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Narrativity and Convention in the *Heroides*

I

In the *Heroides* Ovid imposes upon himself an apparent law of composition: that each individual epistle be autonomous. This law of autonomy consists in the fact that each epistle must provide by itself all the necessary information (along with all the implicit signals that it can supply; more on this below). Above all, the epistles are shaped in such a way as not to call for any response or supplement. Also on account of this, it is no accident that the first piece in the collection is Penelope's epistle.¹

Penelope writes a letter, but states explicitly that she does not want a reply from Odysseus (*nil mihi rescribas tu tamen ...*). She wants her husband home right away (... *ipse veni*), and in closing her letter adds sorrowfully 'even if you come back right away, I will look like an old woman' (1.116). Right away? Of course the letter does not expect to elicit either a response or a positive outcome. And for an eminently practical reason: it is sent to an unknown address. Penelope intends to entrust it to some foreigner passing through Ithaca, in the hope that he might by chance contact Odysseus. It is almost a message in a bottle. But there is a second reason. The letter will never be answered, for at the very moment of writing *Odysseus is already in Ithaca*.² Ovid's epistle fits perfectly into the plot of the *Odyssey*, a universally known text the entire factual framework of which Ovid intends to respect. Penelope had many years to think about writing letters and indeed, as Ovid takes care to inform us in vv. 59-62, she has written many, entrusting them to sailors passing through. But *this* letter is not placed at a random point in her monotonously prolonged wait. The letter is clearly 'dated' on the day Telemachus returned from Sparta and reported to his mother some uncertain news about his father.³ In Lessing's terms, this is a truly pregnant moment in the plot. On that day – how could one forget Homer – the house of Penelope is hosting a foreign traveller, a Cretan who claims to know many things; for Ovid's Penelope, he could be a perfect courier. But readers of Homer know who the Cretan really is, and also that after one night – cf. Penelope's *protinus!* – he will reveal his true identity to everyone. Just one more night and Penelope's long wait will be over.

Thus the first epistle of the book presents the reader with the delicate rules of a new literary game. The texts that follow must be taken as letters in a proper sense – written on a specific occasion, with a specific addressee and a specific goal. But they are strange letters nonetheless, because the reader does not expect them to have any consequence whatsoever. The third epistle is written by Briseis to Achilles. She is in the hands of Agamemnon, and the embassy to Achilles (*Iliad* 9) has failed. 'Tomorrow', Briseis has heard (*fama est* 3.57), Achilles will set sail right away ('To-morrow we the fav'ring Gods implore, / Then shall you see our parting Vessels crown'd, / And hear with Oars the Hellespont resound', in the remarkable rendering by Pope). It seems to be the case that Briseis is writing at night, the crucial night between the embassy and the day of battle around the ships. At the beginning of her letter, she mentions the dangers of wandering off during the night, and we cannot object to her worries, for during the night Homer stages a dangerous exchange of espionage and night-raids. This is the only available moment, the only empty narrative space into which Briseis' epistle might be inserted. The embassy failed, and Briseis is recasting its themes in a new voice. But the next day, as Homer reassures us, will bring the resolution that Briseis seeks. In an extremely long day of battle (which leaves our school editions of the poem in a predicament, forced as they are to entitle Book 11 'the morning of the twenty-sixth day' from the beginning of the poem, and Book 18 as 'the last hours of the twenty-sixth day') Patroclus will fall, Hector will obtain the arms of Achilles, his wrath will cease, and Briseis will be allowed to return to the tent of her beloved. The conclusion will not be lacking in some bitter irony, because she will gain what she sought, but she will also lose her only friend, the gentle man who also tried to console her (cf. *Il.* 19.287ff.; *Ep.* 3.23ff.). The timeframe of the letter is but the most delicate of incisions into the sequence of the *Iliad's* plot. Obviously the stories, whose continuities Ovid knows so well, also have discontinuities, interstices into which he may graft his texts (see Chapter 1 above).

The reader must make these incisions into a given framework that cannot be modified, such that the existence of the epistle will not have any effect upon it. Indeed this narrative context is decided elsewhere, in those literary texts (or more generically in mythologems) upon which Ovid has chosen to operate. In other words, the narrative autonomy of the letter is curiously interwoven with its pragmatic impotence, and the impotence implied by the context moves every letter into the realm of illusion. The lover is dead, gone, in love with someone else, he has left and will not return, or, if he does – in a more subtly ironic variant – it will be for some other reason, some chain of causation over which the letter has no control. The reader's narrative competence puts him or her in a state of ironic superiority compared to the limited field of vision of the first-person narrator.⁴ The *Heroides* are not a mere intertextual byproduct, as is the case with so much of ancient poetry; they are also (if one accepts an almost

playful definition that aims at capturing the ludic character of Ovid's *modus operandi*) real inter-texts, interstitial formations intersecting the bodies of other texts. The poet does not behave like someone who wants to fulfil his model. Such literary operations in general presuppose that one perceive within the models an empty space to be filled (whether before the fact, after, or within the very body of the story), or at least that the plot may be supplemented in one of its interrupted branches. Silius Italicus 8.50ff., for example, fills us in on what happened to Anna, Dido's loving sister, after we last saw her by the pyre in *Aeneid* 4. With Ovid it is not even the case that the narrator conceives a completely alternative plot to the traditional story line, using the latter as a 'possible world' into which new potential developments can be grafted (sometimes even with demystifying or at least ideological ends: 'if only you had spoken, Desdemona'⁵). The poetics of the *Heroides* suggest, more simply, that new windows can be opened on stories already completed. Ovid's narrative prowess is evident in the respect he shows for the traditional script. Each epistle is written in the 'blank space' of a narration already fully and densely composed, sometimes also dramatically fast-paced and action-packed. The spectacular ability of the poet has something surgical about it. It selects the most favourable point, cuts into it, then closes it back up without leaving a trace. Much is achieved by playing on the distance between the single witness, the author of the letter, on the one hand, and the wider points of view traditionally associated with a particular plot on the other. By manipulating the gap between the two, one can induce ironic side-effects in the reader's consciousness, which can, for instance, target the limitations of the witness, or even ironically undermine the values connected with the tradition, or do both at the same time. By combining these ingredients with less care, it is not difficult to arrive at a Gospel according to Judas, or a Hamlet seen from the perspective of poor old Rosencrantz and Guildenstern.

