By his own account, when Ovid was in his fifty first year he suffered a blow that stunned and shamed him, and turned what remained of his life into a kind of living death: he was banished by Augustus to Tomis, an outpost of the empire on the Roumanian coast south of the Danube delta:

iam mihi canities pulsis melioribus annis
venerat, antiquas miscueratque comas,
postque meos ortus Pisaea vinctus oliva
abstulerat deciens praemia victor eques,
cum maris Euxini positos ad laeva Tomitas
quaeere me laesi principis ira iubet. (Tr. 4.10.93-98)

Since Ovid was born in 43 B.C., the year of his banishment was 8 A.D. He never returned to Rome, but died in exile in 17 or perhaps 18 A.D.1

It was in Tomis, therefore, that he wrote his last two major collections of poems, the Tristia and Epistulae ex Ponto. The essence of both collections, the sine qua non, is the fact of his exile. Ovid can't keep his mind from it, but returns to it again and again, like a dog licking a wound. From what he says, we can put together a coherent and reasonably complete account. At the beginning, his offence to Augustus. It was two-fold, a poem and a mistake, carmen et error (Tr. 2.207). The poem was the Ars Amatoria, published probably 8 or 9 years before (not before 1 B.C.). The mistake, which precipitated the wrath of Augustus, was more serious. Ovid never tells us what it was. It was, he says, only too well known to everyone, and naturally, if it had been so offensive to Augustus, Ovid didn't want to aggravate the injury by broadcasting details. When the emperor heard of it, the poet was on the island of Elba with his friend Cotta Maximus.2 He was recalled to Rome, but not for public trial. He was, so he implies, heard and condemned personally by Augustus himself: "You did not condemn my actions through a decree of the senate," he writes, "nor was my banishment imposed by a panel of judges. You attacked me with bitter reproaches ... and, as is proper, avenged your wrongs yourself":

1 The last datable reference in Ovid's work is to the German triumph of Germanicus, of May 26, 17 A.D. (Fast. 1.285f). There is no reference to Germanicus's second consulship of 18 A.D.
2 Pont. 2.3.86.
The sentence was not, strictly speaking, exile. It was the relatively mild *relegatio*, which left Ovid his rights of citizenship and undisturbed possession of his property. In this case, however, Augustus attached a severe and unusual provision. He did not allow Ovid the customary freedom to choose his place of banishment, but chose it for him: Tomis, a half-barbarized Greek colony on the remote and ill-pacified Danube frontier. By a fixed date, and the period of grace was short, Ovid had to be out of Italy.

The poet’s last night in Rome was a heart-breaking farewell from everything he knew and cared for, and that knew and cared for him. At the final moment of parting he felt that he was being torn in two:

\[
\text{Dividor haud aliter, quam si mea membra relinquam,} \\
\text{et pars abrumpi corpore visa suo est;} \\
\text{(Tr. 1.3.73-74)}
\]

and his wife groaned in anguish as though she saw before her eyes Ovid and their daughter laid out ready for cremation.3

His voyage, dangerous and uncomfortable, was a fitting prelude to what was waiting for him at Tomis. In Ovid’s description, this was in every respect that matters no fit habitation for a civilized human being. The distance from Rome cut him off from the life of the city, and from effective communication with his friends. It might be six months before news reached him.4 By then, it was a faint and belated echo, and his response, even if he had the will to make it quickly, had, when it reached Rome, all the mesmeric appeal of a reading from last year’s *acta senatus*. In Tomis itself, he could speak to no one through his poetry, or, with rare exceptions, in Latin at all. It was only in 72 B.C. that the Dobrudja had been brought under Roman control, and the language of the conquerors was still virtually unknown.5

Originally, Tomis had been a colony of Miletus, and Greek was still spoken there, though, according to Ovid, in a form contaminated by the influence of the vernacular.6 The surrounding population was predominantly Thracian in origin, and spoke their native Getic. Ovid, like all Roman poets, wrote his work in the first instance to perform it, i.e. to read it aloud to an invited audience of friends and acquaintances, and in Tomis his writing made no sense. "To compose a poem which you can read to no one is", he says, "like performing a dance in the dark":

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3 Ibid. 97-98.
4 *Pont.* 4.11.16.
5 *Tr.* 5.2.67.
... in tenebris numerosos ponere gestus, 
quodque legas nulli scribere carmen, idem est. (Pont. 4.2.33-34)

The frontier was insecure, and Tomis and its hinterland harried by constant incursions of the tribes north of the Danube, which made cultivation of vines and crops and the maintenance of flocks and herds dangerous and difficult. The drinking water was salty and unpleasant. 7

Finally, lest we be tempted to suppose there may be some mitigating factor, this physical and cultural wasteland lay in the grip of a climate of at least Siberian ferocity. On this point Ovid has much to say. It was not only the raiding barbarians who inhibited development of the rural economy. Even without them the path of agriculture, as Virgil puts it, would not have been easy. Tomis was cold. There was, so to speak, only one season, and that was winter:

Neither do you (sc. Tomis) feel spring, garlanded with flowers, nor do you see the bare torsos of harvesters, nor does autumn offer you its grapes hanging on their tendrils, but every season is gripped by bitter cold.

