

## The Myth of Ovid in Romanian Dramaturgy: Expression of the Dobrogean Space and Spirit

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**Abstract:** The paper analyzes the presence of Dobrogean motifs in Romanian dramaturgy, focusing particularly on the figure of the poet Ovid, exiled to Tomis. Dobrogea is presented as a space rich in history, myth, and legend, where the ancient past intertwines with the collective imagination. The Ovidian motif becomes an important thematic core, explored by playwrights such as Vasile Alecsandri and Nicolae Iorga, each offering their own interpretation of the poet's destiny. The analysis highlights the transformation of Ovid from a historical figure into a symbol of suffering, longing, and artistic creation. In these works, exile appears not merely as punishment, but as a profound experience that leads to a spiritual connection with the Dobrogean space and its local communities. The study also addresses dramatic conflicts, character construction, and the poetic dimension of the texts. The paper emphasizes the dynamic and evolving nature of this motif, also present in more modern works, such as those of Grigore Sălceanu. In conclusion, the myth of Ovid significantly contributes to shaping the cultural identity of Dobrogea and to expressing universal themes such as identity, freedom, and the condition of the artist.

**Keywords:** Ovid; Dobrogea; Romanian dramaturgy; exile; myth

### Introductory Fragment (Translation)

Dobrogea, a fascinating land situated between the gentle waters of the ancient Danube and the turbulent waves of the Black Sea, a region often shaken by storms, droughts, blizzards, and harsh winters, has nevertheless been inhabited—almost in defiance of these hardships—by resilient people who have built civilizations whose age rivals that of humanity itself.

This land, connected through legend to the expedition of the Argonauts and to the tragic fate of Medea, colonized by Greeks and Romans, and traversed by countless barbarian invasions on their way to Western Europe, ennobled by Romanian acts of bravery such as those of Mircea the Voivode or the heroes of Turtucaia, remains a

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mysterious and compelling territory. Here, “settlements, lakes, ruins, mounds, almost every stream, spring, or imposing stone carries its own legend<sup>1</sup>.”

This reference to Dobrogean folklore is not accidental nor merely stylistic. Addressing one of the fundamental Dobrogean motifs—namely, the motif of Ovid—one may assert that it has become a genuine myth of the place. Every child of Dobrogea, even before learning in school about the historical and literary existence of the Latin poet, internalizes this myth as part of their spiritual identity. Thus, Ovid becomes a symbolic ancestor, a figure of authority and justice, a perpetual presence, as if he had remained, for two millennia, an honorary citizen of the city.

In the mind and soul of the native Dobrogean, the image of the exiled poet to Tomis is constantly reconstructed, first and foremost through oral legends: about a mysterious island bearing his name in the middle of Lake Siutghiol, beneath whose waters traces of Roman constructions can still be seen on clear summer days; about a sumptuous sarcophagus long believed to belong to the poet; or about a burial mound more prominent than many others scattered across Dobrogea.

Romanian playwrights, deeply fascinated by the fate of the Latin poet exiled to the margins of Scythia Minor for reasons still unknown today, have drawn on different sources—partly historical, partly derived from the poet’s own works, especially *Tristia* and *Epistulae ex Ponto*. In these writings, Ovid frequently refers to his homeland and, at times, alludes—among his laments—to certain social and political relations with imperial officials, which may have led to his disgrace.

Vasile Alecsandri, the first among our great poets to create a drama entitled *Ovidiu* (a five-act play in verse), described by George Călinescu, with severity yet not without real grounds, as “a false play in which, for four acts, Augustus’ indignation is prepared, only for all the characters to gather artificially in the fifth act at the bedside of the dying poet in Tomis,”<sup>2</sup> based his work on historical and literary sources without becoming their slave, despite the many critics of his time who accused him of disregarding historical truth.

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<sup>1</sup> Alexandru Mitru, *Confessions*, Constanța, 1970.

<sup>2</sup> George Călinescu, *The History of Romanian Literature from Its Origins to the Present*, Bucharest, Minerva Publishing House, 1982.

