

# RONALD SYME AND OVID'S ROAD NOT TAKEN\*

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*Abstract:* This essay seeks to explore Ovid's usefulness to Syme, and the narrative strategies of *History in Ovid*. In doing so, it investigates the structure of the monograph, and finds it more coherent than some have supposed. Likewise, I argue that it shows Syme aware of his readership's familiarity with his own habit of electing spiritual precursors amongst the authors of antiquity—and exploiting that habit to make points about the texture of history in the last decade of Augustus' reign.

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## 1. Introduction

The publication in 1978 of Sir Ronald Syme's monograph, *History in Ovid*, was an important moment in the twentieth-century reception of the exile poetry. Syme argued strongly for the merits of the *Tristia* and the *Epistulae Ex Ponto*, noting, as he did so, both the traditional disparagement of these works and the rehabilitation which was already in progress.<sup>1</sup> *History in Ovid* displays several characteristics shared by Syme's later productions. These include a notably idiosyncratic prose style, seen at its most astringent in the Preface,<sup>2</sup> and the organisation of the work into semi-autonomous essays, the connexions between which are often left implicit:<sup>3</sup> the chapters are bunched into four groups of three chapters apiece, without explanation as to what these groupings signify beyond the author's assurance that an underlying structure is there.<sup>4</sup> In one respect, however, *History in Ovid* is something of a surprise. The unexpectedness springs from the nature of its protagonist.

A literary slant was by no means unusual in Syme's oeuvre. His second published work, in 1929, was on Valerius Flaccus,<sup>5</sup> and the nearest thing to an autobiography he ever wrote remarks on his 'affection for Latin litera-

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<sup>1</sup> Syme (1978) 226, with fn. 4 on that page. Cf. also 163: 'Under the spell of Ovid's other writings ... the *Epistulae ex Ponto* incur dispraisal, or simply neglect'.

<sup>2</sup> Syme (1978) Preface: 'More history than Ovid, some will say. Anxious apologia is not in place. Better, brief statement about the origin of this opusculum.' On Syme's later style, see, for example, Paterson (1987) 224.

<sup>3</sup> Wiseman (1998) 137–8.

<sup>4</sup> Syme (1978) Preface: 'Coherence and structure have been accorded proper attention, so I trust'. Compare Wiseman (1998) 138.

<sup>5</sup> Syme (1929) (I am indebted to the anonymous referee for this observation).

ture'.<sup>6</sup> Syme's scholarly productions, impressive in breadth and sweep as they are, limit themselves almost entirely to epochs from which a substantial quantity of literary Latin survives.<sup>7</sup> *The Roman Revolution* announces itself, in its Preface, as in some respects a conjectural version of the work written by the lost historian Gaius Asinius Pollio.<sup>8</sup> The appearance of Ovid in the titular company of Ammianus, Tacitus, Sallust, and the *Historia Augusta* is not, then, immediately disconcerting.

Further thought, however, suggests that Ovid is, indeed, amongst strange bedfellows. By the time *History in Ovid* appeared, it was already a trite observation that there was a common thread amongst the protagonists of Syme's works: they all shared (or were interpreted by Syme as sharing) pronounced affinities of style and temperament with Syme himself.<sup>9</sup> In the case of Ovid, though, this analysis seems to come off the rails. It was obvious on the publication of *History in Ovid* that Syme was drawing (tongue-in-cheek) analogies between his own situation and that of the exiled poet; reviewers picked up on the potentially self-reflexive reference in the preface to relegation in the 'northern outskirts', and to the insistence that 'late products may happen to be among the best'.<sup>10</sup> Nonetheless, Ovid seems to be an unlikely avatar for Syme. Wherein, then, lay his appeal?

## 2. The Poet and the Historian

Syme's initial justification for his 'opuscule' bears examination. 'It goes back to an ancient predilection for the *Epistulae ex Ponto*, reinforced by that faithful companion, portable on long peregrinations'. The sesquipedalian vocabulary of this passage is in itself very Symian. Syme's praise of the vocabulary of Marguerite Yourcenar's *Mémoires d'Hadrien*,<sup>11</sup> in the James Bryce Memorial Lecture which he delivered at Somerville College, Oxford on 10 May 1984, has clear applicability to his own lexis: 'Never a word or an expression to be-

<sup>6</sup> Syme (1991) xi (once again, I am indebted to the anonymous referee for this observation).