Tu neque ver sentis cinctum florente corona,  
tu neque messorum corpora nuda vides.  
nec tibi pampineas autumnus porrigit uvas: 
cuncta sed immodicum tempora frigus habet.  
(Pont.3.1.11-14)

The sky is always chill, the earth always seared by white frost.

... numquam sine frigore caelum,  
glaebaque canenti semper obusta gelu.  
(Tr. 5.2.65-66)

One lifeless winter is continuous with the next.

... iners hiemi continuatur hiems.  
(Pont. 1.2.24)

In the extreme cold wine froze solid in jars, kept the shape of the jars when they were broken, and was served in pieces. 8 The sea, sunless and windswept at the best of times, 9 at the worst froze over, trapping ships in ice, and even fish - Ovid had seen them there himself, literally half dead and alive:

sed pars ex illis tum quoque viva fuit.  
(Tr. 3.10.50)

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7 Pont. 3.1.17-18.  
8 Tr. 3.10.23-24.  
9 Pont. 1.3.53-54.
The Danube froze, and the barbarians used the icebound river as a highway to butcher and despoil the hapless Tomitans with greater freedom than before.

And across this freezing waste, treeless and devoid of birds apart from those which "drink salt water with raucous throat" (Pont. 3.1.22), the north wind blew so strong that it flattened towers and tore the roofs off houses.

Ovid was not, by nature, inclined to asceticism, and nothing in the undemanding ease of his previous life had prepared him for even minor rigours, let alone the atrocious hardships of Tomis. For this cultivated and witty spokesman of an emancipated metropolitan society, to be anywhere but Rome was already deprivation. To be at Tomis was to live like an animal in pain.

The picture which Ovid draws of himself in his desolate penal colony was meant to stir compassion, especially in Augustus. As an appeal for mercy it left the calloused withers of his judge unwrung, and among later critics of the poet's work it has often met with a comparable aesthetic response. "One may see through the stile of Ovid de Trist.," wrote Abraham Cowley, "the humble and dejected condition of Spirit in which he wrote it; there scarce remains any footsteps of that Genius ... The cold of the Country had strucken through all his faculties, and benummed the very feet of his Verses." Jean-Baptiste Gresset damns Ovid as an "insipid whiner"; Schiller, while admitting that the poems from exile are "affecting" and contain "much that is poetic ... cannot, taking them overall, regard them as a work of poetry". Schlegel finds Ovid "yet more contemptible ... in his books of laments (sc. than in his love-elegies) ... where he ... descends to the basest fawning on his oppressor ... they are murderously monotonous and full of verbose repetitions". Eduard Norden acknowledges that there are some touching poems in the Tristia, but adds that the Epistulae ex Ponto, "apart from a few incidentally interesting pieces, are one of the works in all Roman literature most devoid of content".

Generally speaking, it is the poets among his critics who have treated the exiled Ovid most charitably. Charles Baudelaire credits him with "delicacy and fertility",

10 Tr. 3.12.16.
11 Tr. 3.10.17-18.
12 Poems, ed. A R Waller, Cambridge 1905, p.7. For this and the following critical comments on the Tristia and ex Ponto which I have cited I am indebted to Wilfried Stroh's entertaining anthology, Ovid im Urteil der Nachwelt, Darmstadt, 1969.
13 Pleureur insipide (La Chartreuse, in Oeuvres, Londres, 1751, t.1, p.47).
16 Römische Literatur, Leipzig, 19616, p.75.
and adds that "exile gave the brilliant poet the sadness he lacked".17 Gabriele D'Annunzio preferred the Tristia and ex Ponto to all of Ovid's other works:

My favourites were the Tristia and the books Ex Ponto; and I was attracted less by his arts of love, deceit and seduction ... than by his harsh exile in Tomis and the agony of that hedonistic spirit chafed by its memories beneath the gales of Scythia.18

More impressively, Alexander Pushkin rated the "Pontic elegies" above all of Ovid's poetry apart from the Metamorphoses:

(They have) more true feeling, more directness, more individuality, less cool calculation. What colour in his description of the foreign climate and the foreign land! What life in the details! And what deep longing for Rome! What affecting laments!19

For myself, I have always been closer to the opinion of Pushkin than to that of Ovid's detractors. I have never doubted that the Tristia and ex Ponto were an expression of "true feeling", and have always supposed that some of their defects, if they are defects, can be explained on exactly that assumption. I was therefore somewhat taken aback when I came across an article written by Professor A D Fitton Brown, entitled The unreality of Ovid's Tomitan exile, 20 in which he argued that Ovid never went to Tomis, and the Tristia and ex Ponto are pure fiction, a "fantasy of exile" (p. 22), an "exilic extravaganza [which perhaps] arose from Ovid's reflexions on the dangers he might have incurred by his writings, particularly the Ars" (ibid.). The implication of this is that Ovid was not only not relegated by Augustus, but not punished at all - his references to his "error" are merely "veiled hints intended to add motivation and interest to a fictitious situation" (ibid.p.20).

