Waiting for Ovid
Will he come?

I am going to explain the title and, with it, my intention of clinging, somehow, to an already-known sensation: Samuel Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot*, as an initial invitation to a challenging, unspecific knowledge, to an incursion to oneself, to the self, a kind of strolling with no purpose, no prejudice, a seducing to a permissive dreaming, even to a tempting aspiration to the fantastic.

Somewhere, close-by, we may find the wild and indomitable universe of the creator of beauty, the poet, the artist, waiting for the freedom he is unwilling to give up, for fear it diminishes his priceless treasure of forceful, yet uncontrolled and unconditioned thinking.

I am waiting for Godot. I need him and I hope he will come. I look for a serious argument in culture, art, civilization. I cannot help wondering each time I drag my thoughts, or my feet, on the beach or in the sad sea tired by the millennia of rhythmic and relentless turmoil, like a sentence to eternal life, what was here, what it was like to live and not to be understood, a soul, a thought, mystery, love, a poem line, an art moment, a fall into the eternity.

Not too many people know today or are willing to learn and understand how, a few millennia ago, here, on the shores of Callatis and Istria, the festivals dedicated to Dionysus rivalled with the festivities of the metropolitan Greece and warmed the spirits bursting with unchained artistic and poetic force in an elevating joy in the Hellenistic age.

From this point of view, we should bear in mind not only that young people from the Dobrugean towns used to complete their education in a town from the south – like Cyzic, mentioned before –, but also that, as a long series of examples prove it, these disciples reached a well-deserved fame through original contributions in the field of art and of erudition.1

When he must have come to these places, Ovid, the poet chosen for the disquietude of his own thoughts, the echo of so many poetic works was still heard, either through the celebrity of the authors’ names or through the artistry of their literary creations. Philosophy and drama were written, geographic and historiographic data were gathered. Istros and Thales lost their glory to the passing of time, ignorant and unforgiving, just as some of their works were lost forever, like a rebellious comet, little known in its frequently suicidal trajectory.

We know nothing, though we feign to know everything, like some ancient tramps who, journeying through the main street of civilization, gesture significantly to the other passers-by in order to apparently teach them, yet to deceive them with their own philosophy. We live in Godot’s world.

The generous aspiration to culture, the prerogative of the initiates and the elitists, is strange to us, like a provocation to a frontispiece of self-crowning. We are prophetically drawn by a world of dreams, of contemplation, in which we lose ourselves because we do not know the elementary neumes, the scribbling of the pens carved from flint or from the white marble of the ancient statues, perfectly sliding on the neat surfaces of the human forms teaching us pure beauty, metamorphosed into poetry and the outlines of the living forms, embodying a god or a poet. The ancient actor, tired by the heavy mask on his sweaty face, transfigured by the weight of the words which burn deeply in the minds of a public avid of depersonalization, lies beheaded, in a history museum at Hierapolis, unknown, like the words he spoke. It is in this world that we may find Ovid, sitting and waiting for us to come to him. All we have to do is to embark on Aeneas’s journey.

The Metamorphoses constitute a poem in prose, of mythical inspiration, written during Ovid’s mature age. They are a wonderful poetic illustration of ancient myths. The poet’s greatest merit is generally considered to have humanized the myth.2

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The possibility of saving ourselves in Ovid’s dimension, like the poet himself, or like Godot, looking for meaning in meaninglessness and for purpose in purposelessness, could mean the attempt to civilize barbarity and to put order in chaos. Could this engine of knowledge be enough to motivate the cultural progress? What might be the messages or the meanings of the development of human knowledge, if not those leading to self-destruction?

When the uttered, but banned love is thrown to the dungeon, as is the called-forth, but unapproved freedom, the sublime truth of the most scented word, the sweet love of the poet becomes the poison of our times, a condemnation to cultural exile, a marginalization to the limits of mercy, lack of culture and false values, where not even Godot feels like babbling, because our whole ignorance is a babble. We are invaded by Ionesco’s rhinoceros, who tread like the barbarians, so as there is little time left to clutch to the harsh winds of Pontus Euxinus, to defend ourselves from the sophomore persecution. It is the time of self-exile and of encoded writings, invoking so much love that Ovid would deny his pathos and would clench his hands in prayer, hoping that someone might forgive him because he knew how to write poetry. We all pay the price of knowing.

What did Ovid mostly love and hate? The rough life and the impossible climate were his most infamous enemies. Yet, he appreciated the people’s heart warming to his unfortunate fate and their sympathy for his suffering, hard to understand by a population all too engaged in the ordinariness of life, in agriculture and trade. “In loca, non homines verissima crimina dixi.” His elegies reveal, between fascination and deserted hope, his interest in his peers’ worship, in a kind of ode, like a crown, bestowed to the one who paid for love with exile. “Tempora sacrata mea sunt velata corona / Publicus invilo quam favor imposuit.”

Living far away from home, from the matchless Rome and from the poetry written with a god’s pen is an arrhythmia that dismembers the existence of the Court’s poet, an impulse that we all can feel, that we do actually feel, far from our truths, like an ample stifling of our sensations and thoughts. All that is left is a space for abstract or in memoriam creation, a Beckett-like fascination, in which the soul’s carol is real, though imperceptible.

These data about Tomis, as brief and incomplete as they may be, help us to better understand and appreciate at value face the information about Ovid’s life here. They are about a small locality with a reduced population of Greeks and locals, with no economic, political and military significance. The economic exchanges had a strong local characteristic and engaged in a very little proportion the commercial activity of the harbour, which, it seems, represented almost nothing. Thus, Ovid’s telling of the scarcity of the ships coming into the harbour, usually from the neighbouring lands and very rarely from far-away countries, like Italy, seems to be absolutely correct. (Trist., III, 12, 35-37)

Though weak and sick, the prison-cell blown by the winds gave him the strength to evade in his forgotten love compromised by the daring of placing the soul higher than the social rules, the political conventions, the rigid hierarchy. He kept writing heartfelt lines to his wife, to his daughter, and each time he wrote them, he hoped he would go back and be forgiven. Augustus did not forgive him, nor did Tiberius later, because, the fury gathered in Ovid’s quick and merciless pen grew old, in time, and fuelled the Emperor’s cruelty.

The literary and art critics abated their eyes, reading and editing thousands of pages of a work which travelled through millennia (two, in number), and the Romanian poet Vasile Alecsandri translated the lines into his dynamic and fascinated language ("the imitation of the poet by himself, the comparisons, the creation of the words, the accusative of the exclamation, the rhetorical strategies in Ovid’s poetry – simile –").

Yet, our fears throw us into a world of fascination, of vain heroism, of a history and a civilization, which we, the people living in the present, have no knowledge or perception. Ovid’s dream, a return to his mother country and to a mature love, new, clean, with no allegories or speculations, is a chimera that looks real, like the power of hope.

No, Ovid will not come, because his departure is too late for forgiveness and sin, too strong for the poets succeeding him and too real for an allegoric culture on which we should feed as the truthful followers of ancient Rome. Often with no use, but with a lot of pomp. We are waiting for a ship with beautiful mad people, to take us nowhere, but to bring us back from the exile of our conscience.

I am waiting for Godot.

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