<sup>7</sup> Millar (2004). Compare also Millar (1981) 148 and 150.

<sup>8</sup> Syme (1939) vii.

<sup>9</sup> So for example Momigliano (1974) 33–5: 'Syme attributes his own moods and tastes to the historians he studies. His images of Thucydides, Sallust, Livy, Tacitus, and the anonymous author of the *Historia Augusta* have a common denominator which is Syme himself. For the other occasions when Momigliano made this case, see Wiseman (1998) 215 n. 29. For other examinations of this tendency, see Wiseman (1998) 148, Pitcher (2009) 59, and Toher (2009) 325–6, 328.

<sup>10</sup> Syme (1978) 225. Cf. Griffin (1990) xii, Wiseman (1998) 149.

<sup>11</sup> Yourcenar (1974). See also on this lecture Griffin (2005) 25–8.

tray the middle years of the XXth century. A non-contemporary manner conveys advantage to historians in any age.<sup>12</sup>

Here, however, the vocabulary has a very particular point. ‘Long peregrinations’ was not an idly chosen locution. In fact, it refers to a precise moment in Tacitus’ *Annals*,<sup>13</sup> which Syme will explicitly address in the penultimate chapter of his book. The passage in question is as follows:

After recording the prosecution of an Aemilia Lepida, who, he [sc. Tacitus] notes, had once been betrothed to Lucius Caesar, the historian came upon another transaction concerning the great houses. M. Junius Silanus (*suff.* 15) asked that his brother be permitted to return to Rome. Tiberius Caesar concurred. His response before the Senate was dignified and tinged with gentle irony. He too, he said, was gratified that D. Silanus had come back from a ‘peregrinatio longinqua’. Nothing impeded, neither a law nor a decree of the Senate; but Tiberius Caesar could not pass over an affront to his predecessor.<sup>14</sup>

This is not, however, the first time that Syme refers to this incident in *History in Ovid*, although it is the first occasion on which he mentions the ‘gentle irony’ of Tiberius’ response.<sup>15</sup> The earlier reference to this incident appears at a crucial point earlier in the book. This is the short paragraph (fenced off by asterisks from what immediately precedes it) which concludes both the third chapter of *History in Ovid* and the first of its four sections. The paragraph runs as follows:

Not being a senator or a consular, Ovid had no prospect of a decease (and a funeral) that might secure an entry in Roman annals. None the less, Tacitus may have been aware of Ovid and his ill fortune when coming upon a notable piece of senatorial business in the year 20. On entreaty from his brother, a nobleman (D. Silanus) was permitted to return to Rome. The paramour of the younger Julia: but, as Tiberius Caesar stated, ‘not exiled under any law or by decree of the Senate.’<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Syme (1986b). See also Wiseman (1998) 149.

<sup>13</sup> Tac. *Ann.* 3.24.

<sup>14</sup> Syme (1978) 207.

<sup>15</sup> At Syme (1958) 284, which seems to be the first time Syme discussed this passage in his published work (cf. also 371), the noun *peregrinatio* is characterised a little differently as ‘pompously ironic’. For a discussion of the register of the word in its Tacitean context, see Woodman and Martin (1996) 232.

<sup>16</sup> Syme (1978) 47.

'Not exiled under any law or by decree of the Senate' (*non senatus consulto, non lege pulsus* in the Latin) recalls a passage in *Tristia* 2,<sup>17</sup> as Justus Lipsius had already observed in the late sixteenth century. The theory that Tacitus might have been thinking of Ovid's relegation in his account of Silanus' return was one which held an enduring attraction for Syme. He subsequently returned to it in *The Augustan Aristocracy*: 'The phrase and situation could not fail to evoke in the minds of senators the thought of what had happened to the poet Ovid in the same season (he had died at Tomis only two or three years previously)... the fancy is not idle that the historian saw the relevance to Ovid, that he may have been reading Ovid'.<sup>18</sup>

We have now seen that this episode, which carries possible implications for Tacitus' view of the exiled poet, recurs at key points in *History in Ovid*. A teasingly oblique allusion in the first paragraph of the Preface develops into a central role in the culminating paragraph of the book's opening section. It finally appears as a datum to be deployed in the penultimate chapter during a discussion of the banishment of the younger Julia, a critical moment in the fortunes of her husband L. Aemilius Paullus which would later form the climax of the narrative strand of *The Augustan Aristocracy*.<sup>19</sup> What lies behind these iterations?

