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STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES OF CURRENT OVIDIAN CRITICISM

Response to Michael von Albrecht

A respondent must be forgiven for hoping that his or her rhetorical counterpart will be unreasonable or extremist. But how can I take issue with Michael von Albrecht, either with his brilliant and wideranging analogies from other arts and periods, or with any of the proper scholarly approaches that he has described so clearly to us? I wish I shared his learning: I hope I share his traditional values and respect for the ancient poet's craft that sees the poet's own *corpus* as the best source of understanding of the individual disputed text.

I would like to start with some misgivings about our continuing concern with the overall structure of the *Metamorphoses*, which has generated so many competing analyses and diagrammatic schemes. Of these one of the most modest and persuasive has been developed by Rudolph Rieks[1] and by Michael himself, taking up Ovid's own description of *ter quinque libelli*. They have offered persuasive arguments that Ovid, like Livy, composed in pentads, which he has marked by special features of the fifth, tenth and fifteenth books. These are the extended discourses by professional exponents, the Muse, the poet and the philosopher. But contrast, for example, R. Coleman's study[2] or most recently Anna Crabbe's fair and careful analysis.[3] Using a different methodology, she argues for the centrality of Book 8 by moving from analysis of the book itself to explication backward and forward, demonstrating symmetrical lay-outs in books 7 and 9, although she herself has to recognize Ovid's plurality of articulation: "The structure of Book 7 is at once bi- and tri-partite" (2302). How then shall we make any significant progress given such genuine flexibility of form? How should the critic divide the units of action? By change of scene? Of personnel? Of dynasty? Of myth or mythical source? When Crabbe, a scrupulous scholar, moves to comparable patterning in the first and fifteenth books her chiastic symmetries are confined to minimal units, and she is more convincing in presenting the affinities between the sky-ride of Phaethon in Book 2 and the flight of Icarus that opens Book 8 as evidence counter to her structural scheme.

1 "Zum Aufbau von Ovids Metamorphosen," *Würzburger Jahrbücher 6* (1980) 85-103.
2 "Structure and Intention in the *Metamorphoses*," *CQ* NS 21 (1971) 461-77.
3 "Structure and Content in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*," *ANRW* II.31,4 (1981) 2274-2327.

What the reader or listener notices is recurrence of narrative patterns, each bringing with it expectations engendered by the last version, and subtly shifting—to defeat his expectations. This may in the end be a better key to construing the quasi-historical forward movement of the poem, progressively blending the fantasy of episodes of transformation with the more naturalistic narrative of familiar heroic legend: from the monsters and magic that surround Perseus in 4-5 through Theseus in Books 7-8 and Hercules (Book 9) to recur with increasing incongruity as the narrative incorporates the Homeric cycle and escorts the westward voyages of Odysseus and Aeneas.

Instead of renewing the search for a grand design I see more hope of appreciating Ovid's invention and organization in one of the following approaches: first, taking a cue from some brilliant observations of Alessandro Barchiesi,[4] we can focus on Ovid's ingenuity in linking previously unconnected myths, creating synchronizations or intermediaries like Macareus in *Met.* 14 to bond the narratives. There is also much still to be done in tracing how Ovid exploits allusion to conflate rival versions of a single myth: this is one aspect of Hinds *The Metamorphosis of Persephone*[5] that wins my admiration—when for example the swans of Cayster near Asian Nysa are transferred to lake Pergus near Sicilian Enna as a trace of the original Persephone legend.[6] This kind of work has also been the special contribution of David Ross[7] and Richard Thomas[8] to the study of Virgil, though they may sometimes lose sight of a Virgil's Roman models or narrative direction, distracted by a shattered fragment of Parthenius or the notorious gadfly that simultaneously evokes the Io sagas of Calvus, Aeschylus, and Apollonius.

