



# “Ovid’s Old Age”: Jacek Kaczmarski and the Sung Poetry of Exile

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## INTRODUCTION

Ovidian exile reverberates through European literature. First expressed in the Augustan poet’s own *Tristia* and *Epistulae ex Ponto*, the exilic tradition these works engendered has influenced the work of some of the most important Polish writers. These literary engagements have attracted sustained attention among Polish scholars, but they do not feature prominently in recent international publications on the reception of Ovid’s exile.<sup>1</sup> In an attempt to bridge these two strands of scholarship, we introduce Jacek Kaczmarski (1957–2004), a contemporary Polish poet and musician, heavily influenced by Ovid and classical culture.<sup>2</sup> In his 1987 sung poem “Ovid’s Old Age” (“Starość Owidiusza”), Kaczmarski presents a musical and lyrical interpretation of the last days of Publius Ovidius Naso during his exile (43 BCE–17 CE).<sup>3</sup> In addition to

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1 For Polish studies, see Milewska-Ważbińska and Domański, *Owidiusz: Twórczość – recepcja – legenda*; and Bocheński, *Nazo Poeta*. For the most diverse collection of recent scholarship in English, see Ingleheart, *Two Thousand Years of Solitude: Exile After Ovid*.

2 Kaczmarski’s wide-ranging inspirations have been only partially discussed. Apart from his engagement with visual arts, especially early modern European painting (cf. n. 22), he is also famous for drawing upon Russian poetry and literature, see “Wyśpiewać Rosję, przeczekać sowiety – Rosja w twórczości Jacka Kaczmarskiego,” available online.

3 Zbigniew Herbert’s “Dlaczego klasycy” is perhaps the best known contemporary Polish poetic engagement with the classical exilic tradition. This poem is briefly discussed in Milewska-Ważbińska Barbara, “Exulowie wszystkich czasów,” 421–427.

providing an English translation of this poem (below), our paper will illustrate how Kaczmarek's artistic response to Ovid and his exilic experience can be read both as a deeply personal poem and as part of a more universal and complex interplay between Polish art of the socialist era and classical antiquity.<sup>4</sup> Ovidian exile plays a central role in Kaczmarek's depiction of the political and cultural displacement of Polish emigrants in the 1980s.<sup>5</sup> "Ovid's Old Age" is one of almost two dozen sung poems in which Kaczmarek responds to classical antiquity. Therefore, in our analysis, we shall also attend to Kaczmarek's relationship to antiquity more broadly and attempt to reveal how classical history, myth, and literature informed Polish poetry during the socialist era.<sup>6</sup>

"Ovid's Old Age" was written and released in 1987 on an album called *Kosmopolak*, recorded in Munich.<sup>7</sup> Kaczmarek had been on tour in France in December 1981, when martial law was announced in Poland after a long period of anti-communist strikes and protests. During this period of martial law (1981–

- 4 For more on the relationship between the Greek and Roman classics and communism, see Karsai et al., *Classics and Communism*; Movrin and Olechowska, *Classics and Class*, and Movrin and Olechowska, *Classics and Communism in Theatre*. For more on specifically Polish communist classics, see Elżbieta Olechowska's *Classical Antiquity on Communist Stage in Poland*. For British communist classics both inside and outside the academy, see Hall and Stead, *A People's History of Classics*, 476–495 and 514–531. For early Soviet receptions of classical antiquity, see Stead and Paulouskaya, "Classics, crisis and the Soviet experiment"; and for a growing digital archive of the intersections between classics and world communism, see the collaborative research project Brave New Classics, available online.
- 5 This paper in part builds on work by Milewska-Ważbińska, whose article about Polish poets exiles, especially Kaczmarek, establishes some of the key points of reference between Ovid's work and "Ovid's Old Age," which are noted throughout the text.
- 6 "Powtórka z Odyseji," "Przybycie Tytanów," "Starość Tezeusza," "Wykopalska," "Upadek Imperium Lekcja Historii Klasycznej," "Kassandra," "Pompeje," "Pompeja Lunapar," "Przechadzka z Orfeuszem," "Kołysanka dla Kleopatry," "Lament Tytana," "Młody Bacchus," "Oliwo Wino i Czas," "Petroniusz Bredzi," "Meldunek," "Lot Ikara," "Upadek Ikara." Additionally, there is also a number of songs responding to the biblical tradition: "Hiob," "Kara Barabasa," "Wieża Babel," "Arka Noego," "Wygnanie z Raju," "Strącenie Aniołów," "Przejście Polaków przez Morze Czerwone," "Sara."
- 7 See the memoirs of directors of the music label Pomaton, which later acquired the rights to all of Kaczmarek's musical output, on the website [www.kaczmarek.art.pl](http://www.kaczmarek.art.pl).

1983), ten thousand people were imprisoned in internment centers across the country, and the immediate impact on cultural activity was devastating.<sup>8</sup> Polish creative practitioners and the general public observed a year-long boycott from television and radio, taken over by the military. Literature and performances continued to be monitored and were subject to censorship. At the time, Kaczmariski was heralded by many as the bard of the oppositionist movement, which made it unsafe for him to return to his country, where the state's control and potential repercussions by the socialist regime would have severely affected his personal and artistic life. Instead, he became briefly involved in political activism in France and toured intensively. He spent most of the 1980s in Munich working for Radio Free Europe and traveling around the globe, giving concerts to Polish minorities.<sup>9</sup> Six years into his emigration, Kaczmariski began work on *Kosmopolak*, which in addition to "Ovid's Old Age" contained "The Last Days of Norwid" ("Ostatnie Dni Norwida"), in which he explored another figure of the displaced artist, in this case, the Polish poet Cyprian Norwid (1821–1883).<sup>10</sup>

Ovid was one of the most famous Roman poets whose popularity in Rome was well established before his exile to Tomis, a Greek colony on the Black Sea. Trained in rhetorical studies and having performed some minor judicial posts as a Roman equestrian, Ovid abandoned public service. He gained cultural prominence with such works as *Ars Amatoria* and *Metamorphoses*, but was banished by Augustus in 8 CE in uncertain circumstances. Certainly, a *carmen* [poem] was one reason for the exile.<sup>11</sup> The other was an unspecified *error* – perhaps some involvement in one of the imperial household scandals. Ovid was never pardoned and died in his exile.<sup>12</sup> In any case, the shape of Ovid's fate

8 Olechowska, *Classical Antiquity on Communist Stage*, 72–4 and 106.

9 Gajda, *Jacek Kaczmariski*, 140–192. Cf. also Koziol, "Jacek Kaczmariski," on culture.pl.

10 Kaczmariski talked about his interests in the cultural displacement and a general sense of estrangement in relation to also other poems, such as "Opowieść Pewnego Imigranta" or "Ostatnie Dni Norwida" in an interview with Jolanta Piątek, "Za dużo czerwonego," Radio Wrocław, published in *Odra* in 2001–2002.

11 Ingleheart, *Introduction*, 4–5 convincingly suggests that Ovid's *Ars Amatoria* caused offense to Augustus and his anti-adultery program of reforms.

12 For a detailed account of Ovid's life and his exile, see Ingleheart, *Introduction*, 1–5 with notes. Cf. Hinds, "Ovid," in *OCD*.

particularly attracted Kaczmarek, and the young poet saw many parallels to his own experiences.

Kaczmarek's relationship with Ovid and the Ovidian exilic tradition was formed through direct and indirect literary interactions with antiquity. Despite the now well-documented account of the plight of the traditional classical education behind the Iron Curtain,<sup>13</sup> as a well-educated and avid reader, Kaczmarek would have been exposed to Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and *Ars Amatoria*, which were typical essential reading for a 1970s Polish undergraduate.<sup>14</sup> Since he wrote his master's thesis on the Polish Enlightenment, he must also have been familiar with the classicism associated with that period.<sup>15</sup> However, at school, he only learned the basics of Latin, which means that he depended on vernacular translations for his classical reading.<sup>16</sup> The most readily available Polish translations of Ovid in the late 1970s and 1980s were *Przemiany* [*Metamorphoses*] by Jan Michalewski from 1932, *Metamorfozy czyli Przemiany* [*Metamorphoses, or Transformations*] by Bruno Kiciński from 1826/43 (reprinted in 1953), and *Owidedgo Nazona, Wiersze na wygnaniu pisane to jest Rzeczy smutne, Kłątwa na Ibis, Listy z Pontu* (includes *Tristia, Epistulae ex Pontu* and *Ibis*) by Przybylski from 1802, which was reprinted, revisited and complemented by later poets and classicists throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.<sup>17</sup>

Kaczmarek also read *Naso the Poet* (*Nazo Poeta*), a fictional account of Ovid's life written by Jacek Bocheński (b. 1926) in an Aesopian language and published in 1969 as the second volume in a series that was highly popular among Kaczmarek's intellectual

13 See Movrin and Olechowska, *Classics and Class*, and Karsai et al., *Classics and Communism*, passim.

14 Based on the information provided in an email exchange with Kaczmarek's biographer, Dr. Krzysztof Gajda. See also Gajda, *Jacek Kaczmarek*, 76–80.