The second allusion to the story of Silanus, the one which concludes Chapter Three, provides the clue. As noted above, Syme offers no overt explanation for why the chapters of *History in Ovid* are divided into groups. The governing theme of the first such group, Chapters One to Three, is, however, clear. These chapters seek to establish a chronology for Ovid's life and works. The last paragraph of this section comes just after the account of the poet's death in 17 CE (according to Jerome): 'Ovid died, but his close coeval, the unrelenting Tiberius, lived on for two decades'.<sup>20</sup>

In a work of classical historiography, if a great man has just died, we might expect a necrology at this point, though ancient writers of history are

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<sup>17</sup> Ov. *Tr.* 2.131–2: 'nec mea decreto damnasti facta senatus / nec mea selecto iudice iussa fuga est'. On this passage, see Ingleheart (2010) ad loc.

<sup>18</sup> Syme (1986a) 117, 234.

<sup>19</sup> See Syme (1986a) chapter 9: 'The End of L. Aemilius Paullus', 115–127, in the course of which, as noted above, the relevance of Ovid's fate to the anecdote is stressed. For the structure of the narrative in these chapters, see Wiseman (1998) 140–2, especially 142: 'A climax to the narrative is implied but not stated—the disgrace and punishment of L. Paullus and the younger Julia in AD 8'.

<sup>20</sup> Syme (1978) 47. Compare the remarks on the suffect consul Vibius Rufus at Syme (1978) 113 (quoted below), and the account of the death of Asinius Gallus, *cos.* 8 BCE, in 33 CE, at Syme (1986a) 63: Gallus was 'aged about seventy-three, *close coeval* to the ancient enemy, the recluse on the island Capreae' [my italics]. For Syme's insistence on thus seeing Tiberius as interacting with his contemporaries, see Wiseman (1998) 146.

less predictable in this respect than is sometimes assumed.<sup>21</sup> Syme, ever sensitive to narrative structures, obliges—but with a neat twist. The last paragraph of the chapter notes that Ovid is *not* in fact, the sort of person whose passing a historian like Tacitus would have seen fit to mark: ‘Not being a senator and a consular, Ovid had no prospect of a decease (and a funeral) that might secure an entry in Roman annals’. This is, of course, a perfectly accurate account of Tacitus’ narrative practices, and one which Syme repeated elsewhere: ‘His senatorial annals did not comport extraneous items of literary interest’.<sup>22</sup> However, the necrology which Ovid did not receive is replaced with a reference to the moment at which Tacitus *did* (possibly) notice him: the return of D. Silanus, and that episode’s obvious relevance to the case of the exiled poet. Syme evades the formal restraints under which Tacitus placed himself in writing the *Annals* by finding another way to assert that the consular historian (may have) found Ovid worthy of attention. The hypothesis stands in for a necrology that never was.

Or, to be more accurate, a necrology that might have been. Attention to moments like this illustrates that structural strategy which Syme does not openly articulate. It is interesting to compare the closing paragraphs of the *next* section of the monograph, that which comprises Chapters Four to Six:

... valid for a Roman historian, the claims of ‘bonae artes’ seem strained when extended to a poet and miscellaneous compiler.

Along with his elder brother, P. Ovidius Naso received the *latus clavus*. The brother died in the year 24/3, and Ovid renounced the career after holding two minor magistracies ... However, the fancy is not idle that if Ovid had found the life of a senator not incompatible with the writing of verse (the duties were not exacting, but time was wasted, and money), he might have ended by holding the twelve *fascēs* as consul suffect. Ovid reached fifty in A.D. 8. Or at a later age still, as witness the paradoxical Vibius Rufus (*suff.* 16), who was coeval with Ti. Caesar, if not somewhat older...<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> So, to take an obvious example, Pericles’ ‘obituary’ at Th. 2.65 actually comes at a point in the narrative when its subject still has two and a half years to live. Cf. also Syme (1970) 79–90 and Pomeroy (1991) 192–225.

