

OVID AND THE NEUTRALISATION OF THE TRAUMA

■ Zdzisław Hryhorowicz
■ Adam Mickiewicz University of Poznań
■ Poland

ABSTRACT

The present article is an attempt to illustrate the process of acquiring a new identity by Ovid, the Roman poet exiled by Rome to Tomis, as seen by the Romanian author Vintilă Horia in the novel *Dumnezeu s-a născut în exil* (God was born in exile). The problem raised by the title of this article leads, in more general terms, amongst other things, to establishing and nuancing the relations between identity and otherness. Ovid, living his trauma at the beginning of his exile amongst barbarians, neutralises this trauma in and through a long spiritual process, while, at the same time, this neutralisation becomes a conscious acceptance of the Other.

KEYWORDS

trauma, exile, identity, otherness, others, Vintilă Horia.

Vintilă Horia's name is little or hardly known in many countries, for example, in Poland, while his work, never translated into Polish, is obviously not to be found in bookshops either. That is valid also in Romania, his originating country, which he left after World War II, going into exile, first to Italy, then to Argentina and France, to finally settle down in Spain. In Romania, Vintilă Horia is neither widely known nor read, and out of his eleven novels which he wrote in French and Spanish (to speak only about this part of his work!), only five were published in Romanian, the remaining six never being even translated. In other words, he is not well-known in Romania for the following and rather obvious reason – not all his novels and essays have been translated, and thus, as Georgeta Orian states, 'to offer a *definite*, final portrait

of Vintilă Horia *now* would mean to act without knowing all the facts, without having all data about him'. (Orian, 2008: 11)¹

In Vintilă Horia's case, who was an exiled writer, the theme of self- (re-) definition by relating to traditional or historical values, ultimately to the condition of the exiled is well-known.

One of Vintilă Horia's reference models, both spiritual and existential, was the poet Ovid, exiled by Emperor Augustus to Tomis. As the Romanian writer confesses, Ovid's theme still obsessed him even when he was in Argentina, when he felt Ovid was the symbol of the exile. Vintilă Horia adds that at that time, there had been two thousand years since Ovid was born, and this event was to be celebrated all over the world: 'I was reading books about him, I was rereading *Tristia* and *Epistulae ex Ponto*. I was on a beach (...) and I was reciting *Tristia* all to myself. I was searching everything that had been written about Ovid at that time. For two years, I was marked by the fever for Ovid. I didn't know what to write – a monography, a novel, a literary study...' (Horia in Rotaru, 2002: 59-60). Thus, Ovid becomes 'a significant that offered the scholarly aspect necessary to a certain exigence of the auctorial discourse not just once'. (Orian, 2008: 73).

Gone in search of his character, Horia lives a true crisis of values: 'I was just becoming aware that I could no longer write as I had done. [...] I was just realising that was I not to write a novel, an important book, I would become a failure.' (Rotaru, 2002: 59)

In 1960, the novel *Dieu est né en exil. Journal d'Ovide à Tomes* was published, prefaced by de Daniel-Rops (l'Académie Française)². In Romania, the novel was to be published under the title *Dumnezeu s-a născut în exil* only 30 years later, in 1990, by Europa Publishing House, in Craiova, translated by Al. Castaing, and revised by the author himself.

Paul Ricoeur states that we need a fictional model in order to understand life, which is an incomplete story, and that is the reason why we need to search for ourselves through fiction. (Ricoeur in Deciu, 2001: 6) According to such a vision, the self is a centre of narrative gravitation, because, in the absence of a narrative or when it faces a crisis, the self becomes the very victim of an identity collapse. (Ricoeur in Deciu, 2001: 6)

The novel *Dumnezeu s-a născut în exil* has Ovid, the exiled poet, as fictional character – the prototype of the human being whose defining trait is that of

¹ All translated quotations in the text, both from Vintilă Horia's novel *Dumnezeu s-a născut în exil* (God was born in exile), and from his critics are our translations.

