

## VI. 1

### *VADEMECUM*

You're packing. The trip is booked, the shuttle to the airport is reserved. All you have to do is get all of this stuff on your bed and scattered around the bedroom into *that* suitcase.

A good deal of it you could leave home and hardly miss it. Something reminds you that *impedimenta* was the Roman word for baggage and you appreciate the knack they had for naming things. But the Romans also gave us a term for those "essentials" or necessities that we simply must bring along to make our travels comfortable, or to enhance them—*vademecum*, things that "go along with me."

So you check the essentials: Passport, check; visas, check; credit cards and traveler's cheques, check, air tickets, check. That's it; you could go just about anywhere with that stuff and do just fine.

Maybe.

Everybody has some "other essentials" for a trip. Maybe a picture of your kids or that special "someone." Maybe some medical necessities. Maybe a phone number. Or your CD player or iPod with your favorite tunes. Everybody has some other essentials. Maybe that stuffed animal you've never been able to get to sleep without.

Me, too. For me, and maybe for you as well, an "essential," and the one that seems to take the longest to pack, is *books*. Yes, books are certainly heavy, they don't fold easily into some corner of your suitcase, and when you finish them you either have to drag them through the rest of your trip or make the difficult decision to jettison them.

I am not referring to the books that you have probably already packed: guide books, menu translators, and phrase books. Or even that history of France, or wherever you are going, or a biography. The guide books are usually well worth their weight, but the others I am likely to read, or try to read, *before* the trip.

The books I'm referring to here are novels. There isn't anything particularly revolutionary about taking fiction when one travels. Take a look at any airport gift shop and most, if not all, of the selections are the latest "12 weeks on the NY Times bestseller list" offerings. Potboilers and page-turners by King, Gresham, Clancey and Steele. Airport booksellers know that you want to be *distracted* from the rigors and routines of getting to your destination. Hence the mysteries, horrors, twisty plots, and steamy sex scenes.

Distraction from the tedium of travel is one thing; but somehow the idea of reading a courtroom drama set in New York when one is on the way to Rome, or a

science fiction set in outer space when one is about to meander the inner spaces of Hong Kong, seems silly.

Choosing the *right* books, books that can begin one's *cognitive* transportation, while also providing the distraction from one's corporeal transportation, seems to make much more sense. And good fiction, particularly of the sort that uses one's destination as a 'character' or diver of the plot, can provide the atmosphere of a place that heightens our anticipation and appreciation of it. A good author of a novel, and often especially historical novels, has already sought out the dramatic potentials of a place and a period, setting and plot, given it a narrative form that can give one's travels an underlying sense of, if it is not too much of a stretch, *déjà vu*.

Perhaps this consideration is not of importance to all travelers, but for me my first visits to, say, Ithaca, Alexandria, Saigon, London, and Hong Kong, to select just a few, were actually visits to *Homer's Ithaca*, *Durrel's Alexandria*, *Greene's Saigon*, *Dickens's London*, and *Clavell's Hong Kong*.

Choosing the "right" books can be far more time consuming than the right clothing; there is one requirement: they must be about or set in some place or someone where I am traveling. There is nothing as incongruous, or ludicrous, as someone reading a John Grisham novel at a café in Positano.

So I had thought long and hard about what might be appropriate for a visit I would be making at the Black Sea port Constantza, Romania. I would be arriving by ship, and it would be nice to have read, or be reading something that would add some heightened level of interest and appreciation for the short time I would be there.

A few weeks prior to departure the "Constantza book" was still an unfilled hole in my travel reading plans. It was a different interest that caused me to remove a dusty book from the shelf of my favorite used bookstore in San Diego. It was a novel, *God Was Born in Exile: Ovid at Tomi*, by Vintila Horia, about Roman poet, Publius Ovidius Naso, popularly known as Ovid<sup>1</sup>, and his exile to a garrison town, called Tomi in Roman colonized Dacia.<sup>2</sup> I instinctively grabbed the book because, in four years of studying Latin, my Jesuit teachers had assiduously avoided even an introduction to any of the Roman poets. Of Roman *war* I knew a great deal, having plodded with Caesar's legions over most of the Roman world. But of Roman *love* I knew next to nothing. So it was Ovid's name that caught my eye, he the author of the manual of seduction for Roman males, *Ars Amatoria*.

It was not until I had the book home, eager to feed my long-delayed high school prurient interest in Roman erotica that I decided first to see if I could locate the town of Tomi. The geographical dictionary said: Tomi, or Tomis, *cf. Constantza!* Unwittingly (was it coincidence, or the machinations of the Roman gods?), I had found my "Constantza book." I resolved to start it somewhere in the Ukraine and "time" is completion for my arrival at Constantza, or Tomi.

Ovid himself was a reluctant literary traveler. It was not his literary talents, but his subject matter, that got him exiled from Rome by Augustus in 8 AD. He would have much preferred to remain at the center of the Empire where the inspiration and audience

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<sup>1</sup> Better to be known by this name than "Naso," meaning "nose," an obvious invitation to ridicule.

<sup>2</sup> Vintila Horia, *God Was Born in Exile: Ovid at Tomi*, (St. Martin's Press, 1961)

for his work was large and enthusiastic, and where the supply of beautiful women was endless. "Playboy of the Roman World" is how one reviewer of several new translations and commentaries in the most recent Ovidian revival characterized him.<sup>3</sup> For any Roman, exile from the capitol city was a capital sentence. For an urban rake to be banished to such a backwater as a garrison town in Dacia populated with soldiers, camp-followers, and pacified local illiterates, exile must have been a fate *worse* than death.

