

humanity and the gods. No, Corinna is portrayed as a flesh-and-blood woman, desired and worried over by a flesh-and-blood man. If Corinna is a stand-in for anything or anyone, perhaps it is Julia, the daughter of Augustus, the Roman Emperor who would, some twenty-plus years after the publication of the *Amores*, banish Ovid from Rome for life. While this possibility has long been a matter of debate,⁷¹ it does tie in very nicely with the overall feeling in many of the elegies of forbidden love—an *eros* that is more exciting because of the possibility of getting caught and severely punished. G.P. Goold is convinced that Corinna is Julia, and that the famous twofold reason for Ovid's banishment (*carmen et error*, the poem and the mistake Ovid refers to in his poem *Tristia*, 2.207) was "for writing the *Ars Amatoria* and for committing a transgression" with Julia.⁷² If that is the case, then rather than allegory, what a reader encounters in both the *Amores* and the *Ars Amatoria* is life and experience, transgression and joy, transformed into poetry that celebrated love and desire enjoyed in the shadow of condemnation and banishment. Rather than being a passion sublimated into a search for the divine, these poems are perhaps our first clear example, unsullied by the allegorizing and temporizing mood, of what the troubadours of Occitania will call *fin'amor*, love as an end in itself.

However, in what will soon become a familiar move in criticism of many different authors and periods, some criticism of Ovid's work would return it to the realm of allegory, not of the human-divine relationship, but, in this case, of *poetry itself*. Reducing Ovid's work to a series of conventions and tropes, Peter Allen argues that the poetry amounts to little more than a lecture on literary theory:

The lesson is in fact a lesson in literary theory. The *Ars* and *Remedia* reveal (though often in indirect ways) that the love described in elegiac poetry is essentially the same as the poetry itself: both are artistic fantasies, constructed by the reader and the poetic lover together. Elegiac love depends for its existence on the presence of recognizable conventions, which help the reader situate it within a literary context, to recognize it as fiction. Through such conventions the poet involves the reader in the act of literary creation, which is itself an amatory relationship and, in fact, the most intimate relationship in these texts; the preceptor's true task is to teach the reader how to be a creator, like himself.⁷³

There was once a time when this kind of argument—reducing literature to a kind of meta-discourse in which all that literature talks about is itself—seemed fresh, even profound. It draws loosely on the (now) familiar idea that language refers only to language, and that only by a series of shared conventions do we credit it

⁷¹ For a discussion of this possibility, see John C. Thibault. *The Mystery of Ovid's Exile*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1964), 38-54.

⁷² Goold, 107.

⁷³ Peter Allen. *The Art of Love: Amatory Fiction from Ovid to the Romance of the Rose*. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1992), 20.

with an illusory signifying power in relation to the world. From this perspective, poetry can only ever refer to itself.

This notion can probably be best traced back initially to Maurice Blanchot, a 1930s right-wing journalist turned post-WWII left-wing philosopher and literary critic, who argues (in a sideswipe at Jean-Paul Sartre's 1948 work *Qu'est-ce que la littérature?* or *What is Literature?*⁷⁴) that "it has been found, surprisingly, that the question 'What is literature?' has never received anything other than insignificant answers."⁷⁵ Sartre argues that the author of prose is a politically-committed writer who tries to engage with the world, while the poet writes to escape it, "for one, art is a flight; for the other, a means of conquest,"⁷⁶ and that the committed writer writes in order to take up the cause of human liberty: "the writer, a free man addressing other free men, has only one subject: liberty."⁷⁷ In fact, according to Sartre, such writing only has meaning in a free society: "the art of prose is tied to the only regime in which prose holds any meaning: democracy."⁷⁸ While Sartre's ideas are certainly contestable, Blanchot goes to the opposite extreme, contending that what writers seek to accomplish is irrelevant: the meaning of literature, its essence, its "one subject" is nothing more than language itself. For Blanchot, the question of literature can only find meaningful answers when it is "addressed to language, behind the man who writes and reads, to the language that becomes literature."⁷⁹ Blanchot further argues that literature (and in fact all art) says nothing except to affirm its own existence: "the work of art, the literary work—is neither completed nor unfinished: it is. What it says is only this: it is—and nothing more. Apart from