<sup>22</sup> Syme (1986a) 117, noting that while Tacitus does not allude to the writings of Petronius, the tragedies of a consular general like Pomponius Secundus are another matter (Tac. *Ann.* 12.28.2). By contrast Velleius (whom Syme despised) *did* have ample room for ‘matters of literary interest’: see Vell. 1.16–18.

<sup>23</sup> Syme (1978) 113.

As ever, Syme's phraseology is significant. The last paragraph of Chapter Six sees the only time in the whole book when Ovid is referred to as *Ovidius* and accorded the whole of the *tria nomina*: P. Ovidius Naso. Syme's usual practices with regard to Roman nomenclature are revealing here. From early in his career, Syme was averse to using the traditional Anglicised forms of the names of Roman politicians. He was more accommodating to the Anglicised names of Roman *authors*: Virgil and Horace, not Vergilius and Horatius, appear in *The Roman Revolution's* famous chapter on 'The Organization of Opinion'.<sup>24</sup> When one maps Syme's usage, however, one notes that authors, too, can be treated to the dignity of their original names—in particular contexts. This usually happens when an author is playing some part in the political arena, or when Syme feels a special need to assert the writer's credit and dignity. In 'The Organization of Opinion', Sallust turns up in the Roman form: 'There was Sallustius, it is true, attacking both oligarchy and the power of money, with advocacy of moral and social reform.'<sup>25</sup> In the monograph later devoted to that historian, Sallust's name is usually Anglicised, but the exceptions occur in places where Syme stresses his political and social context.<sup>26</sup> Where Tacitus is concerned, Syme shows a marked tendency to include the author's *nomen* whenever he is stressing his stature, political or historiographical (or both).<sup>27</sup>

In the light of Syme's onomastic practices, then, the singular reference to 'P. Ovidius Naso' rather than 'Ovid' at the close of *History in Ovid's* sixth chapter is revealing. The surrounding text indicates the (modest) success which the poet enjoyed in the political arena ('Ovid renounced the career after holding two minor magistracies'). It highlights, too, the success that he *might* have enjoyed if he had not chosen to devote himself entirely to poetry: 'if Ovid had found the life of a senator not incompatible with the writing of verse ... he might have ended by holding the twelve *fasces* as consul suffect.' Syme does not allow his readers to forget the man that Ovid could have been, here or elsewhere in the monograph: 'On March 20, 1 B.C., Ovid was forty-two, the standard age at which a *novus homo* can accede to the consulship'.<sup>28</sup>

Elements of Syme's structural strategy begin, then, to clarify. In the closing paragraphs of successive sections, we are confronted by the consequences of Ovid's decision to renounce a political career, and the spectre of the Ovid who might have been. Ovid *could* have been the sort of person who

<sup>24</sup> Syme (1939) Chapter XXX.

<sup>25</sup> Syme (1939) 460.

<sup>26</sup> Syme (1964) 7, 31, and n115 on 351.

<sup>27</sup> Syme (1978) 20, 87, 95, and 198.

<sup>28</sup> Syme (1978) 20.

merited a death-notice in Tacitus' *Annals*. He *could* (with luck) have climbed the greasy pole of Roman politics. It happens, however, that he was not, and did not. It has been well observed that the theme 'if things had gone otherwise' was one of enduring significance to Syme.<sup>29</sup> The ease with which history might have taken a different route under the pressure of chance or mishap, themes which he also identified as central to Tacitus,<sup>30</sup> is a leitmotif throughout his historiography: 'If the campaign in Africa against Caesar the Dictator had gone otherwise, the world might have known a ruler with an appellation like "Imp. Scipio Pius";<sup>31</sup> 'if the astrologer had miscalculated, other things being equal, Claudius Nero might never have left Rhodes, condemned to live out a long existence... or rather perhaps falling to the sword or mandate of a centurion'.<sup>32</sup>