15 Lorentz and Rottermund, *Klasycyzm w Polsce*, 6–41; Axer, "Central-Eastern Europe," 132–155, esp. 148–50; cf. Torlone et al., *Handbook to Classical Reception in Eastern and Central Europe*, 162–164, note the mention of Kaczmarek as one of the post-war poets using classical myth and history to comment on violence of the communist era.

16 Note, however, that when commenting on his poem about Caesar's conquests of Gaul, Kaczmarek referred directly to the "cold" tone of Caesar's writings in Latin, see the second interview in a series "Za dużo czerwonego."

17 For the complex history of these translations, see Witczak, "Polskie tłumaczenia 'Tristiów' Owidiusza," 139–153.

circles.<sup>18</sup> In Bocheński's book, where Augustus is modeled on the Polish communist leader, Gomułka, and Ovid is a rock star,<sup>19</sup> the author accentuates the conflict between emperor and poet, bravely drawing analogies to the soviet apparatus of the secret police and questioning the role of poetry in an autocratic system.<sup>20</sup> Kaczmarzski's depiction of Ovid's exile also draws on these themes. Bocheński's work was a crucial mediating reception and one in which Kaczmarzski surely found parallels with his role as a politically engaged creator of sung poetry. Especially important for the interpretation of Ovid's nostalgia for Rome in "Ovid's Old Age" is Augustus' notion in "Naso the Poet" that poets are responsible for praising their (communist) country, that this is their civic duty. Kaczmarzski's Ovid praises Rome but not because he feels an obligation, but because he misses it so terribly that the image of his home becomes idealized. But more on that later.

One can also detect notes of Eugène Delacroix, *Ovide chez les Scythes* (1859), in Kaczmarzski's creative palette. Delacroix portrays the Roman poet in a rustic, almost underdeveloped setting, which, as we shall see, resonates with Kaczmarzski's Ovid.<sup>21</sup>

18 On Bocheński, see Marciniak, "Veni, Vidi, Verti," 357–388; Ziolkowski, *Ovid and the Moderns*, 159–163. Kaczmarzski might have also accessed another fictionalised story of Ovid written in French by Vintilă Horia (*Dieu est né en exil*), but Kaczmarzski's biographer has not found any evidence to prove it (based on private correspondence with Dr. Krzysztof Gajda).

19 For Bocheński's own account see Marciniak, *Veni, Vidi, Verti*, 377–378.

20 Deleixhe, "Powieść historyczna pod czujnym okiem cenzora – analiza tekstów."

21 For Kaczmarzski's inspirations drawn from European paintings and drawings, see Grabska and Wasilewska, *Lekcja historii Jacka Kaczmarzskiego*, 2011. Kaczmarzski's education in painting analysis was part of the training he received at Warsaw University and from his parents, professional artists; see Gajda, *Jacek Kaczmarzski*, 81–3. Cf. "Za dużo czerwonego," part 3, in relation to the paintings of Jacek Malczewski. Among paintings depicting ancient themes that are attested as sources of inspiration for Kaczmarzski's poetry is Caravaggio's *Young Sick Bacchus*, which became "Młody Bacchus," see Gajda, *Jacek Kaczmarzski*, 66. In the context of Ovid, it is possible that Kaczmarzski knew or saw the famous painting *Ovide chez les Scythes* by Eugène Delacroix either in the National Gallery London or during an exhibition in Zurich in Kunsthau 05/06/1987 – 23/08/1987 (05/06/1987 – 23/08/1987) and was at least partly reacting to its depiction of Ovid.



Kaczmarek found in Ovid's figure the inspiration to express his personal experience and comment more generally on the condition of the émigré. The Roman poet's exilic experience – the central theme of the poem – plays a fundamental role in Kaczmarek's processing of his position as an émigré poet. Kaczmarek mythologizes himself by identifying his exilic experience with the situation of the lyrical subject of his poem. He embodies Ovid as an archetypal figure of suffering to understand and ease the pain of his politically forced emigration.<sup>22</sup> He admitted as much in an interview and claimed that he sought consolation for his difficulties exploring the Ovidian myth.<sup>23</sup> This concrete personal interest in Ovid allows Kaczmarek to investigate other important and more universal themes in "Ovid's Old Age": landscape, imperialism, displacement, "national" poets in exile, nostalgia, and the force of poetry.

In many respects, Kaczmarek's response to Ovid as an exiled figure confirms the key observations made by Ingleheart (2011) about the potency of the Ovidian myth as being "uniquely susceptible to being adapted to a wide range of aesthetic, intellectual, and political

22 On self-construction in responses to the Ovidian exile and its myth, see Ingleheart, "Introduction," 8, 19, and Dellner, "Children of the Island," 223–237, who analyses Eavan Boland's search for consolation in Ovid.

23 See "Za dużo czerwonego," part 3, quoted after [www.kaczmarek.art.pl](http://www.kaczmarek.art.pl). Among Kaczmarek's difficulties in this period was alcoholism, which he confesses in the interview. Cf. Gajda, *Jacek Kaczmarek*, 189–191, 213–217.

agendas."<sup>24</sup> Kaczmarek comments on a wide range of issues from the perspective of a composite lyrical subject, which can be mainly identified with the mythical Ovid as imagined by Kaczmarek. He dramatizes Ovid's dislocation and emphasizes the sorrow caused by exile. He creates his distinct vision of Ovid's exile that is profoundly shaped by his own political and personal context where the problems of poetic creativity, linguistic isolation, and cultural estrangement became especially acute.<sup>25</sup> The blurring of ancient and modern time-lines in the depiction of Ovid allows Kaczmarek to comment on displacement, the role of poetry, and personal tragedy in the shadow of Soviet and Augustan imperialism. Finally, in the context of the artistic project, *Kosmopolak*, for which the poem was produced, we can interpret Kaczmarek's use of Graeco-Roman literary tradition as an attempt to remind his audience that the Polish people, though under Soviet oppression and with its own distinct national culture, were also still part of European culture.

The following section offers a thematic analysis of "Ovid's Old Age," which interprets the contextual and universal importance of the poem and serves as an introduction into a broader discussion on Kaczmarek's relationship with the classical world. There are obvious stylistic and biographical parallels between Ovid and Kaczmarek; they were both deeply self-reflective, exiled from their native land, and had expansive artistic ambitions. Besides, they both suffered from confrontation with oppressive autocratic regimes that marked their artistic creation. Such parallels explain Kaczmarek's initial attraction to Ovid's poetry, but the notoriously learned Polish poet's engagement with the classical world extended beyond Ovid. His poems and songs betray a long-lived passion for Greek and Roman antiquity, which he encountered predominantly through translated literature and the visual arts. As "Ovid's Old Age" illustrates, his poems transcend the personal, intimate level and elevate the figures' concerns to a more abstract, social, even universal level.<sup>26</sup>

24 Ingleheart, "Introduction," 9.

25 "Ovid's Old Age" also confirms that "the exiled Ovid appears to be particularly 'good to think with' in times marked by autocratic regimes," Ingleheart, "Introduction," 16.

26 Polish original text from [www.kaczmarek.art.pl](http://www.kaczmarek.art.pl). Translation by Paweł Borowski. The divisions every four lines reflect the rhythm and cadences of the poem in a sung form.

## I.

1. Cóż, że pięknie, gdy obco – kiedyś tu będzie Rumunia
2. Obmywana przez fale morza, co stanie się Czarne.
3. Barbarzyńcy w kozuchach zmieniają się w naród ambitny,
4. Pod Kolumną Trajana zajmując się drobnym handlem.

## II.

5. Umrę, patrząc z tęsknotą na niedostrzegalne szczyty
6. Siedmiu wzgórz, które człowiek zamienił w Wieczne Miasto,
7. Skąd przez kraje podbite, z rąk do rąk – niepiśmiennych
8. Iść będzie i nie dojdzie pismo Augusta z łaską.

## III.

9. Nie ma tu z kim rozmawiać, zwój wierszy wart każdej ceny.
10. Ciała kobiet ciekawych brane pośpiesznie, bez kunsztu
11. I bez szeptów bezwiednych – chłoną nie dając nic w zamian
12. Białe nasienie Imperium w owcą pachnącym łóżku.

## IV.

13. Z dala od dworu i tłumu – cóż to za cena wygnania?
14. Mówilem wszak sam – nad poezją władza nie może mieć władzy.
15. Cyrku w pustelnię zamiana spokój jednak odbiera,
16. Bo pyszniej drażnić Cesarza, niż kupcom za opał kadzić.