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His work is an original poetic fiction in which the nature of the plot and the way it unfolds, the contradictory structure of the characters, and the theatrical effects all point to Alecsandri's predilection for Romantic drama—a tendency from which he could not detach himself when approaching this subject of profound and deeply moving tragedy.

The discursive character of the work, the overly long and excessively pathetic tirades—often sounding artificial—and the verses, not among the most accomplished of the great Alecsandri, were aspects already noticed by the audience at the premiere (March 9, 1885), which was received with reserve, even upon its revival in a revised form at the opening of the 1887–1888 season. Moreover, in the development of the characters there are paradoxical deviations, difficult to explain even within the author's own vision.

For instance, Julia, of imperial lineage, is ready to follow Ovid anywhere, seemingly ignoring social barriers, yet she brutally rejects the marriage proposal of the Dacian king, invoking precisely his “barbarism,” that is, his lack of refined civilization—an inconsistency that confuses the audience.

Nevertheless, beyond all the shortcomings related to the architecture of the work, the structure and development of the characters, and the quality of the verse, the image of the Latin poet—despite certain “ruptures” even within the linear progression of his evolution—emerges from Alecsandri's drama enveloped in a delicate poetic aura, bearing with dignity and melancholy the marks of genius, which is both the source of his misfortune and of his immortality.

Between the moment in Act II, in which the poet of tender loves declares:

“I host within my soul only gentle and joyful guests:

Love, friendship, serenity, compassion,

Precious companions on the path that leads to happiness;”

and that in Act IV, where he offers a magnificent hymn to woman:

“Blessed is he who believes in her enchantment

And sees in her alone both heaven and divinity,

For the sun itself borrows light from her eyes,

And were she not in this world, we would not believe in God.”

and the moment in Act V, when he is “ready to enter / The world where all is shadow and the great Caesar is small...”, questioning with doubt, fear, and bitterness the fate awaiting his work:

“My children, you, *Tristia*, and you, *Metamorphoses*,

And you, *The Art of Love*... what proud apotheoses,

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What laurels await you in times to come?  
Will the pagan world weave you into its veils?  
And I, falling into chaos like hail into the sea,  
Shall I have two shrouds—death and oblivion?”

the psychology of the character undergoes a profound dramatic transformation, gaining depth and substance.

The patriotism emphatically declared at the beginning—“To be *Civis Romanus* is to be a man of iron!”—becomes, toward the end of his life, a grave, burning feeling, yet deeply internalized, marked by the sorrow of an irreparable separation from his homeland:

“For he sorrowfully follows with his long gaze  
The ships upon the sea, fading into the distance,  
The clouds and the birds that come from his country...  
Oh, do you believe it? He recognizes the breath of its wind.  
Then he lowers his eyes, sighs heavily, and weeps.”

Prepared by the elegiac tone of the entire fifth act and crowned by the hero's death, the ending nevertheless “becomes a happy one through the organization of a broad solar euphoria,”<sup>3</sup> in which the vision of the Latin poet—“...oh, miracle... here in the East / A new Rome is being born, a new world is reborn”—is undoubtedly permeated by the light and the thrill of the hopes that the fervent patriot Alecsandri rightfully placed in the radiant future of his homeland.

Above all, however, what emerges from this ending is the belief in the immortality of the Roman poet, or perhaps in the immortality of poetry itself:

“...a hope that gives birth to imagination...  
Tomb and immortality... Tomb and immortality;  
My grave opens... From it, into the future,  
A long torrent of life unfolds, fertile.”

A great enigma of history, as it has been—and in fact remains—the exile of Ovid to Tomis, an excellent opportunity to reconstruct a tumultuous moment in the ever-troubled life of this corner of the country, could not remain outside the wide and varied concerns of the great historian Nicolae Iorga.

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<sup>3</sup>Vicu Mandra, *Inursions into the History of Romanian Dramaturgy*, Bucharest, Meridiane Publishing House, 1973.