The treatment of the eponymous poet in *History in Ovid* represents a particularly thoroughgoing exploration of this strand in Symian historiography. The monograph thrives on the tension between Ovid the poet and what one might call, to borrow a conceit from E. R. Dodds,<sup>33</sup> the 'missing Ovid'—the political animal who might have been. Indeed, it emerges in the antepenultimate chapter, 'Poetry and Government', that the social and political possibilities open to the elegiac poets Propertius, Tibullus, and Ovid, and their marked disinclination towards exploiting these possibilities form an important element in Syme's assessment of their achievement. The studied avoidance of successful political careers that might have been is set in antithesis to the Augustan loyalists Vergil and Horace, for whom such avenues were never open: 'By contrast [sc. with Vergil and Horace], the three elegiac poets. All equestrian. Tibullus was a knight from old Latium. This placid friend of peace and of rural pursuits may have served as *tribunus militum* under Messalla. The Propertii were an old aristocratic family of Asisium, as an inscription attests... Ovid's rank as an *eques* was not the product of luck or warfare, as he affirms more than once.'<sup>34</sup> The element of *choice* in the elegists'

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<sup>29</sup> Wiseman (1998) 145–6. For an interesting contrast to the way in which Syme usually handles this theme, compare Syme (1939) 51, a case where 'things going otherwise' would not in fact have produced a meaningful difference: 'Had Pompeius conquered in battle, the Republic could hardly have survived. A few years, and Pompeius the Dictator would have been assassinated in the Senate by honourable men, at the foot of his own statue.'

<sup>30</sup> Syme (1958) vi: 'Tacitus insists on chance and hazard in the affairs of men, on the "ludibria rerum mortalium cunctis in negotiis".' The quotation is from Tac. *Ann.* 3.18.4.

<sup>31</sup> Syme (1986a) 103.

<sup>32</sup> Syme (1986a) 353.

<sup>33</sup> Cf. Dodds (1977), epigraph (from John Cowper Powys): 'The persons we have been are lost rather than fulfilled in what we become.'

<sup>34</sup> Syme (1978) 182. As Syme himself notes (n. 1), this emphasis on the social rank of the elegists was not unknown to previous scholarship. Compare Hubbard (1974) 96 f.

abstention from weighty political careers is key to Syme, who once defined the focus of history as centred on those who have freedom of action.<sup>35</sup> *History in Ovid* is unusual amongst Syme's works in exploring the fates of those who exercised their freedom of political choice by choosing not to play the game of politics at all.

A politician is not all that Syme suggests Ovid could have been, however. In the final chapter, slyly entitled 'The Error of Caesar Augustus',<sup>36</sup> he favours the second book of the *Tristia* with a compliment couched in significant terms. 'He responded with alacrity in spring or summer of the next year with Book II of the *Tristia*: a fine piece of work, lucid, coherent, and forceful, worthy of a great orator or a good historian [my italics].'<sup>37</sup>

This remark, it might be argued, goes to the heart of the depiction of the eponym in *History in Ovid*. Ovid is *not* an obvious Symian protagonist—but he could have been. The ways in which Syme positions Ovid with respect to himself and Tacitus enable him to instantiate an interesting analysis of the relationship between history and literature.

### 3. On Not Being Ovid

We have already quoted Momigliano's account of Syme's relations with his favoured authors. 'Syme attributes his own moods and tastes to the historians he studies. His images of Thucydides, Sallust, Livy, Tacitus, and the anonymous author of the *Historia Augusta* have a common denominator which is Syme himself'. This model for Syme's historiography has obvious attractions. We have already seen some of the affinities which he carefully stresses between his own historiographical production and that of the writers he studies.

It takes only a little thought, however, to realise that Momigliano's oft-stated assertion is simplistic. In fact, the name slipped into the middle of the list above betrays a flaw in his thesis. *The Roman Revolution* is informed by a particular view of Pollio's history. The elaborate affinities between *Tacitus*

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<sup>35</sup> Millar (1981) 146–7: 'as he [sc. Syme] explained not long ago to an audience of students in London, one writes the history of *those who have freedom of action* [my italics], which is not solely or necessarily a matter of social class...' See also Toher (2009) 320–1.

