IX

Conclusion

There is no simple answer to the question: why did readers like the *Metamorphoses?*

Wilkinson [1] draws attention to two sources of the Roman reader's knowledge of mythology. One was the instruction he received from his *grammaticus;* the object of this was to supply him with sufficient knowledge to understand the poets; the training consisted partly in *poetarum enarratio,* partly in role learning of pedantic mythological catechisms and genealogies. The other was his own reading of poems; paintings have constituted an additional source. Thus his knowledge would be haphazard and fragmentary, not a conception of an integrated world. Here the *Metamorphoses* would have met an obvious need: "The poem would give vitality and coherence to his fragmentary notions of the mythological world, enabling him to look with fresh eyes at the pictures in people's houses, and to listen with fresh ears to recitations of poems". Indeed, even today the reading of Ovid's grand work remains the most pleasant way of learning mythology—though perhaps not the safest one from a scholarly point of view. Mythology has become entertaining [2] and easy [3]. Far less convincing is Wilkinson's theory that the increasing interest in geography should have contributed to the popularity of the poem. That would not have been very much. And his next point: that the fact that the *Metamorphoses* were written in Latin widened the circle of readers in Rome is rather too obvious to be of much use [4].

The need of a readable Latin treatment of mythology explains something; in that respect the *Metamorphoses* appeared just at the right moment. But it is both false and true to say that the poem is a popular work designed to satisfy that part of the reading public who were thirsting for refined culture but had not the time or energy to acquire it through Greek sources. A comparison with Cicero's philosophical writings is misleading. As we have seen there is much more learning in the *Metamorphoses* than displayed on the surface. Ovid satisfies both the ordinary and

the very qualified reader. He has managed to establish a synthesis of Callimachean exclusiveness and general accessibility. The *Metamorphoses* challenge every reader according to his intellectual and educational capacity. By the unobtrusive nature of his learning he is certainly an *Überwinder der neoterischen Bestrebungen,* and yet it remains true that through his mastery of both myth and literature he consummates the Alexandrian movement [5].

The *Metamorphoses* were something essentially new, not only in Rome but in literature as a whole. Bernbeck is quite right when he says about the γένος of the poem that it was not—in any accepted meaning of the word—an epic. His reasons for this statement are, however, of a negative kind. Ovid's poem is a reaction against the epic, especially against Vergil. Bernbeck gives up any attempt of classifying the *Metamorphoses* under the heading of any specific genre and defines the poem as a "spielerische Abwandlung des Epos" [6]. He continues: "Man hätte dann nicht zu fragen was die Metamorphosen eigentlich sind, sondern wovon sie sich abheben wollen". Also in Bernbeck's view Ovid is first and foremost the heir of Callimachus: "Wie die hellenistische Dichtung bedeutet Ovids Werk die Auflösung der Einheitlichkeit und Würde klassischer, epischer Erzählung" [7]. Immediately afterwards he states that the *Metamorphoses* are after all "eine Dichtung von kunstvoller, geschlossener Einheit". But this statement—surprising as it is considering his general thesis—turns out to mean only that Ovid's own versatility and constant change of standpoint match the heterogeneous nature of his subject-matter. But consistency in inconsistency hardly produces unity in itself.

Before I venture a tentative answer to the two problems: what was the human experience and attitude that really kept the *Metamorphoses* together, and: how did the structure of the *Metamorphoses* communicate that experience and that attitude to the readers, let us survey what attractions the poem would have offered by way of being a reaction against the previous generation and its standards.