The effectiveness of this shift is guaranteed in Ovid by a fundamental narrative choice: the character who for the reader is a *witness*, when measured against his or her own intentions, is instead a *pleader*. The subjectivity of the point of view is ensured each time by the pragmatic end of the text. Even in this respect, the similarity so often invoked between the *Heroides* and dramatic monologues shows itself to be weak, episodic, and insubstantial.

II

To conquer, reconquer, or prolong love – worked into the most diverse texts and myths, the *Heroides* have these three intentions in common. This is what renders them so like one another, and so similar to a genre already consolidated before this new Ovidian *opus*: I mean, of course, Roman elegy.⁶

We know that elegy is the genre of monologue *par excellence*.⁷ It is not

only a question of thematic constraint – the unifying theme, as in the *Heroides*, is love – but rather of the constant effect of an individual voice drawing into itself any and every theme. Elegy could also deal with, as indeed it does, mythology, ethics, landscape, legislation, foreign policy, or trips to the seaside. What distinguishes it is its peremptory reduction of every external matter to its central focus, the persona of the poet-lover and his all-consuming purpose: the conquest and defence of love. The identifying feature of elegy is precisely this monologic reduction; as a rule, elegy has room for one voice only.

Elegy's contribution to the *Heroides* cannot be reduced (as some still do) to long lists of influences and interferences (following dull recipes of *Kreuzung der Gattungen*); in this sense even the current definition of 'lyric monologues' harbours some element of confusion. Elegy's contribution is qualitatively different from the influence of other genres, because it is not limited to subject matter and narrative techniques, nor merely to the presence of a unifying theme, love, but rather because of a unifying perspective. Elegy teaches the heroines how to 'reduce' every external reality, bringing it back to the *persona* of the lover. It teaches how to fuel a poetic discourse through resistance, the irreducibility of a personal point of view in the face of 'external' reality, while the partiality of the point of view and the pragmatic aim (the intent of the *Werbung*, or the elegiac courting ritual) reinforce one another. Ovid's choice of the love epistle ought therefore to be seen in light of this, a choice that gives the subjectivity of elegy 'institutional' form.

III

The field of study called poetics by some, narratology by others, has familiarized us with the concept that the choice of first-person narrative is a significant one, endowed with very subtle implications and variations. Without going into too much detail, I believe that the majority of scholars interested in narrative might agree on one conspicuous feature: it is typical of first-person narrative to stress the process of *subjective* reproduction of the events narrated. This narrative mode elicits from the reader a deeper participation in the 'making' of the narrative, while the hiatus between the time of the narrative and the time of its narration becomes increasingly sharp and perceptible. This readily leaves room, nonetheless, for a rich spectrum of effects ranging, for instance, from the naïve identification associated with memoir, to the complex effects of detachment and irony, stronger even and more radical than those which a heterodiegetic account is able to produce.

It is time now to consider the interaction between this homodiegetic, monologic form, and its intertextual quality noted before. It is here that a notable difference arises between elegy and 'heroid'. There is no doubt that a single elegy can project its own narrative context, by laying down the

tracks for a temporal development, by taking its place in a plot already known in part, and by playing on the recurrence, throughout the book, of an 'elegiac' persona which becomes more and more defined with each successive framing. It is uncommon, however, for a text to subsume as its context a narrative sequence already known and 'quotable'. We know that in elegy the identity and the character of the speaker have great importance in shaping the meaning of the text. In occasional examples (as in the so-called *Rollengedichte*) this information can become not only supplementary but also decisive, and produce a transvaluation of the content (in some cases, even an ironic rereading of the whole). But in the *Heroides*, the whole complex of information that defines the character is, as a rule, fundamental for interpretation, even when one deals with information merely assumed and tendentiously unspoken. An epistle like Hypsipyle's, for instance, is rather dull for readers with insufficient knowledge of the myth to project a narrative frame. She wants to warn Jason by means of a tendentious reading of the story of Medea, who is seen as a barbaric and cruel witch who rejoices in shedding the blood of her kin. Hypsipyle's reading doubtless intends to sound jealous and partisan, all the more so if one recalls Apollonius Rhodius' portrayal of the young and anxious Medea. But Apollonius himself reminds us (as does in general the current mythological lore, the basic 'encyclopaedia' of myth that controls the reader's competence) that Hypsipyle, while she accuses Medea of fratricide and other plots, is famous for having conspired and led a frightful mass uxoricide. As a whole, the epistle sounds like an elegiac text (dominated by subjectivity, the presence of courting, lament and jealousy) in which the narrative context and paratextual information (identity and biography of the speaker) assume an overwhelming importance.

In the *Heroides*, Ovid has turned the monologic constraint typical of Roman elegy – restrictions of voice, thematic spheres, and ideology – into a *narrative* convention. His epistles make 'elegiac' incisions into the narrative bodies of epic, tragedy and myth. The monologic reduction of this material is but the farthest outpost of elegiac imperialism. The gap between the time of narration and the narrative time guarantees the margin for irony and reflexivity.

The other side of Ovid's enterprise is that, by proposing fifteen different elegiac subjectivities, he is able in the end to attain an objective, external gaze upon elegiac love. This cultural construction has its own natural retinue of feelings – passion, jealousy, spite, uncertainty, anxiety – and its own arsenal of tactics – threats, enticements, blackmail, self-humiliation, self-exaltation, pleas, accusations, renunciations. But to be true elegy it must be looked at from the inside. The *Heroides* pay homage to the elegiac code, a code that has the power to 'retell' – and to 'recant' – the myth only when it establishes the proper perspective. But this expansion of the code ends up distancing itself from it; it becomes a disenchanted gaze. Repro-

duction and seriality are generally typical of either a popular art, or of a highly self-conscious art, learned and derivative. I would say that in the *Heroides* both these strategies play a role.