Certainly the student should consider the internal organization of the books that Ovid himself marked off. But if he wants to work on the larger scale, I believe he should trace two complementary aspects of Ovid's narrative chain: *continuity*, as maintained, for example through the erotic career of Apollo or the dynasty of Peleus, and *recurrence*, in mythical actions, e.g., combat with the shapeshifters Achelous, Thetis and Periclymenos, or acts of divine favour to unite loving couples, or the deaths by transformation of rejected and passionate women. Only through analysis of divergence in

4 *Materiali e Discussioni* 16 (1986) 82-92.
5 Cambridge 1987.
6 *Ibid.* 26-27.
7 *Virgil's Elements* (Princeton 1986).
8 See *A Commentary on the Georgics of Vergil*, vols. I and II (Cambridge 1988), and the articles cited in his bibliography.

recurring themes, studying the variations in tone and form and their impact on Ovid's audience, will we be able to represent the cumulative effect of this *perpetuum carmen*, or better *perpetuum mutabile*.[9]

Is there a place here for hermeneutics? Certainly structuralist (as opposed to structural) analysis can contribute, provided the codes adopted fit the way in which the poet originally shaped his episode and the critic does not force a match between disparate forms. Thus a gender-based analysis is appropriate to Iphis and Ianthe, or the tale of Salmacis and Hermaphroditus—and we will shortly have such a study from Georgia Nugent. When the poet operates with the polarities of mortal man and immortal god, or man and beast as in the transformation of Chiron's daughter Ocyrhoe, or the *Liebestod* of Cyllarus and Hylonome, or when he exploits the divisions of *tria regna* in the change of man to bird or sea-god, constructing interpretation around these categories may uncover and explain anomalies, but in general Ovid seems to privilege obvious bonds like sexual love or kinship.

Although Michael barely mentioned genre-based criticism in his listing, his praise for Hinds' new book surely implies recognition that the post-Heinzian issue of *elegische* versus *epische Erzählung* deserves the attention it has attracted. I would hope that he also found much to approve of in the generic arguments of Peter Knox.[10] Knox's *Ovid's Metamorphoses and the Tradition of Augustan Poetry* adopts a series of approaches to illustrate the persistence of elegiac technique from Ovid's erotic poetry into his narrative epic, whether in scale of episode, choice of diction, compression or ellipse of dialogue, or the sheer chop and change of Hellenistic narrative. Familiar myths are recalled, rather than retold, and the ostensibly simple account is mined with subsurface allusion and correction of predecessors.

Ovidian elegy in the wider context of Roman love elegy is currently the subject of radical and, to my mind, damaging reinterpretation, and the recent articles of Maria Wyke and book of Paul Veyne[11] seem to have deconstructed

9 I owe the final formulation of this approach to discussion with Stephen Wheeler of Princeton University.
10 *Ovid's Metamorphoses and the Traditions of Augustan Poetry*, Camb. Phil. Soc. Suppl. 11 (Cambridge 1986), most recently reviewed by Hinds, *CP* 84 (1989) 266-71. Note esp. 270, a key excursus on *perpetuum carmen* and the problem of epic versus elegiac in the prologue of Callimachus' *Aitia*.
11 For Wyke, see "Written Women: Propertius' *scripta puella*" *JRS* 77 (1987) 47-61; Paul Veyne's *Elégie érotique romaine*, has recently been translated as *Roman Erotic Elegy: Love, Poetry and the West* (Chicago 1988). Both authors use the acknowledged fictionality of the women to justify treating Roman elegy almost exclusively as the poet's representation of himself and his artistic *parti pris*.

the artistry along with the woman and the world. I can only hope that Gian Biagio Conte's voice of reason will be heard over their protestations: "The fact that in the dialectics of life/literature, reality/fiction the elegists place themselves on the side of literature does not mean that life is considered an epiphenomenon or a shadow of literature, but only that reality, to find a possible expression, necessarily enters into the language of literature. . . the literary conventions of elegy are the grammar of this discourse, the form of a content whose substance is precisely the life experience of the lover poet."[12]

But if Gian Biagio Conte rightly warned us yesterday that *die Kreuzung der Gattungen* cannot resolve the complexities of poems such as *Eclogues* 6 and 10, there is still a need to investigate generic features as part of the attempt to understand Ovid's other great *Kollektivgedicht*, the *Fasti*. Yes, Callimachus is marked as the dominant model by the elegiac meter and programmatic announcement of *tempora cum causis*, but since Propertius avoided any semblance of continuity in the *Aitia* of his fourth book, and so little has survived of the link passages in Callimachus' *Aitia*, the discontinuous continuities of the *Fasti* are for us a new kind of poetic achievement. Here I found Carlo Santini's papers, especially his study of the role of Aratean astronomical entries to articulate the aetiological episodes, to be helpful in explaining the organization of the poem,precisely because he identifies traces of the submerged genre.[13] I hope Michael would agree that didactic, a genre unrecognized by contemporary Romans, is the most ambiguous and therefore the severest test of the utility of generic theory; here is the greatest indeterminacy and the boldest innovation.