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I believe that, in part, the fascination of this reconstruction—where the historian’s knowledge plays a decisive role—is also the reason why, unlike other plays dedicated to the Latin poet, the five acts of Nicolae Iorga’s dramatic poem *Ovidiu* take place exclusively in Tomis.

Consequently, we are confronted with a city perpetually harassed:

“All is haste here, between two storms,  
The flower seems afraid of the lingering gaze,  
For everything is change and everything is war.”

inhabited, as history indicates, primarily by Greek colonists who have made it their homeland, bearing the consciousness of a civilizing people:

“People of the world,  
We find a home in every place  
And make a Hellas even out of wilderness.”

Here, commerce flourishes, along with the cult of Greek gods and of the dead; primitive medicine and opportunism coexist. All of this unfolds, of course, between two invasions of the Scythian barbarians, whom the Greeks, the few Romans present as imperial envoys, and a large number of Getae—the inhabitants of the surrounding areas—confront together, despite their numerical inferiority.

The work opens spectacularly with a true theatrical coup: sent to Scythia Minor as a delegate of Octavian Augustus to gather information about this land, the poet learns of his sentence of exile only upon reaching the Scythian shore, where he is immediately abandoned.

In this land where:

“There are the Geloni of frost, and feathers fly  
Like birds that turn into pure water,”  
and where spring

“Nowhere in the world is more desired  
Than here, in the wake of deep suffering,”  
and where

“The Thracian hero, on horseback,  
Shows what our life is: we ride in flight  
Across the narrow space allotted to our lives,”

the poet’s delicate soul wanders, consumed by the sadness of memories that constantly draw him back toward his homeland, Italy.

In vain is his fleeting enthusiasm for the luxuriant procession of spring, with its unrestrained joy—“I am yours, spring, and I sing new hymns”; in vain the honors

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he receives, though they are not usually granted to strangers; in vain the nature that can offer him “treasures for song”:

“The whole plain is a blazing wave of gold,  
And among the ears of grain chirp maddened crickets,  
While sparrows, in greedy flight, search for food.”

All these are “a nest for the wanderer who has lost his way,” but “it is not my homeland, my sacred homeland.”

Gravely ill with a disease that “they name with a word that for us means longing, yet it is not a pain from outside, but from within,” Ovid hears from the physician Chiron that:

“...Here among the barbarians, too often  
We encounter the very illness that has struck you,  
It seems to come from the same enchanting stars.”

Cared for with unusual devotion and healed by the young Getae woman Dava, the poet develops for her a late love that cannot be fulfilled except after their blood has been mingled—as tradition demands—in the same battle against the enemy.

Ultimately pardoned by “holy Mother Rome,” Ovid refuses to return home, for the freedom of the city for which he has fought now binds him with a thousand threads, even more strongly than his profound love for Dava or the life of his son soon to be born. In this way, the birth of a new Rome is sealed—a Rome of which he feels himself a founder, the poet who ultimately becomes “a Getae from Getia.”

This is, perhaps, the most beautiful idea of the play: the integration of the refined Roman poet—through longing, suffering, and shared struggle—into the difficult life and complex philosophy of the Geto-Dacian ancestors.

“...when these defenders of the farthest edge  
Of the inhabited world speak of death,  
You feel that within them still lives  
The thought of immortality  
In which entire generations were raised.”

The entire work is, in fact, permeated by a deep vibration of the connection between man and the place where he was born, or between man and a foreign land which he has nevertheless sanctified through his life and labor, through his joys and sufferings, and, if necessary, through his own blood.

In this play, Iorga dedicates remarkable verses to labor:

“Grant it success in work, peace in the home, joy,  
Upon each labor let a flower descend,

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And in each flower place a call to work.”

and to poetry:

“But what the gods cannot grant me directly,  
Songs accomplish...”

Most moving, however, are the lines through which he attempts to define the notion of “dor” (longing)—and, though failing to define it precisely, manages to suggest its entire ineffable nature:

**Ovidius:** What is longing?

**Dava:** Something that can make you die.

Something calls you back, and you cannot break away.

Often it is not good. I know it, but what use?

Among us, many have died of longing alone.

