Crossroads Narrative or Beauty Contest?
Role-Play in Ovid, *Amores* 3.1[1]

At the beginning of the third book of his *Amores*, Ovid faces a quandary: he is uncertain about what to write.[2] When two divine figures, *Elegia* and *Tragoedia*, appear to the poet addressing him and courting his favor, it becomes apparent that his difficulty does not simply consist in choosing a topic, but that he is undecided whether to keep writing elegy at all, or rather turn to tragedy. *Amores* 3.1 thus upholds the concern with opposition between elegiac poetry and other poetic genres which runs through the openings of the first two books: elegiac vs. heroic-epic in *Amores* 1.1, elegiac vs. mythological-epic in *Amores* 2.1, elegiac vs. tragic poetry in *Amores* 3.1.[3]

The situation is not without a certain humor: an author of erotic elegies begins his third book of erotic elegies by contemplating whether he would rather be writing tragedy. The outcome is, of course, a foregone conclusion, but Ovid seems to take pleasure in playfully painting such an absurd picture. Or is the situation not absurd at all? Does *Amores* 3.1 reflect an actual deliberation in the mind of Ovid, and attest that continuing to write elegy, even on a temporary basis, was a difficult and precarious decision for him?[4]

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[1] This article is based on a lecture given at the 12th *Aquilonia* (15.6.2007, Humboldt-Universität Berlin); for helping with the English version of my paper, I would like to thank Christian Hess and Martin Worthington, for some useful corrections and hints the anonymous referees of *Digressus*.

[2] Ovid *Am.* 3.1.6: *quod mea, quaerebam, Musa moveret, opus* – as noted already by Stroh 1971, 144 fn. 18, a rather unusual statement.

[3] For a comparison of the three opening poems in Ovid's *Amores* and the *recusatio* motif touched on by all three, see especially D'Anna 1999, also Mazzoli 1999, McKeown 1998, 1-4. For the Gigantomachy in *Amores* 2.1 as "polar opposite of Callimacheanism" see Sharrock 1994, 115, and McKeown 1998, 10.

[4] Fleischer 1957, 46 notes the challenges facing the interpreter: "Ein irisierendes Schillern der Bedeutungen, je nach der Beleuchtung, in die man

Though previous studies of *Amores* 3.1 have identified humorous elements, the poem as a whole has generally been interpreted as evidence that Ovid truly had serious doubts concerning his further career as an author of erotic elegies.[5] It has been claimed that the poem's position at the beginning of the third book and its theoretical subject matter argue strongly for a poetological function, which it shares with the openings of the first two books.[6] In particular, it has also been suggested that the poetic frames which introduce the three books exhibit a linear development attesting to a dwindling interest in elegy on the part of the author. The notion that *Amores* 3.1 reflects serious doubts by Ovid about whether to continue writing elegy

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das Stück rückt, erscheint als der Grundcharakter dieses eigenartigen Gedichts."

[5] See Wyke 1989, 118-122; Perkins 2000, 57. Fleischer 1957, 44 alone mentions the possibility that the elegy does not reflect severe doubts in Ovid's mind, but he goes on to reject this notion: "... in dieser dem Stil der Amores trefflich angepaßten Selbstironie, aber auch in der Ausmalung von Einzelzügen der Allegorese liegt so viel köstliche Persiflage, daß man den Ernst der Selbstaussage in dieser Elegie bestreiten könnte. Aber zusammen mit den anderen Äußerungen des Dichters wird sie uns zu einem Beweis dafür, daß hier für Ovid wirklich ein Problem vorlag, daß man von ihm Höheres erwartete als Elegien …"

[6] See Fleischer 1957, 44; Büchner 1961, 67; Davis 1989, 108 and fn. 6 with further literature, particularly on *Am*. 3.1 as a "program poem and its programmatic antecedents" ; Boyd 1997, 195 ("an obviously programmatic statement … marking the third book as the conclusion to the collection"); Smith 1997, 92 ("… Ovid is about to rediscover himself, poetically speaking"); Weinlich 1999, 272; Gildenhard/ Zissos 2000, 78 fn. 14; on the metapoetic aspects of the poem, see Mazzoli 1999; Hunter, 2006, 40 ("with particular connections to the traditions of Greek poetry", especially to the poetry of Callimachus). Bretzigheimer 2001, 61 ff. sees in this elegy an externally projected poetological reflection of the poet, a serious examination of the arguments for and against each choice. The elegy has also been though to enshrine moral and political messages , see Wyke 1989, 125, and Davis 2006, 74: "Thus the poet faces a choice, not merely between genres but between the embodiments of different values, … between wanton idleness and social responsibility".

