I

Poem and Reader

The aim of the present study is not to try to evaluate artistic meri
Rather it is an attempt to establish certain historical facts. The questic
is not what Ovid should have or could have done, nor what he intend
to do, but what he actually did. In other words, our chief concern is n
the creation of the *Metamorphoses,* nor the poem regarded as the resu
of more or less conscious artistic efforts, methods, and aims of the poe
all this is in a certain sense "before" the poem and this study aims
establishing, as far as possible, the actual effect of the poem upon i
readers. By studying this effect the meaning of the poem itself will emerg
in so far as the only meaning of a poem is the way in which it is actual
understood. Only in the mind of the reader does a poem become a
articulated whole, and the poet himself might be said to be the first read
of the poem; however, once having committed his work to the publ
the poet is not able to determine what the poem says to the readers. Tl
poet should not be regarded as a more competent reader than anyboc
else; on the contrary his apprehension is blurred by the fact that in mc
instances he is unable to make a neat distinction between what he intend
to write and what he actually wrote. Therefore he may think his read
misunderstands him, but the reader may have an adequate understan
ing of the poem even if he misunderstands the poet; he is not supposed
read the mind of the poet but his book. In a certain sense any misunde
standing of a poem is adequate; the impression left by the poem on tl
reader is a fact that cannot be assessed on a scale of truth any more tha
e. g. the colours we see. It might seem, then, that the understanding
literature is an exclusively private and subjective matter to which tl
notions of right and wrong, fundamental in every scholarly approach, c
not apply. Fortunately this is not the case. Just as we normally ref
to certain people as colourblind, not because we deny that they percei
the colours they actually do, but because they perceive them different
from the majority of us, so misunderstanding literature is equivalent

understanding it differently from one's fellow-readers, to understanding it in a way that cannot be accepted by others than oneself. Only when the impression is shared by somebody else,—at the very least one person—and can be justified to others, can it be said to have an objective value and, therefore, to be susceptible of discussion and analysis. But although we accept the understanding common only to two persons as valid as such, it is probably more interesting and profitable to study what kind of understanding the majority or at any rate a considerable number of readers have or had. To take an example, it was agreed among very many and rather competent readers in antiquity, as *e. g.* Horace, that Homer should be understood and interpreted allegorically; nowadays no reader holds that view but nevertheless we are not entitled to maintain that Horace had no understanding of Homer, because his understanding had both subjective reality and objective value in the sense that it was shared by a great number of fellow-readers. Too often scholars, to say nothing about non-professional readers, seem to nurse the somewhat pretentious conviction that everybody has misunderstood a certain work of art until, finally, they themselves have hit upon the only correct interpretation; this interpretation may then call forward another from a learned colleague, who in turn reduces the interpretation of his opponent to the history of literary criticism, which becomes, then, the history of misinterpretation, not of interpretation.

In a famous paper [1] Otto Regenbogen drew attention to the fact that through centuries the tragedies of Seneca have had an enormous influence, which can only be explained by their qualities; I have readily accepted his thesis that the effect of a literary work, *in casu* the tragedies of Seneca, reveals something essential in the work. But as Regenbogen cannot accept more than one interpretation as the right one nor on the other hand reject as entirely wrong the different interpretations which causes the work to have such great influence, he arrives at the following conclusion: "Nur wer vom Ende aller Tage rückschauend das Werk und sine ganze Wirkung in eines sehen könnte, hätte den wahren Aspekt vom ganzen Wesen des Werkes" [2]. This literary theory of knowledge, attractive though it is at first sight, invariably must lead to the conclusion that it is impossible to understand a literary work in all its aspects; even literary monomaniacs would probably have other thoughts forced upon themselves on the Last Day. We are, then, reduced to considering such interpretations only, which may not include all possible aspects of a work but have the indisputable advantage of being facts; they will be of interest provided that they have some objective validity and are not

exclusively based upon some kind of idiosyncrasy. We have to give up the theory that there is one and only one correct understanding of a poem. As a matter of fact the very ambiguity of a poem, the possibility of different interpretations, seems to me the only possible explanation of the vitality of a poem throughout the ages. The poems of Homer might be understood as a symbolic tale of human life within the framework of Stoic thinking and as such they appealed to readers influenced by moral philosophy of that kind. Books have their appointed lot; and this among other things seems to be to change with the ages; only by constant metamorphosis do some of them prove able to survive. However old, they may become new when read by new readers, provided these like what they see; and what they see depends in some measure on their eyes.