In essence, Fitton Brown's case rests on one fact and one assumption. The fact is that, apart from what Ovid himself says, we have virtually no contemporary or near-contemporary evidence that he was ever exiled. In the first century there are only two possible allusions. One is in Statius' Silvae: elegiac poets such as Callimachus and Propertius in his Umbrian cave would have delighted in celebrating the wedding day of Stella and Violentilla, and Ovid too, no longer miserable even in Tomis:

19 Thracian Elegies, Poems of Viktor Tepljakov, in Essays and Diaries, quoted from the German translation of F Frisch, München, 1925, p.341.
20 Liverpool Classical Monthly 10.2, Feb. 1985, pp. 18-22. Fitton Brown's position was later given qualified support in the same journal by H Hofmann: "I have long since come to the conclusion that these poems do not permit us any [Hofmann's emphasis]conclusions about the reality (in the sense of historical fact) of the statements and assertions put forward in them. ... on the grounds of his own poems alone it can never be proved that Ovid really was relegated and wrote those poems on the way to, and in, Tomi itself" (LCM 12.2, Feb. 1987, p.23).
Callimachusque senex Umbroque Propertius antro
ambissent laudare diem, nec tristis in ipsis
Naso Tomis. (2.1.253-55)

The other is in Pliny's *Natural History*: "To these we will add the animals included by Ovid. They are found in no other source, but are perhaps indigenous to the Black Sea, where he began that book\(^{21}\) towards the end of his life":

His adiciemus ab Ovidio posita animalia, quae apud neminem alium reperiuntur, sed fortassim in Ponto nascentia, ubi id volumen supremis suis temporibus inchoavit. (32.152)

Fitton Brown discounts both of these allusions. Of the first he writes: "It is surely clear that the actuality of Ovid's exile is of no importance to Statius - it is enough that Ovid purported to be very sad". I would not dispute this, although Statius' remark has considerably more force if it means that Ovid would give up a real, not a mere mock sorrow. Of the reference in Pliny, he says: "If this is indeed what Pliny wrote, he clearly believed that Ovid ended his life in exile at Tomis; but that may only prove that he knew of the exilic poems and took them at face-value" (p.20); and adds that Pliny himself may not have written the crucial words, *ubi id volumen ... inchoavit*: "id volumen, picking up nothing in particular, is very awkward stylistically. I think it at least possible that *ubi ... inchoavit* is a gloss explaining why Pliny thought that the fish might be native to Pontus - in which case Pliny would have been implying no more than that Ovid had included fish from Pontus" (ibid.).

Pliny's testimony has rather more weight than Fitton Brown suggests. We can, I think, immediately dismiss the proposition that he would wrongly have taken the *Tristia* and *ex Ponto* as autobiographical. This would mean that not only the polymath himself, but his sources and informants as well - including his near-contemporary Seneca the Elder, who wrote a history of Rome from the period of the Gracchi to his own day - were equally mistaken. This is simply incredible. Whether Ovid was exiled or not must have been common knowledge in the literary circles of Rome long after his death, which occurred only six years or so before Pliny was born.

Admittedly, *id volumen* seems abrupt, but it is not so "awkward" that we need postulate the hand of an interpolator. Pliny has already identified the *Halieutica* at Section 11, and *id volumen* picks up that passage: "... that book, i.e. the one I referred to above ... " But it would not be enough for Fitton Brown's purpose to excise that one clause. He would have to excise *qua apud neminem alium reperiuntur* as well, since Pliny is asserting here, as clearly as he might, that there is no secondary source which Ovid may have used for his account of the fish of the

\(^{21}\) At 32.11 Pliny names the book *Halieutica*, "On Fishing". The hexametric fragment which has survived under that name is probably not by Ovid.
Black Sea - in other words, that the poet is drawing on personal observation. It is possible, of course, that Ovid was familiar with recondite studies of Pontine ichthyology which lay outside Pliny's encyclopaedic ken, but to those acquainted with the characteristic bent of both this possibility must seem remote.

To his discussion of these two passages Fitton Brown adds an item of negative evidence from a first century literary source: "But the passage which tells most strikingly against the actuality of Ovid's exile is surely Tacitus Dialogus 12f., where Maternus is urging the advantages of a career in poetry over the advantages of a career at the Bar. After asserting that Ovid's Medea is more famous than the speeches of Asinius and Corvinus, he immediately adds that poetry is also a safe career, unlike the inquieta et anxia oratorum vita. What retort could be more obvious and effective than a reminder that Ovid, on his own showing, was relegated to Tomis on account of a carmen? Is it likely that the retort would have been withheld if Tacitus had believed the exile story?" (p.21)