or turn to tragedy has been argued to support this interpretation.[7]

It is widely thought that, given the indecisiveness of the poem's first-person speaker, an excellent model and point of comparison for interpreting the poem can be found in the story of Heracles at the Crossroads.[8] The crossroads motif is first found in Prodikos,[9] with a predecessor in the Hesiodic description of the two paths of Ἀρετή and Κακία.[10] Brandt, in his commentary to the *Amores*, also refers to the conflict between the arts of sculpture and scholarship in Lucian's *Somnium* and the conflict between Λόγος δίκαιος and Λόγος ἄδικος in Aristophanes.[11] On the view that *Amores* 3.1 is a

[7] Weinlich 1999, 12 and 266. Weinlich sees the proper task of *Am.* 3.1 as being to foreshadow the end of the *Amores* (189f.). Cf. Holzberg ^{2}1998, 73 and ^{2}2001, 134.

[8] For this view, see Brandt 1911, 141 ("Am Scheidewege"); Fleischer 1957, 44; Luck 1961, 170; Lenz 1966, 212 ("Durch den Streit der beiden Frauen wird der Dichter zu einem neuen Herakles am Scheidewege"); Döpp 1992, 46 ("Situation entspricht derjenigen des Herakles am Scheidewege"); Marg/ Harder 1992, 212; Boyd 1997, 197; Mazzoli 1999, 141; Gildenhard/ Zissos 2000, 79 fn. 24 ("making the crossroads choice of Hercules"); Albrecht 2000, 178; Holzberg ^{2}2001, 131 ("Situation des Herkules am Scheidewege"); Bretzigheimer 2001, 62 ("evident jedenfalls ist der Bezug zum Prätext 'Herakles am Scheideweg'"); similarly Zgoll 2004, 184; Hunter, 2006, 33. More detailed discussions of the Heracles story, undertaken by reason of its assumed interpretative importance, appear in Wyke 1989 (see ibid., 125: "… the recollection and comic debasement of the earlier moral allegory assigns the Ovidian narrator the role of a latter-day Roman Hercules, deciding not just between writing-styles, but between life-styles"), and most recently in Nickel 2004 (see ibid., 52: "Daß Ovid sich bei der Abfassung von Am. 3,1 von der prodikeisch-xenophontischen Wahl des Herakles hat anregen lassen, ist offensichtlich").

[9] Xen. *Mem*. 2.1.21-34; cf. also Cic. *Off.* 1.118.

[10] Hesiod *Erg*. 287-292.

[11] Aristoph. *Nub.* 889-1104. Cf. Brandt 1911, 141. One could add the agonic speeches in the tragedies of Euripides or in historiography, as they have some points in common with the crossroads motif, cf. for example Eur. *Alc.* 28-76; *Hipp.* 88-120; *Andr.* 234-273; *Suppl.* 399-584; *Phoen.* 446-637; Thuc. 3.52-68; 5.84-113; 6.75-88 (resulting in a compromise, as in Ovid *Amores* 3.1); 7.46-49. On the parallels between *Am.* 3.1 and Prop. 3.1 and

crossroads narrative, Ovid faces a dramatic decision. Heracles had to choose between arduous virtue and dissolute leisure, and Ovid stands before a similar decision of principle: he must choose whether to abide by wanton elegy[12] or turn to loftier, Roman tragedy.[13] *Amores* 3.1 is supposed to be read against the story of Heracles at the Crossroads, and comparison between the two can illumine Ovid's concerns and self-understanding.[14] Yet this interpretation is worth challenging: does Ovid truly give us in this elegy a striking self-depiction as a second Heracles, a 'Heracles of poetry'?[15]

At first glance, the parallels in narrative structure between *Amores* 3.1 and Heracles at the Crossroads are seductive. Both involve a human protagonist who must decide between two alternatives, and in both the alternatives are personified as numinous women. Further parallels are the lengthy bids addressed to the undecided human, partly reminiscent of agonistic speech, and the promise of reward.

