

BOOK REVIEW

Christoph Ransmayr: *The Last World*, translated from the German by John Woods.
London, Paladin Grafton Books, 1991. Paperback, 201pp.

Ovid's exile has captivated the imagination of his readers over the centuries. At least two other novels are based on the life of the exiled poet at Tomis.¹ Woods' extremely competent translation from the Austrian German's 1988 novel, *Die Letzte Welt* (Frankfurt-am-Main, Eichborn Verlag) exposes the English-speaking world to a fascinating and thought-provoking view of the interaction of the poet's life and works.

In true "post-modern" style the author encapsulates time, in the sense that the book purports to be set in an unspecified "now" which oscillates between the 20th century, the exiled Ovid's world, the world of a contemporary Roman who has set out to find the exile and his lost work, and the mythical world of the poet's own *Metamorphoses*. In this the author is following the exilic fiction created by the exiled Ovid himself. As I have shown elsewhere, "Ovid's poetic Pontus"² is a mythical world where time stands still and where fantasy and fact perpetually fluctuate.

The young Roman, Cotta, is searching for a real exile and his lost work, but gets caught up in a world peopled by squalid characters bearing the names of Ovid's mythical heroes and

¹ Vintila Horia, *God was born in exile* (Transl. from the French by A.L. Sells). New York, St. Martin's Press, 1961; David Malouf, *An imaginary life*. New York, George Braziller, ca.1970; both reviewed by Betty Rose Nagle, "Ovid: a poet between two novelists", *Helios* NS 12.1 (1985), 65-74.

² *Papers of the International Latin Seminar* 6 (1990), 65-94.

heroines from the *Metamorphoses*. Stories from this work are projected on the walls of the slaughter house by a travelling showman, a dwarf called Cypris. That there is a horror in the past of the butcher Tereus and his wife Procne, is a constant theme. The truth emerges only when a mutilated wretch appears - her sister Philomela. The death of their son Itys retains the horror of the Ovidian telling. There are other characters - Battus, the epileptic, fascinated by a movie projector that he learns to work; Arachne the deaf-mute who weaves strange tales into stranger garments; Marsyas the charcoal-burner; Echo, who retells the exiled poet's tales, a once beautiful woman who is disfigured by a scaly patch, a prostitute that sells her favours for "pieces of amber, hides, dried fish or pots of oil" (p.184); Fama, the grocer, who grows talkative after her son Battus has turned to stone; and the central figure, more *catalyst* than *hero*, Cotta, "one of many ... *fugitives of the state*" (pp.181-182).

A useful index (pp.177-201) epitomizes the Ransmayr characters in relation to their Ovidian prototypes. Even without recourse to this "Ovidian Repertory" (*sic*) the discerning reader can unravel the intricate threads of Ovidian magic as rewoven by a new master of imagined reality, the Austrian author. It takes more than one reading to do this unravelling satisfactorily. Ovid's epitaph (*Met.* 15.871-872) is easily recognisable: why the stone upon which it is engraved should be covered in slimy slugs (pp.28-29) is less immediately discernible. The reader is left at the end with the desire immediately to begin rereading Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and his poems from exile, for he or she has joined Ransmayr's "Cotta" in the ranks of those looking for the elusive exiled poet within his works.

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