If we accept that Ovid was exiled, and assume that Tacitus believed that the cause was his poetry, his silence here might appear surprising. But against Fitton Brown's position three points may be made. The first is the general one, that we can never know precisely what is in a writer's mind, and it is dangerous to prescribe what he should or should not have written. For whatever reason, he chooses to express himself in the particular way he does, and it is not our business to re-write his work for him. The second is that, if we consider the structure of the Dialogus, and the place of this episode in it, Tacitus' "silence" is rather less surprising. Maternus' defence of poetry is, in fact, something of an excursus in this work, which is a discussion not of the relative merits of poetry and oratory, but of the reasons for the decline of oratory under the Empire - "You often ask me, Fabius lustus," Tacitus begins, "why, when earlier generations have been richly endowed with the glory and the talents of so many outstanding orators, our age of all ages is impoverished, bereft of distinction in eloquence, and has almost lost the very word orator":

Saepe ex me requiris, Iuste Fabi, cur, cum priora saecula tot eminencium oratorum ingeniis gloriaque floruerint, nostra potissimum aetas deserta et laude eloquentiae orbata vix nomen ipsum oratoris retineat. (1.1)

This is Tacitus' theme, and he consequently lets no answer at all be given to Maternus' arguments. Instead, he creates, by the unexpected arrival of Vipstanus Messalla, a dramatic interruption which puts the discussion back on course. Messalla's intellectual tastes are conservative, and having spontaneously provoked Marcus Aper, the champion of modernism (14.4), he invites any of those present to "examine and explain the causes of this huge disparity", huius infinitae differentiae (15.2), i.e., the disparity between contemporary and republican oratory. The rest of the Dialogus is devoted exclusively to this question.

The third point is that we do not need to suppose that Tacitus regarded the Ars Amatoria as the cause, or even a cause, of Ovid's exile. Had Maternus been challenged on the issue, he may well have replied that Ovid was a case in point: he was not punished for his poetry - that was only a makeweight in the charge against
him - but for his "mistake". Perhaps Tacitus chose the example of Ovid precisely because that was his view of the case, as it is the view of many modern scholars.22

It seems to me, then, that the scantiness of the documentary evidence, and its nature, do not provide much support for Fitton Brown's position. His hypothesis is more important: that Ovid's account of the climate of Tomis is a tissue of exaggerations so grotesque that it cannot possibly be based on personal experience. Against it, Fitton Brown sets the figures issued by the Roumanian National Tourist Office for the mean monthly temperatures of Mamaia, a resort close to Constanza, the town now standing on the site of Ovid's Tomis. According to these figures (in degrees Fahrenheit) the warmest months are July and August, with mean temperatures of 79 by day, and 63 by night. Even in November, temperatures are still 51 by day and 38 by night. It is not until December that the mean temperature by night reaches freezing-point. The coldest month is January, with temperatures of 37 and 25. In February the figures are 41 and 30, and in March the mean temperature by night is already 35 degrees. From these figures Fitton Brown draws the conclusion that the Dobrudja, unlike some other parts of Roumania, has long, hot summers and short, mild winters" (p. 18). As for Ovid's claim that wine froze solid in the shape of the jar and was served in pieces,"... wine of average alcoholic content does not stand up in bottle-form until it approaches - 4°F. which is far below anything found in the Dobrudja" (p.19).

It was principally on the basis of these figures that Fitton Brown felt impelled to question the veracity of Ovid's account - which he does not scruple to stigmatize as a "farrago of nonsense" (ibid.) - as though the transformation of the suave sophisticate into the heartbroken exile should properly form an appendix to the myths of the *Metamorphoses*, rather than a chapter in the poet's biography. If he is right, he has faced readers like myself, who have taken Ovid more or less at his word, with no inconsiderable problem. We would be obliged to make a radical re-evaluation of our judgement of the *Tristia* and *ex Ponto*, since we would have to employ a completely new criterion - not that of whether these words are appropriate for a writer enduring near-intolerable loneliness and deprivation - not whether their purpose is to arouse, in their own degree, something like pity and terror - but whether they are appropriate as expression of the witty fantasy of a droll Roman poet living in his usual consummate ease among his friends and family, writing them, as he always had written, in the sybaritic comfort of his garden couch, emerging at judicious intervals to read them to audiences who rocked with laughter while the poet, with studious poker face, addressed friends in the front row as though they were two and a half

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22 Although at *Tr.* 5.12.46 Ovid claims that the Muses were the prime cause of his exile - *vos estis nostrae maxima cause fugae* - elsewhere he speaks of his poems as defensible, but not his mistake, which had injured Augustus more deeply: "If only I could defend myself against the other charge [sc. his mistake] as I do against this one [sc. the immorality of his poetry]. But you [Augustus] know there is a second which injured you more":

 legalized habeas corpus in 1789.

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utraque hoc, sic utinam defendere cetera possem.
scis alium quod te laeserit esse magis. (*Pont.* 3.3.71-72)
thousand kilometres away, described his sickly and emaciated condition, averring that if they suddenly saw him they wouldn’t recognize him, then dazzled them with his representation of a man half-dead with cold while the temperature down in the forum was touching 40 degrees (Celsius), to climax the whole performance with a heartrending account of isolation and despair in a voice broken by sobs and groans till it was drowned out by the uproarious applause of the audience who had turned up in their dozens to see the old stager at his tricks once more.