⁷⁴ Sartre argues for a distinction between poetry and prose, claiming that "l'empire des signes, c'est la prose; la poésie est du côté de la peinture, de la sculpture, de la musique" (Jean-Paul Sartre. *Qu'est-ce que la littérature?* [Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1948], 16-17)—"the empire of signs, that is prose; poetry is on the side of painting, sculpture, and music." For Sartre, the crucial distinction lies in the way each form of writing relates to language: "Les poètes sont des hommes qui refusent d'utiliser le langage"—"the poets are those men who refuse to use language," and though it is "dans et par le langage conçu comme une espèce d'instrument que s'opère la recherche de la vérité, il ne faut pas s'imaginer qu'ils visent à discerner le vrai ni à l'exposer" (17)—"in and through language conceived as a kind of instrument that the search for truth operates, we must not imagine that [poets] are intended to discern or expose the truth." In Sartre's view, that function was left to the writers of prose, for whom words reflected the conditions of the world, as opposed to poets, for whom language served as a mirror, reflecting themselves: "[c]ar le mot qui arrache le prosateur à lui même et le jette au milieu du monde, renvoie au poète, comme un miroir, sa propre image" (21)—"for the word which wrenches the prose writer outside of himself and throws him amidst the world, returns the poet, as in a mirror, to his proper image."

⁷⁵ "On a constaté avec surprise que la question: «Qu'est-ce que la littérature?» n'avait jamais reçu que des réponses insignifiantes" (Maurice Blanchot. "La Littérature et le droit à la mort." *La Part de Feu*. [Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1949], 294).

⁷⁶ "pour celui-ci, l'art est une fuite; pour celui-là, un moyen de conquérir" (Sartre, 45).

⁷⁷ "l'écrivain, homme libre s'adressant à des hommes libres, n'a qu'un seul sujet: la liberté" (Ibid., 70).

⁷⁸ "[l']art de la prose est solidaire du seul régime où la prose garde un sens: la démocratie" (Ibid., 82).

⁷⁹ "adressée au langage, derrière l'homme qui écrit et lit, par le langage devenu littérature" (Blanchot. "La Littérature et le droit à la mort," 293).

that, it is nothing. Whoever wants it to express more, will find nothing, find that it expresses nothing.⁷⁸⁰

As Eric Richtmeyer notes, this expresses a view of writing in which words do not and cannot represent the world (any world) in which writers and readers live:

For Blanchot [...] the committed writer must commit to literature rather than the world. He must commit to words rather than the things that words represent. This is nothing less than the writer's abandonment of representation's claim to be able truly to conjure things before the reader. The kind of literature preferred by Sartre [...] demands that words reflect things perfectly, that they own them, that they be the exact mirror of reality. Blanchot, however, argued that genuinely literary writing is the embrace of the gap between written words and the things that words summon. In this gap lies the very possibility for literature and poetry; without it, all imagination would be exhausted. To be a writer is to be committed to this gap, to be consumed and inspired by it, to be gripped by the infinite possibility that it promises.⁸¹

This basic idea stretches through the work of a great deal of modern criticism, much of it based in French thought of the latter half of the twentieth century, thought that owes a profound debt to Blanchot. For example, Jacques Derrida argues that one cannot understand a text by appealing to a world outside of that text:

Yet if reading must not simply redouble the text, it cannot legitimately transgress the text toward something other than itself, to a referent (metaphysical reality, historical, psycho-biographical, etc.) or to a signified outside text whose content could take place, could have taken place outside the language, that is to say, in the sense that we give here to that word, outside of writing in general. This is why the methodological considerations that we risk here on an example are closely dependent on general propositions that we have elaborated above, as to the absence of the referent or the transcendental signified. *There is no outside-text.*⁸²

⁸⁰ "L'œuvre d'art, l'œuvre littéraire—n'est ni ni achevée ni inachevée: elle est. Ce qu'elle dit, c'est exclusivement cela: qu'elle est—et rien de plus. En dehors de cela, elle n'est rien. Qui veut lui faire exprimer davantage, ne trouve rien, trouve qu'elle n'exprime rien" (Maurice Blanchot. "La Solitude Essentielle." *L'Espace Littéraire*. [Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1955], 12).

⁸¹ Eric Richtmeyer. "Maurice Blanchot: Saboteur of the Writers' War." *Proceedings of the Western Society for French History*. Volume 35, (2007), 255-56.