## V.

17. Rzymu mego kolumny! Wróg z murów was powydziera
18. I tylko we mnie zostanie czysty wasz grecki rodowód!
19. Na nim jednym się wspieram tu, gdzie nie wiedzą – co Grecja
20. Z szacunkiem śmiejąc się z czci, jaką oddają słowu.

## VI.

21. Sen, jedzenie, gra w kości do bólu w schylonych plecach,
22. Wiersz od ręki pisany dla tych, którym starczy – co mają.
23. Piękna tu nikt nie obieca, za piękno płaci się złotem.
24. Pojąłem, tworząc tu, jak z Ariadny [*sic*] powstaje pająk:

## VII.

25. Na pajęczynie wyrazów – barwy, zapachy i dotyk,
26. Łąki, pałace i ludzie – drżący Rzym mojej duszy –
27. Geometria pamięci przodków wyzbyta brzydoty,
28. Zwierciadło żywej harmonii diamentowych okruszyn.

## VIII.

29. Stoją nade mną tubylcy pachnący czosnkiem i czuje,
30. Jak zmieniam się w list do Stolicy, który nikogo nie wzrusza.
31. Kiedyś tu będzie Rumunia, Morze – już Czarne – faluje
32. I glebą pieśni się staje ciało i świat Owidiusza.

I.

1. So much for pretty, when it's alien – one day it'll be Romania
2. Washed by the waves of a sea that will become "Black."
3. Barbarians in sheepskins will form an ambitious nation,
4. Under Trajan's Column conducting petty transactions.

II.

5. I will die looking out, yearning for the out-of-sight summits
6. Of the Seven Hills, which Man transformed into the Eternal City,
7. From where, through conquered lands, passing from hand to illiterate hand,
8. Augustus' letter of pardon, always coming, will never arrive.

III.

9. No one to speak to here; a scroll of poems worth any price.
10. Bodies of curious women dealt with fast, with no art,
11. And no spontaneous gasps – they absorb but give nothing back,
12. The Empire's white seed in a bed that smells of sheep.

IV.

13. Far from the court and crowd – what a price to pay for exile?
14. After all, I used myself to say: over poetry Power shall have no power.
15. Yet, the switch from Circus to hermit's cave steals peace of mind,
16. For riling Caesar sits better than adulating fuel merchants.

V.

17. My Rome's columns! From the walls, the enemy will tear you
18. And I will remain the sole guardian of your pure Greek lineage!
19. It is my only consolation, here where they are ignorant of Greece,
20. Laughing politely at my reverence for the word.

VI.

21. Sleep, food, dice, till my bowed back hurts,
22. A handwritten poem for those to whom it suffices what they possess.
23. No one will promise beauty here, beauty is paid for in gold.
24. Writing here, I understand how from Ariadne [*sic*] came a spider:

VII.

25. On the web of words – colors, odors, and touch,
26. Meadows, palaces and people – trembling Rome of my soul,
27. Free from ugliness the geometry of our ancestors' memory,
28. A mirror of the living harmony of diamond particles.

VIII.

29. The natives stand over me stinking of garlic – and I feel
30. How I transform myself into a letter to the Capital that doesn't move anyone.
31. Someday this will be Romania, the Sea already breaking Black,
32. And into the song's soil is turned the body and world of Ovid.

## TRANSFORMATIONS

The poem's central stylistic theme of transformation alludes to Ovid's grand-oeuvre, the *Metamorphoses*, where mythical characters are regularly changed or transformed.<sup>27</sup> In this way, Kaczmarek creates an "Ovidian" feel to the poem. His artistic engagement with the theme is also explicitly attested in another poem interacting with Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and *Ars Amatoria*: the ironic portrayal of a female accountant in "Metamorfozy Sentymentalne" ("Sentimental Metamorphoses"). But more importantly, he uses the language of transformation to underscore the volatile nature of exile and, by proxy, of human existence under autocratic regimes more generally. The instances of transformations discussed in more detail in individual sections are not merely decorative but also convey an important message: the world under autocrats is continuously in flux. The poets have to adapt, even when their exile makes everything even less predictable.

The opening and closing lines anticipate profound changes in the exilic landscapes. Scythia will become Romania (1, 31), Pontos will become the Black Sea (2, 31), the barbarians will develop into an ambitious nation (3), and even the "Eternal City" of Rome will continue to change after Ovid's death, with the addition of Trajan's column (4) and, eventually, the enemy's dismantling of the walls (17), symbolizing the city's fall. The very moment of banishment is communicated through a "transformation" of the Circus (Maximus), frequented and described by Ovid,<sup>28</sup> into a hermit's cave, or "hermitage," to which he was reduced in exile (15). There is a certain irony to this transformation because, as noted above, initially, the poet welcomes it as liberating, only to discover later that it comes with a significant drawback – political and cultural displacement. Ovid's world is therefore unpredictable, and a poet under an autocratic regime cannot fully predict how his circumstances will really change. The nature of poetry is also changing. The metaphor of Arachne turning into a spider and weaving webs of words (24–5) evokes cultural displacement but also a heightened sense of poetic sensibility fuelled by nostalgia. Ovid himself – who produced so many accounts of the transformations of others in *Metamorphoses* – is being changed too through

27 This deliberate stylistic choice confirms that Kaczmarek must have had good knowledge of Ovid's writings. Cf. possible reference by Kaczmarek to *Ex Ponto*, in Milewska-Ważbińska, "Exulowie wszystkich czasów," 167–8.

28 Esp. *Ars Amatoria* 1.135 and *Amores* 3.

his exilic condition. His despair reduces him to a letter begging for pardon (30). Finally, the (dead) body and the world of Ovid – both the products of exile – turn into a fertile soil that will inspire future poetry and consolation for generations of poets émigrés to come.

## LANDSCAPE, SPACE AND TIME

The opening and closing lines of the poem (1–2 and 31–2) set Romania and the Black Sea as the poem's main stage. The first line stresses the dichotomy between natural beauty ("cóż, że pięknie" – lit. "so what if pretty") and displacement of the lyrical subject ("gdy obco" – "and yet foreign"). It also introduces one of the main themes of the poem, the sense of alienation and estrangement.<sup>29</sup> In lines 1–2, the lyrical subject anticipates the change of the Dobruja region, colonized as Moesia by the Romans in the 1<sup>st</sup> c. BCE, to a modern nation-state ("kiedyś tu będzie Rumunia" – "one day it will be Romania") and of the sea's name from *Pontos* to the Black Sea ("morza, co stanie się Czarne" – "sea that will become 'Black'"). In lines 3–4, he predicts that the ancient inhabitants of Romania will form an "ambitious nation." Kaczmarek thus imposes his modern knowledge on the ancient context of Ovid's exile to blur the distinction between past and present, lyrical fiction, and historical reality.<sup>30</sup> The passage of time throughout the poem is especially evident in the closing lines (31) where the sea is already Black ("Morze – już Czarne – faluje" – "The Sea already breaking Black"), indicating the transition from Ovid's ancient to Kaczmarek's contemporary geography.

The blurring of geographical and temporal boundaries emphasizes the universality of the experiences explored in the poem and their applicability to Kaczmarek's circumstances. The lyrical subject embodies Ovid, who uses first-person verbs (5: "umrę" – "I will die") to describe the exilic experience. It is perhaps also the voice of Kaczmarek embodying the Ovidian figure. The precision of the

29 For Kaczmarek the exile was not limited to one concrete space, but similarly to Ovid longing for Rome, his object of nostalgia was the center of his native culture and language, Warsaw.

30 For the fictional blend of lyrical and historical character of the poem and the multifaceted character of the lyrical subject. Cf. Milewska-Ważbińska, "Exulowie wszystkich czasów," 167: "Słowa te są sygnałem historyczno-literackiej fikcji, którą buduje w wierszu. Historia miesza się tu ze współczesnością, literatura z faktem, fikcja z rzeczywistością."

word “umrę” foreshadows Ovid’s death with a certainty that only the contemporary author and audience can have. Ovid himself is left helplessly hoping for the emperor’s pardon until the end of his days (7–8). Such word choice creates a sense of intimacy between the audience and the lyrical subject, and between Kaczmarek in the present and Ovid’s figure in the past.<sup>31</sup> The depiction of the setting where Ovid spends his last days does not aim, therefore, for a faithful reconstruction of historical geography and reveals that Kaczmarek is not interested in the historical figure of Ovid per se. His poem focuses instead on a mythical figure of an exiled poet whose fate can resonate across time and space and help Kaczmarek understand his own political emigration experiences. This timeless rusticity chimes with Delcroix’s mythic scene.