Personally, I would have found this re-evaluation rather difficult to make, and it seemed to me that, before I embarked on the effort, I should give Fitton Brown’s hypothesis closer consideration. In an area where manifest truths are not common, we can, I think, make the following propositions with some confidence:

1. In the *Tristia* and *ex Ponto*, Ovid does not only allude to or assume his exile; in the autobiographical *Tr. 4.10* he states it as the salient fact of his life.
2. In the *ex Ponto*, Ovid addresses or refers to Roman officials who knew from their own experience what the conditions at Tomis were.
3. In appeals addressed to Augustus himself, and to other members of the imperial family, Ovid claims that he had offended the emperor, and been punished by him.
4. All of Ovid’s extant work, which can be dated to 8 a.D. or later, purports to have been written in exile.23

I will consider these propositions in turn.

1. *Tristia 4.10*

Ovid wrote this autobiographical poem to perpetuate his own memory alongside that of his poetry, and given this intention, it is difficult to see why he should want to give a fictional account of his life. No one, to my knowledge, has ever claimed that what he says here is all fictional, nor could they, since Ovid makes explicit reference to his own earlier elegiac poetry (*nomine non vero dicta Corinna mihi*, 60). We would have to suppose then that it is a mixture of truth and fantasy, and in that case at least one third of the whole is fantasy, since that is the proportion devoted to his exile - roughly the same as that devoted to his birth, his brother, their upbringing and education, and his decision to give up politics for poetry. Yet if we suppose this, we must suppose also in Ovid an unusual degree of frivolity and irreverence, since he comes to speak of his exile in what we would normally take, without compelling reason for assuming the contrary, as a context which called for seriousness and sincerity, that is, the death of the poet’s own parents. "Lucky both of them," he says, "and in a timely grave, who died before the day of my disgrace":

Felices ambo, tempestiveque sepulti,

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23 Including the Ibis, and, presumably, his Halieutica.
Then, in case there is life beyond the grave, and a "bodiless shade escapes the heaped up pyre" (86), the poet declares his punishment, and his innocence, to his parents' shades below: "Know - and to lie to you would be sacrilege - that the cause of my exile was a mistake, not a crime":

Scite, precor, causam (nec vos mihi fallere fas est) erorem iussae, non scelus, esse fugae.

Ovid is, I believe, not exaggerating - what is involved here would be sacrilege. Are we nonetheless to suppose that he mocked the memory of his parents like this to lend show of truth to a comic charade? or that a Roman audience, however cynical and blasé - and there were those in Ovid's who weren't that cynical - would find this profanation of the familial relationship amusing? Both seem to me unlikely, and unlikely also that this was the impression of himself Ovid wanted to record for the future generations of readers for whom this autobiography is intended.

2. Ovid's addresses to Roman officials

That Ovid's account of climatic conditions at Tomis contains exaggerations is clear from his occasional inconsistencies. The picture he wants to create is that of a bare and hostile land gripped by extreme and unrelieved cold. So he describes the surrounding plains as treeless, the sea as sunless and windswept, and the earth as covered by the permanent snow of an unbroken winter. Now and again, however, he forgets himself, and the picture takes on a little more variety. When the air is warm, he says - *dum lamen aura tepet* (Tr. 3.10.7) -, the Danube thaws and provides an effective defence against the Sarmatians; it is only "when winter has shown his bristling face" that "the earth is white with marble of frost" (ibid. 9-10); snow is not permanent everywhere but "lies for two years in many places" (ibid. 16); the plains are not entirely bare: there are trees, though they are few and far between, and of no use:

rara, neque haec felix, in apertis eminet arvis
arbor.

(Pont. 3.1.19-20)

Most surprisingly, in the same poem in which he asserts that one winter is continuous with the next, he explains the confident aggression of the tribes from across the Danube by their ability to tolerate hunger and thirst, and their knowledge that a pursuing enemy will find no water. He does not seem to be pre-supposing a snowbound tundra here.

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24 These are overlooked by Fitton Brown: "... a simple assertion to the effect that Tomis lies at all seasons in the grip of extreme cold. In this Ovid is at least consistent: the climate is never free from cold ... " etc. (p. 18).
25 See above, p.3.
26 Pont. 1.2.85-86.
In the Tristia and ex Ponto, Ovid did not set out to write a climatological handbook on the Dobrudja. Most of the poems were, ostensibly (as Fitton Brown would say), or in fact, appeals for clemency, help, or sympathy; and even if Ovid, in his poetry, habitually paid Socratic veneration to the unadorned truth, he may have been prepared in this instance - supposing he was in Tomis - to compromise his ideals rather than risk prejudicing his case by untimely restraint. In fact, true to the principles later expounded by the dedicated bard Eumolpus, he had always believed that a poem "should appear more like the prophetic outpouring of a soul in frenzy rather than a statement under oath before witnesses". In Ovid's own words,

The fertile freedom of poets is infinite; it does not hobble its utterances by the historian's laws of evidence; or, more bluntly, "Most of my work is mendacious fabrication":

Magnaque pars mendax operum est et ficta meorum. (Tr. 2.355)