<sup>36</sup> Syme (1978) 215–229. 'Error' in a late Ovidian context of course usually refers to the mysterious mistake which the poet claims to have been partly responsible for his plight. Syme redeploys it to characterise Augustus' miscalculation (in terms of posterity) in treating Ovid thus and (more mischievously) the energy wasted by scholars in trying to work out what Ovid's 'error' was: 'Modern writers can offer parallels in error' (Syme (1978) 209 n. 4, with a cross-reference to a discussion of the reasons for Ovid's exile on 216).

<sup>37</sup> Syme (1978) 222.



and Tacitus are obvious. But few would argue that Syme perceived thoroughgoing similarities between himself and Livy, the ‘steady citizen’,<sup>38</sup> ‘on a footing of candid amity with members of the dynasty’,<sup>39</sup> whose treatment by Pollio he vigorously endorsed: ‘Pollio knew what history was. It was not like Livy.’<sup>40</sup> As it happens, Syme probably misinterpreted the grounds of Pollio’s objection to Livian history-writing. He certainly had little evidence to support the vision of Pollio as a historiographical paragon which he raised in opposition to it.<sup>41</sup> This in no way diminishes the fact, however, that Livy is an improbable choice as a straightforward avatar for Syme.

In fact, Momigliano consistently underestimated the amount of conscious role-playing and what might now be called implied focalisation in Syme’s use of his authors. This was never as simple as a total and willing self-identification with them. As early as *The Roman Revolution*, Syme noted that his impersonation of a hypothetical Pollio could lead to emphases and statements uttered ‘in character’ for which the twentieth-century author did not necessarily take full responsibility: ‘In narrating the central epoch of the history of Rome I have been unable to escape from the influence of the historians Sallust, Pollio and Tacitus, all of them Republican in sentiment. Hence a deliberately critical attitude to Augustus. If Caesar and Antonius by contrast are treated rather leniently, the reason may be discovered in the character and opinions of the historian Pollio—a Republican, but a partisan of Caesar and of Antonius. This also explains what is said about Cicero and about Livy.’<sup>42</sup>

It may reasonably be objected that this conveniently gets Syme off the hook of justifying statements which he approves but cannot actually substantiate, much as Tacitus floats interpretations and insinuations for which he refuses to take full authorial responsibility as contemporary rumours or ‘the sort of thing people would have been saying’. It is certainly striking that jibes at the expense of Livy, excused in *The Roman Revolution* on the grounds of Pollionic influence, actually remained a constant throughout Syme’s later career, as we have already seen. Nor did Syme show any conspicuous enthusiasm for reproducing with such loving care the thought-worlds of

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<sup>38</sup> Syme (1978) 2.

<sup>39</sup> Syme (1978) 109.

<sup>40</sup> Syme (1939) 486.

<sup>41</sup> On Syme’s interpretation of Pollio and his relationship to Livy, see Levene (2007) 275–6. Compare also Kraus (1994) 1 n. 2; Morgan (2000) 51–69, and Pitcher (2009) 173–4.

<sup>42</sup> Syme (1939) vii.

equally relevant writers whose attitudes he found uncongenial. Velleius Paterculus would be an obvious example.<sup>43</sup>

Nonetheless, the *dialogic* character of these enterprises remains worth stressing. Syme does not simply collapse the distinction between himself and his classical avatars. Rather, he tries to represent the voices of these authors within the new context of his own monographs: 'this may be expressed in writing English sentences which are deliberate paraphrases of ancient ones; but also in a trick of style... which consists of using such a paraphrased sentence, transferred out of context, to express a thought which a Roman *could* have had about a particular event or set of circumstances (for example *Tacitus*, 13 and n. 3).'<sup>44</sup>

The extent to which Syme himself endorses such paraphrased sentences is something which the reader usually has to puzzle out for himself or herself. Of course, in many cases such endorsement seems very probable. Syme makes no bones about expressing his admiration for Tacitus: 'It is good fortune and a privilege if one can consort for so many years with an historian who knew the worst, discovered few reasons for ease or hope or confidence, and none the less believed in human dignity and freedom of speech.'<sup>45</sup> It is clear that a close concinnity between their viewpoints (or, to be more precise, Syme's viewpoint and that which he attributed to Tacitus) informs much of the later historian's output.