These elegies cannot wholly forget the rigidity of their code. Just as before in the *Amores*, Ovid assumes that elegy is already fully crystallized elsewhere, and takes pains that the reader not forget this. We know that Ovid can now look at the elegiac scenario from the outside. His evolution as love poet (already completed for the most part, from what we can gather, by the time of the *Epistulae Heroidum*) led him to reformulate his heritage, the young tradition of elegy. Relativism and irony have been the guiding principles of his work, marked by the translation of passionate love into a new flirtatious code. By now he has attained a detached perspective (frequently presupposed in the *Heroides*, and dominant in the *Remedia*) from whose vantage point there now exists an 'old-fashioned' elegy. This kind of Ur-elegy is distinguished by closure, absoluteness, and the purposeful union of poetics and life-choice. It is serious, pure, and in a certain sense also ascetic. This is the main reason why Propertius is so important as a model for the *Heroides*. The procedure, consisting in rendering visible the literary and cultural code according to which one works, has curious consequences for the *Heroides*. The world represented there is no longer exactly the traditional world of elegiac poetry that we find in the *Amores*. In fact these heroines, originating in epic and drama, were not born inside and for the elegiac code, as forms and representatives of the 'elegiac Self'. They can only appropriate it with a certain dose of anachronism. Thus the appearance of Penelope in the first position of the book has already, undoubtedly, a programmatic force. Some of the procedures adopted by Ovid, as I will try to show, introduce the reader to a new literary universe, one neither old-fashioned nor modern, neither epic nor elegiac, but founded upon the hesitation between, coexistence of, and the shifting back and forth of codes and values.

IV

Penelope is not only a character from epic. She is also a paradigm for elegy, conspicuous not only for her recurrence, but also for the stability of her role as an exemplar. Her functionality is the force that transforms the myth, as it is usually said, into a paradigm.⁸ When she appears in the elegiac equation, she exemplifies the value of conjugal love and fidelity at any price. Catullus closes the lengthy blessing of his epithalamium with the name of Penelope (61.130). From here springs the rhetoric of elegy: the faithful conjugal love of Penelope metaphorically figures the noblest specimen of that which the poet-lover can ask his lady. When Cynthia has proved herself inconstant and unfaithful, Propertius flings this example in her face:

Penelope poterat bis denos salva per annos
vivere, tam multis femina digna procis;
coniugium falsa poterat differre Minerva,
nocturno solvens texta diurna dolo;
visura et quamvis numquam speraret Ulixem,
illum expectando facta remansit anus.
(Prop. 2.9.3-8)

Ovid remembered these lines. The last words of Penelope's epistle allude to Propertius: *protinus ut venias, facta videbor anus* (1.116). This is how the elegiac eye looks at Penelope. But how does Penelope regard her own story?

If the whole plot could be summarized in a single symbol (admittedly hard to find in a twenty-year wait spent in women's quarters), it would be the *motif of the shroud*. Propertius himself seems to consider it exemplary. Penelope's nocturnal wiles are the symbol of her will to remain faithful at any cost, by beguiling the suitors. ('You, Cynthia,' Propertius goes on to say, 'were not able to spend one night, one day alone.') This motif is conspicuously absent from Ovid's text. Penelope's own account, a condensed, faithful, and complete retelling of the Homeric story, leaves no room for the famous trick of the shroud. As a surprised Arthur Palmer notes, 'it is strange that Ovid did not make more use of the story of Penelope's web' (n. ad 1.10). But stranger still is the use he actually makes of it.

O utinam tum cum Lacedaemona classe petebat
obrutus insanis esset adulter aquis!
non ego deserto iacuissem frigida lecto
non quereretur tardos ire relicta dies
nec mihi quaerenti spatiosam fallere noctem
lassaret viduas pendula tela manus.
(vv. 7-12)

Everybody knows that her weaving is a trick: *falsa Minerva* and *nocturnus dolus* of Propertius, the *doloi* of Homer (*Od.* 19.137). The epic heroine, in so far as she is epic, is the wife of the hero of *metis*. Her ruses are the equivalent in aim and form to those of her husband Odysseus. But if he ceases to be *polyphrôn* and becomes merely her beloved, the addressee of an elegiac love epistle, Penelope likewise will no longer be the crafty heroine, weaver of lies. Thus the shroud in Ovid serves one purpose – to *beguile the time*. No objective reader faced with these lines would ever think that she is working by night to *unweave* her tapestry. But *fallere noctem* is a daring expression. It preserves more metaphorical force than does our corresponding cliché, and to be more precise, here is a question of nights – with clear erotic surplus value – not simply of time. Love's time is measured in nights. This takes us back, once again, to an elegy of Propertius:

'O utinam talis perducas, improbe, noctes
me miseram qualis semper habere iubes!
Nam modo purpureo fallebam stamine somnum,⁹
rursus et Orpheae carmine, fessa, lyrae;
interdum leviter mecum deserta querebar
externo longas saepe in amore moras!'

(Prop. 1.3.39-44)

This time Cynthia is different. This time she speaks in her own voice. She is waiting for her lover who is lingering, like Odysseus, in *externo amore* ('outside love affairs'). She finds the night to be endless (1.3.37: *nam ubi longa meae consumpsti tempora noctis* – cf. Penelope's *spatiosa nox*). She then takes refuge in the maternal activity of weaving. Cynthia is fashioning herself as a Penelope.

