Bulletin of the *Transilvania* University of Braşov • Vol. 2 (51) - 2009
Series IV: Philology and Cultural Studies

EXTRAPATRIA(M)?

Richard WITT[1]

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

[1] British Open University.

BDD-A20257 © 2009 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 18:34:21 UTC)

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.

OUTS-EYED

Would OVID at Constança 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. Bogged 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,

BDD-A20257 © 2009 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 18:34:21 UTC)

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
Gainimg an extra *patria*, and not
Extra patriam, άπολις, 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?

BDD-A20257 © 2009 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 18:34:21 UTC)

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,
Expâtriate 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.

BDD-A20257 © 2009 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 18:34:21 UTC)