Nonetheless, his description of the climate of Tomis does not owe everything to a poet's fertile freedom - although there were, even then, those who claimed it owed too much. Travellers from Rome, writes Ovid to the poet Albinovanus Pedo, "tell me that you [plural] hardly believe these things":

Qui veniunt istinc, vix vos ea credere dicunt. (Pont. 4,10.35)

Ovid answers their aspersions by appealing to the testimony of two men who knew the lower Danube at first hand. The first was Vestalis. On Ovid's account, as senior centurion of a Roman legion, he had played a prominent part in the recapture of the town of Aegisus, not far from Tomis, which had been over-run by the Getae in a surprise raid in 12 a.D. Subsequently he had been posted back to Moesia as an imperial prefect. On his return, Ovid writes to him that he can see for himself that what Ovid has been saying about Tomis is true:

Being here, you can see the kind of land I am confined in, and you will bear witness that I have not been making false complaints ... With your own eyes you clearly see the Black Sea under ice, with your own eyes wine standing solid with the stiffening cold, with your own eyes you see the herdsmen of the savage Iazyges drive their loaded carts across the middle of the Danube.

27 Ut potius furentis animi vaticinatio appareat quam religiosae sub testibus fides, Petr. Sat. 118.6.
28 Exit in immensum secunda licentia vatun
   obligat historica nec sua verba fide. (Am 3. 12. 41-2)
29 Ripae Danuvii or orae maritimae (Ronald Syme History in Ovid, Oxford, 1978, pp. 82-83- referred to below as "Syme").
Aspicis en praesens, quali iacamus in arvo,  
 nec me testis eris falsa solere queri  
 ...  
ipse vides certe glacie concrescere Pontum,  
ipse vides rigido stantia vina gelu;  
ipse vides, onerata ferox ut ducat Iazyx  
 per medias Histri plaustra bubulcus aquas. (Pont. 4.7.3-4, 7.10)

Ovid is confident that the confirmation given by Vestalis will not be lightly disregarded: as a "young man sprung from Alpine kings" (ibid.6), he has the auctoritas conferred by royal blood.30

The second was a witness more imposing yet. This was Lucius Pomponius Flaccus, consul in 17 a.D., and brother of Caius Pomponius Graecinus, consul suffect in a. D.16. On the occasion of Graecinus' inauguration Ovid writes to him expressing regret that he cannot be present for the celebrations, and asking Graecinus himself and his brother to intercede for him with Tiberius to "let my ship set sail from the river of hell",

exeat e Stygiis ut mea navis aquis. (Pont. 4.9.74)

Flaccus has been on the Danube, and knows what it is like:

Ask him about the look of the place and the rigours of the Scythian climate ... [ask him] whether I am lying, or whether the Black Sea does freeze over and ice cover acres of its surface.

Quaere loci faciem Scythicique incommoda caeli  
 ...  
 mentiar, an coeat duratus frigore Pontus,  
et teneat glacies iugera multa freti. (ibid.81,85-86)

In neither of these poems does Ovid ask his witnesses to endorse his extreme claim that Tomis lies sunk in endless winter, which may be a tacit admission that not all was simple fact; although, as I have said, in his more restrained moments Ovid does not insist on that himself. What he does expect them to corroborate, however, is the substantial truth of his account of the severity of the Moesian winter: wine does freeze solid, and both the Danube and the open sea are covered with ice.

3. Ovid's addresses to members of the imperial family

In both the Tristia and ex Ponto Ovid makes many appeals, direct and indirect, to the compassion of Augustus. The most notable is the single poem of almost 600 lines which constitutes Bk. 2 of the Tristia. It is not a plea for pardon. Though Ovid

30 Syme identifies him as "son of the native prince Marcus Iulius Cottius" (p. 82).
defends his poetry, he admits that he has wronged Augustus, and asks only for a safer and more peaceable place of exile. Pleas much less elaborate, but assuming the same circumstances and with much the same drift, are made to Livia, Tiberius and Germanicus.\textsuperscript{31} Now if anyone in Rome knew whether Ovid had offended Augustus and been relegated by him to Tomis it must have been the emperor himself and these members of his immediate family; and if the offence and the relegation are a literary jeu d'esprit, we would have to assume that this powerful quartet were prepared, by accepting the roles in which he had cast them, to lend their formidable prestige in support of a poet's mock-masochistic fantasy. This is not, in my opinion, a probability which approaches the level of a self-evident truth, but if it was in fact the case, we might well be astonished at the levity of Augustus and his Palatine players, since the terms in which Ovid makes his pleas are what would be, by any normal Roman criterion, those of the most solemn adjuration: the gods, the patria, victoria, the life of Augustus himself (Tr. 2.155-69), the lives of Germanicus, Livia, and her two sons Tiberius and Drusus (ibid.), and later, the death of Drusus and the victory by which Tiberius will avenge it (Pont. 2.8.47-50). At the very least we would have to say that the readiness of Augustus to take part in this iconoclastic farce throws a new light on the character of a man historians have been prone to disparage as a humourless hypocrite.