⁸² "Et pourtant, si la lecture ne doit pas se contenter de redoubler le texte, elle ne peut légitimement transgresser le texte vers autre chose que lui, vers un référent (réalité métaphysique, historique, psycho-biographique, etc.) ou vers un signifié hors texte dont le contenu pourrait avoir lieu, aurait pu avoir lieu hors de la langue, c'est-à-dire, au sens que nous donnons ici à ce mot, hors de l'écriture en général. C'est pourquoi les considérations méthodologiques que nous risquons ici sur un exemple sont étroitement dépendantes des propositions générales que nous avons élaborées plus haut, quant à l'absence du référent ou du signifié transcendantal. *Il n'y a pas de hors-texte?*" (Jacques Derrida. *De la Grammatologie*. [Paris: Les Éditions du Minuit, 1967], 227).

Similarly, Jacques Lacan argues that language is a closed system, in which our signifiers cannot ever point to a “thing” that is somehow outside the system:

Therefore, let me specify what Language means in that which it communicates; it is neither signal, nor sign, nor even a sign of the thing as an external reality. The relationship between signifier and signified is entirely enclosed in the order of Language itself, which completely determines the two terms.⁸³

These ideas can be traced back further to the ideas of the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure, whose work (first published in 1916) analyzes language in terms of a system of signs, which “unite not a thing and a name, but a concept and a sound-image”⁸⁴ or what he will later refer to as a signified and a signifier, using ideas that date back to Sextus Empiricus (c. 160-210 CE) who identifies the Stoics as arguing that “three things, they say, are yoked with one another, the signified, the signifier, and the thing that happens to exist.”⁸⁵ However, Saussure, unlike the Stoics, attempts to define linguistic signs purely internally, with as little reference as possible to any “thing that happens to exist.” Such signs are not to be read, according to Saussure, in terms of any positive content or reference, but in terms of their difference from other signs in the overall system:

When we say they correspond to concepts, we imply that these are purely differential, defined not by their positive content but negatively by their relations with other terms of the system.⁸⁶

In fact, for Saussure, language is entirely composed of differential relationships, a series of differences without any positive terms:

in language there are only differences. Even more: a difference generally supposes positive terms between which it is established; but in language there are only differences *without positive terms.* Whether we take the signified or the signifier, language has neither ideas nor sounds that pre-exist the language system, but only conceptual differences and phonic differences issuing from the system.⁸⁷

⁸³ “Précisons donc ce que le langage signifie en ce qu’il communique : il n’est ni signal, ni signe, ni même signe de la chose, en tant que réalité extérieure. La relation entre signifiant et signifié est tout entière incluse dans l’ordre du langage lui-même qui en conditionne intégralement les deux termes” (“Discours de Jacques Lacan.” *La Psychanalyse* 1 [1956], 243).

⁸⁴ “unit non une chose et un nom, mais un concept et une image acoustique” (Ferdinand de Saussure. *Cours de Linguistique Générale*. Edited by Tullio de Mauro. [Paris: Éditions Payot & Rivages, 1967], 98).

⁸⁵ “τρία φάμενοι συζυγεῖν ἀλλήλοις, τὸ τε σημαίνόμενον καὶ τὸ σημαῖνον καὶ τὸ τυγχάνον” (Sextus Empiricus. *Against Logicians*, 2.11. Edited by R. G. Bury. [Cambridge: Loeb Classical Library, Harvard University Press, 1935], 244).

⁸⁶ “Quand on dit qu’elles correspondent à des concepts, on sous-entend que ceux-ci sont purement différentiels, définis non pas positivement par leur contenu, mais négativement par leurs rapports avec les autres termes du système” (Saussure, 162).

⁸⁷ “dans la langue il n’y a que des différences. Bien plus: une différence suppose en général des termes positifs entre lesquels elle s’établit; mais dans la langue il n’y a que des différences *sans termes positifs.*”

Finally, Saussure attempts to analyze language as a sealed system, internally-focused and wholly without reference. In Saussure's view, the basic unit of language, *le signe linguistique*, is arbitrary. It has no necessary association with the world of objects and actions outside of language. It is strictly an association of sounds and concepts. Neither does it reflect any necessary logic that ties together the sound (the acoustic image, or signifier) and the associated concept (or the signified):

The unifying link between the signifier and the signified is arbitrary, or again, as we intend by signs the whole that results from the association of a signifier with a signified, we can say it more simply: *the linguistic sign is arbitrary*.⁸⁸

Blanchot's work views literature in much the same internally-focused way that the work of Derrida, Lacan, and Saussure view language, and this view of literature's self-referentiality has been enormously important for later critics.⁸⁹

Qu'on prenne le signifié ou le signifiant, la langue ne comporte ni des idées ni des sons qui préexisteraient au système linguistique, mais seulement des différences conceptuelles et des différences phoniques issues de ce système" (Ibid., 166).