The older Augustan literature furthers a high standard of morality. The *Aeneid* tries to interpret the history of the Roman people as the result of divine justice, thus justifying the Roman Empire and making Roman citizens realize their obligations towards the nation and its historic mission. The dreams and hopes of the true Rome, almost destroyed by the civil wars, were concentrated in the person of Augustus, the redeemer of the state and consummator of Rome's ultimate purpose. In the *Aeneid* the dream comes symbolically true in the heroic past. The virtues of the founder and his men are the same as must and will bring about a new

and happy age now. The *Georgica* exhibit the same blend of nostalgia and confidence, and so does Titus Livius' *Ab urbe condita.* Horace, too, on many occasions, explicitly voices the thought that Rome must take upon herself the burden of her moral inheritance from her fathers. And also when he is concerned with themes that have no obvious relevance to the commonwealth, there is an underlying feeling that the conduct of individuals is decisive for the welfare of all. Even when he advises us to forget the troubles of life and enjoy the gifts of Bacchus he is assuming a moral attitude in the sense that human life could be and should be something more than it actually is, richer, more dignified. The attitude of the elegiac poets was apologetic, and this was much more than just a literary convention of minor poetry; the peculiar character of Roman elegy derives largely from the tension between the feeling of moral obligation as Romans and the servitude of love.

Ovid's generation had very different conditions. There are almost thirty years between the *Aeneid* and the *Metamorphoses,* a short time in the history of mankind, but enough to make boys mature men and young men old. Ovid's generation had not seen any mortal dangers threatening the commonwealth, there was not any more a New State to be founded. As they had grown up after the civil wars they could not have that feeling of common guilt and liberation which had been so inspiring to the previous generation. They were left to admire what had been done, what had been built, what had been written. Theirs was the uncomfortable lot of having just missed a classic era. Admiration of the deeds of an older generation has never been enough to fill the life of a young generation. And as classical perfection in the intellectual field and the reconstitution of a state in the political field, once they have been achieved, leave no room for repetition, people must set up other goals for their lives than those of their predecessors which were based upon a different experience of life.

Most clearly we see the inevitable reaction in the new rhetoric. Under the new conditions Ciceronian eloquence had become impossible. But the change had come about so suddenly that the cultural traditions and educational system had not even had a chance to be adapted to the different conditions. Hence that restlessness and inner futility which mark the oratory preserved thanks to the memory of the elder Seneca [8]. There was no need for this kind of civil activity under the new bureaucratic and monarchic government. No wonder that rhetoric degenerated into scholastic ineptitude and idle ostentation. There is nothing remarkable in the fact that Ovid studied this rhetoric. Everybody did. The important thing is

that he left it, as he later left his "political" career. Both things had become empty shells without real significance. So far his case may have been typical. As there was no real rewards to be obtained from public service, the Romans (and the Italians) seem more or less to have turned their backs on the state and tried to live their own lives as best they could. Of course, they admired the glory of the first Augustan generation, not least its literary glory. But Vergil and Horace were already established classics and could not be read as contemporary literature. It was possible not only to appreciate their mature art but also to understand them; but then it was necessary to imagine their dreams and visions, to accept their hopes and beliefs *as if* they were still valid. To intelligent people, however, there can be no lasting satisfaction in living on the premises of another age; and intelligent men do not allow themselves to indulge in even the most beautiful and ideal historical illusions without a mental reservation to protect their own identity and assert their own experience. They must take up an ironic attitude—or leave the past altogether. It did not make things better that it was uncomfortably evident that the restoration of the true old republic had proved to be a façade of stucco hiding a well-organized monarchy. There was peace, law and order, stability and prosperity. There was no challenge.

They turned their interests from public to private life, as far as this was possible. It was not easy because the Father of the Fatherland tried to keep them to what he believed was their duty. Most of them, no doubt, quietly attended to their business, their families and friends, their houses, enjoying life and that *cultus* which marked the age. The absence of surprise would occasionally have made them restless in their cage of everyday life. But a great number, even the richest and most educated of the young generation, turned to a life of pleasure, to that busy, splendid, and highly civilized idleness which usually marks classes when their wealth and education have grown out of proportion with their obligations. Social life replaced the world of civil activity. They were not content with their assigned lot of being content and tried to satisfy themselves by refined amusement and gay social life. The moral degeneration of the Roman classes which traditionally had been the leading classes is often explained as an effect of luxury, also by the Romans themselves. But it seems nearer to the truth to say that luxury was an outcome of that frustration which stems from being left with the best culture of the time and nothing to use it for. They did not want back the old disorder, nor did they like either what the new order had turned out to be.

