

## EXTRAPATRIA(M)?

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**Abstract:** *The first couple of stanzas propose a contrast between two poets away from their native land: OVID, and BYRON; the next three stanzas list modes of displacement (a term gratefully snatched from Cora Kaplan): by force, by conviction, by choice. Attention then shifts to motives of one sort or another: adventure, in two sense, and above all, money. Once the uprooted individual has reached the **terminus ad quem** for the time being, there are two choices: involve with the new environment that presents itself, or stay well away from it, gallantly aloof perhaps. Assuming the first choice, some kind of self-preparation, assimilation, or camouflage is advisable, and this cannot well be learned beforehand. The career of the incomer is metastable; in the long term, if not long before, it will follow one two paths, upward or downward. The condition of 'living abroad' implies a kind of **monstrously unequal** contract between individual incomer and host country. It also implies an odd kind of quittance with the country of origin (as for example the convicts who, having arrived in Australia from Britain, were induced to put on a theatre performance clarifying their situation). The gloomy but obsessive subject of dying in foreign parts is touched upon, with the compensating reflection that displacement is a law of the natural Universe. An envoi neatly rejects the expatriate condition as a value.*

**Key words:** *expatriate, alienation, assimilation, Ovid.*

### 1. Preamble

The atmosphere I'd like to evoke is that of the poet, or in the present case the versemaker, reading to a small circle of friends. The French poet Gérard DE NERVAL is said on good authority to have carried about with him a lobster, of sex unknown. For OVID's pessimistic persona, the appropriate emblem is, I think, *this*. [*Business with umbrella*]. It also seems to me that the Roman poet would have declaimed standing up, which I shall therefore do; and he would of course have been wearing a toga, which I shall not.

First I want to sketch my *Hypothesis*, my line of argument, then get on with

reading my verses. Poetic strategy is necessarily, of course, tactile, flammable, clipped, and allusive; it is quite foreign to the sober, neutral, explanatory ordering of the orthodox prose communication expected at a conference. So off we go.

### 2. Hypothesis

The first couple of stanzas propose a contrast between two poets away from their native land: OVID, and BYRON; the next three stanzas list modes of displacement (a term gratefully snatched from Cora Kaplan): by force, by conviction, by choice. Attention then shifts to motives of one sort or another:

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Once the uprooted individual has reached the *terminus ad quem* for the time being, there are two choices: involve with the new environment that presents itself, or stay well away from it, gallantly aloof perhaps. Assuming the first choice, some kind of self-preparation, assimilation, or camouflage is advisable, and this cannot well be learned beforehand. The career of the incomer is metastable; in the long term, if not long before, it will follow one two paths, upward or downward.

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### OUTS-EYED

Would OVID at Constanţa moan so much  
If he had had

More of the Greek in him, the Alexander touch,  
To boldly onward march to regions whither none

Had marched. But no. His sad  
And faultless verse inconsolable he spun  
Looking out blackly over the Black Sea

Too soon for FTV,  
Nursing in smock-land his postmodern passion  
For women's fashion.

Of sterner paste Lord BYRON, sixth of that  
name,

Though mad, though bad,  
Yet one who knew what he was after, had fixed  
aim,

Th' emancipation of himself and of an entire  
land,

Poet not a whit dead  
(Though fever-wasted on an alien strand),  
His battels to Dame Fame most nobly paid,  
His name – last accolade! –  
Morphemically converted to – by jingo! –  
The local lingo.

Why chop the knot with home? Why flee the  
fort

By hook and crook?  
A hundred necessary reasons play their part.  
Malfeasance, pogrom, famine, insurrection,  
threat

To life and livelihood.  
The passage perilous on the leaky boat  
Barely afloat, freedom for deadly dues  
(Some cannot choose their cues).  
Malice domestic, other minor forces  
Running their courses.

Destiny too makes move. Bugged down in  
Carthage

Budged, then dislodged  
The stormtossed Trojans on the run, ships,  
spars and cordage  
Hoping 'gainst hope to win their rest by  
tacking round

(*Italie, Italie*).  
Fa Hsien the Buddhist, barelegged,  
saffrongowned  
Threading the Chinese foothills, rafting, poling.  
With high and dry his scrolls.

The anxious Pilgrim Fathers guided nightly  
By the Almighty.

Contrariwise, Micawber the optimist.

Brighteyed pot luck.  
'Go West, young man', they counselled them,  
'or else go west'.

The grass in the next minefield always greener,  
The existential pluck

To make some different thing of one's arena,  
Adventure, a diversification of place,  
And identity, and pace.

The claim staked on Cavafy's first-seen  
harbours,  
On Fijian arbours.

Adventure, a chameleon of a lexis  
Box of all sorts,

A good brisk trade in Slavic lovelies of all sexes  
Alert in search of vulnerable wills and of weak hearts  
    The expat sexpot's courts.  
Love being a searching for a missing part  
(Plato: *Symposium*) if you know where to look  
    In Casanova's book.  
There's wider scope for interesting flirtation  
    In other nations.