A closer look, however, reveals differences between the two sources which are too deep to be satisfactorily explicable as deviations from the prototype of the crossroads narrative. The most fundamental difference lies in the fact that Heracles' choice at the crossroads is *final*, affecting the rest of his life,

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3.3, which will not be discussed here, see Boyd 1997, 196-198, citing previous research. Boyd 1997, 197f. also compares the important parallels in Prop. 4.1.

[12] Cf. *Am.* 3.1.17: *nequitiam vinosa tuam convivia narrant*. Ovid himself describes his erotic poetry as *nequitia* (*Am.* 2.1.2).

[13] Cf. *Am.* 3.1.24: *incipe maius opus*.

[14] See Nickel 2004, 52, according to whom departures from the model serve as a "Kontrastierung, um das Eigene besonders deutlich hervortreten zu lassen. Eine derartige Kontrastierung besteht schon darin, daß sich der Dichter der *teneri Amores* an die Stelle des Herakles setzt und so an dessen Ruhm partizipiert. Das ist eine Form der Selbstdarstellung, wie sie wirkungsvoller nicht sein kann." For a similar, though not quite so uniformly serious interpretation, see Marg/Harder 1992, 212: "Natürlich steckt stolzes Selbstbewußtsein in dieser Selbstironie ..."

[15] Thus Nickel 2004, 53.

whereas the speaker in *Amores* 3.1 is in no way obliged to reach a binding decision, and indeed, in the end he does not.[16] There is a more profound, and critically important, reason for this difference. Heracles stands before two mutually *exclusive* alternatives, one positive and the other negative: a life of vice or a life of virtue. The same type of choice appears in the stories of the two paths, where again the options are diametrically opposed: fame or shameful oblivion, good or evil, justice or injustice, a life of the mind or a life of materiality. In contrast, *Amores* 3.1 does not offer mutually exclusive alternatives nor a choice of positive vs. negative, but rather two *non-exclusive* and *positive* possibilities which both bear the promise of fame and honor.[17]

Accordingly, unlike Heracles, Ovid is not required to make a fundamental choice *for himself*. The framing poems of book three of the *Amores* (3.1 and 3.15) make it transparently clear that the poet wishes, and is able, to produce work in both genres, both elegiac and tragic. In 3.1 he only has to decide *which of the two women to favor* at that particular moment in time. He thus stands before them not as a young and unaccomplished man whom two polar opposites seek to win for themselves, but as a judge with the power to grant one of the two first place.

[16] Nickel 2004, 52 also notes these differences: "Eine besondere Spannung zwischen dem griechischen Text und der römischen Elegie wird noch dadurch empfunden, daß Ovid weder das eindeutig negative Bild der 'Lust' (Κακία), noch das eindeutig positive Bild der 'Tugend' (Ἀρετή) für die Zeichnung seiner beiden Frauen übernimmt. Er kann dies auch gar nicht tun, weil er nicht wie Herakles mit einem ethischen Entweder-Oder konfrontiert ist, sondern mit einem ästhetischen Sowohl-als-auch leben möchte." Boyd 1997, 200 rightly observes that Ovid can choose both options, while Heracles' choices are mutually exclusive. She therefore emphasizes the parallels in Prop. 4.1, in which two forms of poetry are compared which then appear in the course of the work. This, however, is not the case in the third book of Ovid's *Amores*, which only includes elegies. Tragedy is postponed for a later point in time.

[17] Cf. *Am.* 3.1.29: *nunc habeam per te Romana Tragoedia nomen* and 3.1.65: *altera das nostro victurum nomen amori*.

At this point it should be clear that a wholly different mythological scene provides a more powerful key to understanding *Amores* 3.1. The decisive point of reference seems not to be the story of Heracles at the Crossroads, but that of the Judgment of Paris.