Accordingly it has been necessary to choose, which stage in the process of transformation of the *Metamorphoses* should be investigated. The *Metamorphoses* were different to mediaeval readers from what they were to Ovid's contemporaries or any other age because both men and background change. A study of the mediaeval way of understanding the *Metamorphoses* would be extremely useful to our knowledge of both Ovid and mediaeval culture. However, in that field the present writer does not feel competent at all. I might have chosen to explain my own appreciation and understanding of the poem in the hope that it would not prove to be what is termed by Regenbogen as "individuelles Missverstehen oder individuelle Perversität". But as the present study is intended as a work of classical philology rather than literary criticism, my objective is to see the poem through the eyes of ancient readers rather than to study what Ovid might have to say to myself and my contemporaries.

We know, apart from a number of corruptions due to the transmission, the words Ovid wrote. But only by means of complicated studies shall we be able to form an estimate of what he really achieved by his writing. Here, I am not thinking of what he achieved for himself such as his popularity and the satisfaction of having secured for himself everlasting renown; this was important to Ovid and is important to his biographers, and so is his exile, which may have been caused by his writing, too. But what really matters in the history of civilisation is what he achieved for his readers. The question to be answered may then be put in the following terms: what kind of experience would people in the imperial age of Rome have by reading the *Metamorphoses?* Or in a simpler form: why did people read the *Metamorphoses?* If we succeed in answering this question to some degree, we shall know something very essential about the nature and structure of the *Metamorphoses* in relation to that age.

It appears, then, that we shall have to deal with questions of literary taste, trying to establish what the taste of Ovid's readers is likely to have been. Here, we meet with considerable difficulties. We cannot make a poll, asking a large number of ancient readers, why they read the *Metamorphoses* and why they liked the poem. We have no ancient newspapers nor literary magazines, conveying to us what readers and critics thought about the *Metamorphoses*. We have only few and not very detailed remarks on the subject scattered in the works of other ancient authors. But even if we had the possibility of using the modern methods of George Gallup and Louis Harris, even if we had in our libraries yards of ancient reviews and appreciations, even if we had more ancient testimonies of the kind which we actually have, too much importance should perhaps not be attached to such direct evidence. In most cases, readers do not reflect very much on the question why they like a book, but are content to read it because they like it. And very often there seems to be a rather broad gap between appreciation and interpretation; that is why it seldom appears from the handbooks of literature whether a certain book is worth reading or not, the only way to find out being—of course—to read it. As a matter of fact the analysis of one's own mental experiences often seems to influence the experiences in a rather disturbing way: Ask a lover of nature what feelings a beautiful landscape arouses in him and his explanations, unless he is a poet, will be vague and inadequate; this does not prove that he does not know how to enjoy landscapes, nor does the inability of a reader to interpret a book adequately prove that he does not experience it in a sensitive way.

The famous experiment of I. A. Richards [3] was taken by the author to prove that even good readers are very often unable to read, that they fail to understand the direct as well as the metaphorical meaning of a poem. I rather tend to think that the conclusion to be drawn is that even good readers are very often unable to analyse their experience and communicate it to others in words of their own. If a reader finds out that he likes a book and wants to share his experience with others, he will not, as a rule, try to undertake a critical analysis in order to persuade his friends to read the book; he will recommend the book, stating that he finds it interesting, beautiful, fascinating, or simply good, and in case it turns out that his friends are attracted to the book in the same way as himself, he will feel that he has communicated his experience. If after the performance of a play one were to try to elicit from the spectators their opinion concerning the meaning of the play, there would probably be approximately as many "meanings" as there are spectators. This

does not prove the absence of a common experience; the fact remains that the audience were laughing at the same places; so whether or not they agree in the analysis of their experience, they must to some extent have been in agreement on the experience itself.