⁸⁸ "Le lien unissant le signifiant au signifié est arbitraire, ou encore, puisque nous entendons par signe le total résultant de l'association d'un signifiant à un signifié, nous pouvons dire plus simplement: *le signe linguistique est arbitraire*" (Ibid., 100).

⁸⁹ In fairness, however, it must be said that later thinkers who engage with Saussure seem to reverse the linguist's emphasis on the place of linguistics within what he called "sémiologie." Where Saussure argues that "[l]a linguistique n'est qu'une partie de cette science générale" (33)—"linguistics is only a part of this general science," Roland Barthes, in the expanded introduction to the English translation of "Éléments de Sémiologie" (not part of the original French article published in *Communications*, 4, 1964, 91-135), argues that "we must now face the possibility of inverting Saussure's declaration: linguistics is not a part of the general science of signs, even a privileged part, it is semiology which is a part of linguistics" (11). Later thinkers also reverse Saussure's sense of the relation between the sound-image and the concept, or the signifier and the signified. Saussure gives precedence to the concept or signified. In his view, "On ne peut donc réduire la langue au son, [...] il n'est que l'instrument de la pensée et n'existe pas pour lui-même" (24)—"One cannot reduce language to sound, [...] it is merely the instrument of thought, and does not exist for itself." Jacques Lacan reverses Saussure's relation between the signifier and the signified, representing the relation as S/s, with "S" in the dominant position referring to the signifier (Saussure's "sound-image") and "s" as the subordinate term referring to the signified (Saussure's "concept"). But rather than acknowledge his wholesale reversal of the relation of the terms, Lacan ascribes *his own* inversion thereof to Saussure: "Le signe écrit ainsi, mérite d'être attribué à Ferdinand de Saussure" (*Écrits*. [Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1966], 497)—"the sign thus written, deserves to be attributed to Ferdinand de Saussure." For Lacan, the French psychoanalyst who argued that "l'inconscient est structuré comme un langage"—"the unconscious is structured like a language" (*Le Séminaire de Jacques Lacan, Livre XX: Encore: 1972-1973*. Edited by Jacques Alain Miller. [Paris: Éditions de Seuil, 1975], 46) the signifier, in its most pristine state, is not what Saussure described as the instrument of thought; in fact, it signifies nothing at all: "tout vrai signifiant en tant que tel est un signifiant qui ne signifie rien. [...] car c'est précisément dans la mesure où, plus il ne signifie rien, plus il est indestructible" (*Le Séminaire de Jacques Lacan, Livre III: Les Psychoses: 1955-1956*. Edited by Jacques Alain Miller. [Paris: Éditions de Seuil, 1981], 210)—"all real signifiers, in themselves, are signifiers that signify nothing. [...] The more a signifier signifies nothing, the more indestructible it is." This a conception of language that had been rejected a decade before by the Danish linguist Louis Hjelmslev, for whom there can be no signifier without a signified because "udtryksmening"—"expressional meaning" is

Michel Foucault argues that “it is Blanchot that made possible all discourse on literature,” while claiming that literature is “an empty space that runs as a grand movement through all literary languages,” a position he credits to Blanchot, who “assigned to contemporary criticism that which is rightly its object.”⁹⁰

Blanchot, in turn, owes a significant debt to Hegel, who in his *Vorlesungen über die Aesthetik* argues that poetry, properly speaking, is disconnected from materiality or any concrete reference to the material world: “Poetry is the universal art of self-liberated spirit, not bound to external sensuous material for its realization, but moving only in the inner space and inner time of ideas and feelings.”⁹¹ But the twist that Blanchot adds to Hegel’s disconnection of poetry and materiality is to work with an idea of language as a conventional yoking together of words and ideas (as do Saussure, Lacan, Foucault, and Derrida in their different ways), pursuing an argument that ultimately derives from Plato in the dialogue *Cratylus*. In that work, Hermogenes disputes Cratylus’s notion that words are derived directly from nature, by insisting that “on the contrary, for their origins, each name is produced, not by nature, but by the customs, habits, and character of those who are both accustomed to use it and called it forth.”⁹²