But Ovid's Penelope sees herself as Cynthia. Her weaving is no longer an epic trick, but only the means of beguiling the nights on which she is deprived of her rightful love. The deformation of the Homeric model betrays a subjective shift, to a point of view that 'rereads' the epic theme from an elegiac perspective. The allusion to Propertius is the clearest sign of the new codification. With a light touch Ovid teaches us that the great themes of epic can also be turned into elegy. It is enough to change the point of view and to accept the monologic constraint native to elegy.

There can be no elegiac love without rivals. Ovid discovers in Penelope the possibility for this as well. He cannot make her omniscient, but he leads her, through her feminine intuition, very close to the 'truth' (i.e. the textual objectivity of its model, the *Odyssey*).

Haec ego dum stulte metuo, quae vestra libido est,
esse peregrino captus amore potes.
Forsitan et narres, quam sit tibi rustica coniunx,
quae tantum lanas non sinat esse rudes.

(vv. 75-8)

From a symmetrical perspective, Propertius had said to Cynthia *obicitur totiens a te mihi nostra libido* (3.19.1). The reader knows that Odysseus has also given into temptation, but knows too that as soon as he was free to go (v. 80: *revertendi liber*), he preferred mortal Penelope to divine Calypso. 'I know very well that compared to you the wise Penelope has but little virtue, in form and appearance ... nevertheless, I want and long each day to see the day of my return' (*Od.* 5.215ff.). On this comparative detail hangs the language of jealousy, the erotic diction of Ovid's Penelope. *Akidnos* (cf. 5.217) means something like 'weak, of little value'. Odysseus is addressing a divine lady. But Penelope is thinking of a *foreign lover*, with all its associated connotations but with all the signs reversed. *Rudis* is someone uncultured in the games of love; *rusticus*, for Ovid, is a key word, the attribute appropriate to 'all that is opposed to the *esprit* of the city'¹⁰

and its elegant, flirtatious culture. Spinning wool is the most obvious sign of matronly chastity. With modernizing irreverence Ovid sees in the *lanifica* ('wool-spinning') matron the type of woman who does not know how to make love. 'I hate the one who gives herself only because it is unavoidable, *siccaeque de lana cogitat ipsa sua*' (*Ars* 2.685ff.). Moved by jealousy, Penelope goes so far as to perceive herself as a negative model. She establishes a dialogue with the Homeric Odysseus through the medium of light erotic poetry and its language.

V

Briseis too is a paradigm for love poetry. Her character has undoubtedly romantic features. She is the woman loved by Achilles (*Il.* 9.342ff.), and in whose name the destructive wrath began. If one were to conduct an experiment and modify the arrangement of cultural values, focusing entirely on the wounded eros of Achilles rather than on his offended pride, one could end up with an 'elegiac' *Iliad*, a great epic text inscribing itself, paradoxically, within the bounds of a 'tenuous' love story. But sometimes Roman poets prefer to stress a feature with more realistic implications. Briseis is a *slave* (*serva*: *Hor. Carm.* 2.4.3; *captiva*: *Prop.* 2.9.11; *ancilla*: *Am.* 2.8.11). Her relationship with Achilles is the epic projection of a theme from everyday life: an affair with a maidservant. God only knows what has been done for the love of a chambermaid!¹¹ Ovid's epistle duly accounts for this 'sociological' situating of the paradigm. The whole movement and feeling of the letter is determined by Briseis' social position, and it may be instructive to contrast it with the tone of the noble and lawful wife, Penelope. But here too, we can detect in the narrative situation some signals implicating elegy, which already provided Ovid with a rather unusual perspective, namely, the experience of an affair with a maidservant seen from below, and not, for once, through the eyes of the free man or even the *dominus*. But what happens, in terms of the elegiac code, if a slave is loved by her master?

One is reminded of a cultural model fundamental to Roman elegy, even when it remains unspoken: the 'manservant-mistress' relationship precipitated by the bond of *obsequium* towards his lady. The elegiac Self addresses the woman he loves as his *domina*, opening up the entire semantic field that we now associate with the label *servitium amoris*. It is important for modern readers to appreciate the violent divergence of these images from social norms. In order to devise a new rapport with a woman, one calls into question the most settled of social assumptions, the distinction between free and slave, and employs it metaphorically to represent the subjection of a freeborn man to a woman, who is herself, moreover, not infrequently a freed slave. It must be remembered that in Gallus and Propertius this is not merely gallant talk, drawing upon language that might have already been widespread in Greek epigram and in Catullus'

own work. It is instead a semantic field that points to the choice of a nonconformist lifestyle. The core of the *servitium amoris* is, in fact, 'the degradation implied by the process of falling in love'.¹² Indeed, this degradation can exist only if we adopt the point of view of the elegiac Self – an upper-class Roman citizen from a good family, someone in a high enough position to draw his readers' attention to his act of renunciation.

Adopting the point of view of Briseis (who speaks 'from the perspective of the harem'¹³) produces a *Verfremdungseffekt*. The topoi, by now commonplace, of Gallus, Tibullus and Propertius, are traversed from a new perspective. Her intense and literal use of *dominus* reminds us that the metaphoric realm of elegy is neither symmetrical nor bilateral. The relationship of the lover with his *domina* cannot be travelled in the opposite direction. The enamoured voice of monologue in this letter belongs to one whose social position is that of a slave (Briseis repeats this constantly), in other words, a woman who could only achieve a *higher* standing through love (she tactfully alludes to this possibility). The symbolic degradation of the lover in elegy is replaced by a literal and violent subjection: a character who speaks of herself as a *munus* (v. 20),¹⁴ a *serva* (v. 100), and who refuses the title of *domina* (v. 101). But there are ironic novelties on the other end of the line of amorous communication as well. The choice in favour of *servitium amoris* is allied, as is well known, with the choice in favour of *militia amoris*, and the refusal to take up arms for the fatherland. Whoever takes the side of love wages war against warfare. Briseis is certainly an elegiac voice – there is hardly any other way to define the premise of her epistle, in which the subject matter is announced as a lament for and to the one she loves (in short, elegiac *querela*):

si mihi pauca queri de te dominoque viroque
fas est, de domino pauca viroque querar.
(3.5-6)¹⁵