² Librairie Arthème Fayard, 18 Rue du Saint-Gothard Paris XIV, 1960, col. 'Le Signe', 309 pages.

being banished from Paradise, something which starts a process of fusion between the pain located in a geographical space and the discovery of the unique important space which is that of the soul. This is to be accomplished by Ovid at the Eastern border of the Roman Empire – the end of the world for any Roman citizen. Vintilă Horia imagines the last years of Ovid's life, which the latter spent on the shore of *Pontus Euxinus* as a result of Emperor Augustus's decision, whose reasons remained a mystery kept also by the poet himself. In Tomis, Ovid feels a terrible nostalgia for Rome, the lost space, and which gradually turned into metaphysical nostalgia determined by the need of and search for God. Thus, Vintilă Horia sends us to the poet's work, the lines of which prove Ovid's metaphysical sense and predilection for Pitagora's theories regarding the immortality of the soul and the existence of a unique god, which renders the poet's change as being more credible, and also suggests one of the reasons why Ovid had to go into exile.

Pitagora's teachings which Ovid remembers from Rome and the Thraco-Dacian spirit discovered during his exile and which prepare him for the receiving of the Christian message, slowly and tenderly neutralises the poet's trauma of being exiled¹. Thus the trauma changes suffering into a modality of knowledge, strengthened by the new scenery, the Dacians' customs and religion where he now lives. Ovid starts to know the world again.

Georgeta Orian, while researching the problem of the exiled Vintilă Horia, underlines that 'thus self-knowledge first means the knowledge of the Other', who must first be discovered, then conquered, and loved, and only lastly known'. (Orian, 2008: 137)

The process of trauma neutralisation with Ovid is very slow and difficult, accompanied by different changes and 'jammings' of the spatial optics. From the very beginning, the contrast Rome – Tomis is enhanced as emotional and spatial opposition. Rome is the space of the past *i.e.* happiness, glory, and splendour, it is the centre of the world, of culture and pleasures. Tomis, on the other hand, is the space of loneliness, and sadness, situated somewhere at the end of the civilised world, populated by 'barbarians who have not reached the subtlety of smile, and who live at the outskirts of gravity and gaiety' (Horia, 1990: 11), with long, heavy winters, with blizzards that shake the roofs, with a roaring sea and with waves 'which turn into wild icy shapes, all these contrasting with the sun and the mild climate of Rome, where what we understand by human means a two-legged animal lacking both feelings and reason.' (Horia, 1990: 19)

¹ The syntagma 'the neutralisation of the trauma' belongs to Dominik LaCapra, in Dominick LaCapra, *History and Memory after Auschwitz*, Cornell University Press, New York 1998, p. 18.

‘Only Rome is the place worth living’, states Ovid, (Horia, 1990: 24) his sole consolation being the hope to return, but the heavy winters and the massive snow falls in Tomis shatter any possibility to communicate with his beloved Rome. He fights with himself, he is miserable, and revolts against his unhappy destiny:

Who will give me the strength to endure, to shout out this suffering which does not only exist in my mind? Is it the same I, Ovid, the poet of Rome, Corina’s lover, he who had and lost *everything*? I had got used to growing old and dying. Humans were created for that. But I am the only Roman citizen exiled in Tomis so far away from all that my life used to be. How could I convince myself that is a normal course of things? (Horia, 1990: 13)

At the beginning, the barbarians in Tomis represent a threatening population, an absolutely foreign social group, to which he could not belong. Georgeta Orian, writing about the problem of otherness, distinguishes three constitutive elements of the idea of otherness, resorting to Tzvetan Todorov’s research: the axiological one *i.e.* stating a value judgement, the praxiological one *i.e.* proximity or distance towards the other, and the epistemological one *i.e.* I acknowledge or ignore the identity of the other. (Orian, 2008: 137)

The poet Ovid transgresses such an emotional-psychological trajectory rendered in the form of a diary, which he would have written during the eight years of exile, in the first person narration: ‘I, Ovid’, the author of the diary, in the novel *Dumnezeu s-a născut în exil*, is the exiled one who, from the very beginning of his arrival in another realm, judges, feels superior, but slowly starts to learn, to come closer to, and cherish the values of the other culture. As Georgeta Orian notices, the relation *I – he* which generates another relation – *here – there*, is to be found in the novel from the very first lines (Orian, 2008: 137): ‘I close my eyes in order to read. And in order to kill! And thus I am stronger than he who closes his eyes only in order to sleep, even though this cannot bring him any consolation. [...] Beyond this shriek [...], the roaring of the sea seems to be the very voice of night, as if time had a voice and it would be heard in only one place: here.’ (Horia, 1990: 7)