Although the reasons why readers read a book may be more or less concealed to themselves, the student of culture and civilization in his studies of the common background of these readers may be able to reveal something about them; by way of illustration consider an analogy from quite another field: when we choose between different kinds of food, we do not, normally, know why we choose what we do, but content ourselves to take what we like most; the physiologist, however, may tell us that the real motive for our choice is that we need certain minerals or vitamins. It might be added that exactly as physiological details at a dinner would tend to spoil the gastronomic pleasure, so critical analysis of a literary experience during the experience itself might often ruin the pleasure. Experience is one thing, analysis of it something quite different and to enjoy, *i. e.* to "understand" the *Metamorphoses* does not involve any obligation on the part of the reader to make an analysis.

As stated above the present book has as its aim to find out, if possible, the nature of the *Metamorphoses* in relation to Roman readers at the beginning of our era. Of the overwhelming majority of these readers we have no detailed information whatsoever; but our general knowledge of the historical epoch in question and the people who lived in it is comparatively good owing to the transmission of texts, the preservation of ancient monuments and specimens of art, etc. Last but not least tradition, a rather vague but very important concept, enables us to understand the ancient Romans better, perhaps, than any other ancient people. We know their language although we cannot, of course, aspire to know it as well as they did themselves; nevertheless, we have the advantage of being able to study it from without, as it were, to view it as characteristic of the Romans; like any other language Latin has its own "individual" personality. From a study of the language we can learn very much about the minds of the Romans, their tastes, their attitudes to life, their scales of value, their morals and their feelings. Language is not only an expression of thought or mind but also something which in turn determines both thinking and feeling. We are rather well acquainted with their history, on several points even better than they were themselves; and if the history of a people is not *magistra vitae* in the sense that the people learn from their errors, it certainly has the power to influence the people's mind for better or worse. Physical and moral philosophy and political thinking,

too, are known to us to such an extent that we may gather how the Romans saw the position of man in relation to the world and society. It would be possible to continue for several pages; I shall not do that. But what I have already said might justify the opinion that our knowledge of the Romans in general and the educated Romans in particular is sufficiently deep and broad to make it possible to apply the method. Let us, then, try on the basis of this knowledge to find out how and why the *Metamorphoses* did find favour with its readers – or in other words: what kind of poem the *Metamorphoses* were in that age.

PART ONE: THE CONTEXT

II

The literary Context

The study of literary sources and models is mainly pursued in order to investigate the genesis of a poem. Here we shall be concerned with such studies from our own point of view. It was maintained that the poet himself might be regarded as the first reader of his poem, although in some respects a very atypical one. The reason why it might prove profitable to start with Ovid himself is that, thanks to the study of the sources and models of the *Metamorphoses* and Ovid's other poems, we know something about his literary background. Like Vergil and Horace he was a voracious reader whose creative power was nourished by books as we know from statements made in the poems written during his exile [1]; such statements are fully confirmed by his work. Probably, he read more than most of his contemporaries; but Ovid was not, for all we know, an outsider in matters of taste. On the contrary, he openly admitted his happiness about having been born into an age characterized by *cultus* [2]; and he carefully informs the reader that by this term he does not understand the display of wealth but the grace and elegance of the Roman intellectual aristocracy to which he belonged. An essential feature of this refined *cultus* was literary education; in his Lectures on Love Ovid instructs his undergraduate that he must study the *ingenuae artes* and thoroughly learn both languages [3], and he recommends a large *pensum* of poetry, ranging from Anacreon to himself but including the *Aeneid,* which cannot be termed an exclusively erotic poem [4]; besides, it is evident that the third book of *Ars amatoria,* meant to be read by women, presupposes that its readers actually know both Greek and Latin literature to no little extent. Moreover, unlike many modern poets Latin poets did not address their poems directly to the anonymous public. The process of publication had an intermediate stage, where the poet read his poem or the finished parts of it to a selected audience representing the qualified public. Often, his friends or members of his *cercle littéraire* were being directly involved in the making of the poem by their criticisms, directions,

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CHANGING FORMS

STUDIES IN THE METAMORPHOSES OF OVID

BY

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