**Ovidius:** And is longing something good?...

**Dava:** It is not only for the one you desire; it is for all that once was,

For your very self as you once were there,

And what you were then, you would wish to be again.

This dramatic poem, with evident implications of brilliant lyricism—such as the folk-style hymn dedicated to spring and labor, a page of memorable poetry—is constructed according to a classical pattern. There are two main characters, yet only one of them reaches truly overwhelming dimensions: Ovidius.

The conflict concerns him almost exclusively; it unfolds with an ever-increasing, ever more tense progression, between the poet and his tragic destiny, which—like in ancient plays—he ultimately subdues, not without awareness of his sacrifice and not without a deeply human sadness of victory.

With his “extraordinary ability to penetrate the facts and existences of the mythical and historical past, to perceive their profound meanings and to evoke them dramatically,”<sup>4</sup> Iorga reconstructs in his poem—with less historical minutiae, yet with massive and, in this case, undeniable poetic talent—the circumstances, conditions, and especially the meanings and significance of the Latin poet’s evolution in Tomis. It becomes an exemplary civic and ethical existence, ultimately towering with Olympian grandeur over an unfortunate destiny.

This poem, imbued with a tragic sense that is not lacerating and enveloped in the pure light of a grave optimism, would have deserved a better fate from theatre practitioners. Even if, here and there, one encounters heavier, less polished verses,

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<sup>4</sup> Virgil Brădăţeanu, *Studies in Romanian Dramaturgy*, Bucharest, Academy Publishing House, 1975.

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and even if at times—rarely—one senses slight traces of a mildly chauvinistic tone, the broad breath of humanity and universality of the work remains entirely unaltered.

The qualities of the poem are perhaps best illustrated by the remarks made by **Perpessicius** in 1957:

“...the dramatic poem *Ovidiu* by N. Iorga is a masterpiece... For the first time, we are faced with an Ovid stripped of all legends and bookish references... the fact that all acts take place in Tomis compels the fiction to take root in the soil of Dobrogea... The meaning of the play, derived from the Geto-Roman communion of blood, sanctified in the midst of battles, emerges without the slightest trace of rhetoric... Everything possesses a human and historical simplicity rarely encountered in our theatre of this kind... The decision of the exile to refuse the possibility of returning to Rome, when it is offered to him, even if it contradicts historical and biographical truth, lends a different gravity to the ending of the play, in which, for the first time, Ovid does not simply ‘repose’.”<sup>5</sup>

In 1957, during the celebrations marking the bimillennium of Ovid, the verse play *Ovidius* by the poet Grigore Sălceanu was staged in Constanța.

Subtitled a tragedy, the play is in fact closer to a Romantic drama, apparently following the structure of Alecsandri’s play: four acts in Rome, the severe sentence of exile, one act in Tomis, and the death of the poet. However, it differs essentially from the classical playwright’s version in that it is grounded in a conflict of social nature, which seems to have reached a climax during the reign of Octavian Augustus:

“Landowners, in every village,  
Impose ever heavier taxes on cattle and homes,  
And those who cannot pay are forced  
To sell all they own. Starving, sick,  
Debtors flee or are taken as slaves.”  
Sicily, Corsica, and even Rome itself—“the dream of stone,” where  
“All the pillars of the court, all  
The statues in the forum are marble carved  
By the arm that stretches out, begging for bread!”

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<sup>5</sup> Perpessicius, *Other Contributions to Historiography and Folklore (II)*, Bucharest, Publishing House for Literature, 1964.

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—are shaken by uprisings of the poor and the slaves, which the aging Caesar, dominated by the will and thirst for power of a demonic woman, Livia, his second wife, can no longer control, showing only imperial contempt toward them:

“As for that crowd of starving men—what would you have?

Such is their fate, sealed by the gods:

To crawl along the roads with marble on their backs,

For nothing else can be made of them.”

Part of the nobility, themselves dissatisfied with this state of affairs and with the tyranny and cruelty heralded by the accession of Tiberius, Livia’s son, “weary of the vain form of empire,” strive to restore the republic, aspiring to justice, freedom, and human dignity.