*History in Ovid* sees Syme exploring an interesting variation on this approach. Momigliano's criticism, as we have seen, rather misses the point of Syme's practice, but the concerns that inform it are understandable. If one only engages with those representatives of antiquity with whom one feels an unambiguous kinship, there is the risk of ironing out the contradictions and alternate possibilities of the ancient world, of reducing multiplicity to sameness. History, in this case, always ends up being written from an identical angle, eliminating all others.

Syme's engagement with Ovid, however, is a rather different matter. For Syme, Ovid is the One Who Got Away, a man with the potential to be a political player and, perhaps, even another consular historian like the ad-

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<sup>43</sup> Millar (1981) 147: '*The Roman Revolution* also makes too little use of Velleius ... losing the chance to see the whole process as represented in the loyalist effusions of a man who represented that Italy which the Augustan revolution brought to the fore ... Syme would not have needed to take a *favourable* view, for it is precisely the time-serving loyalism and the carefully-designed reticences of Velleius which tell us so much of the inner quality of the régime.' Syme *does* examine the 'reticences of Velleius' in Syme (1978) of course, (e.g., 68), but still avoids the intertextual ventriloquism characteristic of his use of Tacitus. For an example of how Velleian ventriloquism might proceed, see Levick (2011).

<sup>44</sup> Millar (1981) 146.

<sup>45</sup> Syme (1958) vi.

mired Tacitus, but who chose a different path. This then gives Syme the opportunity to explore *alternatives* to Tacitean historiography, plotting the social history of the late Augustan period, of ‘various groups... that have not benefited from the hazards of record and survival’,<sup>46</sup> in an account mediated through the fortunes of an individual whose abilities he can still respect.

As such, the assimilation of subject to author is rather more complicated in this monograph than it was in the ones which preceded it. Syme does not just advertise similarities, between himself and his protagonist, as had been the case with Tacitus. This time, he is equally keen on the differences. Syme is not Ovid, though the two have their affinities. And history is not quite poetry—even if Syme sometimes saw Tacitus as subsuming the roles of poet and of dramatist.<sup>47</sup> Indeed, the contrast between the two fields of endeavour is one upon which he places significant emphasis:

For poets, origin and status is not the first thing. Their true pedigree is their predecessors in the art and manner, and their writing is their best biography.<sup>48</sup>

It is another matter with historians. Antecedents and condition can hardly fail to have some influence on their social and political opinions.<sup>49</sup>

As a result, Syme’s presentation of Ovid is notable in the extent to which it highlights contrast as well as concinnity between the twentieth-century historian and the Augustan historian *manqué*. True enough, Ovid is a model of industry, producing powerful works, with a ‘subtle sense of structure’,<sup>50</sup> into an active old age while living on the ‘northern outskirts’. He displays distaste for much Augustan ideology,<sup>51</sup> and (after an unsuccessful flirtation in the *Fasti*)<sup>52</sup> no great enthusiasm for erudition as an end in itself.<sup>53</sup> But Syme al-

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<sup>46</sup> Syme (1978) 116.

<sup>47</sup> Syme (1958) 546: ‘Tacitus is a poet and a dramatist, not different in that from other historians (such as deserve the name), but better.’ Cf. also Wiseman (1998) 149; Toher (2009) 322.

<sup>48</sup> This resonant paragraph on the nature of poets, one might note, ends with a *sententia* that forms a perfect iambic pentameter.

<sup>49</sup> Syme (1978) 95.

<sup>50</sup> Syme (1978) 226.

<sup>51</sup> Syme (1978) 190: ‘Something more than that, however, might be discovered in Ovid: malicious frivolity or even muted defiance’.

<sup>52</sup> Syme (1978) 35: ‘However that may be, the theme, despite enlivenment through quaint legends or frivolous mythology, proved uncongenial. A man needs to have the passion for antiquarian erudition as well as a certain sympathy with superstition or entrancement with mystery’.

ways returned from *his* 'long peregrinations'—some of which, particularly in the years of World War II, left their own marks on the historical record.<sup>54</sup> And the Wolfson of the Preface presents a much more appealing aspect than Ovid's Tomis.