The landscape also features prominently as a barrier that establishes the distance between the lyrical subject and the object of his nostalgia. Lines 5–8 situate Ovid helplessly awaiting a pardon letter from Augustus as an old man isolated from his intellectual circles. There is tragedy in the fact that the great Roman poet is confined to a distant country looking with longing for Rome but unable to culturally interact with it anymore. The sense of displacement is powerfully conveyed by the geographical distance between the eternal *urbs* (Rome) founded on seven hills that are invisible from Ovid’s location, which is surrounded by a very different type of landscape, the sea (5–6). The contrasting depiction of the “familiar” hills versus the “vast and unknown” sea can reflect the lyrical subject’s sense of angst and can also serve to heighten his sense of isolation from the known and intelligible world.<sup>32</sup> Kaczmarek does not qualify these landscapes so explicitly, but his depiction of Ovid’s suffering is built upon the profound dichotomy of the uncouth world in which the ancient poet found himself and the cultured world to which he used to belong.

The vast space isolating Ovid from his home underlies the hopelessness of his position. The image of doomed hope is conveyed by lines 7–8 that protractedly describe Ovid awaiting the imperial pardon to end his exile. Neither we nor Kaczmarek can know whether

31 Cf. Ingleheart, “Introduction,” 6–7.

32 For the creation of “civilized” and “barbaric” literary spaces in works responding to Ovidian exile, see Ingleheart, “Introduction,” 17–18, and Michalopoulos, “The Love-Artist,” 265. For an example of textual analysis of the Black Sea as a “threatening” landscape that heightens a sense of isolation in *Iphigenia among the Taurians* by Euripides, see Bray, *Interrogating Liminality*, 52–71.

such a letter was ever sent, but Ovid's hope is evoked by the image of a pardon letter, passed from hand to hand, but never arriving. The phrase "z rąk do rąk – niepiśmiennych. Iść będzie i nie dojdzie pismo" ("from where, through conquered lands, passing from hand to illiterate hand, / Augustus' letter of pardon, always coming, will never arrive") delays the delivery by using the future continuous tense ("iść będzie" – "it will be arriving") which stretches time and reflects Ovid's never-ending wait.<sup>33</sup> The same phrase also manipulates space. The distance between the seven hills of Rome, invisible from Romania, and the Black Sea, feels especially impassable and impenetrable for a pardoning letter because none of its handlers are literate enough to realize its cultural importance. The image of a letter coming from Rome to Tomis through illiterate hands depicts an axis of culture and civilization, with Rome at the epicenter, and Ovid in Scythia, at the farthest outskirts of the known world.<sup>34</sup> The conquered lands filled with illiterate peoples evoke the empire's scale and contrast with Ovid, whose personal culture and independence doom him to be utterly lost and hopeless in the face of the limitless, unintelligible, and utterly alien space that separates him from home. His transformation into the letter lost in the middle of that unbounded space compounds this sense of isolation. One can see in Ovid's desperate hoping against all the odds a reflection of Kaczmarek's own exilic experiences. To Kaczmarek in 1987, there seemed little chance in socialist Poland for the political change that would allow him to return to his country.<sup>35</sup>

## IMPERIALISM

Lines 3–4 evoke the transformation of the barbarians wearing sheepskins into an ambitious nation, trading under Trajan's column. The juxtaposition of the nation's ambition with their disparaging economic activity ("drobny handel" – lit. "small-scale business") signals skepticism or even irony towards the inferior position ascribed to

33 We have attempted to render this effect by using the present participle, which felt more natural in English.

34 For a literary polarisation of Tomis and Rome as an essential element of responses to the Ovidian exile, see Ingleheart, "Introduction," 17–18.

35 "Za dużo czerwonego," part 2: "To był 1987 rok, taki okres ciszy przed burzą, wydawało się, że już naprawdę nic z tego nie będzie, tylko żaloba, pleśń i rozkład."

the provincials within the scheme of the empire. The barbarians do not become cultured men in Rome but are reduced to small traders under Roman rule. The transition is evoked by Trajan's column, which depicts the conquest and exploitation of Dacia (a region neighboring Moesia Inferior, where Ovid was in exile) almost a hundred years after Ovid's death. The evocation of Trajan's column foreshadows military coercion through which the peoples inhabiting the coast of the Black Sea will be forcefully incorporated into the empire.<sup>36</sup> The notion of the Roman conquest of lands between Rome and Tomis is also expressed in line 7 ("przez kraje podbite" – "through conquered lands"). All these references to the military character of the Roman empire can be interpreted as Kaczmarek's ironic commentary on imperialism and colonial exploitation that elevates him above Ovid's imperialistic perception of the local people. Here, Kaczmarek's Ovid presents the perspective of rulers, which considers Romans and their culture as superior to the people living in the peripheries of the empire, far away from its center, Rome.

While setting the stage for Ovid's suffering and longing for his home, Kaczmarek conveys his critical stance towards seemingly beneficial aspects of living in an empire, reminding us that the gravitational pull of its capital was founded on brutal military conquest. His view is undoubtedly informed by contemporary experiences and perceptions of economic emigration in socialist Poland, and in the Eastern Block more generally, where many every-day commodities had to be procured through small-scale trade, often abroad.<sup>37</sup> The economic difficulties of ancient and modern "provincials" living in the shadow of imperialism are related to Kaczmarek's sensitivity to the question of imperialism in antiquity and in modern times.<sup>38</sup>

36 The region was secured permanently by Roman force in 29 BCE (Liv. *Per.* 135, Cassius Dio 51.23–6, Florus 2.26, 13–16, Zonaras 10.32). For the historical background of the Black Sea region before and during Roman conquest, see Musielak, *Spółczesność greckich miast zachodnich wybrzeży Morza Czarnego*; for the overview of the province of Moesia, encompassing Tomis, where Ovid was exiled, see Cary and Wilkes, "Moesia," in  *OCD*.

37 Krywult-Albańska, *Przyczyny i okoliczności emigracji z Polski w latach 1980 na przykładzie emigracji do Kanady*, 3–5; Kornai, *Niedobór w gospodarce*; Staniszkis, *Patologie struktur organizacyjnych (próba podejścia systemowego)*; Górny and Stola, "Akumulacja i wykorzystanie migracyjnego kapitału społecznego," 98.

38 Kaczmarek later differentiated between Soviet imperialism the conquests of Alexander the Great or Caesar. He found the former more contemptible than the latter, which he partly justified as a civilizing mission. See "Za dużo czerwonego," part 2.

His ironic depictions of historical figures and events can be found in several other sung poems and serve as a bitter commentary on the nature of imperialism, military power struggles, and colonial conquests.<sup>39</sup> In this poem, it is the image of the descendants of the *Getae* and Scythians who trade in the literal shadow of Roman imperialism, cast by Trajan's column. From this perspective, Kaczmar-ski's response to Ovid can be seen as part of a more general trend to treat Ovid's figure as an occasion to discuss or critique the repressive nature of twentieth-century regimes.<sup>40</sup>

## CULTURAL DISPLACEMENT

As was the case of another 1.3 million Polish people, Kaczmar-ski lived as an émigré in the 1980s and could not come back to the country without fear of political repression.<sup>41</sup> In 1987, when he composed "Ovid's Old Age," he had already been "displaced" for six years, living first in Paris, then in Munich.<sup>42</sup> During this time, as an artist creating in his native tongue, he must have particularly suffered from cultural and linguistic isolation.<sup>43</sup> Kaczmar-ski thus purposefully reconstructs the emotional state of the exiled Ovid, longing for Rome and hoping for his exile to end, to understand his own situation and experiences. In his 2001 interview with Jolanta Piątek, he admitted that he used his source material depending on his own need and context: "partly to improve my frame of mind, partly as an attempt to understand the nature of exile – in the case of Ovid, it was political exile."<sup>44</sup>

39 E.g., "Jałta," "Sen Katarzyny II," "Historia Lekcji Klasycznej," "Kniazia Jaremy Nawrócenie."

40 Ingleheart, "Introduction," 15–16.

41 For Polish emigration in this period, see Krywult-Albańska, *Przyczyny i okoliczności emigracji z Polski*, and Pleskot, "Polish Political Emigration in the 1980s," 49–64.

42 Gajda, *Jacek Kaczmar-ski*, 148: in Paris, Kaczmar-ski had relatively comfortable living standards compared to most political émigrés.

43 For the very Polish character of Kaczmar-ski's poetry and its reception by foreign poets and friends, see Gajda, *Jacek Kaczmar-ski*, 154. However, Kaczmar-ski had a large audience abroad, especially in France, where generations of immigrants produced a large minority of Polish speakers, see Gajda, *Jacek Kaczmar-ski*, 157.

44 Interview "Za dużo czerwonego" was conducted in Radio Wrocław in 2001 and published in *Odra*. Retrieved from [www.kaczmar-ski.art.pl](http://www.kaczmar-ski.art.pl) and translated.