always connected to “udtryksform som udtryks_{substans}”—“expressional form as expressional substance,” due to “den enhed af indholdsform og udtryksform der etableres af den solidaritet som vi har kaldt tegnfunktionen”—“the unity of content-form and expression-form established by the solidarity of what we have called the sign-function” (*Omkring Sprogteoriens Grundlæggelse*. [Copenhagen: Bianco Lunos Bogtrykkeri, 1943], 51, 53). Even before Lacan’s sleight-of-hand rearrangement, the French anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss had inverted Saussure’s relation between the signifier and the signified: “les symboles sont plus réels que ce qu’ils symbolisent, le signifiant précède et détermine le signifié” (“Introduction à l’œuvre de Marcel Mauss.” In Marcel Mauss, *Sociologie et Anthropologie*. [Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1950], xxxii)—“symbols are more real than that which they symbolize; the signifier precedes and determines the signified.” This latter view makes it possible to “read” language as wholly determinative of thought, which in concert with such moves as Barthes’ and Foucault’s differing formulations of the “death of the Author,” renders literature—already unmoored from any externally-referential function or ability—a mere function of language itself. Roland Barthes, for example, argues for an ideal he draws from the French poet Stephan Mallarmé, when he claims that “pour [Mallarmé], comme pour nous, c’est le langage qui parle, ce n’est pas l’auteur, écrire, c’est, à travers une impersonnalité préalable [...] atteindre ce point où seul le langage agit, «performe» et non «moi»” (Barthes, “La mort de l’auteur,” 62)—“for Mallarmé, as for us, it is language that speaks, not the author; to write, is through a prior impersonality [...] to reach that point where only language acts, ‘performs’, and not ‘me.’”

⁹⁰ “C’est Blanchot qui a rendu possible tout discours sur la littérature” [...] “un creux qui parcourt comme un grand mouvement tous les langages littéraires” [...] “assigné à la critique contemporaine ce qui doit être son objet?” (Michel Foucault. “Sur les façons d’écrire l’Histoire” [interview with Raymond Bellour]. *Les Lettres françaises*, n. 1187, 15-21 juin 1967, 6-9. Reprinted in *Dits et écrits*, vol. I. [Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1994], 593).

⁹¹ “Die Dichtkunst ist die allgemeine Kunst des in sich freigewordenen, nicht an das äußerlich-sinnliche Material zur Realisation gebundenen Geistes, der nur im inneren Raume und der inneren Zeit der Vorstellungen und Empfindungen sich ergeht” (Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel. *Vorlesungen über die Aesthetik*, vol 1. [Berlin: Dunder und Humblot, 1835], 115).

⁹² “οὐ γὰρ φύσει ἐκάστῳ πεφυμέναι ὄνομα οὐδὲν οὐδενί, ἀλλὰ νόμορακι ἔθει τῶν ἐθισάντων τε καὶ καλούντων” (Plato. *Cratylus. Parmenides. Greater Hippias. Lesser Hippias*. Edited by Harold North Fowler. [Cambridge: Loeb Classical Library, Harvard University Press, 1926], 10).

From Hegel's declaration that poetry is "not bound to external sensuous material," to Blanchot's idea that the question of poetry (understood through Platonic and Saussurian categories) is properly "addressed to language" and "expresses nothing" is but a short step, and thus we find ourselves facing contemporary critics who have taken the additional step of insisting that poetry is always and only about itself.⁹³ Such poetry and criticism categorically denies any possibility of its own intervention in the world, thus serving rather conveniently as a passive prop for political, military, economic, and even epistemological regimes of power which it cannot even refer to, much less oppose. Such poetry and criticism presents an *appearance* of radicalism, while deliberately entangling itself in its own refusals and withdrawals.

An argument on Ovid that is informed by such refusals and withdrawals⁹⁴ will insist that "Despite the *Amores*' pose of sincerity, well-

⁹³ In a discussion of Hans-Georg Gadamer's ideas about "propositional" versus "eminent" or "absolute" texts, Rod Coltman puts the case in the starkest possible terms: "Because it does not refer to anything outside of itself, there is nothing beyond the poem that is more important than the poem itself. The text of the poem remains, in other words, because the poem is not about anything, or rather, it is only about itself" (Rod Coltman. "Hermeneutics: Literature and Being." *The Blackwell Companion to Hermeneutics*, edited by Niall Keane and Chris Lawn. [Chichester: John Wiley and Sons, 2016], 550-51).