The circumstances however compel the elegiac voice to raise a cry to arms, *Arma cape, Aeacide!* (v. 87), and to condemn the degradation accompanying the *militia amoris*:

... tibi plectra moventur,
te tenet in tepido mollis amica sinu.
Si quisquam quaerit, quare pugnare recuses –
pugna nocet, citharae noxque Venusque iuvant.
Tutius est iacuisse toro, tenuisse puellam,
Threiciam digitis increpuisse lyram,
quam manibus clipeos et acutae cuspidis hastam
et galeam pressa sustinuisse coma.
(3.113-20)

She recounts, moreover, the hedonistic precept of elegiac *otium* developed

in the *Amores* in nearly identical terms: *tutius est fovisse torum, legisse libellum, / Threiciam digitis increpuisse lyram* (2.11.31-2). Here we have unprecedented elegiac *querela* which rehabilitate arms and military glory and deplores *otium*, intimacy and playing the lyre. (Laodamia's phrase *bella gerant alii*, *Her.* 13.84, is less absolute by comparison.) If we look at the origin of *servitium amoris*, we have to admit that this concept had a lexical valence that was anti-conformist, libertarian, and the mark of an opposition to social conventions and constraints. But this fight against convention – in which Ovid's elegiac revisionism takes a stand – has precipitated a literary convention as well, one that has by now acquired its own weight. In so far as the *servitium* or the *militia amoris* has become a convention or an institution, one will be able to demonstrate its relativity, that partiality which the elegiac code, as a rule, ought to silence.

VI

I believe that the range of this operation depends most of all upon literary conventions and their mechanics. The question is not one of making a parody of or subverting elegy, be it in the name of poetic alternatives, or of life-styles that need support, but only of revealing some points of conventional 'weight'. Exactly the same occurs with epic. The hesitation of a Briseis or a Penelope between the epic and elegiac worlds should not be read as a parody or subversion of the epic tradition. It would be naïve to think that the amorous climate of the epistles is aggressive towards epic, intending to dissolve and subsume it under the dominion of the more 'modern' genre of elegy. It is precisely the narrative structure of the epistles – autonomous but continually threatened by the factual implications of their diegetic frames – which reminds us of how epic maintains its identity. The system of values claimed in elegy, as we have just seen, is ambiguous and relativized, just as epic too is neither nullified nor criticized, but re-explored from novel perspectives. Once again the stress falls on the power of conventions, those conventions peculiar to each genre which regulate the digestion of narrative and biographical material into the structure of the literary body. Just as is the case with the transformation of elegiac models, what is effective here is the strategy of reading in a strictly literal manner those themes that have crystallized into convention, losing touch with their concrete roots. Yet again Briseis' epistle provides us with an example.

The game of allusion between convention and experiential reality is particularly prominent in v. 52, in which the apparently 'direct' pathos and the emotional investment of the voice of monologue are most intense:

tu dominus, tu vir, tu mihi frater eras.

The success of this type of formula in love elegy is well known. Ever

searching for hyperbolic expressions of everyday feelings, the poet widens the area under his *domina's* control at the expense of any other emotional ties: *tu mihi sola domus, tu, Cynthia, sola parentes* (Prop. 1.11.23). Such catalogues of 'substitutions' all go back, more or less directly, to a famous scene in Homer: Andromache's conjugal love for Hector, made famous by the enumeration, 'you are my father, my mother, my brother, my blooming companion' (Il. 6.429-30). It is difficult, and perhaps not that important, to establish to what degree love poets are affected by the persistence of the Homeric model.¹⁶ But it is at least legitimate to recall that this passionate and pathetic gesture was devised for a *female* figure, alone in a world of warrior heroes. It is worth noting that the lover-poet chooses Andromache's eros as his model, in spite of the fact that both the success and diffusion of the cliché serve to water down the reference, making it more generic.

But Ovid is endowed with an extremely literal poetic memory. He remembers Andromache's line as well as its Homeric context, the true original motivation for those bold words. Often the widespread occurrence of a *Pathosformel* follows a strong dose of forgetfulness, and the sublime is born from the loss of verisimilitude. In Homer, Andromache speaks as she does because she truly has no father nor mother nor brothers. War has consumed them, and her spouse Hector is literally her entire world. Beyond the possible and feared loss of Hector, Andromache glimpses total annihilation, slavery and desolation.

In the *Iliad* Andromache's fate is only tragically foreshadowed. Compared to the fears of the Trojan women, only one character appears as a concrete example anticipating their fate. This is Briseis, the prisoner of war who, like Andromache, has lost all of her loved ones in the destruction of her homeland. What is more, she has already suffered what Andromache fears: the death of her lawful husband and the reduction to slavery. In the poem's plot, in her lamentation over the corpse of Patroclus, Briseis presents the reader with a preview of Andromache's fate. After Briseis' lament, Andromache will experience another facet of this fate: she will watch her husband die. The last point of comparison – the destruction of the city, her capture and reduction to slavery – falls outside the Homeric plot, but is no less foreseeable and impending.

It seems therefore that between Briseis and Andromache there already existed a sort of natural parallelism, an easy exchange of ideas and motifs. But the transference of the pathetic formula has paradoxical implications for Ovid's text. One might see both of them mirrored in the tragic destiny of a third character certainly familiar to Ovid. I mean Tecmessa in Sophocles' *Ajax*.¹⁷ In the heart of the tragedy, Tecmessa finds herself in a situation similar to Ovid's Briseis. She is a slave of war and a concubine, and is forced to defend her rights as a wife without actually being one, and thus to do so from a subordinate position. Hence her disheartened appeal to Ajax begins with the harsh words *o despot' Aias*, 'master'. Briseis begins

(vv. 5-6) and seals her letter (v. 154) by addressing Achilles as *dominus*. Like Ovid's Briseis, Tecmessa is frightened that her future will mirror what she has endured in the past. If Ajax should fall, a re-enactment of her past awaits her.