Understanding that:

“It is a dreadful slavery

To act as dictated

By a mind enslaved to an evil will,”

and that a step toward the democratic ideal would be the installation—after the death of Octavian Augustus—of a descendant of the Julian line on the imperial throne, Ovidius becomes the main instigator of the conspiracy to bring Posthumus Agrippa back from the island of Planasia, where he had been exiled through Livia’s intrigues.

The conspiracy, however, is betrayed by Ibis, an orator envious of Ovidius’ success, and the fury with which the empress turns against the poet’s fate is, understandably, boundless. All the more so as she hypocritically justifies it by accusing Ovidius of concealing the love affair between Decimus Silanus, a common man, and Julia Minor, the emperor’s granddaughter—thus, in her eyes, a being of divine lineage (both in fact participants in the conspiracy).

Thus, the two poles of the conflict are Ovidius and Livia: the former representing noble ideals connected to the life of his country and people, the latter embodying petty, selfish ambition—the desire to rule unchecked, with despotic force, over an empire of splendor built upon suffering and misery.

As in any Romantic drama, the action is dynamic, sustained by unexpected events: the betrayal of the conspiracy by Ibis, the reversal of Augustus’ attitude toward Ovidius, the edict of exile, the suicide of Fabius Maximus—chosen as the only alternative to betraying the conspirators—the offer of Ovidius’ pardon in Tomis in exchange for betrayal, his refusal, and the poet’s unexpected death.

Most of the characters possess a distinct and strongly individualized life; accordingly, their participation in the action unfolds clearly, on a single psychological

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plane, as in classical drama: Ibis embodies literary envy; Livia represents an insatiable thirst for power, willing to step over corpses to rule; Tiberius embodies violence and unrestrained eroticism; Fabius Maximus stands for integrity and fidelity to a noble cause; Julia for purity; Fabia for gentleness, and so on.

Only the character of Octavian Augustus undergoes what might be called a true evolution. Particularly striking is the tragic retrospective vision he attains in the twilight of his life:

“What immense emptiness! To whom shall I cry out my pain?

I do not think, Ovid, that it is so cold for you in Tomis.

I see the mouths of the starving crowd weeping,

Revolts of centuries drowned in blood,

Eyes exhausted by tears, circled by deception,

And slaves who raise Rome, crushed beneath marble...”

The only truly complex character—though not marked by convincing contradictions, but rather by an accumulation of new traits with each experience, harmoniously interwoven with the existing ones—is that of Ovidius.

A poet of his time:

“My feelings and yours,

And our times have begun to unfold

In his clear verses, in their living rhythms;

Through him, our days no longer seem empty,

For his words sing as our hearts beat.”

At the same time, he is a citizen who loves freedom—“Maecenas, you know I hate slavery”—and who fights for it in secret, yet invokes it courageously even before Caesar:

“When slaves bear their burden groaning, with tearful faces,

Their arms wounded by merciless rods,

Could you, Caesar, truly erase them from your heart?”

A poet of love, he expresses toward Fabia, his wife, a feeling so pure and ethereal that her portrait seems to emerge from a rarefied, almost immaterial substance, as if detached from earthly concreteness:

“Marble-like, pure, dazzling in whiteness,

Gentler than a nymph, delicate as a mallow flower,

From the folds of this garment, woven of dreams,

Like Venus from the waves, you have now appeared to me!

With a voice as silky as the breeze over the dunes,

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The gods shaped you from moonlight,  
From rose petals, from the foam of the sea...”  
“The masculine beauty and deep humanity of this moment of obscure history”<sup>6</sup> are  
powerfully revealed in the way Ovidius cultivates friendship:  
“...better that my life  
Be scattered upon the shores of fear,  
But through this sacrifice, I may protect my friends!  
I cradled them with verses forged in nights of toil;  
From across the seas, I shall write, so they may hear me,  
Singing the boundlessness of a bard’s sorrow,  
In which a thousand longings struggle and burn.”