If I may, I would like to broaden the discussion by remarking on some limitations of contemporary criticism and teaching of Roman poetry. Why, I wonder, is the study of Latin literature increasingly concentrated on the two great narrative poems from the beginning and end of the Augustan age? Of course both epics deserve our lasting devotion, offering rewards to both the first time reader and the persistent student clutching at Servius, or at Bömer, our modern Servius. Certainly each poem retains enough of its color even in translation to attract the Great Books Class on its way from Greek Tragedy to Dante, or perhaps Augustine. In contrast, Lucretius, Horace, Cicero, the great historians or, say, Lucan, make demands on the reader's knowledge of antiquity for which most students are ill equipped. But the dominance of these

12 "Love without Elegy: the *Remedia Amoris* and the Logic of a Genre," *Poetics Today*, 10.3 (1989) 451-2 n.16.

13 "Motivi astronomici e moduli didattici nei "Fasti" di Ovidio," *GIF* 27 (1975) 1-26.

two texts persists in graduate school in the writing of theses and the publishing of articles and monographs. I would suggest that the fault lies with our common schooling in modern narrative fiction. As Peter Wiseman suggested, preoccupation with the novel shapes the questions we ask and the expectations with which we approach an ancient text. Turning to Latin literature, the student can apply his critical procedures only to the epic or the novel—but Petronius is incomplete and Apuleius ornate and difficult in diction; and so this age has produced Winkler's brilliant narratological study of Apuleius, and a series of challenging books on the *Aeneid* and *Metamorphoses*.

There are two corollaries of this narrow, if stereoscopic view. The first is the inevitable resort—and I shall resort to it myself shortly—to comparing and contrasting Ovid as not-Virgil with Virgil (less often) as not-Ovid: this leads us to privilege the episodes that we perceive as being most Virgilian in the *Aeneid* and deprecate as too "Ovidian" Virgil's love of fantasy and his reluctance to leave the Apollonian sea-scape for the urgencies of battle in Latium. In the same way scholars now play down the elements of genuine pathos in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* that Brooks Otis cherished, such as the death of the innocent Dryope or the sufferings of Hecuba. It has proved far more fruitful in recent years to consider both poets in the light of post-Augustan developments; there is much of the "baroque" in Virgil, and I was glad to see that Karl Galinsky had taken up the approach of both Gordon Williams and Stephen Hinds to consider Ovid in terms of Silver Latin poetry.[14]

The second corollary is the quest for structure, which I have already regretted, one of misapplied methods rather than inappropriate value judgements. I am sure our host, as author of one of the best introductions to the *Metamorphoses*, will agree that one cannot "cover" the diversity of Ovid, and criticism that attempts to be comprehensive will end in panic or dementia. We need a closer focus on the tale as it is told, the kind of work we have learned to expect from E.J. Kenney and his pupils, who now in turn are bringing forward young Canadian and American university teachers. Our first care should go to Ovid's words: their choice, their arrangement, and their interplay of echo and allusion.

In privileging Ovid's language I do not want to neglect the relatively unexplored field of versification. Metrical patterns can carry generic

14 For inclusion of Ovid as a precursor to Silver Latin poetry see Williams, *Change and Decline* (Berkeley 1978) and Hinds, "Generalizing about Ovid" in *The Imperial Muse*, ed. A.J. Boyle (Victoria, Australia 1988). G.K. Galinsky provides formal and stylistic illustration in "Was Ovid a Silver Latin Poet?," *ICS* 14 (1989) 69-89.

overtones, as Knox has shown in tracing the persistence of the elegiac fourth-foot trochaic caesura not only in Ovid's later "serious" elegy but also in the *Metamorphoses*.[15] But if Frau Möhler's imaged sequences of dactyls and spondees are a precious tool for determining the paternity of the *Ilias Latina*, they seem more subjective in Michael's association of individual lines with mood or content. He did not mention the additional factors, the complex interplay of sense and metrical units, hiatus, heterodyne word-forms and the multiple components of rhythm, so clearly illustrated in Michael's own brief study of a Horatian Epistle.[16] Thus when Michael called *Met.* 10.40 (*talia dicentem nervosque ad verba moventem)* an "almost ironic" echo of the rhythm of 10.3 (*tendit et Orphea nequiquam voce vocatur*), I suspect that irony has been invoked, as it often is, to smooth out an anomaly. What most readers hear in 10.40 is the internal rhyming of the two unfulfilled present participles that will be repeated again at 10.72-3 (*orantem frustraque iterum transire volentem*). There is a parallel use of the less noticeable nominative participles in 10.58. This is Virgil's audible graph of frustration, found in *Georgics* 4.501-2 (*prensantem nequiquam umbras et multa volentem/dicere)* as it will most famously recur in Aeneas' farewell to Dido.[17]

