record that I am agnostic.
And, in any case, the question of whether Virgil wrote the lines is,
strictly speaking, immaterial to my argument. If he did not write them,
they could still have begun to circulate as if from his pen before Ovid is-
sued the second edition of the *Amores*; and even if Virgil did write the
lines, it is at least possible that they nevertheless did not become known
until after Ovid's time. These points are obvious enough, but I make
them in order to stress that the question of authenticity is *per se* irrele-
vant and quite separable from that of when the lines first became
known.

Attempts to determine when the preproemium became known are
generally made in the service of arguing that the lines were not written
by Virgil, and this motive tends to distort the argument. Our best evi-
dence on this point is provided by an anecdote in the Donatus life of
Virgil. According to this anecdote, Nisus the grammarian heard from
some older men that Varius removed the lines from the beginning of
the *Aeneid* before releasing the poem to the public.[29] Whether Varius
did anything of the kind is obviously immaterial to the question of the
date by which this story became current. Nisus lived in the mid-first
century AD – Kaster makes Suetonius his younger contemporary.[30]
These older men would then have lived perhaps in Tiberius' time or a
little after. But observe how this information has been used. Austin, in
his influential discussion of the problem, concludes on the basis of this
anecdote that it is «reasonably certain» that «there is no ground for as-
signing the *ille ego* lines to a period much before the time of Tiberius».[31]
This is obviously unjust reasoning. If the ascription of this story to
Nisus is reliable (and Austin accepts that it is), and if we should believe
that Nisus had the story from older men (as Austin also accepts), then
the correct inference is that there is no ground for assigning the story to
a period much *after* the time of Tiberius. It is certainly true that one
need not trust either Donatus or Nisus implicitly, but while few believe
that Varius did as Nisus claims he did, few deny that this is the story he
was told. So unless one adopts a position of radical skepticism, one has
to admit that the preproemium was current within a generation or so of

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29. «Nisus grammaticus audisse se a senioribus aiebat, Varium duorum librorum
ordinem commutasse ... etiam primi libri correxisse principium, his versibus demp-
tis: *ille ego qui...*» (*Vita Donatiana* 42, eds. Brugnoli and Stok).

30. *OCD*[3], 1046, s.v. *Nisus* 3; Suetonius, *De Grammaticis et Rhetoribus*, ed. R. A. Kas-
ter, Oxford 1995, pp. 106-107.

31. R. G. Austin, *"Ille ego qui quondam..."*, «Class. Quart.» 18, 1968, p. 115.

Virgil's death, and admit at least the possibility that it was current even earlier.

What I have tried to do in this paper is to suggest that the pre-proemium was current very early indeed after Virgil's death. The argument turns on how one interprets Ovid's use of the phrase *ille ego (qui)*. In my opinion, Ovid's repeated, almost obsessive use of this otherwise very undistinguished phrase in a series of contexts that concern his reputation as a poet calls for some explanation; and the clearest explanation available is that when he used this phrase, he was quoting a single, well-known occurrence. If the phrase was indeed known as the rejected opening of the *Aeneid* – even if only to cognoscenti – then Ovid's interest in and use of it are easily explained. Certainty is obviously impossible, but the explanation I have advanced is much more likely than the traditional view – that some unknown person, wishing to pass the pre-proemium off as Virgil's, began it with a phrase that appears many times in Ovid – or than the alternative view – that the lines were composed, still in the style of Ovid, with no intention to deceive but came, nevertheless, by the time of Nisus' *seniores*, to be regarded as Virgilian.