The four lines depicting isolated Ovid in Tomis illustrate how Kaczmarek's exilic experiences found their expression in the figure from antiquity. The renowned poet Ovid has no one to talk to (9: "Nie ma tu z kim rozmawiać" – "No one to speak with here") and suffers from a lack of artistic stimulation in a place where poetry is so rare that any script becomes priceless ("zwój wierszy wart każdej ceny" – "scroll of poems worth any price"). Among the sheepskin wearing barbarians (3) who smell of garlic (29), Ovid is wholly isolated from the high culture in which he participated in Rome. Kaczmarek himself was obviously also partially culturally separated from the artistic activities in Poland, but his "exile" allowed him to participate in Polish cultural activities abroad, for example, to meet some of the most renowned Polish actors and filmmakers.<sup>45</sup> Nonetheless, since Kaczmarek's own literacy and poetic prowess were rooted in his native language, the foreign people surrounding him might have seemed as illiterate as Ovid's Scythian companions who knew no Latin and were "ignorant of Greece" (19). These unusual circumstances for an artist prompted Kaczmarek to align himself with Ovid's artistic fate and depict him as linguistically displaced.

The solemn tone of 19–20 underscores Ovid's expression of discontentment with his cultural displacement. The lyrical subject seeks solace in the Graeco-Roman culture that permeates his poetry, which proves to be the only reliable source of "support" during his exile (19: "na nim jednym się wspieram" – "It (the lineage) is my sole consolation"). During exile, cultural identity becomes much more important than anything else. The significance of the cultural heritage cherished by Ovid is contrasted with the supposed ignorance of people who ridicule his reverence for poetry (20: "śmiejąc się z czci, jaką oddaję słowu" – "laughing politely at my reverence for the word"). These lines are full of bitter irony and resemble Ovid's expression of frustration with the Getae laughing at his use of the Latin language (Ov. *Trist.* 5.10.38).<sup>46</sup>

It is important to note that Kaczmarek changes the emphasis slightly in this image: his Ovid is concerned with the lack of understanding for the value of poetry and the importance of language in general. Whereas the passage from Ovid's *Tristia* depicts the more

45 Gajda, *Jacek Kaczmarek*, 148, 151–3, 163–7. Kaczmarek became friends with Andrzej Seweryn and had frequent contacts with internationally renowned filmmakers, such as Andrzej Wajda and Agnieszka Holland.

46 Milewska-Ważbińska, "Exulowie wszystkich czasów," 169–170.

mundane ridicule of the local people in every-day miscommunication with Ovid, it does not undermine the role of poetry in general. The difference in emphasis can be explained by the fact that Kaczmarek himself spoke fluent French while he found himself in exile and did not have communicative problems. For this reason, it might have been more personally relevant to focus on Ovidian exile as not just a linguistically alienating experience, which is a more generic emigratory experience, but primarily as a cultural displacement where the poet's core values are challenged. The resulting picture is one of contrast between Ovid, who represents the purest form of classical poetry, and the barbarians who ignore the most fundamental aspects of his culture (19: "tu, gdzie nie wiedzą – co Grecja" – "here where they are ignorant of Greece"). No doubt, through this image, Kaczmarek conveys his own exilic experiences of being fundamentally misunderstood abroad, especially when he was ascribed the constraining role of a national bard (see below), which changed the interpretation of even his apolitical songs.<sup>47</sup>

Ovid's cultural displacement is further underscored by an image of non-intellectual pleasures replacing his poetic activity. The list of Ovid's key activities is composed of a series of abruptly uttered words (21: "Sen, jedzenie, gra w kości" – "Sleep, food, dice") which evoke the lack of sophistication in his daily life. Instead of spending time writing, he gambles excessively (21: "do bólu w schylonych plecach" – "till my bowed back hurts"). When he does write, it is a cheap commission, produced hastily, and for an easily satisfied audience (22). By evoking bodily, visceral sensations, such as eating, suffering from back pain, or writing on a knee in a bent position, Kaczmarek draws his audience into the experience of a poet reduced to the physical world. This reduction is particularly difficult because it distances Ovid from the intellectual world of poetry, which becomes the cornerstone of his identity in exile (19). The reduction of the poet to a sore gambler is a powerful development of the image of cultural alienation that helps the audience to identify with the exiled Ovid, and by proxy, with Kaczmarek.

Kaczmarek's depiction of the Scythians as disinterested in Graeco-Roman culture and literature corresponds with Ovid's complaints (*Ov. Trist.* 4.1.94).<sup>48</sup> His new audience is too content with what they already possess and therefore are not as interested in the

47 Gajda, *Jacek Kaczmarek*, 168–9.

48 For linguistic isolation, see Milewska-Ważbińska "Exulowie wszystkich czasów," 166.

hope and mirage that Ovid's poetry could offer. The striking contrast between the locals' materialism and the spiritual experience that could be accessed through poetry underlies the next lines. No one will promise beauty because one must pay for it in gold (23). This makes for an intellectually and lyrically poor, almost hostile environment. Ovid cannot achieve aesthetic satisfaction among the people who are only interested in material goods. His cultural displacement is all the more profound because no one around him shares the same aspirations and expectations from daily life.

The last line of this section evokes a mythical figure from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, whose tragic displacement can only be understood by the lyrical subject in exile. This is also perhaps the most ambiguous part of the poem because of the uncertainty whether the figure should be identified as Ariadne, who helped Theseus navigate the Minotaur's maze, or Arachne, who was turned into a spider. Arachne was punished by Minerva for her hubristic challenge of the goddess's craft and the resulting masterly tapestry that depicted crimes of the gods (Ov. *Met.* 6.1–145). Did Kaczmarek confuse Ariadne with Arachne? Judging by how closely Kaczmarek was engaged with Ovid's work, it seems improbable that he did not distinguish the two figures. We could try to explain this lapsus by the fact that, like most of Kaczmarek's poems, it was supposed to be sung out loud, which could obscure the minuscule phonetic dissimilarity between the two names. This explanation's weakness lies in the fact that Kaczmarek had excellent diction and would have been quite capable of distinguishing between different sounds. Unfortunately, there are no accessible manuscripts of the lyrics to verify which name Kaczmarek had originally written and whether it was changed later when copying the lyrics.<sup>49</sup> While there are several creative defenses of Ariadne, it is most likely a simple mistake. The two names are similar and, especially for the non-specialist, exist within the same interpretative realm, i.e., classical myth.<sup>50</sup> Faced with these interpretative difficulties, we read the line as: "Pojąłem, tworząc tu, jak z *Arachne* powstaje pająk" ("I grasped, composing here, how *Arachne* turns into a spider"), which makes the most sense in the

49 Checked against the largest online database of Kaczmarek's manuscripts, available on [www.kaczmarek.art.pl](http://www.kaczmarek.art.pl).

50 He would not be the first, and certainly will not be the last to mistake the two names. See, e.g., Hall and Stead, *People's History of Classics*, 76, where Miles Aston also mistook the two in a poem, published in Dublin, 1728.

context of its place in the poem.<sup>51</sup> One of the reasons for which Ovid was banished by "divine" Augustus was a song, *carmen*.<sup>52</sup> Similarly, Arachne met her punishment after she created the most beautiful and highly detailed tapestries. After her transformation by Minerva, she continued to weave with the same skill she had before, but ephemeral cobwebs rather than tapestries. Ovid, too, retained his poetic skill but, after banishment, had been reduced to writing among people who could not appreciate his art. In the same way, Arachne's fellow spiders were incapable of comprehending the sophistication of her weaving skills. The metaphor primarily communicates Ovid's and Kaczmarski's alienation and the feeling of being misunderstood as poets, but it recalls the brutal physical manifestations of metamorphosis. Towards the end of the poem, it will be juxtaposed, however, with the image of resilient poetry that, despite hostile surroundings, retains its power to offer solace by conjuring images of a lost home (see the section on nostalgia and exilic poetry below).

Ovid's displacement is not confined to linguistic alienation and the reduction of his poetic activity but also encompasses changes in intimate, personal life. Directly referring to Ovid's works on love life, Kaczmarski dramatizes the poet's erotic life in exile. In Tomis, sexual conquests, so vividly depicted in *Amores* and *Ars Amatoria*, become devoid of the art that characterized intimate encounters in Rome. The bodies of local women are taken hastily and without sophistication, without art (10 "brane pośpiesznie, bez kunsztu" – lit. "taken hurriedly, with no art") and produce nothing but disappointment (11 "chłoną nie dając nic w zamian" – "they absorb, giving nothing in return"). They "absorb" ("chłoną") white semen of the empire without reciprocity, without sighs. These women might be prostitutes or ordinary "curious" local women, "curious," perhaps about Ovid as a famous poet or simply because at the outskirts of the empire, his Roman status makes him privileged ("ciała kobiet ciekawych" – "Bodies of curious women"). Controversially, the lyrical subject reduces them to "bodies." Their human agency is removed, leaving space but for a distraction for Ovid, who is nostalgically comparing them to his artful sexual relationships in Rome. There is also a jarring power dynamic set up in the image of "curious women's bodies" attracted to Ovid's "imperial semen."