⁹⁴ It is just such refusals and withdrawals that Theodore Adorno holds up for a devastating critique with his argument that to indulge in poetry (particularly under a theory of poetry's absolute self-referentiality) is, after Auschwitz, "barbaric": "Nach Auschwitz ein Gedicht zu schreiben, ist barbarisch, und das frisst auch die Erkenntnis an, die ausspricht, warum es unmöglich ward, heute Gedichte zu schreiben" (Theodore Adorno. "Kulturkritik und Gesellschaft." *Soziologische Forschung in unserer Zeit: Leopold Wiese zum 75. Geburtstag*. [Köln und Opladen: Verlag, 1951], 240)—"To write a poem after Auschwitz is barbaric, and this eats away even the knowledge that pronounces why it has become impossible to write poetry today." What disturbed Adorno was what he called the vanity of the critic who could still, after Auschwitz, consider culture in an isolated and dogmatic way: "Wo Verzweiflung und unmäßiges Leiden ist, soll darin bloß Geistiges, der Bewußtseinszustand der Menschheit, der Verfall der Norm sich anzeigen. Indem die Kritik darauf insistiert, gerät sie in Versuchung, das Unsagbare zu vergessen" (228)—"Where there is despair and immoderate suffering, he sees merely the academic, the state of consciousness of humanity, the decline of standards. By insisting on this critique, the critic is tempted to forget the unspeakable." In the aftermath of events that *absolutely cried out to be represented, remembered, and recognized in any and all possible human ways*, to argue that poetry does not and cannot (and perhaps even should not) address the world in which those events took place is both barbaric and obscene. And yet, it goes on, and even flourishes in what Adorno referred to as "selbstgenügsamer Kontemplation"—"self-satisfied contemplation." A practical example of such *Kontemplation* can be seen in an argument by Mary Lewis Shaw, grounded in critical views formed, in part, by working with French poetry from Baudelaire, Mallarmé, Rimbaud, and Laforgue, in which she describes modern criticism as a practice that regards poetry and poetic language as "anti-representational and self-referential," with "an effect of self-sufficiency, of autonomy from the world outside the text." This can further be seen in the idea of a "poetry that speaks only of itself," in "twentieth-century French poets extending from Paul Valéry to Francis Ponge and Yves Bonnefort." Such poetry, and the criticism that shares its assumptions, "at its radical extreme," refers only to itself because it "treats the text as a viable substitute for the world" (Mary Lewis Shaw. "Concrete and Abstract Poetry: The World as Text and the Text as World." In *World, Self, Poem: Essays on Contemporary Poetry from the "Jubilation of Poets."* Edited by Leonard M. Trawick. [Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 1990], 163, 167, 170).

informed readers will recognize that each of their characters and situations are conventional.”⁹⁵ Note the rhetorical pressure being put on the reader with that critical move—for a reader to resist the critic’s insistence that Ovid’s work is merely conventional, that it has nothing of sincerity about it, that it relates only to the experience of *writing about love*, and not any experience of *love itself*, puts that reader outside the camp of the “well-informed.” Thus, subtly, we are told how we *should* read Ovid, and how we *should not* read Ovid. And “well-informed” readers will naturally *obey* such prescriptions and proscriptions. But this is all a symptom of a kind of authoritarian strain in criticism that can be seen running all the way back through Origen and Rabbi Akiba, for whom the *Song of Songs* had to be read in a very particular way, and for whom, in the absence of such readerly obedience, the *Song* would be better left unread entirely. And to demand, even as subtly as Allen does, *obedience* in the reading of a poet who himself neglected obedience to the point that he got himself banished by Augustus Caesar, is both faintly absurd, and consistent with the methods of Origen and Akiba. But here we also see a new kind of assertion—one we will encounter again in criticism of medieval poetry: the assertion that the “poetic I” does not represent an individual point of view (neither that of a poet nor that of a narrative voice), but is instead a kind of conventional, and collective, illusion. It would be *ill-informed*, according to such criticism, to believe otherwise:

The *amator* is little more than a convention himself, a reuse of the traditional Roman poetic “I,” which derives from Propertius, Tibullus, Gallus, and Catullus, as well as Catullus’s Alexandrian model, Callimachus. This poetic “I” is a ventriloquist’s voice, a literary echo of an echo of an echo. Even the sincerity that post-Romantic readers, at least, traditionally attribute to the poet-lover is undermined by the *amator*’s confessions of infidelity and multifarious desire. His affirmations of love are “sincere” not in the sense that they unify the *amator*, the poet, and the historical Ovid, but in the sense that they create an effective illusion of a poet in love.⁹⁶