For Ovid, this *here* means, unfortunately, the wild Tomis, while *there* means the Rome he cannot forget, and which he misses so much: ‘The second year of my exile starts today. Next year, I will be in Rome, maybe even in a few months’ time, when Augustus has certainly died, and my books will be found again in all libraries, and I will tell stories either at the *thermae* or at home, by the fire [...]’ (Horia: 1990: 29)

Yet, for the moment, Ovid, here in Tomis, becomes timidly friendly with Dochia, the Getic servant who initiates him into a new life, belief and happiness: 'Since she has been in my service, it's been more than one year and she has learnt to smile. She has become my friend.' (Horia, 1990: 32) Discovering new horizons of life and happiness, dominated by the deep belief in Zalmoxis and in the immortality of the soul makes Ovid slowly change his attitude as towards his own existence here, far away from his Roman lands, so much loved so far. Thus starts Ovid's spiritual adventure:

It is really not necessary to have all that you wish for in order to be happy. I know you do not share my view, but still, that is the way it is.' [...] 'You know, Dochia, I used to have all that a man could wish for and still I wasn't happy.' [...] 'We cannot be the masters of our own fate, nor of our own happiness', she added. 'Who is the master then?' She answered without hesitation: 'Zalmoxe.' (Horia, 1990: 26, 27)

This short dialogue between Ovid and Dochia, apparently without significance, has unbelievable spiritual repercussions for Ovid:

This name was unfolding over us, filling the twilight. [...] I felt touched by its power, and somehow obliged to follow it too. Did he become the master of my destiny before I have even met him? This woman [...] had uttered his name, and I could hear it for the first time, blooming on human lips. [...] I had totally forgotten about my unhappiness, where I was and why. I came to understand what Pitagora had called [...] *the unique god*. And everything disappeared when facing this life which I actually didn't know, but whose knowledge was waiting for me at the end of the world, under the walls of Tomis, as a single possible consolation. (Horia, 1990: 27)

So far, Ovid's tumultuous and even frivolous existence has been 'one relying on experimentation, knowledge and reasonable possession' (Orlan, 2008: 138). Everything changes when Ovid steps in the core of the culture he considers to be barbarian, when he starts to get in touch with the inhabitants of this realm, almost inexistent in his past so that he finds out the following in his fifth year of exile: 'Were I younger, I'd ask Dochia to marry me. I would start a new life with her, beyond Ister, and I would send a single letter to Rome. Reading it, Augustus would die a few years sooner.' (Horia, 1990: 129) This proves the deep transformation Ovid has gone through. He makes two trips to the country of the Dacians, which allows him to firmly master his new identity. During the first trip, he meets Mucaporus, a Roman soldier who left the Empire in order to find a new identity amongst the Dacians. Mucaporus helps Ovid understand how happy and rich life can be if lived with the belief in Zalmoxis, amongst foreigners, in the middle of an

unknown place, so far from Rome. During his second trip, when Ovid goes away to find Zalmoxis's priests, travelling new places, he reaches Poiana Mărului, where he meets a Dacian priest, all dressed in white, with white hair and white beard, a priest who was nothing but the soul, turned visible, of the charmed trees. This experience announces the arrival of the Saviour, and reveals the meaning of exile to Ovid from the perspective of a long time awaited arrival of God, announced by both the prophets of Israel and Zalmoxis, the god of the Dacians:

The distance which keeps you away from your dear ones, by the sky and the land of your childhood is painful. I want you to know that your exile has been given to you as a phase. Do not mourn in Tomis, and prepare yourself for the other, true life which does not know any pain. [...] Those who will shall know nothing but joy because they will be in God's light, and this light is nothing but kindness. [...] Believe that your soul is the result of your own strain, that you shape it every day out of your good deeds, and that only the soul is immortal. (Horia, 1990: 99)