Rupees. Riyals. The grubby labour, paid  
    With grubbier notes.  
Money, a term too blunt and coarse to be inlaid  
In pretty conferences such as this one. Yet  
    The ghost that haunts the nights  
And days and nightmares of the expatriate  
As rent, as bus fare, phone bill, doctor's fee  
    Taxes, and bribery.  
The co-dependency of emigrant yearnings  
    And actual earnings.

Two choices only. Swim with; swim against.  
    And if the first?  
Forthwith adopt-a-country then (*le vice anglais*  
So saith Todorova), defying *piano* or *forte*  
one's roots,  
    For better or for worse  
Gaining an extra *patria*, and not  
*Extra patriam*, ἀπολις, citiless  
    Among the pitiless...  
'But it's *their* country!' 'No, it's mine too', the dancer  
    Must give the answer.

And if the second? Forge in your entrenched  
    Compatriots' ark  
A carapace, a Middle Kingdom, thickly  
branched,  
Feared to take part, feared to take sides, to  
vote, to cry out  
    Feared for the rasping bark  
*Raus*, *raus*, the way that dogs scent fear.  
Devout,  
Cherishing origins, with a whiff of Brie,  
    Sushi, or g. and t.  
As Horace put it: 'With a change of latitude,  
    But not of attitude'.

Forewarned is forearmed, but only at half-  
cock;  
    And ten years' start

Studying a land will only half cushion the  
shock  
Of actual contact with the lakes, speech,  
politics  
    One thought one knew by heart.  
Better than nothing? Maybe. *Idées fixes*,  
Cognitive dissonance, was no disheveller  
    Of that first tour-ist traveller  
Doing his homework, reading up the books  
    Of Thomas Cook's.

Life, in a country one was not born in, brings  
    At every turn  
An *ad hoc* act or process of translating things;  
A guising of expression, camouflaging in  
    (Learnt well or badly learnt)  
The ambient language, second and better skin.  
Seen on TV: Dutch lips, but pure *pudong*  
    In a Beijing *hutong*.  
The illusion you're the perfect understander  
    Of *das Ander*'.

Two directions only. Go up, or go down...  
    (Perchance '...and out').  
Never an equilibrium; either to the crown,  
Or stepwise giving ground. A few fly high in  
air:  
    Nubar Gulbenkian,  
Orchid at buttonhole; Rațiu the millionaire.  
Far more will just make good, with the added  
joy  
    Of seeing their girl or boy  
Top of a noisy class of indigens  
    Jealous as hens.

Some ate the lotus fruit. And these forgot  
    Even yet to forget.  
Drafted into the legion of the drifted, taught  
The quantum universal law of least resistance  
    Sandalled, they sit  
Draped Daliclockwise in the middle distance,  
Robinson Crusoes on the breadfruit line,  
    the Diasporate  
Proven: strength of the seeding plant, and  
weedi-  
    Ness of the seedy.

O that most monstrous, most lopsided pact!  
    What will small I  
With my adoptive millionhanded host contract?  
How word the deal? A covenant of occupance?  
    Or a repairing lease?

Which of us two, I wonder, in our dance  
Wins most pro rata on the roundabout?  
(Still, if no gain come out  
The contract will revoke, the restless settler  
Search on for better).

Is it an oath of Sartrian good faith?  
Good faith with whom?  
One's self? One's new employer? Some  
Confucian Path?  
*I will be sure and solid with my new found  
land,  
Humour its works and quirks,  
Respect its civic customs, fresh or canned,  
Root for its football teams, note if its rash  
Drivers are apt to crash  
The traffic lights. These are survival matters  
For the expatter.*

Not to ignore the far-from-gentleman's  
Agreement made  
With one's own land. Mind's-eye sees  
fluttering fans  
The gaslit stage, the motley convict  
groundlings  
Haggard sheepstealers, cowed  
Young girl-infanticides, bewildered foundlings.  
'They left their country for their country's  
good'  
(Be it *well* understood),  
Shipped out as scapegoats for communal  
failure  
They shaped Australia.

*Dulce et decorum est in patria mori.*  
Whence this strong sense  
That our poor bones – or ash – make rich our  
homeland's glory,

And that, these rites denied, what's left is  
nullity:

X marks the expat spot.  
*Let not my destiny give me to die  
In a strange land: Andreas Kalvos, to whom  
This same romantic doom  
Was imperturbably assigned and given  
By Highest Heaven.*

For here we have no city that abides.  
A galaxy  
Out on a minor limbo. Spacetime, and  
spacetides,  
Expatriate us all for good and all from town.  
What special gravity  
In EINSTEIN's universe shall pin us down  
Like the full-length bronze statue of James  
Joyce  
That greets and shocks your eyes  
In central Trieste, slouched on a bridge's axle  
Frozen in exile?

#### L'ENVOI

Suppose  
That you know how to scan  
The land of your adoption; and suppose  
That you have made enough to live and prosper  
on; and suppose  
That you can don a fresh language like a fresh  
shirt,  
And newness, death included, has no terrors for  
you; and suppose  
You grapple friends of other culture to you;  
why,  
Yours is the global world and all that's in it;  
and  
No longer, o my daughter, will you rate  
Expatriate.