The beginning of Ovid's Orpheus narrative raises larger questions. And since these could involve no less than three of my fellows in discussion it would be a pity to pass them by. We have all come to think of the myth of Orpheus as the myth of the poet, especially since the valuable discussion by Bill Anderson[18] and Charles Segal's recent consideration of his previous articles on this theme.[19] Anderson showed how much a reader's appreciation of Ovid's negative presentation is sharpened by comparison with his preeminent model. Reacting against the supremacy of his predecessor Ovid shuns Virgilian pathos, but uses echoes and half-echoes of Virgil to highlight points of divergence, constructing a speech for Orpheus where Virgil left it unreported, and implicitly reproaching the older poet for the few words of complaint he gave to Eurydice at the fatal moment when Orpheus looked back; of course she did not complain: *quid enim nisi se quereretur amatam*? (10.61).

15 Knox, *Ovid's Metamorphoses*, Appendix I 84-87.
16 "Horazens Brief an Albius," *RhMus* 114 (1971) 193-209
17 *Aen.* 4.390-91: *linquens multa metu cunctantem et multa parantem/dicere.*
18 "The Orpheus of Vergil and Ovid" in *Orpheus: the Metamorphoses of a Myth,* ed. J. Warden (Toronto 1982).
19 C.P. Segal, *Orpheus: the Myth of the Poet* (Baltimore 1989) 73-94.

I share Michael von Albrecht's reservations about Ovid's presentation of Orpheus in the underworld, but despite his interesting suggestion that Ovid is deliberately beginning his account in a low key before intensifying the emotional content, I feel compelled to read negatively both Orpheus' behavior in Hades and his poetic prologue in the following scene. While love overcomes his gift of poetry in Virgil's narrative, reducing his song to the single name of his lost wife, in Ovid's account Orpheus is not even a convincing lover, but a *causidicus*, and a dull one. His petition to the rulers of Hades is a veritable Beckmesser's song, absolutely incongruous with the lyre which we are told accompanies it. Similarly, the poem with which Orpheus begins his one-man recital for the trees, birds and beasts is self-consciously professional. Not only has he heard the song of his mother Calliope in book 5: his opening *ab Iove, Musa parens. . . carmina nostra move* echoes the now hackneyed theme of Aratus. The modest presentation of his program as a sort of dessert, *leviore lyra*, after the sterner stuff of his main course, is not only a rhapsode's cliché, but plays another programmatic game.[20] It is Ovid, not Orpheus, who has already sung a lay of the gigantomachy, in all of twelve lines (*Met.* 1.151-62). Not surprisingly interpreters recall the function of both Zeus and the gigantomachy in Augustan panegyric. Orpheus is making Ovid's excuses for him, but his eight-line poem evokes not true art but the career performer.

Have we become too obsessed by meta-poetics? If poets were entirely or predominantly concerned with their own creativity, such narcissism would turn away readers. We as critics have done much to devalue the poets we recommend to our students by our insistence on reading them in terms of their poetical apparatus. Not only do academic critics harp on the geography of Parnassus, untrodden paths and crystal springs, the fine-spun song, and the laurel or wand of honor, where such overt symbols cluster in programmatic passages, but they seize on every slender epithet, or hint of water, even taking such descriptive details as the swans of Lake Pergus, which function as an allusion to the Homeric location of the rape of Persephone, as a symbol and reflection of the poet's song.