51 For fans' divided interpretations of this passage and various explanations of how "Ariadne" can make sense in the poem's context, see [www.kaczmarski.art.pl](http://www.kaczmarski.art.pl).

52 Cf. n. 23; Ingleheart, "Introduction," 4–5.

Do they want to have children with a Roman citizen to improve their legal status? Or are they simply attracted to the famous international poet? There seems to be a value judgment hidden in these lines, and the sexual exploitation can be read in parallel to lines 3–4, which strongly suggest a skeptical stance towards Roman imperialism. Kaczmarski compares Ovid’s poetic “art of love” in Rome with the crude objectification of women as purely sexual objects during his exile.

Is this sexual image an expression of Kaczmarski’s disappointment with his exilic fame and popularity among female fans? Kaczmarski’s promiscuity is no secret, and his preference for considerably younger women further problematizes the already unsavoury image.<sup>53</sup> The uncertain nature of our sources, as well as dynamic developments in the poet’s intimate life, make it difficult to define with precision how much of his depiction of Ovid’s erotic life can be read as Kaczmarski’s self-reflection on his own extramarital sexual experiences with women abroad.<sup>54</sup> However, it is not improbable that Kaczmarski subtly confesses his dissatisfaction with the sexual life that the exilic conditions offered to him, for example, when touring in the US in 1987.<sup>55</sup> Adding to this picture’s complexity, the description of beds as smelling of sheep (12) repeats the notion of barbarity and perhaps even inferiority of the people surrounding Ovid. This is a perverse picture of “simple” women attracted by artistic fame, the basis of which they cannot understand, and by the superiority of a Roman, who, as the conqueror sent to the province, takes their bodies as his spoil.<sup>56</sup> Therefore, displacement is not just a linguistic problem but an overall bodily experience that alters even the most intimate aspects of a poet’s exilic life.

53 See, e.g., Gajda, *Jacek Kaczmarski*, 103 for a latter account of Kaczmarski’s conversation about his intimate relations with younger women.

54 Kaczmarski certainly did not shy away from tackling intimate relations and details of intercourse in his poetry, see, e.g., “Potępienie rozkoszy” or “Wyznanie kalifa, czyli o mocy baśni.”

55 See Kaczmarski’s self-reflection on a two-month tour as hedonistic and excessive in “Za dużo czerwonego,” part 4, where Kaczmarski refers to alcohol consumption and heavy partying.

56 Kaczmarski’s attitude towards marital fidelity in his 20s was qualified by his friends as “relaxed.” He had an active sexual life, often involving younger female fans, and extra-marital romances which eventually ended his first marriage with Inka Kardys, see Gajda, *Jacek Kaczmarski*, 202–211.

## POLITICAL DISPLACEMENT

There is no doubt that Kaczmarek sought in the myth of Ovid's exile an analogy to his emigration and positioned himself as an exiled poet suffering from political displacement.<sup>57</sup> The character of the self-identification of Kaczmarek with the lyrical subject of his poem – an imaginary Ovid – is underlined by self-mythologization. Kaczmarek's life in western Europe can hardly be compared to his rendering of the Ovidian experience of displacement in the cultural backwaters of the world.<sup>58</sup> Nonetheless, despite Kaczmarek's sustained activity and a certain level of professional success abroad (well-paid job in the Free Europe Radio alongside many international and intercontinental tours), he strongly needed to express his sense of isolation and frustration with the authoritarian regime that caused the immigratory trauma.<sup>59</sup>

The analogy to Ovid testifies to Kaczmarek's need to communicate his suffering for which he found expression in similar feelings in antiquity. Lines 13–16 explore the consequences of political exile for the poet's agency in more depth. The lyrical subject suggests that, on the one hand, the price of exile seems low because it "frees" the poet from the influence of the court and the crowd (13: "Far from the court and crowd – what a price for exile"). That these audiences were the negative side of residing in Rome is evident from the next line suggesting Ovid's work constraints. The lyrical subject proclaims in line 14 that poetry ought to be free from "władza," a word which denotes both power in a general sense, e.g., the audience's taste exerting influence on the artist, and the political authority of a person or institution. Kaczmarek's "authority shall not rule over poetry" (14) evokes Ovid's actual words concerning his talent (*ingenium*) over which Caesar cannot rule (Ov., *Trist.* 3.7.45–48: *ingenio tamen ipse meo comitorque fruorque: / Caesar in hoc potuit iuris habere nihil* – "my mind is nevertheless my comrade and my joy; over this Caesar could have no right").<sup>60</sup> Ovid's position as portrayed by Kaczmarek

57 "Za dużo czerwonego": "'Ovid's Old Age' was a more or less conscious positioning of myself in the role of the poet exile" ("*Starość Owidiusza* były mniej lub bardziej świadomym ustawianiem siebie w roli poety wygnança").

58 For the account of Kaczmarek's life abroad in the 1980s, see Gajda, *Jacek Kaczmarek*, 146–216.

59 That is how Gajda, *Jacek Kaczmarek*, 213–4 interprets Kaczmarek's work and testimonies of his life from this period.

60 Milewska-Ważbińska, "Exulowie wszystkich czasów," 169.

was both a universal statement and a reflection on the particular situation in Poland after 1981 when some leading artists and intellectuals supported communist propaganda, which agitated Kaczmarek.<sup>61</sup> Kaczmarek was equally allergic to constraints of artistic freedom coming from the political opposition and explicitly stood against “making poetry useful,” whatever the cause.<sup>62</sup>

On the other hand, the price of political exile is higher than it seems to the poet at first. The lyrical subject might have championed the freedom of poetry, but now, the change of the circus into a hermitage (15: “Cyrku w pustelnię zamiana”) snatches his peace away (“spokój jednak odbiera”). This “transformation” points to an unexpected consequence for the poet who is disappointed with the final result. The Polish word for hermitage “pustelnia” has strong connotations with the physical isolation of a spiritual man and can be associated with a setting where one can find inner peace and perhaps achieve illumination. It contrasts with the *Circus* (Maximus), a symbol of socializing in Rome (and a setting in Ovid’s *Ars Amatoria* 1.135). For a poet, such isolation might promise artistic freedom, but in Kaczmarek’s imagined reality, the removal from the center of Rome has the opposite effect on Ovid. The poet regrets the “trade-off” because he has been reduced to a man bargaining for fuel from an artist able to goad the emperor himself (16). The degradation of his socio-economic position is conveyed by the image of an ancient poet forced to use his rhetorical skills to negotiate for fuel to keep himself warm – a position of extreme economic precariousness. Both the economic instability and removal from the court’s circle are humiliating and severely minimize the role an exiled artist can hope to play.

Kaczmarek plays with the irony of political exile where, though free from political censorship or tastes of the crowd, artistic creation is constrained by the necessities of every-day life and has a reduced impact on the distant political authorities. The poet’s removal from Rome means that there is no longer any point in criticising the emperor because there is no audience that can listen to Ovid.<sup>63</sup> Through this image, filled with frustration, bitterness, and disappointment,

61 Gajda, *Jacek Kaczmarek*, 165–6. For artistic expression of Kaczmarek’s disappointment with some artists and intellectuals in this period, see e.g., *Marsz Intelektualistów, Koncert Fortepianowy, Artyści*.

62 “Za dużo czerwonego,” part 1.

63 Cf. Vintilia Horia’s depiction of Ovid as having a new, politically free voice on his exile, analyzed by Sebastian Matzner, “Tomis Writes Back,” 307–321.

KaczmarSKI explores the paradox of his displacement. Away from the communist regime, he is finally free to compose and perform however he wishes. KaczmarSKI's artistic creation and performance before emigration in 1981 were constantly marked by a careful dance around censorship. He was ultimately tolerated by authorities in public performative settings, but this constrained his delivery of more politically explicit songs to only smaller, private audiences, sometimes to key political oppositionists.<sup>64</sup> However, the freedom from political censorship is accompanied by cultural displacement – partial removal from literary life and distance from his native audiences – which limits the scope of his artistic activities. As in the case of Ovid, KaczmarSKI's removal from literary life in Poland was only partial. His songs were illegally duplicated in Poland, and his name continued to be advertised through international concerts in numerous Polish diasporas.<sup>65</sup>

The depiction of political displacement corresponds to the ambiguous reality of KaczmarSKI's and Ovid's political stances. Neither of them was an open adversary of the contemporary authorities. The Ovidian exile was the first attested banishment of a major poet due to political reasons, even though the exact reasons for Augustus' displeasure with Ovid are still debated.<sup>66</sup> KaczmarSKI's artistic stance towards the communist regime might appear more critical than Ovid's, it was however rarely as explicit as his audience's reception of it. After all, he preferred to zoom out from criticism of the problems at hand to more universal observations, such as the fate and role of the exiled national poets.<sup>67</sup>

## NATIONAL POETS

In lines 17–20, KaczmarSKI depicts Ovid as an exiled national poet whose work will become the cornerstone of national literature. In

64 See Gajda, *Jacek KaczmarSKI*, 100–102, 106–110. For KaczmarSKI's "diplomatic" contacts with the secret police, see *ibid.*, 113–114, and 121–122.