4. Finally, the question of Ovid's poetic production in these last years of his life:

Whatever the reason may have been, some time about 8 a.D. Ovid's writing underwent a dramatic change in character, and contraction in scope. As I have said, there is none of his extant work which can be dated later than 8 a.D. which does not purport to be written in exile, more specifically, which does not concern his exile. He abandoned forever the erotic poetry which had first secured his fame, and - and this seems to me to be more important - the spirit of eroticism which infects all his other works, and which is one of the main components of their characteristic sly humour, and a large part of what we normally understand by the term "Ovidian". If we are to believe what he says, he never completed his revision of the \textit{Metamorphoses}, which, when he left Rome, still lacked the final polish. Although he claims to have written twelve books of the \textit{Fasti} (\textit{sex ego Fastorum scripsi totidemque libellos}, Tr. 2.549), only six are extant, and the most likely explanation is that he never put the last touches to the remainder, or published them.\textsuperscript{32} Even the six we have are clearly in a state of incomplete revision.\textsuperscript{33}

\textsuperscript{31} Livia: \textit{Pont.} 2.8.43; 3.1.97f, esp. 147f; Tiberius: \textit{Pont.} 2.8.37-42; 4.9.71-74; Germanicus: \textit{Pont.} 4.8.23f, 63f.

\textsuperscript{32} If he had, we might expect some reference to them in the \textit{Tristia} and \textit{ex Ponto}, especially to Bk. 8. It would have covered the month of August, re-named in the emperor's honour by a decree of the senate in 8 B.C. because it contained "the three paramount anniversaries in his career ... the first consulate, the fall of Alexandria, the triple triumph after the end of all wars, in 29 B.C." (Syte p.34).

\textsuperscript{33} The \textit{Fasti} were originally dedicated to Augustus. After his death in 14 a.D. Ovid re-dedicated Bk. 1 to Germanicus, and made other changes and additions to this book. Apart from one passage in Bk. 4 (a complaint to Germanicus about his exile, lines 81-84) Bks. 2 - 6
In short, then, from about 8 a.D. until his death, Ovid confined himself virtually to a single mode of elegy, the "elegiac" mode in our sense of the term, and to a single theme, his exile in Tomis. That is, if we are to believe Fitton Brown, he confined the capacity of his witty and fertile imagination to the elaboration of a single conceit, to which he devoted the last nine years of his life, and which accounts for a quarter of his total extant production as a poet. If this is right, what we are confronted with is a series of variations on a theme - 96 variations, in fact - and our approach to them will be clear enough. It will not be contaminated with natural sympathy for a fellow human being in distress, since there is none such present here. We must apply a strictly aesthetic criterion, and judge these variations solely on the skill, imagination, and above all on the wit (given the underlying comic purpose) with which they are worked out. On these points, as it happens, Fitton Brown does not pass an opinion, though it seems to me that the final implication of his argument may well be that Ovid suffered a strange and crippling paralysis of his creative faculty. If, on the other hand, Fitton Brown does detect this skill and wit, he has an advantage over some of Ovid's original readers, who could not, and over the poet himself. For Ovid came to fear that he had said too much and for too long:

Words fail me as I make the same request so often, and I am ashamed to persist with my useless prayers. I expect that boredom is coming upon you from poetry so unvaried, and that all of you know my pleas by heart.

Verba mihi desuni eadem tam saepe roganli,
iamque pudet vanas fine carere preces.
taedia consimili fieri de carmine vobis,
quidque petam cunctos edidicisse reor.

(Pont. 3.7.1-4)

Unfriendly critics were ready to confirm his fears:

You tell me, Brutus, that because the gist of these books is the same, some one is carping at my poetry, claiming that I write nothing but pleas for the

contain no definitive evidence of revision. Book 4 itself is still dedicated to Augustus, and many passages in the Fasti pre-suppose that he is still alive. (On the question of Ovid's revision of the Fasti, v. Franz Bömer, Die Fasten, Heidelberg, 1957, Band 1, Einleitung pp. 17f).

34 The Halieutica and, to a lesser extent, the Ibis would be exceptions.
35 These poems from exile tend to be neglected in discussions of Ovid, but they are not something he wrote by the way. They constitute a body of work greater than any of his others except for the epic Metamorphoses, and contain 1100 lines more than the Amores, Ars Amatoria, and Remedia Amoris put together - in round figures, 6,700 as against 5,600. The case of the Spanish poet Garcilasso de la Vega cited by Fitton Brown (p.22), who may have written one poem in which he falsely claimed to be confined on an island in the Danube, does not provide a convincing parallel to that of Ovid.

36 Cf. Pont. 4.15.29-30.
relief of a land closer to Rome, that all I speak about is the mass of enemies who hem me in.

Quod est in his eadem sententia, Brute, libellis, carmina nescio quem carpere nostra refers:
il nisi me terra fruar ut propiore rogare, et quam sim denso cinctus ab hoste loqui. (Pont.. 3.9.1-4)

Ovid admits the justice of the charge, but excuses his shortcomings: his poems only mirror his life - when he was lighthearted, he wrote lighthearted verse; now, when he is miserable, so is his work (ibid. 35-36). He has written these poems not to enhance his fame, but for a purely practical purpose: his well-being depends on them, and "the reputation of my work is worth less" (than that):

vilior est operis fama salute mea. (ibid. 46)

Naturally, since they are appeals for help, he makes the same appeal to all his friends (ibid. 41-44); and whereas a poet, creating freely out of his own fantasy, can vary his material at will, "My muse is a witness to my suffering only too truthful":

Musa mea est index nimium quoque vera malorum. (ibid.49)

Grim reality has, in the end, proved greater than the fertile freedom of his imagination.