The crossroads motif may have influenced Ovid's description, because the Prodikean tale resembles on some points the Judgment of Paris,[18] but cannot – in my opinion – be seen as the decisive model.[19] Certainly we need not demand correspondence in every detail to see an author playing with a known story, and we might even consider that the incongruity of Ovid as a Heracles figure was perhaps one of the pleasures of reading this poem,[20] but if we have the choice between two models, it is expedient and justifiable to pose the question, with which of them the fit is more exact and the parallels are more striking. In the Judgement of Paris, as in our poem, the human protagonist's role is not that of inexperienced youth, but of judge: goddesses court the favor of a human judge to win some advantage for themselves. Several alternatives are offered to him which are not mutually exclusive, and they are presented as equally positive choices. Another similarity with *Amores* 3.1 is that Paris, just as the speaker of the *Amores*, is a love-hero who prefers Aphrodite over Athena and Hera.[21]

[18] See Kuntz, 1994, 172-174, 172: "The Judgment of Paris offers perhaps the closest example of the mythic pattern that Prodikos seems to have adapted here for his lesson."

[19] Marg/Harder 1992, 212 mention the "Judgment of Paris" in the context of *Am.* 3.1 only once and in passing. Their brief comment has not been taken up again in later research.

[20] I owe this idea to one of the anonymous referees.

[21] The change in the number of goddesses in Ovid's adaptation is not so important as it seems at first glance, for it is only a *formal* deviation from the original: the decrease in the number of protagonists does not affect the overall structure of the model (and, pursuant to an idea of an anonymous referee, the placement of this poem in the third book of poetry may hint at the usual number). Similarly, if a young girl like Snow White encountered not seven but only three dwarfs while the other elements of the story broadly remained the same, hardly anybody would fail to recognize the original motif. Ovid's deviation is motivated among other things by the

An examination of the character of the speeches in *Amores* 3.1 confirms the similarity to the Judgment of Paris. The goddesses before Ovid, like those before Paris, vie for the favor of their human judge.[22] But, unlike that of Ἀρετή to Heracles, their pleas are not motivated by a disinterested concern for the best interests of the inexperienced youth. Rather, they are thoroughly laced with self-interest. Accordingly, they go beyond direct appeal, and pepper their pleas with jabs at each other. The Ovidian *Elegia* is unable to refrain from subtle, overly humble and thus slightly ironic quips of a type rare in crossroad narratives.[23] The 'virtuous' Ovidian Tragedy however berates the wantonness of elegiac poetry in almost crude fashion.[24] Though such behavior can be found in the crossroads narratives, it is usually characteristic of the speaker representing vice, while the speaker representing virtue holds herself aloof from such vulgarities, and maintains a reserved distance. *Amores* 3.1 contains a further element which matches the Judgment of Paris perfectly: the words which Tragedy addresses to Ovid not only malign her opponent and portray benefits and temptations, but also serve thoroughly to flatter the poet. Roman Tragedy wishes nothing more than to achieve fame and status through Ovid![25] This is not merely forceful self-praise from the poet, but intrinsic to the choice of the

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parallel between *Amores* 3.1 and the opening poems of the first two books, which allot preference of elegy to the disadvantage of *one* other rival genre (cf. the introductory remarks above).

[22] The speakers' attitudes in *Amores* 3.1 are admittedly more sophisticated: they show an individual transformation of the model, and are no slavish emulation. *Tragoedia* addresses the poet directly, whereas *Elegia* mostly speaks to her opponent, apostrophating the poet only in the last distich of her speech (3.1.59f). For detailed analysis and interpretation of the speeches see Bretzigheimer 2001, 61ff, especially 63 und 75f.

[23] *Am.* 3.1.39f: *non ego contulerim* ironically, because the whole passage is an apologetic comparison of the two rival genres; *obruit* and *exiguas* are slightly provoking hyperboles.

[24] *Am.* 3.1.15-22.

[25] *Am.* 3.1.29: *nunc habeam per te Romana Tragoedia nomen*.

"Judgment of Paris" motif: Tragedy employs all means at her disposal, not to *convince*, but to *win*.[26]

It is noteworthy that agonic speeches such as those which occur in the crossroads narratives are often won by the second speaker. The same holds true for *Amores* 3.1. Tradition also dictates that the argument should be won by the person who personifies the 'good' but difficult position, whereas in Ovid, victory is (at least temporarily) won by Elegy, who represents the easy and comfortable path, and, at least in the eyes of Tragedy, the path of vice.[27] Similarly, Paris chose not the gifts of Hera or Athena, but love.