At this point Sophocles triggers the comparison to Andromache. Any reader of the scene in which Tecmessa appeals to Ajax will hear in the highly pathetic expression a reference to *Iliad* 6. The similarities are both meaningful and intended – Tecmessa's appeal, her anxious vision of the future, the presence of their small, frightened son – but so too are the differences. Tecmessa is not a lawful wife, and Ajax is no longer a true Homeric hero, awaiting the 'natural' destiny of the warrior. What Sophocles has *not* taken from the Homeric model is therefore also meaningful; he elicits the comparison, but stops it short before Tecmessa is allowed to utter Andromache's famous lines. The most insightful interpreters of Sophocles usually underline this 'halting' of the allusive structure: 'how could Tecmessa tell Ajax "you are my father, my mother, my brother, my husband", when the destruction of her family, even if not the very death of her father and mother, was ultimately caused by Ajax himself? ... 'It would be inhuman for Tecmessa to so love the one responsible for the death of her parents' ... 'Sophocles is probably thereby avoiding the special horror of the idea that Tecmessa has been cohabiting with the man who killed her father'.¹⁸ It is Sophocles' audience who must fulfil the intertextual movement, uncovering the cruel difference between Tecmessa and Andromache. The former, torn between two positions, is already living the tragic model of Andromache, but is unable to live up to it with confidence. She remains, as it were, beneath it.

Ovid closes the circle, taking his Briseis beyond the limits traced by Sophocles' dramatic tact to explore an actual 'perversion' of the Homeric model. Every single narrative given remains, as has been seen, under the explicit responsibility of Homer; it is he who tells of the brutal reality that Achilles took Briseis after killing her family. But Ovid's Briseis implores Achilles by the very sword that stabbed them. In a very similar situation, Tecmessa limited herself to supplicating Ajax by the bed that united them. By remaining perfectly faithful to Homer, Ovid discovers in the *Iliad* the key to upending the conventions. His version, however respectful, is already a perversion, precisely because the topos, an epic exemplar re-embodyed as a *Pathosformel* in the elegiac tradition, now proves far too close to the concrete, real-life situation. In the same way, traditional elegiac expressions – not only 'you are my whole family', but also 'I will follow you to the end of the world', 'I am at your service', and 'you are my conqueror' – are now given new motivation and the metaphoric distance is reduced, bringing them back from sentimental hyperbole to a description of a factual state of affairs. I will move now to an analysis of what happens with the most infamous of these topoi: 'I die for love'.

VII

By now, as in the first and third epistle, the importance of the traditional status that the heroines assume is clear. They are epic characters known to elegy as *paradigms*. Elegiac poets base their work upon the 'external' provenance of the characters only then to assimilate them into the elegiac context. The paradigms have value precisely because they are summoned from 'the outside', from a different and pre-existent literary world. Ovid exploits this strategy in order to work upon the co-existence of diverse worlds. His hesitation between the codes of elegy and of epos becomes the very literary space of these epistles, and the simultaneous presence of the codes shows, at once, their power (i.e. their specific spheres of influence)¹⁹ and their conventional, relative nature. But not all the characters of the *Heroides*, not even all the characters of epic, are willing to play this game. Dido for example is not, or at least not yet, a paradigm; rather, she is a character drawn into epic from love poetry.

By choosing a Roman model, one not yet paradigmatic and one so close in time, Ovid has risked more than usual and has paid for it – to judge from what his many critics and casual readers say – with a loss of quality. There is little doubt that Epistle 7 (in a hypothetical poll) is one of the least loved in the whole collection. One might think that the sublime Virgil of Book 4 offers, as does the great Homer, the right amount of 'resistance'. The distance between the epic and epistolary Dido does bring into play a vigorous dialectic, but the difficulty for Ovid lies elsewhere. In a certain sense the epic model has already taken an initiative that would be proper to the poetics of the *Heroides*. In short, Ovid has been pre-empted.

No doubt the rewriting needs, first of all, to diminish the points of grandeur in the Virgilian model and basically downplay its tragic features. Ovid executes this programme scrupulously. Not one of the high-pitched moments of Dido's tragic nature is preserved by Ovid, and his seventh epistle verifies *e contrario* how important it was for Virgil's heroine to become or feel (in a strictly literal and allusively precise sense) like Phaedra, Medea, Alcestis, Pentheus, Ajax, Andromache, Helen, and Evadne. Freed from these references, Dido is really a different character. But Virgil's Dido is not only an epic character with a tragic 'vocation'; she has already absorbed, to a certain degree, the specifically elegiac toxins that Ovid (as we now well know) reserves for his heroines.²⁰ The fact that she has already swallowed these poisons is what damages the work of assimilation. We know that for this epic love-story Virgil has pressed the boundaries of inclusiveness in his epic: tragedy, erotic lyric, epigram, Hellenistic love poetry, perhaps even comedy, and certainly Roman elegy, all contributed to its making. Nor were they merely compositional materials. Dido does not live solely in an elegiac context but (and more importantly, for the structure of the narrative) she also sometimes, intermittently, *speaks* in language that is erotic and elegiac. It is this feature

that dramatically clarifies her interior conflict and her inability to communicate with Aeneas. The large space given Dido in the epic text is more one of self-expression than of action. It is natural that in the *Aeneid* no voice is more 'subjective' than hers is. Correlated to this notion is the fact that Dido, in quantitative terms, speaks a lot, a fact that is also of interest to Ovid. In the span of her book, Dido speaks in direct dialogue for more than 180 hexameters; this corresponds in Ovid to an epistle a little over 190 verses long (an uncommon length in the *Heroides*). The near balance of these numbers is food for thought.