Ovid and his critics were right. The Tristia and ex Ponto are highly repetitive. They centre about a small number of motifs which recur constantly - the dangers and discomforts of Tomis, the barbarity of the natives, the loyalty or treachery of Ovid's friends, pleas not for pardon but for a less inhuman place of punishment - and which are often treated in near-identical terms.\textsuperscript{37} If we believe that Ovid is telling the truth, these reiterations are not unaffecting. As we read them, we can come to feel, before long, something like the chilling fascination I once felt as I watched, on film, a scorpion running backwards in its circle of fire till it seemed to sting itself to death with its own tail. If, on the other hand, we suppose with Fitton Brown that everything here is fiction, so too, of course, are the unfriendly critics and Ovid's self-defence. They would be a kind of sophisticated double-bluff, and we must imagine then that Ovid's audience, far from finding his repetitions excessive, relished them, and their imaginary critics, as part of the joke. If Fitton Brown is right, he either definitively gives the lie to those who have accused the Romans of lacking a sense of humour, or provides confirmation, in an unexpected context, of their dogged perseverance.

Now what I have just said suggests that there is an essential identity shared by all the poems in the Tristia and ex Ponto, and I believe that is true. There is,\textsuperscript{37} See for instance Tr. 3.14.37f and 4.1.89f, and the two versions of the Iphigeneia in Tauris at Tr. 4.4.63f and Pont. 3.2.45f.
nevertheless, an important distinction to be made between the earlier and the later collection. In the Tristia (Bk. 5 seems to have been finished in 12 a.D.) Ovid names only two addressees: Augustus, and a young woman called Perilla to whom he writes as a protégée in poetry.38 If Ovid had offended Augustus, his restraint is understandable - he wants his friends, and others to whom he owes respect, to be spared the embarrassment of public association with him.39 In ex Ponto, however - the scandal was by now five years behind him - he abandons this regard of sensitivities, addresses twenty-one of his correspondents by name, and unequivocally identifies others to whom his appeals are directed. These correspondents and hoped-for patrons are not nobodies, cheap seekers after notoriety who may have been flattered to have their unmemorable name enshrined in the pages of Rome's greatest living poet. I have mentioned some of them already: Livia, Tiberius and Germanicus, the two consular brothers Pomponius Graecinus and Pomponius Flaccus, and the poet Albinovanus Pedo. To them may be added two sons of the distinguished orator and statesman Messalla Corvinus: Valerius Messalla Messallinus and Aurelius Cotta Messallinus; Paullus Fabius Maximus, consul in 11 b.C. and a close personal friend of Augustus; two other men of senatorial rank who were later to reach the consulship: Vibius Rufinus, consul suffect in 21 or 22 a.D., and Suillius Rufus, consul suffect circa 43 a.D.;40 two further senators, Gallio and Tuticanus; and two of Ovid's fellow-poets, Carus and Cornelius Severus.

If Ovid had never incurred the hostility of Augustus, we would have to assume that his reluctance to involve others in his defence in the Tristia was part of the pretence of deadly seriousness. His outspokenness in the ex Ponto would be much more difficult to explain. It would mean, in essence, that Ovid had declined to offer his friends and patrons a role in the joke while it still was a joke and its comic impact was fresh; when it was five years old, however, and he felt that it was, perhaps, pallind a little, and needed a new injection of comedy, he offered to bring them in, and some of the noblest men in Rome, and one of the noblest women, accepted this less than flattering offer and played their part faithfully to the end. Even Tiberius, who was not widely renowned for his effervescent sense of fun, seems never to have tired of the jest. Eight years after it was launched on Rome, and two years after Augustus' ears were closed forever to the irreverent charms of the Ovidian wit he had done so much to encourage, the stern features of his stepson would still relax in a boyish grin when he read the latest appeal for clemency and a release from icy Tomis composed by his near neighbour across the Velabrum.41

On a question such as that raised by Fitton Brown, as on many with which ancient Rome confronts us, we can never hope to attain absolute certainly. All we can do is weigh the probability of alternatives, which, in this case, are these: firstly, that Ovid's account of conditions in Tomis contains considerable exaggerations, but is substantially true; or secondly, that Ovid never offended Augustus; was never

38 3.7.
39 Although the unnamed addressee of Tr. 4.4 is identifiable as Messallinus.
41 Pont. 4.9.71-74, from 16 a.D.
relegated to Tomis; and that the whole story is a fabrication which was patiently maintained for nine years by the poet himself and the political and literary élite of Rome.

Given these alternatives, I prefer to believe that Ovid was, in this instance, telling the truth.