65 For the removal of Ovid's books from libraries in Rome as a rhetorical theme and modern responses to this aspect of Ovid's exile, see Ingleheart, "Introduction," 16–7.

66 Ingleheart, "Introduction," 14–15.

67 For an account of KaczmarSKI's political involvement and contemporary perceptions of his political views in poetry, see Gajda, *Jacek KaczmarSKI*, 70–71, 86, 94–131.

so doing, Kaczmarek merges two distinct traditions of responses to the emigrated national artists. One is related directly to the figure of Ovid, who has been an archetype of an exiled national poet in European literature for centuries. The other is derived from the nineteenth- and twentieth-century experiences of Polish national writers and the cultural legacy they left for the generations of politically oppressed Poles. The Polish national tradition is important here because it strongly marks the image of Ovid who “retains in himself” the fundamentals of Graeco-Roman culture (18). A key national poet will preserve it, presumably through artistic legacy, even after “the enemy” will have torn columns apart from the walls in Rome, that is after the fall of Roman civilization (17). This ennobling cultural mission is juxtaposed with the cultural alienation of poet exiles just discussed.

The Polish tradition of exiled and repressed artists encompasses some of the most influential artists whose work during the Partitions (1795–1918) became part of the canon of Polish national culture. Some of the most iconic Polish artists who had to emigrate from Poland and who produced the most nationally acclaimed work include Frederic Chopin (1810–1849), Adam Mickiewicz (1798–1855), Juliusz Słowacki (1809–1849), and Cyprian Kamil Norwid (whose exilic fate Kaczmarek explored in “Ostatnie Dni Norwida” in 1987). Among the near contemporaries of Kaczmarek, other famous Polish poets émigrés suffered from the political repression of the socialist regime, e.g., Czesław Miłosz (1911–2004) whose grand-oeuvre *Zniewolony Umysł* from 1953 did not appear in Poland officially until 1989.<sup>68</sup> This national tradition is distinct from the Ovidian exile, but it is worth noting that the latter was an ever-present influence in Polish literature.<sup>69</sup> Having graduated from Warsaw University with a diploma in literature, Kaczmarek must have studied the topos of “an exiled poet” suffering from political repression while composing essential national works.<sup>70</sup> This background is evident in his ironical poem from 1996, “Czaty Śmiełowskie” where Kaczmarek makes a direct link between his situation during the transformation period and that of Adam Mickiewicz (one of the most iconic figures of nine-

68 Stankowska, *Literatura i krytyka w czasopiśmie Wielkiej Emigracji*; Wolski, “Literatura emigracyjna 1939–1989”; Lenkiewicz, “Wielka Emigracja i wizje Wieszców.”

69 For a recent study of Ovidian exile in Polish literature, see Milewska-Ważbińska and Domański, *Owidiusz: Twórczość – recepcja – legenda*.

70 See, e.g., Straszewska, *Życie literackie Wielkiej Emigracji we Francji 1831–1840*.

teenth-century Polish literature), who was also entangled in difficult personal circumstances during political upheavals related to the November Uprising in 1831. In "Czaty Śmiełowskie," the comparison of the two poets focuses on the influence of "patriotic conscience" on artistic creation. Politically displaced, Kaczmarski's Mickiewicz finds inspiration in his complicated situation to write works that will become canonical in Polish literature. On the other hand, the image of an inspired poet creating his crucial works in exile is in some opposition to Ovid's rhetoric of the inferiority of the poems composed in Tomis, and the high importance of Ovid's writings from his time in Rome.<sup>71</sup> Nevertheless, Kaczmarski, influenced by the Polish national tradition of exilic poetry, depicts Ovid as a "repository" of his national heritage.

Kaczmarski's unique response to Ovidian exile thus becomes only understandable when seen in the context of the Polish tradition of exiled poets who compose masterpieces of national literature abroad. The way "Ovid's Old Age" situates Ovid as a banished national poet draws upon such figures as Mickiewicz and helps Kaczmarski identify himself as an exiled poet with a cultural mission. This is not, however, self-mythologizing for its own sake. The evocation of Ovid's or Mickiewicz's cultural missions in exile can be read as Kaczmarski's search for consolation. Suffering caused by political and cultural displacement can also create a unique opportunity for an artist to leave a long-lasting legacy. Mickiewicz and Kaczmarski composed away from home, just as the legacy of the Graeco-Roman civilization was retained in Ovid and his work when he was not in Rome. The image of lines 17–18 where Rome is destroyed but Ovid's poetry endures suggest that national heritage is best preserved not by cultural centers themselves, but in the poets who embody their national identity, even though they are composing abroad because the political situation or the enmity of political authorities is preventing them from being physically present at home.

## NOSTALGIA AND EXILIC POETRY

The lack of interest in poetic work among the Scythians is contrasted with Ovid's heightened sensitivity to poetry fuelled by exilic nostalgia. Arachne's metaphor conveys the poet's suffering from cultural alienation, but it also unfolds itself into a web of words (25 "Na

71 See Ingleheart, "Introduction," 7–9.

pajęczynie wyrazów” – “on the web of words”) that depicts a lyrical image of Ovid’s lost home. The penultimate section reveals an intimate image of Rome that is characterized by both lyrical sophistication and the idealization of the poet’s home. Lines 25–28 thus explore how the pain of an exiled poet can be transformed into art and how art, in turn, can conjure powerful mental images of Rome. To elicit the image of Rome (26 “drżący Rzym mojej duszy” – “trembling Rome of my soul”), Ovid’s web of words names sensory experiences (colors, smells, touch), spaces (meadows, palaces), and people (25–6).

Kaczmarek does not evoke any concrete names but calls out the categories of words that can empower the process of conjuring a clear image of a place. In so doing, he observes from a distance how an exiled poet would draw his audience into a lyrical image. Kaczmarek does not attempt to offer a picture worthy of Ovid but simply reflects on poetic techniques that can be effectively used to ease the longing for home by depicting it as vividly as possible. Here, Kaczmarek limits himself to an observation of the artistic workshop, but throughout the poem he indicates that he has mastered these techniques during his exile. In lines 21 and 29, he draws his audience into Ovid’s exilic life by evoking sensory experiences (21: “Sen, jedzenie, gra w kości do bólu w schyłonych plecach” – “Sleep, food, dice, till my bowed back hurts” and 29: “tubyłcy pachnący czosnkiem” – “garlic-smelling locals”) and places (Romania, Black Sea) that are meant to be immediately recognizable by his audience. Kaczmarek’s affinity to Ovid’s fate allows him to use the techniques of an exiled poet to blur the boundaries between the contemporary world and the ancient landscape. It is thus the condition of exile and its accompanying nostalgia that empowers Kaczmarek’s poetry. His displacement is a source of both suffering and inspiration, without which he would not have been able to portray Ovid’s exilic experiences with such sensitivity and thorough understanding of a poet *exilé*.<sup>72</sup>

Ovid’s nostalgia idealizes the mental image of Rome he conjures. Kaczmarek explores the effects of exile on the poet’s perception of his home and illustrates through concrete metaphors the extent to which an exiled poet can lose his critical, distanced view of his country. Line 27 describes the memory of ancestors that is devoid of ugliness: the word “geometria” [geometry] implies that this image

72 For exilic nostalgia as a source of empowerment for exiled poets and artists, such as Nabokov, Cavafy, or Portillo, see Riley (forthcoming), *Imagining Ithaca: Nostos and nostalgia since the Great War*.

underwent a beautifying process akin to the mathematical idealization of real-life imperfections. The following expression, "Zwierciadło żywej harmonii diamentowych okruszyn" ("mirror of a living harmony of diamond particles"), is perhaps the most complex and elusive. Like the geometry of memory, it confirms that imagined Rome conveys feelings of harmony rather than urban chaos. Nevertheless, the image of the mirror and the diamond particles refers to Rome by evoking light and shimmering, which produce a much blurrier and more rapidly changing picture than that of mathematical "geometry." The two images juxtaposed together can be seen as a reflection on the nature of our nostalgia, which, on the one hand, idealizes the blemishes and, on the other, provides only unstable pictures that flit like reflected light. Kaczmarek communicates through these lines that the exilic experience and its accompanying longing for home can both profoundly inspire and manipulate poetic visions.