Suddenly Ovid discovers that the exile, inscribed in the human nature, is part of his terrestrial existence, which is not tragic if accompanied by the immortal soul as it is merely transient meant to prepare man for the afterlife. Thanks to the Greek doctor, Teodor, who tells Ovid, a year later, that he witnessed the birth of the Saviour, the poet is close to understanding the true value of suffering and pain. Ovid confronts himself, thus learning the new possibilities of manifesting his *self*. Consequently, in the life in Tomis, the poet discovers his inner truths, the capacity to suffer and the deep meaning of existence of which he was not aware when he lived in Rome, whose glamour and imperial glitter deceived him for thirty years, as they were mere cruel tyranny and lack of freedom. He used to be the man who knew the rites of a world always ready to amuse itself. Yet he ultimately understands, exiled amongst the Dacians, the meanings of the wise books he has read, he understands the significance of the news he receives from his Roman friends, and he also understands Pitagora better, his teacher of esoteric knowledge. Ovid transgresses in Tomis the way from party to asceticism, from vice to purification. Travelling in order to know the places where he is exiled, Ovid knows many Roman runaways who converted to the religion of the Getae, who prepare themselves for the arrival of the Lord, as they were attracted by the spiritual values Dacia offered them through the hope in life after death. According to Cornel Ungureanu, 'Ovid's Dacia becomes a country of the spirit' (Ungureanu, 1995: 129). Monica Nedelcu states that 'one of the key-aspects of Vintilă Horia's novel is the process of *metamorphosis* or *metanoia* suffered by Ovid in Tomis: the excruciating longing for the lost space –

Rome – slowly turns into metaphysical longing defined by the need of and search for God.’ (Nedelcu in Horia, 1990: 200). The longing for Rome, which he lost, ‘turns the memory places into landscape spaces’ (Ungureanu, 1995: 129), while the space of exile in Tomis changes into space of expectancy and hope, paradise-like, which the poet discovers in the other realm. The paradise-like landscapes of Dacia, the secret paths which Ovid learns from Dochia, a local Beatrice of the poet, the Dacians whom he knows together with their customs – all these make Ovid neutralise the trauma he felt at the beginning of the exile. Georgeta Orian underlines the fact that ‘Ovid’s old identity does not disappear together with the displacement from the motherly universe, but changes into a stand for the new identity. [...] He has the possibility to confront his *own identity* with *hetero-identity*. This phenomenon happens when he gets in contact with otherness.’ (Orian, 2008: 142)

The beginnings of Ovid’s exile in Tomis are highly unfavourable, and very difficult to take. *Displacement* breaks the calming continuum of identity. The poet feels estranged amongst the Dacians, and is even considered to be a foreigner by the citizens of Tomis because he simply represents another set of values than those accepted by the citizens of Tomis, a sign of both danger and fear. Georgeta Orian writes that ‘the fear of the unknown prevents mutual knowledge.’ (Orian, 2008: 142) When the poet starts to slowly know the tradition of the places of his exile, he also finds the proper modality to know the other. We can here paraphrase Vintilă Horia’s own words, voiced out by Ovid: exile lost its tragic sense, now having an aim which can already be guessed. (Horia, 1990: 172) Ovid understands and accepts – the others are no longer strangers, nor is he one for them, while Rome is no longer the destination of all roads, now ‘Dacia, the periphery of the Empire lies at the centre of the world.’ (Nedelcu in Horia, 1990: 205) The exile, as estrangement from the native lands, loses its dramatism when Ovid discovers the universality of the human condition, and understands the importance of the spiritual values which should be his preoccupations now above all else. The exile ceased to be traumatising and slowly started to become a sort of ‘home’ where he has made friends, Tomis becoming a centre, a place where, as Cornel Ungureanu describes is, all the illuminating elements of the beginning of the world.’ (Ungureanu, 1995: 127)

When old, Ovid, becoming aware of the political situation in Rome and hearing about different political crimes ‘which have become a habit in the Empire’ (Horia: 1990: 186), remains without a choice, especially because ‘the return to Rome is not viable, at least in the near future’ (Horia, 1990: 186). He thus makes the choice to remain in the new lands for good, with his new friends who assure him of both their friendship and respect: ‘If your people forget you, we shall not.’ (Horia, 1990: 186).

Having come to terms with his new destiny of being a citizen of Tomis, Ovid finds a new homeland, thus accepting ‘the conscience of his own difference’ (Orian, 2008: 150) but also of his new identity:

I have few years more to live, and I’d better spend them amongst friendly smiles, in the middle of a forest where the centurions have yet not arrived.

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