That Ovid's model in composing *Amores* 3.1 was the Judgment of Paris rather than Heracles at the Crossroads can also be argued on the basis of his further work. Since a passing reference to the Judgment of Paris appears already in Homer, it must have been a well-known story.[28] But it is Ovid himself, in the *Heroides*, who provides us with the first detailed account of the episode.[29] The parallels in structure and content between the two introductory passages in the *Heroides* and in *Amores* 3.1 are evident, and, although Ovid frequently uses such idyllic scenes to introduce dramatic actions,[30] striking.[31] Both

[26] Cf. Smith 1997, 93: "These genres vie for Ovid's poetic affiliation as two women jealously competing for Ovid's romantic attention." Davis 1989, 109 fn. 6 draws attention to another significant difference: "...of all the previous authors who imagined themselves encountering an argumentative deity, only Ovid talks back" (and that might remind the reader of *Am.* 1.1.5-20).

[27] *Am.* 3.1.15-22.

[28] Hom. *Il.* 24.28-30.

[29] Ov. *Her.* 16.53-88, Letter from Paris to Helen. Further versions of the story can be found in Eur. *Iph. A.* 1283-1311, Hygin. *Fab.* 92, Lucian *Dial. Deor.* 20, Apul. *Met.* 10.30-32 and Kolluthos 68-191.

[30] Cf. the brief note in Kenney, 1996, 92, the more detailed note on Ov. *Ars* 3,687 ff by Gibson, 2003, 362 f, and in general Segal, 1969 (especially 43 fn. 71, where he describes *Am.* 3.1.1-2 as a "tongue-in cheek parody of this kind of scenery").

[31] The connection between the two does not, however, provide evidence for the direction of borrowing or the relative chronology of the two works. The

introduce the passage through four verses which describe a dense and rocky wood, and both emphasize the isolation and pristine condition of the place.[32] Ovid's Paris in the *Heroides*, just like the first-person speaker in *Amores* 3.1, behaves very diplomatically, emphasizing that each of the goddesses deserves victory and regretting that a decision must be reached at all.[33] Although the speeches of the goddesses are not elaborated in the *Heroides*, at least one distich suffices to characterize the proceedings: Paris notes that the goddesses are so eager to win that they try to influence the verdict with exceptional bribes.[34] The gifts the goddesses offer are all positive (power, bravery, love), and there, as in our poem, it is love which wins in the end.

Heroides 16-21 are generally dated later than the *Amores* (e.g. Döpp 1992, 67; Holzberg ²1998, 43); Ovid could thus have had *Amores* 3.1 in mind while composing the literary arrangement of the Judgment of Paris in *Heroides* 16.

[32] Cf. Ov. *Her.* 16.53-56 (*est locus in mediis nemorosae vallibus Idae / devius et piceis ilicibusque frequens, / qui nec ovis placidae nec amantis saxa capellae / nec patulo tardae carpitur ore bovis*) and *Am.* 3.1.1-4 (*stat vetus et multos incaedua silva per annos; / credibile est illi numen inesse loco. / fons sacer in medio speluncaque pumice pendens, / et latere ex omni dulce queruntur aves*). On literary models and the motif of the *locus amoenus* which Ovid employs here, see in detail Mazzoli 1999, 137-140. The poet in an isolated woodland brings to mind Hesiod's consecration by the Muses. This connection is made, for example, by Döpp 1992, 44. Ovid himself once mentions Hesiod's "Consecration by the Muses" and the Judgment of Paris together in the same passage (Ov. *Fast.* 6.13-16), again in a situation in which the poet contemplates the progress of his poetry in woodland isolation. The narratives' similarity in external setting is, however, accidental, and contributes little to our understanding of *Amores* 3.1, which contains no elements of a 'consecration' of the poet.

[33] *Her.* 16.75f. (*vincere erant omnes dignae iudexque querebar / non omnes causam vincere posse suam*). While Ovid in this letter of the *Heroides* styles Paris as a judge (one might also note that at *Ars* 1.625 f the contest is called a *iudicium*), this does not accurately reflect the situation of the mythological scene. There, in the strict sense, Paris fulfils the function not of a judge, deciding over wrong and right, but of a mere referee. His 'judgment' is not a self-assured, juridical verdict, but a preference, expressed more diplomatically in *Amores* 3.1 and *Heroides* 16 than in other versions of the myth.