#### THE EVERLASTING FORCE OF POETRY

The poem's final section brings us back to the present reality of Ovid's life in exile. Overwhelmed by his exilic condition, he becomes reduced to one wish only – to be granted pardon. The profound realization that he is utterly displaced in Tomis consumes Ovid, and this is metaphorically expressed as his transformation into a letter to the capital asking for pardon. Surrounded by the locals smelling of garlic (29), Ovid feels himself having been transformed into a letter (30). This image is in direct parallel with Ovid's identification with a physical letter that is described in Ovid's own writing (*Ov. Trist.* 5.4.1–4).<sup>73</sup> The smell of garlic can be associated with repugnancy (*Hor. Ep.* 3.3.), religious impurity, or an agricultural laborer's dish.<sup>74</sup> In Ovid's context, garlic symbolizes the poet's displacement among the peoples of different sensibilities. No one in Rome is, however, moved by Ovid's predicament (30 "nikogo nie

73 Cf. Milewska-Ważbińska, "Exulowie wszystkich czasów," 169, who quotes the same passage but in relation to lines 5–8.

74 Kloppenborg and Ascough, *Greco-Roman Associations*, 265 (IG 112 1365); for the garlic dish in the *Moretum* see Stead, [thehighwindowpress.com](http://thehighwindowpress.com): "One at a time he exposes garlic heads / from their knotted bodies and strips off / their outer skins scattering the discarded / husks all over tossing them to the ground / He wets each bulb freed from its skin / and casts it into the circular hollow of stone."

wzrusza” – “moves no one”). The use of the word “Stolica” – “capital,” instead of “Rome” or “the City” (more idiomatic in Ovid’s time), reminds us about the modern viewpoint of Kaczmarek, who associates the center of power with a country’s capital, in his case Warsaw. Where there are exiled poets, there are also capitals where the fate of the *émigrés* is decided. What matters is not the specific case or period but the universal struggle of poet exiles. That Rome is not evoked by name here or anywhere else in the poem helps Kaczmarek to show that the exilic experiences he describes apply to anyone who can identify with Ovid’s fate.

Line 31 “buckles” the opening lines 1–2 and underscores this universalistic vision by blurring the boundaries of time and space.<sup>75</sup> The lyrical subject predicts that Ovid’s surroundings will once become Romania but does not state it as a present fact yet. However, in the middle of the line, the “Sea” is already “Black,” suggesting that the figure of Ovid and the modern knowledge of Kaczmarek are blended in this last image. The smooth transition of the lyrical subject from Ovid to Kaczmarek is evident in the last line where the narrative voice appears in the third person, rather than in the first person singular.<sup>76</sup> This is a very subtle indication of Ovid’s sudden, almost unnoticeable death. Instead of dramatizing the last hours of the ancient poet, Kaczmarek uses the figure of Ovid turning into a letter begging for pardon to draw a universal picture that holds true in the present time. The despair of the old Ovid and his complete dependency on the mercy of the imperial authorities portray Kaczmarek, and other exiled poets, as a tragic individual confronted against the inhuman machine of bureaucracy where procedures and political agendas overtake sensitivity to the traumatic experience of emigrated poets.

The final image Kaczmarek delivers (32) is the transformation of Ovid’s body into fertile soil for future poetry. In an elegant way, it punctuates the entire poem and observes that Ovid is no longer just “there,” in past times among the garlic-smelling Scythians. Although dead, Ovid’s body and his world “are becoming” the fertile ground for a song, that is for poetry in times to

75 For the ring composition here, see Milewska-Ważbińska, “Exulowie wszystkich czasów,” 170.

76 The transition is suggested but not fully explained by Milewska-Ważbińska, “Exulowie wszystkich czasów,” 170. Kaczmarek writes here “świat Owidiusza” (Ovid’s world), instead of “mój świat” (my world).

come. Kaczmarek must be intentionally describing this transformation by using the present continuous tense of "to become" ("staje się") rather than present perfect form ("stało się") to emphasize the universality and timelessness of Ovidian exilic experience for poets.<sup>77</sup> Ultimately, the fertilized soil is Kaczmarek's poetic vision of the role of Ovid and his exilic myth.<sup>78</sup> As Kaczmarek's poem testifies, Ovid's exilic experiences nourish contemporary poetic encounters, whether mediated or not, with the classical world. In communicating his emigratory trauma through Ovid's figure, Kaczmarek pays homage to the ancient poet and acknowledges his timeless importance.

77 The effect of timelessness is also achieved through Kaczmarek's music. It has been acknowledged that Kaczmarek's musical composition enhances the meaning of his lyrics, see Dźwiniel, "Piosenki Jacka Kaczmareckiego w aspekcie zagadnienia melosemii," 110–120. In the case of "Ovid's Old Age," the song opens and ends with a chord, the individual notes of which are picked in a repeating pattern, creating a dreamy, timeless atmosphere. Even when the chord changes, the base note remains the same throughout much of the verse, establishing a sense of unresolved continuity. The echoing effect of the base note seems to reverberate through time, encouraging the reading of Kaczmarek's forced emigration as an echo of Ovid's exile. Warm thanks to Dr. Chloe Bray for her comments on the music in "Ovid's Old Age."

78 Cf. Derek Walcott's "All that Greek manure under the green bananas," in *Omeros*; Nanton, "All that Greek manure under the green bananas": Migration in Derek Walcott's *Omeros* and Homer's *The Odyssey*," 472–476.

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## ABSTRACT

"Ovid's Old Age" is a sung poem written by the Polish poet and musician Jacek Kaczmarski (1957–2004) which engages with the myth of Ovid's exile. Kaczmarski's works were heavily influenced both by classical culture and his experience of political emigration during the communist era. He was famed as an unofficial bard of the opposition movement, but is as yet little known to classical reception scholars. This paper presents Kaczmarski's creative engagement with Ovid as both a deeply personal reflection on the nature of exile and at the same time a universal commentary on poetry under authoritarian regimes. Our interpretation is based on a thematic analysis of the poem, including landscape, imperialism, displacement, "national" poets in exile, nostalgia, and the force of poetry. We set the reception in its social, political, and biographical context, with reference to several mediating receptions of the Ovidian exile. In Kaczmarski's poem, the Ovidian voice helps the poet to express the trials of emigration and reveals their effect on his art. It shows how engagements with classical culture may flourish, even while the formal discipline of Classics has been undernourished. We provide a bilingual translation of "Ovid's Old Age" to foster the understanding of migratory experiences in contemporary poetry and enrich international scholarship on the reception of Ovid with a response from communist Poland.

## KEYWORDS

Jacek Kaczmarski, classical reception, Poland, Ovid, sung poetry, communism, exile

## IZVLEČEK

»Ovidijeva starost«: Jacek Kaczmarski in spevna poezija izgnanstva

»Ovidijeva starost« je spevna pesem poljskega pesnika in glasbenika Jaceka Kaczmarskega (1957–2004), ki gradi na mitu o Ovidijevem izgnanstvu. Dela Kaczmarskega so nastajala pod močnim vplivom klasične kulture ter avtorjevih izkušenj s politično emigracijo v obdobju komunizma. Kaczmarski je slovel kot neuradni bard opozicijskega gibanja, vendar je med raziskovalci klasične recepcije še vedno razmeroma slabo poznan. Pričujoči članek predstavi njegov ustvarjalni stik z Ovidijem kot globoko osebno razmišljanje o naravi izgnanstva ter hkrati kot univerzalni komentar o vlogi poezije v avtoritarnih režimih. Ta interpretacija temelji na tematski analizi pesmi, ki vključuje pokrajino, imperializem, razseljevanje, »nacionalne« pesnike v izgnanstvu, nostalgijo in moč poezije. Recepcijo postavlja v njen družbeni, politični in biografski kontekst, sklicujoč se na več posredniških recepcij Ovidijevega izgnanstva. V pesmi Kaczmarskega ovidijevski glas pesniku pomaga izraziti preizkušnje emigracije in razkriti njihov učinek na njegovo umetnost. Pokaže, kako srečevanje s klasično kulturo lahko cveti tudi v času, ko je klasična filologija kot stroka podhranjena. Članek ponuja prevod »Ovidijeve starosti«, postavljen ob izvirniku, ter skuša s tem spodbuditi razumevanje migracijskih izkušenj v sodobni poeziji ter obogatiti mednarodno raziskovanje Ovidijeve recepcije z odzivom iz komunistične Poljske.

## KLJUČNE BESEDE

Jacek Kaczmarski, klasična recepcija, Poljska, Ovidij, spevna poezija, komunizem, izgnanstvo