The absence of moralizing in the *Metamorphoses* would be a relief to

them. All the great works of the real Augustan age had tried, in one way or another, to change the world and to teach people to be different from what they were. The *Metamorphoses* question all those values in which the former generation had so ardently believed or wanted to believe.

The grandiose attempt to revive the gods of the ancients had proved to be, at most, an external success. It was easy enough—though expensive—to reconstruct their temples, to make them bigger and more beautiful than ever before, to have their statues created by the finest artists of the world, and it was easy enough—though a troublesome task for the antiquarians—to reconstruct half-forgotten rituals and appoint new priests to perform them. But educated people could not long believe in those extraordinary creatures that had developed from the fusion of old Roman *numina* and a highly secularized hellenistic pantheon. The gods were plainly ridiculous. Yet they retained just enough of their former majesty and recently acquired heavy make-up to provide an irrisistible temptation: the incongruity between their false magnificence and their real life as reported by literary mythology was an obvious source of ironic treatment.

Vergil and Horace had, more or less explicitly, compared the redeemer and ruler of the state with the King of the immortal gods; as we have seen Ovid turns this pattern upside down when he invests his Jupiter with a Roman-Augustan colour and "majesty". It must have been both a relief and a thrill beyond what we can imagine for his readers to discover this cleverly veiled banter against divine as well as secular authorities.

Under Augustus philosophy continued to play an important part. Almost everything of this vast literature—Fabianus alone wrote more than Cicero did about philosophy [9]—is lost. However, from the fragments it is clear that Sextius and his school, which enjoyed a short-lived but extremely productive *floruit* under Augustus, represented a curious mixture of stoicism and neo-pythagoreanism, two sects which also had their separate adherents. We have seen how in the beginning of his poem Ovid draws up a cosmogony which is in the main stoic, and that his flippant virtuosity in presenting it as well as the context in which it stands point to a certain scepticism: this may be as good an explanation as any other. The speech of Pythagoras at the end of the poem presents a moral doctrine of vegetarianism based upon both humanitarian and psychomigrational principles [10], and a conception of physics as incessant change. There is enough in this to convey an illusion of a philosophical basis for the world of the *Metamorphoses,* but not enough to conceal that it is an illusion: Philosophy may not be less fanciful than mythology and may, accordingly, be met with exactly the same suspension of disbelief; Ovid is

here as ambivalent as ever. We have noticed that the theory of the cyclic life of nations implicitly contradicts the vision of *Roma Aeterna* which Pythagoras propounds [11]. There was no lack of answers to the great questions of life and the world. There were many, too many, and only too often they were completely contradictory; but they were all expounded with self-assured dogmatism. The *Metamorphoses* would offer those readers who found it impossible to be saved by the sermons of any philosophy a kind of justification of their scepticism.

The subtle and virtuose play in the *Metamorphoses* with literary models of all kind, and especially Vergil, would constitute a great attraction to a generation which had the leisure to indulge freely in refinements. The *Metamorphoses* are well designed to meet the requirements of highly sophisticated minds by their multiple variation of themes and literary forms and their ironic ambivalence, which allows the reader to admire Vergil and smile at him at the same time. The *Metamorphoses* would make it possible to live with the epic masterpiece of the classic era without being oppressed by it. But also in this field of literary imitation and counter-imitation does the challenge of the poem depend on the ability of the reader. It may be read with pleasure simply because the stories are well told.

So there can be no doubt that in several respects reaction against the previous generation contributed to the success of the *Metamorphoses.* But there were more positive qualities as well. I have just mentioned Ovid's narrative skill and it is not necessary to repeat what has already been said about his humour, irony and wit. It seems probable too, that those passages of ingenious gruesomeness, which have found so little favour with modern critics, would have found an audience in Rome; in any case both Seneca and Lucan were able to go considerably farther with some success fifty years later, at a time when there had been peace in Italy for almost a century.