Ovid's epistolary enterprise runs the risk of drowning in an excess of stimuli. The Virgilian Dido provides practically everything he needs; often it is simply a matter of 'declining' his model. Virgil says *uritur*, and the new Dido *uror* (4.68; v. 25). But here the reworking of the conventions is already an ambush. *Uror ut inducto ceratae sulphure taedae*, with its unexpected, pyromaniacal physicality, reminds us that the fire of love is on its way to becoming, outside the metaphor, a sad bonfire (cf. *Aen.* 4.504ff. *at regina, pyra penetrati in sede sub auras / erecta ingenti taedis atque ilice secta ...*). And thus the delicate, gradual progression in Virgil, from the first metaphors of incendiary passion up to the fatal pyre, is subsumed in an emblem that points up its elegiac matrix.²¹ Similarly, the final image (191ff.: *nec mea nunc primum feriuntur pectora telo; / ille locus saevi vulnus amoris habet*) condenses into an epigram the subtle progression through which, in Virgil, the wound of love (first seen in 4.1, *saucia*) is transformed into an actual sword fixed into Dido's breast. In this way the epistolary poetics, which by its very nature 'compresses' the flow of narrative enunciation, elaborates the Virgilian text by exposing its elegiac potential. Even more often, the grand pathetic speeches in Book 4 provide models already oriented, both grammatically and rhetorically, towards elegy. The monologic reduction has its usual effects, by now familiar: not only is everything seen from Dido's point of view, but we are also compelled to participate in a process of subjective recasting imposed by the monologue upon already known events. Compared to the structure of the *Aeneid*, the epistle is noteworthy for its complete suppression of the all-controlling narrator's voice, which intervenes to balance empathy and sympathy, the voice of the character and the demands of fate.²² But the *Aeneid* has already familiarized us with a strong subjective voice able to produce irreconcilable perspectives. Aeneas as impious, and his mission as pointless and in vain – these are perspectives made sharper in the *Aeneid* within the context provided by the narrator's voice in harmony with the voice of fate. For this reason the uncertainty of truth that the Ovidian monologue induces cannot attain the effects of other epistles. Virgil's 'if only I had a child by you' overshadows, in its force and visionary autonomy, the harshly criticized 'I could be pregnant' of Ovid.

We end up missing some of the suspense, the irony, and the playing with conventions prominent in the 'Homeric' epistles. But there is still another

facet to explore, one connected once again with the 'time' of the epistle and that of its model.

Comparative tables of models and borrowings no longer receive good press, but a glance at the sequence in which the Virgilian models appear can still teach us a good deal. One infers from it (but it comes as no surprise) that Ovid manages to reuse not only the main points of Virgil's narrative, but also every case of Dido 'taking the stand' within the course of Book 4. The epistle's spatial continuum of discourse joins quotations, with varying degrees of exactness, from each of Dido's speeches and monologues. Needless to say, this collection of samples is redistributed within the epistle's self-contained, homogeneous and coherent monologue. We get the impression rather that the Ovidian epistle achieves a more continuous and coherent state than any of his model discourses. The psychological vacillation, the 'spiral-like' reasoning, the elegiac or dramatic ups and downs, are certainly more marked in Virgil than in Ovid. Nevertheless, for a reader mindful of Virgil the effect is paradoxical. In a single continuum we see a series of famous *topoi* march by – regardless of their original location and progressive disposition! – *topoi* we usually connect with individual contexts where the course of epic action and where psychological developments (threats and promises, hopes and suicidal despair) provided various motivations. Our first lesson in relativism.

It is good to ask ourselves also whether there exists a blank space in the model which allows for the letter's insertion (a test that proved useful for the 'Homeric' epistles). The Virgilian narrative, pressing and continuous, does not offer suitable spaces, but there is one possible point of intersection, one long since identified:²³

ire iterum in lacrimas, iterum temptare precando
cogitur et supplex animos summittere amori
ne quid inexpertum frustra moritura relinquat.
(4.413-15)

Directly after this Virgil places a speech addressed to Anna, who will then often report messages (cf. 4.237ff.: *talisque miserrima fletus / fertque refertque soror*). Here an epistle becomes possible, even plausible. And it is natural to infer from this point the dominant tone of the epistle; indeed it will be supplicatory and downcast (*supplex animos summittere amori*; cf. 4.24: *I, soror, atque hostem supplex adfare superbum*).²⁴ From here derives the narrative frame as well (Aeneas has already decided to leave immediately). Moreover, the repetitions hinted at in Virgil's text (4.413: *ire ... iterum in lacrimas, iterum temptare ...*; 4.437: *fertque refertque soror*; 4.447: *adsiduis hinc atque hinc vocibus*) are certainly good justification for the persistence of Ovid's Dido. Perhaps the entire letter should be read as a clever extended commentary upon Virgil's verse (immediately before *ire ... iterum in lacrimas*), *improbe Amor, quid non mortalia pectora cogis!*

This line is a good resource for Ovid, who perhaps already anticipates, reasonably enough, that he will meet with harsh criticism for the humble submissiveness and total surrender of his Dido. In sum, the letter represents not only an intersection with Virgil's epic text, but expresses also the search for a precise elegiac 'place' within the continuity of Virgil's account. *Improbe Amor* – the reaction of the narrator, with a 'halt' sympathetically imposed upon the narrative, reveals the movement towards a liminal zone. At this critical juncture the repeated messages of love, loaded with *obsequium*, nearly brush up against the borders of the elegiac world: *temptare precando*. Anna's role as messenger of love is already a potential feature of elegy, one that the narrator, not by chance, immediately limits and reinterprets: *miserrima* is in fact a vigilant recall of the stern code of tragedy that hovers over the plot. *Miserrima ... fertque refertque soror* has a slight, but not unfelt, assonance with the stock elegiac formulas for the go-between through whom lovers keep in touch: *tabellas ... portans itque reditque* (Tib. 2.6.46), [*quaerere*] *quas ferat et referat sollers ancilla tabellas* (Am. 2.20.41). But in Virgil, *refert* does not imply a response, as in the elegiac cliché, but only unilateral repetition. True elegiac communication remains incipient and the Virgilian narrative takes another direction.