From Allen’s perspective, the “well-informed” reader will also reject the possibility that “Corinna” had any referent in the world of flesh-and-blood, regarding it as obvious that “she” is merely another literary convention:

Corinna is no more real than her lover. Historical identities have been found for the women in earlier elegy, but literary history is silent on Corinna, and efforts to re-create her are not only fruitless but even irrelevant to an understanding of the *Amores*. Rather than existing as a person in her own right (in fact, she speaks only once [poem 2.18]), she is the object of the *amator*’s desire, the grain of sand that provokes the poetic oyster to produce a string of literary pearls [...]. Poetry, not Corinna, is the true star of the *Amores*.⁹⁷

⁹⁵ Allen, 20.

⁹⁶ Allen, 21.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*

And thus the “well-informed” (and properly compliant) reader will read the *Amores* in order to read about poetry, not about love. We will see this same move made by other critics, though in different contexts, again and again *ad infinitum*. Even a less apparently authoritarian critic like Alison Sharrock ultimately cannot seem to resist turning Ovid’s poetry into an allegory for the act of reading: “the *Ars* itself is a spell (a *carmen*) with great seductive power. Sex is magic; love is itself a seductive spell; poetry is magic, a spell by which both reader and poet are seduced. Just as texts are magically seductive, so is interpretation, so is theory. It is the act of reading that draws us into the poem. Reading about desire provokes the desire to read.”⁹⁸ It seems as if many critics have become temperamentally averse to the idea of there being any subject of poetry *other than* poetry, as if poetry never spoke of anything but itself, like the kind of crashing bore most of us try to avoid at parties.⁹⁹

But Ovid was *anything* but a bore. Barbara Weiden Boyd emphasizes this in describing “the sort of poet that Ovid not only would become but already was—pushing the limits (of convention, genre, discretion) and refusing to be bound to or by anything other than his own genius.”¹⁰⁰ Ovid gives every appearance of refusing to take seriously the pieties that surround love, and especially refuses to take seriously the laws that surround marriage and procreation in Augustus’ Rome (the *Lex Iulia de Maritandis Ordinibus* of 18 BCE restricted marriage between the social classes, and the *Lex Iulia de Adulteriis Coercendis* of the same year made adultery punishable by banishment—the latter was applied to Julia in 2 BCE). However, he does seem to take quite seriously the joys of transgressive love itself. For example, “*Ad Auroram*,” Elegy 1.13 from the *Amores*, shows a lover railing—in a way that foretells the passions of the *alba* form of twelfth-century Occitania¹⁰¹—against the rising sun, for cutting short his time with his beloved:

⁹⁸ Alison Sharrock. *Seduction and Repetition in Ovid’s Ars Amatoria 2*. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), 296.

⁹⁹ Summarizing Sartre’s view of poetry and poets, David Carroll argues that “Poets [...] are ‘foreigners’ to the language they use [...] because they decline to use that language as an instrument to convey meaning. Words are not signs for poets but things, just as a house painted by a painter is [...] simply a painted house that signifies only itself” (David Carroll. “The Post-Literary Condition: Sartre, Camus, and the Questions(s) of Literature.” In *The Question of Literature: The Place of the Literary in Contemporary Theory*. Edited by Elizabeth Beaumont Bissell. [Manchester, England: Manchester University Press, 2002], 72).

¹⁰⁰ Barbara Weiden Boyd. “The *Amores*: The Invention of Ovid.” In *Brill’s Companion to Ovid*. Edited by Barbara Weiden Boyd. (Leiden, Netherlands: Brill, 2002), 116.

¹⁰¹ The same motif can be traced back even further than Ovid, as pointed out by Arthur Thomas Hatto in his magisterial work *Eos: An Enquiry Into the Theme of Lovers’ Meetings and Partings at Dawn in Poetry* (The Hague: Mouton and Co., 1965), and can be seen in Chinese poetry of the classical period. From the collection known as 詩經, or *The Book of Poetry* (c. 1100-700 BCE), the poem entitled 女曰雞鳴, Nu Yue Ji Ming, or “The lady says, ‘The cock has crowed,’” shares something of both Ovid’s and the troubadours’ later thematic concern. As Arthur Waley renders the first stanza:

The lady says: ‘The cock has crowed’;