Alongside modern concern with meta-poetics comes that other subtext, the hunt for political ideology. Perhaps because we grew up in the shadow of Syme's *Roman Revolution* in which the Augustan poets served "The Organization of Opinion," or perhaps because we are burdened with disillusionment about contemporary leaders and their ill-disguised imperialism,

20 Detected by Knox, *Ovid's Metamorphoses* 50.

the scholars of this continent have become obsessed with Augustanism as a problematic varnish that must be stripped from the text to reveal the liberal democracy of our poets, and free them from the dishonor of believing in Rome and its empire, or failing to declare their dissent. Respecting and loving Virgil we exonerate him by discovering pervasive pessimism[21] and overhearing further voices[22] that cancel every exhortation (*tu regere imperio populos Romane memento*—but don't go near the water) so that Aeneas can either be honored for disillusionment or dismissed as flawed. It has taken the extraordinary achievement of Philip Hardie's study of cosmic allegory in the *Aeneid*[23] to demonstrate the inspired tropes by which Virgil implies the greatness of his ancient and his modern hero—and his empire.

Sceptics find Ovid easier to handle. Sure that he cannot have respected an aging establishment, they credit him with blatant mockery of his Princeps as if Augustus were too stupid to recognize such malice. Once again we owe a shrewder formulation to Stephen Hinds; he argues that the poet calculated his panegyric to be read respectfully by the orthodox but to leave pleasantly subversive associations in the minds of the dissenting.[24] Thus Ovid's Palatine Jupiter with his Tacitean Senate of yes-gods uses the means so brilliantly analyzed by E.J. Bernbeck[25] to discredit the ruler of the gods and obliquely his earthly counterpart. Or, to take a symbol common to Virgil and Ovid: the serpent which, as Hardie has shown,[26] conveys the horror or the awe of divine power in the *Aeneid* becomes an absurdity when Ovid depicts the gliding serenity of the snake god Aesculapius *en voyage* from Epidaurus to Rome. Despite the timely return to his *species caelestis* this godhead venerated by the sons of Aeneas[27] is an undignified precedent for Julius and Augustus Caesar who follow so closely on his tail.

21 See M.C.J. Putnam, *The Poetry of Vergil's Aeneid* (Cambridge, Mass. 1965), W.R. Johnson, *Darkness Visible: a Study of Vergil's Aeneid* (Berkeley 1976) and what is often called "the Harvard School."

22 R.O.A.M. Lyne, *Further Voices in Vergil's Aeneid* (Oxford 1987).

23 *Vergil's Aeneid: Cosmos and Imperium* (Oxford 1986).

24 "Generalizing about Ovid" 23-31. For a discussion of such political equivocation in prose and verse compare F.M. Ahl, "The Art of Safe Criticism in Greece and Rome," *AJP* 105 (1984) 174-209.

25 *Beobachtungen zur Darstellungsart in Ovid's Metamorphosen. Zetemata* 43 (Munich 1967).

26 See also Putnam, *The Poetry of Virgil's Aeneid*, passim (index s.v. "serpent" p. 237).

27 *Met.* 15.680-82: *quisquis adest visum venerantur numen, et omnes / ... / Aeneadae praestant et mente et voce favorem.*

In our academic climate it is unfashionable to be empiricist, like an emperor who refuses to buy new clothes. Perhaps his old clothes were of better quality and a more comfortable fit, but this is no reason to refuse all new clothes even if some may prove transparent or unbecoming when put on. In his illuminating history of our profession,[28] Gerald Graff rightly warns conservatives like myself that we differ from the new theorists only in not having realized and systematized our presuppositions. The literary interpreter who has not asked himself—or herself—what his critical principles and values are may well be threadbare. But if he cannot bring himself to put on the new methodology, he can at least try to find merit in other critics' approaches to the text.

I must confess that preparing for this colloquium has left me troubled by my own unadaptability. It is the empiricist's failing to treat a lyric like a prose text, a work of poetry like a document. Of course we should not expect a witness's truth from our poets,[29] but it is as much an offence against them to blur their delicacy with overinterpretation.

With his usual modesty and good sense Michael has offered in his survey of current approaches to *Metamorphoses* a variety of careful techniques that can and should be applied to prepare a secure understanding of a Roman poetic text. If they seem only preliminaries to the more exciting application of critical theory, they are still essential preliminaries that will protect the aspiring scholar from the hazards of subjectivity. It is timely and salutary to have them brought to mind.

28 *Professing Literature: An Institutional History* (Chicago 1987). See especially ch. 15.

29 Ovid made this quite clear (*Am.* 3.12.19): *nec tamen ut testes mos est audire poetas*, and *ibid.* 41-42: *exit in immensum fecunda licentia vatum/obligat historica nec sua verba fide.*

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