Indeed, present-day Tomi/Constantsa still has the gritty, derelict feel of a garrison town, although this may have more to do with the years of Ceausescu's dictatorship rather than Ceasar's. A pall of destitution hangs over the entire port. Forests of cranes, acres of them, signal its former importance as an *entrepôt*. But nothing is going on here; the cranes stand idle and rusting, as lifeless as trees in a forest murdered by acid rain. The only activity is some sluggish unloading from a rust-stained Shanghai freighter, its red smears looking like blood from the flanks of a harpooned whale. It's a graveyard for a failed political system and economy.

There is not much that Ovid might recognize in the present-day city. It has grown from the Roman *castrum* into a metropolis of a quarter million. The sweeping curve of beach fronting the Black Sea (called the Euxine Sea in his day) on the road into town might be much the same. It remains one of the Rumanian Black Sea resorts, but the hotels all look down-at-the-heels, and the beach is deserted. He would certainly recognize the large mosaic floor of the former baths, now preserved in an annex to the Archeological Museum. But what he would think of the statue of the poet himself that sits centered in the square in front of the museum can only be guessed. After all, there are blank pedestals where statues of Stalin and Lenin once stood.

Guessing and inventing, of course, are what a novelist such as Horia must do about the poet's years in exile there.<sup>4</sup> He has the poet visit a city to the north of Tomi, Aegyptos, that took its name from far off Egypt. That city serves as the source of the origin of the wandering Gypsies, who refer to themselves as "Rom" and, as a complaining American couple at the local tourist office attest, with their razor-slit pockets and purse, remain locally active in their skillful larceny. Aegyptos, for which Horia has Ovid employ the 2<sup>nd</sup> Century Greek traveler and geographer, Pausanias, as a 'Baedeker,' lies at the top of the Danube delta, and may be the site of present-day Tulcea.

Despite the ancient place-names and personalities there is something remarkably contemporary about the circumstances that dictated Ovid's fate. In the early years of the 1<sup>st</sup> Century Rome was enjoying a period of peace after years of war. Octavian, the adopted son of Julius Caesar, had vanquished Anthony and Cleopatra at Actium, and declared himself Augustus. It was also a period in which the more conservative moral code that had come down from the days of Rome's Republican and agrarian past had loosened considerably. Roman Patrician couples often divorced, and abortion was not

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<sup>3</sup> Bernard Knox, "Playboy of the Roman World," *The New York Review of Books*, January 15, 1998, Pp. 32-36

<sup>4</sup> A subsequent book that centers its plot on Ovid's exile at Tomi is Christophe Ransmayr's *The Last World* (Grove Weidenfeld, 1988). Ransmayr places his story at Tomi after the death of Ovid where a youthful Roman admirer searches for the lost manuscript of the poet's *Metamorphoses*, rumored to have been burned by the author in his depression over his banishment.

considered unacceptable since smaller, urban families were becoming the norm. Ovid could write openly and with approval of his own amorous escapades. He chronicled his long adulterous affair with a married woman who aborted his child, and whose maid was also one of his seductions.

The poet reveled in the sexual license of his times, even to mocking the “crudities of our ancestors” in maintaining monogamous relationships. “Those Sabine women stuck to/One husband apiece. But then *they* didn’t wash,” he wrote.

But as has happened to artists in many ages, Ovid’s proselytizing of his lifestyle through his verses ran afoul of shifts in the political *zeitgeist*. Augustus himself was anything but a model for what today would be referred to as “family values.” He was a bit of a playboy himself before he divorced his wife, Scribonia, to marry Livia even as she was carrying her divorced husband’s child. But dictators are often “do as I say, not as I do,” types, and then as nowadays, controlled the “spin” on public opinion.

Augustus, out of reformist zeal, and by domination of the Senate, began to promulgate legislation that would have pleased the types of right-wing religious groups roiling the political waters in contemporary America. Among the laws was one that permitted the banishment of adulterers. Although such laws were not always enforced, a high-profile personality like the author of the *Arts of Love* could make a good scapegoat or example.

Ovid certainly sensed the precariousness of his position. Perhaps to ingratiate himself with the Emperor he dedicated his lengthy poem, the *Fasti*, a celebration of Roman religious festivals, to Augustus to convince him he had switched his love interest from the secular to the sacred. The ploy failed and Augustus in return blamed Ovid’s poetry for the licentiousness of his daughter Julia, and Ovid was packed off to Tomi.

According to Horia, at first Ovid pined for Rome and its women, orgies, banquets and other pleasures, and for a time plotted ways to regain the good graces of Augustus. Even his amours with a beautiful Dacian woman only remind him of his Roman mistress.

But gradually he formed friendships with the locals. He kept company with a tavern-keeper, a slave girl, a courtesan, and even a Roman centurion, and soon came to the realization that he would live out his years in this remote outpost. He even seems to have turned his interest to the early Christianity that appealed to the Dacians and may have appealed to him as he himself was subjected to, or observed the rigors, dangers, and violent treatment of, these remote Roman subjects.

And so Ovid marked his final years in exile, although there seems to be only the statue in the museum square to commemorate his tenure there. But, of course he comes to life through his poetry again and again, especially when the times are easy-going and circumstances turn from war, to love—and when a traveler is looking for something to make a trip, even to an erstwhile place of exile, more memorable.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Originally published as “Ovid in Exile,” *The Literary Traveler*, Special Issue, Europe, Winter 1999, (<http://www.literarytraveler.com/europe/ovid.htm>)