Such contrasts of situation are not the end of the matter. For Syme, poet and historian differ not just in their lives and fortunes, but also in the extent and variety of self-revelation that is appropriate to each. 'Of the Paeligni and Sulmo, of meadows, orchards, and streams, Ovid has frequent and affectionate mention... On the other hand, Sallust (so far as extant) does not disclose Amiternum and the Sabine country. *Relevance and reticence accord well with the writing of history* [my italics].'<sup>55</sup> As we have seen elsewhere,<sup>56</sup> Syme means by 'the writing of history' the practice of those Roman historians he personally esteemed: above all, Tacitus.<sup>57</sup> The despised Velleius, one might note, is more forthcoming on the subject of his antecedents (although he does record apologies for it),<sup>58</sup> and so is Pompeius Trogus.<sup>59</sup>

There is no doubt, however, that Syme sees the contrast between the legitimate self-revelation of the poet and the reticence of the historian as a valid one. Syme's own reticence and aversion to self-display, from his dis-

<sup>53</sup> 'Erudite' in Syme (1978) is by no means a friendly adjective: 'otherwise inadvertence might be the reason, or the intensity of erudition at the expense of reading classical texts' (14 n. 3); [of Tibullus] 'in a standard work of erudition it is asserted, not once but twice, that his birth must fall in 39 B.C.' (118); 'the nature of Ovid's mistake has long engaged the attentions of the erudite, the ingenious, the frivolous' (216).

<sup>54</sup> For the importance of travel and autopsy to Syme's historiography, see Millar (1981) 145 and Millar (2004). For the war years, see Bowersock (1994) 549–51 and A. Birley's introduction to Syme (1999) xiii–xiv; Syme refers to the 1941 invasion of Yugoslavia directly at Syme (1999) 130 n. 2. The anonymous referee (to whom this whole note is indebted) observes that 'Tomis—i.e. Constanța in Axis Rumania—was down the Danube from Belgrade, up the coast from Istanbul', two cities in which Syme was based for his work in wartime.

<sup>55</sup> Syme (1978) 96–7. On Roman authors and their provenance, again including Ovid, see also Syme (1964) 6–7. Ovid in that passage, appearing in a social context, is 'Ovidius Naso' (7), confirming our observations about Syme's deployment of his nomenclature (above, pp. 237).

<sup>56</sup> See n. 22 above, for an example of how Velleius falls outside the canons of what Syme would have considered proper Roman historiography in his broad coverage of artistic affairs.

<sup>57</sup> For the 'proud reserve' which Syme detected in Tacitus, see Syme (1958) 119, 540, with Griffin (1999) 146.

<sup>58</sup> Vell. 2.16.2; 2.69.5; 2.76.1.

<sup>59</sup> Justin 43.5.11–12. On these passages of Trogus and Velleius, see Marincola (1997) 141–4.

taste for the ‘odious pronoun’,<sup>60</sup> to his discretion on the subject of his own life, were very notable.<sup>61</sup> The Preface to *History in Ovid* thus displays one final difference between the poet who might have been a historian and the actual historian who is analysing him: Syme’s decorous obliquity and concision in talking about himself. The poet of the *Tristia* makes his own life his subject; the historian of *History in Ovid* scorns to expound the personal significance of the date-line at the bottom of his Preface.<sup>62</sup>

*History in Ovid*, then, sees a unique development in Syme’s use of a protagonist. Syme’s analysis of Ovid the poet derives much of its force from its delineation of that more suitable historiographical protagonist, the politician P. Ovidius Naso who never existed—but not for want of opportunity. In this monograph, the *differences* between the historian and his subject are thus every bit as important as their affinities. Syme shows the reader how the Ovid of history was the product of his choices, by not allowing one to forget the road not taken: the Ovid that might have been.

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<sup>60</sup> Syme (1991) ix.

<sup>61</sup> On this reticence, see A. Birley *ap.* Syme (1991) v, Bowersock (1994) 539–40, Millar (2004), and Toher (2009) 325.

<sup>62</sup> March 11, 1977, was Syme’s seventy-fourth birthday. Syme (1968), (1971), and (1983) (all works on the *Historia Augusta*) also have prefaces dated March 11. Contrast Ov. *Tr.* 3.13.2, with comment at Syme (1978) 38.

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