A friendship he considers just as sacred even after eight years of solitude in Tomis, when he refuses, for the second time, to betray his companions, at the cost of remaining forever in exile:

“Within me I feel the burning temptation, like wine,  
To embrace with love the Palatine,  
The squares of Rome and the proud Capitol;  
But without them, all would seem empty to me!”

An imposing personality, the Ovidius created by Grigore Sălceanu displays—apparently in accordance with historical accounts—a consciousness of his poetic value that is not arrogant, but deeply dignified:

“From Tomis to Rome, I shall cast a bridge,  
And my sorrowful poems shall defy millennia!”  
or, in the hour of his death:  
“O! Over thousands of years,  
Fly, proud poems with nymphs and titans!  
Fly to the four winds, beings torn from my soul!  
Late shall antiquity listen to you in tears—  
Those who, from Rome to the Pontus Euxinus,  
Will remember the exile of the Latin poet!”

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<sup>6</sup> Valentin Silvestru, *Writings on Theatre*, Bucharest, Eminescu Publishing House, 1970.

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The famous and enigmatic epitaph found on the poet's statue in Constanța—*Ingenio perii*...—invoked as a powerful starting point of the play under discussion, also points toward this self-awareness.

There is little to be said about the Getae who populate the fifth act. Animated by a pious respect for the suffering of the exiled poet, admiring his cultivated spirit and bravery, this small Getic community does not fully convince the audience—despite its efforts—of the fusion that is meant to have taken place between them and the poet. Still, one striking image remains, depicting the harsh life these locals lead, divided between agricultural labor and the defense against barbarian invasions:

“To plough the harsh land, full of stones and thistles,  
Carrying on your back the bow and the quiver of arrows!  
While the ox strains in the yoke, you must be ready  
To shoot the arrow at the enemy rising from the horizon.”

Alongside facile verses with purely incantatory effects—

“O, the wondrous charm of times long past”—

there are entire passages in this play with genuine poetic virtues, capable of communicating ideas and emotions through their euphony, such as the following, which seems to measure the passage of time with the rhythm of a cosmic clock:

“Countless nights pass,  
Endless days and long hours of torment,  
Deepening the solitude of the Pontus Euxinus!  
Wave after wave comes, foaming armies,  
Reminding me of the splendor of past times.  
Where are those days of glory and fervor?”

Equally remarkable is the free translation of the myth of Icarus (Act V), which constitutes a deeply moving and authentic moment belonging to the work of the Latin poet.

In concluding this brief overview of the Ovidian motif, I wish to mention, if only in passing, and merely to illustrate the vitality and productivity of the theme, that in 1972 I became acquainted with a dramatic poem titled *Ovidius et rex poeta Cotis* by George Acsinteanu, preserved in manuscript form and broadcast in a condensed version on the radio.

This work introduces new ideas—unusual in dramatic literature—such as the hypothesis that the Dacian language might have been a Latin idiom, and that the Dacians themselves were a branch of the Dardanians who left Troy and settled in our lands, alongside those led by Aeneas to Latium. The poem focuses less on Ovidius,

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dedicating more space to the description of Dacian civilization, which the author seems to know well from scientifically معتبر sources. Though not exceptional in literary quality, the play—unique after that of Iorga—presents Ovidius arriving in Tomis not in a desolate land, but within an organized society, with strong traditions, cultivating philosophy (of an Indian nuance), heroism, and poetry—in short, a civilized society.

The motif of Ovid thus emerges in Romanian dramaturgy as a major symbol of the encounter between history, myth, and cultural identity, with Dobrogea as its privileged space. Beyond the biographical dimension of exile, the figure of the poet becomes the expression of a universal experience in which suffering, longing, and alienation are transformed into knowledge and creation.

Playwrights capitalize on this theme to construct a complex character capable of mediating between worlds and epochs, thereby granting the Dobrogean space a profound significance, both historical and symbolic. Thus, the Ovidian motif remains a living source of inspiration, defining not only an important thematic vein, but also a perspective on the condition of the artist and the permanence of cultural values.

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