PREFACE

Publius Ovidius Naso—Ovid—wrote this poem roughly between A.D. 2 and 8, which was about twenty years after the death of Virgil. In other words, this is an epic written in the shadow of Virgil's *Aeneid*, then and still the most official epic in literature. People who like the Stazione Centrale in Milan adore the *Aeneid*, with its earnest if rueful celebration of piety and the glory and manifest destiny of Rome. To attempt another large poem that would, in its rather different way, presume to engage history and cover everything from the creation of the world to the late news must have been, for Ovid, both inevitable and dismaying.

Rome—the civilized, literary Rome of wealth and power—was a relatively small town. Ovid wasn't exactly a buddy of Augustus Caesar's, but because Ovid's third wife was Livia's cousin, he was probably on the B list for palace parties. (This was what got him into trouble and, eventually, exiled to Tomis, at the mouth of the Danube, where he died.) One must remember, though, that Augustus had been Virgil's patron, too. What we must try to imagine, then, was not just some theoretical instance of the "anxiety" of literary influence, but a constant comparison, the burden of which must have weighed on Ovid all the more heavily as his reputation grew with the successes of the early courtly poems. As he became "the" poet, he must have come to feel Virgil's shadow more and more palpably; it persisted, grew, and loomed over the Roman hills.

It is not impossible for a poet my age to understand at least a little of what this must have been like. I can remember the odd atmosphere of the fifties in which poets such as James Merrill, Richard Wilbur, and Howard Nemerov made their debuts. The successes of their early books were occasions for celebration not only because these were collections of impressive and accomplished poems from writers of great talent but also because, in a more general way, these successes demonstrated that it was possible to go on from the achievement of Eliot, Pound, Joyce, and the modernists. The work of these younger men was

liberating because now other, if perhaps smaller, kinds of excellence were . . . imaginable.

As Ovid reports, himself, in the *Tristia* (4, 10), remembering how he became a poet:

> I was lucky, at least in the timing of the choice I'd made. Macer
> was old then but I knew him well and heard him
> read often of birds and snakes and healing plants
> from that long didactic poem of his. Propertius
> was a close friend. We enjoyed poetry, conversation,
> and a friendly glass with Bassus, who used to write
> iambics, and Ponticus, famous now for his epics, and Horace,
> whose odes we heard him read with the ink still
> damp on the page. I saw Virgil once at a party
> but didn't have the nerve to go up to speak
> to the great man.

A complicated business, we can allow, a potpourri of admiration, envy, pride, reverence, modesty, and ambition. There was also the expectation—from Rome, perhaps from Augustus himself—that the mark of success in a poet's career was an epic that might stand on the shelf alongside Virgil's. But how was a poet like Ovid, with a more intimate, livelier, funnier, and more self-mocking sensibility, to attempt such a thing? The epic form was not, I think, immediately congenial, and my guess is that Ovid recognized this himself. Accordingly, he transformed the epic, playing against its grain a lot of the time, and escaping its severe organizational and thematic demands by transforming it into something altogether different. The first metamorphosis, then, is of the idea of the epic itself.

Virgil's is a highly conscious, elegantly artifactual poem of the waking mind; Ovid's is a dream poem in which one story blossoms into further stories, some of which are tangential, others of which are enfolded and enveloped. The speakers shift and shimmer, giving way to speakers within their tales and sometimes to speakers within those. (I have never before had occasion to use three different levels of quotation marks.) Ovid acceded to Virgil's metrical approximation of the Homeric hexameter, but with a quite different set of strategies and, therefore, quite different results. As L. P. Wilkinson puts it, in *Ovid Recalled,* "The gravity, variety of rhythm and expressiveness of Virgil's verse were due largely to heavy elision, but also to variation of pauses in the line and to free use of spondees, whereas Ovid dispensed as much as possible with elision, tended to pause at the caesura or at the end of the line, and in general was more dactylic, sacrificing everything to lightness and speed." There is a footnote that points out, with wonderful scholarly exactitude, that A. Siedow declared in 1911, in *De elisionis usu in hexametris Latinis*, that Ovid has 15.6 elisions on average for each hundred hexameter lines, while Virgil has 50.5.

So what? Think of the differences between Milton's pentameter lines and Dryden's, or the difference between Dryden's and Pope's, and you get the general idea. Ovid's metric calls attention to itself, and only now and then will he allow the drama of a story to interfere with the dancing-master precision of his performance.

My own experiment here is in the assertion of the possibility of English hexameters, even though there are not many successful precedents. Longfellow's Acadian jog-trot sounded in my ears like a bell buoy, warning me off that treacherous reef. And yet, there was Lattimore's Homer, which is in hexameters and which works well. (It remains my favorite modern translation of Homer and is the only one that suggests both the metrical stateliness and the syntactical muscularity of the Greek.) I wanted, moreover, not just to be more contemporary than Horace Gregory and Rolfe Humphries, but to attempt something that had not been done before, something that might stand comparison with Arthur Golding's work of 1567, and George Sandys' (1632), and even Dryden's brilliant fragments. Both Sandys and Dryden used heroic couplets, and Golding's version (Ezra Pound called it "the most beautiful book in the language,") is in fourteeners—the metrical pattern of "Mary Had a Little Lamb"! So why not hexameters? They might perhaps give some sense of the formality of Ovid's Latin, that constraint he could tighten or relax as the rhetorical occasions prompted.*

The poem, I think, is known more in its pieces than as a whole, perhaps because the separate stories are so conveniently excerptable. This is the *locus classicus* for a great number of myths, after all, and people have consulted this text the way they have consulted Lemprière's classical dictionary. (It is also true that, in a fourteen-week term, a poem of this length tends to get assigned in pieces, like the *Faerie Queene,* for example.) At 12,015 lines, the *Metamorphoses* is longer than the *Aeneid* (9,896) or the *Odyssey* (10,912) and almost as long as the *Iliad* (15,600). As a translator, I take all kinds of liberties, but I am strict in my observation of length and scale, which I take to be significant artistic decisions that any new poem ought to respect and re-create. The sweep of this work, the change in its moods and rhythms, the way in which the

*As an act of homage, I have used Sandys' rhymes for the last dozen lines of the poem, although the lines I am rhyming are hexameters, of course. My other expropriation is the Cyclops' song, which I took from John Gay's elegant libretto for Handel's *Acis and Galatea*.

heart of the poem turns out to be in the transitions, some of them quite arbitrary and fortuitous, are what have impressed me and what I have tried to convey.

A translation, after all, is an account of a reading. Each person's encounter with any text amounts to a translation, for each of us supplies a context, a frame of reference, an emotional environment, and an individual history that is unique and that the author could not possibly have imagined or tried to predict. The miracle is that any writer's text can resound in the mind, heart, and soul of any other reader. This is the great mystery of literature. It is also what allows me to imagine that what I have been doing may be of some possible use. My enthusiasm for Ovid's work and my delusion that I have understood his poem, that I have seen it and seen through it to these new words, are brash but necessary, and no more implausible, after all, than that first impossibility of any reader's leap of sympathy, intuition, understanding, and, finally, collaboration.

I do not propose therefore to discuss the poem or to attempt to analyze or explicate it. My translation is my commentary. But I can recommend that those who are interested may look at Wilkinson's *Ovid Recalled* and at Sarah Mack's *Ovid*. Both of these are reliably informative and provide useful bibliographies that will enable further reading.

The *Metamorphoses* of Ovid