The *Metamorphoses* are characterized by a high degree of readability. The language is clear and natural, the verses smooth and swift. The whole work is, to use Seneca's words of Ovid's *ingenium* for rhetoric, *comptum et amabile.* Artistic perfection of form is in itself an admirable thing. But Ovid claimed that he possessed more than *ars,* and the position he won among his comtemporaries, to say nothing about his popularity among later generations, is difficult to understand if he were not right in claiming that he possessed *ingenium* as well.

We have observed that the solutions offered to the problems of the structure of the *Metamorphoses* all seem to be unsatisfactory in the sense

that they are but half truths. What structure will emerge as the relevant one depends to a great extent on the reader's point of view and on the passage of the poem he may be engaged in reading at any moment. And very often different structures may be observed simultaneously, belonging either to different dimensions or contradicting each other. This structural multiplicity makes it difficult to analyze the poem as an architectonic whole. And the multiplicity becomes actually infinite when we consider that the poem is suitable both for reading from end to end and for reading passages at random. I can hardly imagine any narrative work which it is easier or more pleasant to use as a "bed-side book". We all have such books which we like, in leisurely hours, to open and read in at random. It seems, then, that the structure of the *Metamorphoses* is something very dynamic. No great help can be derived from analyses which are based upon the conception that structure here is something analogous to a building. I do not think that it is possible in the *Metamorphoses* to find a set of principles that would allow us to say that because of them the poem must have the structure it has. In this highly artificial poem apparent fortuities create ever new and surprising patterns. I have mentioned the kaleidoscopic character of the *Metamorphoses,* and I think that this concept might contribute something to an understanding of the poem's actual structure. The context of the single stories contains mirrors, the reflections of which produce new patterns for every movement the reader makes. Perhaps we should not use the word structure at all. The nature of the *Metamorphoses* bears perhaps a closer resemblance to that of a tree: the poem lives and moves before the eyes of the reader with symmetry and balance, and yet it is capricious and irregular in all its details, the same tree presenting a different shape from every side; it is not a construction but an organism.

The *Metamorphoses* are not really an epic poem. They are a descriptive poem. And what is described is the innumerable aspects of man, and not least of woman, and of their behaviour as individuals in this fantastic world. Ovid's gods reveal nothing about religion, and his Kings nothing about the state. Ovid's animals are not zoological but psychological phaenomena. This vast gallery of virgins, mothers, wives, young men, fathers, and husbands, heroes, nymphs, gods, monsters, and plain people, with their different human characters, good and bad or both, and their strange experiences, happy or more often unhappy, in their imaginary world broaden the reader's human knowledge as they pass before his eyes. Ovid does not point a moral. Any moral would narrow the import of the description [12]: life may be just, but is far from always just, it is often

comic or pathetic or stark or cruel or grotesque and macabre. It is always fascinating and interesting—as interesting and fascinating as our own lives and that of our neighbour when looked upon with fresh eyes. No wonder that Ovid's poem found favour with a generation which had been forced to satisfy their intellectual and emotional needs within the limits of private and social life.

So the *Metamorphoses* are not a poem between two worlds but a poem of its own individual age. And exactly because it is a true expression of its own time, it has been able to live on through the ages. Nor are the *Metamorphoses* an interpretation of the world and its history, a *Weltgedicht,* nor are they an Augustan poem. That is all on the surface. *Man* is what all evolves around, his shortcomings, his passions, his aggressions, his pretensions, and his love, a mixture of heroism, tragedy, comedy, romance and elegy, true as only—life itself.

CLASSICA ET MEDIAEVALIA · DISSERTATIONES X

CHANGING FORMS

STUDIES IN THE METAMORPHOSES OF OVID

BY

OTTO STEEN DUE

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