[34] *Her.* 16.79f.

Furthermore, Ovid's description of the Judgment of Paris in the *Heroides* has strong similarities with the opening passage of the sixth book of the *Fasti*, where Ovid, searching for inspiration – like searching for a decision in *Amores* 3.1 – gives us a description of the surrounding landscape, again comparable to *Amores* 3.1; and here too he directly compares his situation to Paris' encounter with the three goddesses on Mount Ida[35].

These observations make it clear that the differences between Heracles at the Crossroads and Ovid in *Amores* 3.1 are more extensive than they seemed at first glance. Heracles reaches a final decision, whereas Ovid makes a temporary compromise; Heracles is young and stands at the beginning of his career, whereas Ovid is already an accomplished author;[36] unlike Heracles, Ovid does not face a basic life-choice, but rather a comparably marginal decision within the context of an already established way of life; and, not least, the Heracles story contains definite pedagogical and ethical implications completely absent from the Ovidian elegy.[37] Indeed, on the whole the "elegiac I," whether speaking and acting as *amator* or, as in our elegy, as *poeta*, represents in almost every conceivable way an antithesis to the values and qualities which Heracles embodies.[38] The first person speaker in the *Amores* is not ἀλεξίκακος, not a virtuous hero who rids the world of wicked monsters, but rather a hero of women and words. His deeds are accomplished, if they are accomplished at all, in bed or with the pen, certainly not in the underworld or with club and bow.

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[35] Ov. *Fast.* 6,9-16 (6,15 f: *nec quas Priamides in aquosae vallibus Idae / contulit*); cf. Littlewood, 2006, 11 f.

[36] As recognized already by Bretzigheimer 2001, 64.

[37] Nickel 2004, 52 also notices these differences, but interprets them as emphasizing the alterity of the Ovidian situation.

[38] On the characterization of the speaker in the *Amores* and the identification of the "poetic I" in Roman love elegy as *poeta/amator*, see Holzberg ²1998, 20; also Holzberg ²2001a, 1f. and Bretzigheimer 2001, 11 with fn. 1.

In *Amores* 3.1 Ovid does not follow Heracles in taking the virtuous path and rejecting an alternative, but rather, like Paris, chooses one gift, love, from those offered to him. The first-person speaker in this elegy, in keeping with the themes which are natural to a book of erotic elegies, compares himself more to an erotic hero than to a hero destined for hardship and austerity. Paris represents *amor*, Heracles *labor*. Ovid in *Amores* 3.1 is not so much a second Heracles as a second Paris.[39]

The protagonist's similarity to Paris lends the whole elegy 3.1, as in 1.1, a decidedly humorous character, indicating that poetological, political and gender-specific aspects of the poem are not to be taken all too seriously.[40] This is not to imply that these aspects should be dismissed completely. But Ovid in the role of Paris does anything but transport allegorical, political ideologies or seriously bid farewell to, or distance himself from, erotic elegy[41]. Like *Amores* 1.1, the poem 3.1 represents a witty and humoristic variant of the *recusatio* motif common to Augustan poetry, a sleek and elegant rejection of grand, exalted poetry in favor of the small and polished form.

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[39] If one accepts the portrayal of Ovid as Paris rather than Heracles, the question naturally arises whether the parallel between the first-person speaker and Paris staged in 3.1 continues into the third book. Since, however, the following elegies break thematically with the opening poem, the parallel does not extend beyond 3.1.

[40] In light of our previous observations on the poem, how seriously must Ovid's plan soon to devote himself to tragedy be understood? On the problem of Ovid's plans for tragedy and the question of his lost *Medea*, see Fränkel 1970, 50f.; Schrijvers 1976; Thomas 1978; Holzberg [2]1998, 43-45 views the tradition rather sceptically.

[41] Cf. Hutchinson, 2008, 196: "The move to tragedy in the frame has aspects of an imposing ascent; but the poetic value and attractiveness of elegy are strongly felt by the reader of the inset, and are affirmed in the final elegy."

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