Intersection with a model is also a way to anticipate objections and emotional responses of readers. Questions of verisimilitude and, above all, indignation for the deep humiliation inflicted upon Virgil's heroine – a pejorative version of elegiac *obsequium* – have arisen in the course of the centuries. Ovid seems to insinuate that he has captured Dido having hit 'rock bottom', at the lowest possible point of her life. It is useless to protest if the queen shows very little dignity and, for example, instead of cursing Aeneas, she wishes (in the typical style of an elegiac *propempticon*) that she had not wished him to suffer shipwreck.²⁵ Is this a question of psychology or of situation? Is there, so to speak, another Dido, an alternative character, or is it rather the dialogue form of the epistle that prompts her strategies? The poetics of the *Heroides* implies this oscillation, but does not intend to resolve it. The consequences of the epistolary strategy cannot end here. We are not reading a new speech by Virgil's Dido after all, some sort of super-monologue that contains them all, but a letter, a communicative act that projects around itself the shadow of a situation, a strategy, and a precise purpose. We can refer in Virgil only to hints of intention, and this is moreover a rather problematic line: *ne quid inexpertum frustra moritura relinquat*.

VIII

The Ovidian epistle itself gives better indications. We can find these most of all in the opening and in the closing. The letter concludes with the *imago* of Dido writing while holding ready the Trojan sword on her lap, and it is sealed with a text-book case of poetic epitaph (v. 197: *praebuit Aeneas et*

causam mortis et ensem ...).²⁶ It opened, moreover, with the promise of a swan song:

sic ubi fata vocant, udis abiectus in herbis
ad vada Maeandri concinit albus olor.²⁷

The motif signals, with the utmost desirable clarity, that Dido is uttering her *ultima verba* in an atmosphere of absolute desperation. A similar usage of the motif already appears in Apollonius Rhodius, in a passage that Ovid may have had in mind, on account of certain specific similarities (the background of wet grass, the echoing riverbanks). Medea and her companions, when death seems certain, sing a death lament (*Arg.* 4.1300-3):

ἢ ὅτε καλὰ νάοντος ἐπ' ὀφρύσι Πακτωλοῖο
κύκνοι κινήσουσιν ἑὸν μέλος, ἀμφὶ δὲ λειμῶν
ἑρσήεις βρέμεται ποταμοῖό τε καλὰ ρέεθρα ...²⁸

The conventional nature of the motif creates a slight dissonance within the epistolary framework of the *Heroides*. To be sure, if one looks to Virgil, this Dido who is ready to die is no innovation. Not only the *ultima verba* of Virgil's Dido but also, as is known, a hint contained in her first words to Aeneas, in the crisis of Book 4, head in this direction: ... *nec moritura tenet crudeli funere Dido?* (v. 307). One cannot be more Virgilian than this; *moritura* is the leitmotif for this character, and it is up to the wise reader to distinguish, in the various stages of the drama, the decreasing levels of dramatic irony. *Moritura* is first a comment by the narrator, then in a character's voice, which gradually progresses from an emotional outburst, to a dawning consciousness, to lucid desperation, and finally, to a concrete decision to kill herself. We could say then that Ovid has condensed, according to the modes of epistolary poetics, the development of a complex and volatile narrative isotope. The decision to compose the heroine's *ultima verba* as an epistle is an invitation to consider more closely the *novissima verba* of Virgil's protagonist. Dido dies (at last) saying:

'felix, heu nimium felix, si litora tantum
numquam Dardaniae tetigissent nostra carinae.'
Dixit, et os impressa toro: 'Moriemur ...'

(4.667-9)

This theme of bidding farewell to life becomes, in Ovid's hands, an ironic aside within the course of a rhetorical argument the gist of which is, 'it is not true that a god is guiding you towards a prosperous future – stay here!':

'Sed iubet ire deus!' vellem, vetuisset adire
Punica nec Teucris pressa fuisset humus.

(7.141-2)

It would be useless to multiply examples of this sort. Every unbiased reader would admit that this letter is by no means a suicide note. On the contrary, in every detail, in every significant transformation and revision of the Virgilian model, it is an attempt to win back Aeneas.²⁹ (Her sense of guilt towards Sychaeus, another factor in her suicide, is played down through the symptomatic plea *da veniam culpa; decepit idoneus auctor*, v. 107.) The letter is written in that space opened up by the tenacious difference between elegy's 'dying for love' and the tragic code's *amor mortis*.

The swan song therefore turns out to be an element of illusion. Like all the other *Heroides*, this letter is endowed with an illusory aura: it is without effect, because we are able to measure it against its outcome, and it is written at the wrong time, after everything has already played out. But while the context of the myth condemns and annuls the pragmatic intention, that very intention ends up demystifying the explicit framework of the letter, which foretells her death. After the calculated uncertainty of *ne quid inexpertum frustra moritura relinquat*, the development of Virgil's narrative has Dido – in her famous *Trugrede* – mask her resolution to die with an attempt of another sort, *novis praetexere funera sacris* (4.500), the magic rites that will either dissolve, or reaffirm, her relationship with Aeneas. Ironically, Ovid has composed a letter in which the resolution to die is an ostentatious mask for the real attempt to convince and to win back Aeneas.³⁰ Pale with love – instead of *pallida morte futura* – the Carthaginian queen returns one last time to that elegiac world from which Virgil, by developing her tragic potential, had prematurely banished her.

So the elegiac poetics of the epistle accepts and slyly exploits the troubled subordination of elegy to epic. Yet, this is not a good reason to read the Ovidian text (as most interpreters still do) as the submissive beginning of the *aetas Vergiliana* in Latin literature. True, the swan is *abiectus*, but ancient tradition suggests that swans sing their *best* songs right before they die.