Ovid's Metamorphosis of Myth

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It is a commonplace in the history of mythological litera-ture that myth, in order to stay alive, must constantly be readapted and reinterpreted. Such creative adaptation—and I am not con-cerned, to use a distinction made by Benedetto Croce,[1] with the exegetical adaptations of myth—can come from many impulses and is not without its difficulties. One of these was outlined in the early eighteenth century by Dr. Samuel Johnson. "We have been too early acquainted," he wrote, "with the poetical heroes to expect any pleasure from their revival; to show them as they have already been shown is to disgust by repetition; to give them new qualities or new adventures, is to offend by violating received notions."[2]

[1] In his critique of Jean Seznec's *The Survival of the Pagan Gods*, entitled "Gli dei antichi nella tradizione mitologica del Medioevo e del Rinascimento," in *Varietà di storia letteraria e civile* 2 (1949): 50–65. The translations from the *Metamorphoses* are those of Rolfe Humphries, reprinted by permission of Indi-ana University Press.

[2] Samuel Johnson, *Lives of the English Poets*, Nicholas Rowe, ed. G. B. Hill (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1935), II, 58.

When Ovid wrote his *Metamorphoses*, eighteen centuries earlier, the problem was even more acute because it was compounded by what we may call the existential crisis of Graeco-Roman myth. Few, if any, of Ovid's contemporaries believed in the literal truth of myth or considered it as expressing realities of a high order. Myth had been severed from its traditional, religious base and, as was shown in the failure of the religious program of Augustus, to infuse the old meaning into it on a grand scale was impossible. On a smaller scale, however, it was possible, as is exemplified by Vergil's epic where the metaphysical and historical components of myth render it profoundly meaningful. But because the *Aeneid* is the treatment of a myth in depth rather than in breadth, the range of Vergil's mythology remained limited. By contrast, Ovid's undertaking, again in terms of mythology, was far more ambitious. He presented more than 250 myths drawn from all genres of the ancient literary tradition, and this in itself makes it difficult to put a genre label on the *Metamorphoses*. The *Metamorphoses* thus is the most comprehensive, creative mythological work that has come down to us from antiquity. Its comprehensiveness and its use as a handbook have tended to obscure Ovid's creative achievement, the revival of myth on an unprecedented scale. In the *Metamorphoses*, Ovid was concerned not so much with mythological metamorphoses—because metamorphosis is quite tangential to many stories—as he was concerned, and had to be, with the metamorphosis of myth.

How was Ovid able to metamorphose myth? He suggests the answer in a lengthy passage in the Second Book of the *Art of Love*, where he extols the merits of versatility of mind and ease of expression. The mythological example that he adduces is Odysseus, more specifically, Odysseus complying with Calypso's request to tell her the story of the fall of Troy (*Art* 2.123–142). Now Calypso was rather insatiable, even for such delights as a good story, and she repeated the request to him time and again. Each time, Odysseus complied, and he told her the same story, the story of the fall of Troy. But the important difference was that he managed to tell it *aliter*—differently or in a different way: *ille referre aliter saepe solebat idem* (128). Taking into account the formidable talents of both Ovid and Odysseus, we might surmise that Calypso heard the same story in the style of epic, elegy, epistle, *suasoria*, tragedy, epyllion, *aition*, and perhaps even satyr play, even if the

last may have involved a somewhat radical transformation of the Trojan Horse. But Odysseus, in the *Art of Love*, like Ovid in the *Metamorphoses*,[3] would look upon a traditional myth in terms of the challenge to *referre idem aliter*.

In the *Metamorphoses*, the adoption of this principle had two more specific consequences for the mythological narrative on which I should like to concentrate. The first is the constantly varying tonality of the narrative. In most of the individual stories and in the *Metamorphoses* in general, Ovid deliberately refuses to sustain a consistent tone or mood. Instead, the *Metamorphoses* thrive on the juxtaposition of the serious with the comic, of the logical with the incongruous, and of the straight with the playful. A related quality of Ovid's narrative is his basically untragic presentation of myth and the resulting tension—one of the main tensions in the poem—between the traditionally profound and serious implications of a theme and Ovid's frequent indifference to them.

I should like to single out for detailed consideration the stories of Erysichthon and Narcissus, not only because they illustrate these characteristics very well, but also because they are freer than other stories from the dilemma defined by Dr. Johnson. These stories had no extensive tradition in Greek literature, and Ovid here could create even more freely than he did on other occasions. His mythopoeia thus involves both the make-up of the actual stories and the narrative technique and devices. Let me first turn to the story of Erysichthon (8.738–878).

We have a good basis for comparison here in the version of the

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[3] The passage is a good example of the many links, which Ovidian scholarship in the last fifty years has tended to ignore, between Ovid's earlier poetry and the *Metamorphoses*. Early in this century, E. K. Rand still could state the obvious: "The *Amores*, apart from its own merit, is biographically significant in that it presents in the germ all the vital interests to which Ovid later turned" ("Ovid and the Spirit of Metamorphosis," in *Harvard Essays on Classical Subjects*, ed. H. W. Smith [Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard College Press, 1912], p. 233). But not much later, under the influence of Richard Heinze's *Ovid's elegische Erzählung* (*Sitzungsberichte Leipzig, Phil.-Hist. Klasse.* 71 [1919] fasc. 7), scholars started dissecting the elegiac from the epic Ovid. The variety, however, of both tone and subject of the *Metamorphoses* defies such simple categorization and the poet's *ingenium* (cf. *Amores* 1.15.14 and *Trist.* 3.3.74) merely worked on a larger scale in the *Metamorphoses*, whose main theme is love, than it had in his shorter love poems. For his attitude to Odysseus, compare Ovid's identification with the Greek in *Trist.* 1.2.9 and *Ex Ponto* 1.3.33–34.

Greek poet Callimachus, who incorporated the myth into his *Hymn to Demeter*. The basic characteristics of the story as Callimachus tells it are that it is rather straightforward and forms a consistent whole.

Because he wants to build a house for himself, Erysichthon, the young son of Triopas, goes into the forest with twenty attendants to cut trees. They happen on a grove sacred to Demeter. The first tree they cut down cries aloud, and Demeter, disguised as a priestess, asks Erysichthon to desist. He replies that he needs a house for banqueting, whereupon the goddess appears in her true form—her step touching the earth, her head reaching unto Olympus—and sends perpetual hunger on him. In the subsequent and longer part of the narrative (lines 68–118), the poet focuses on the destructive effects of Erysichthon's affliction upon his family and their social status. The parents desperately want to maintain their respectability and try to conceal the true state of Erysichthon's condition by keeping him home and devising ever-new excuses for declining invitations. Meanwhile, the youth impoverishes them by eating up everything, even the family cat. Finally, with no edibles or money for edibles left at home, the parents' struggle is lost as Erysichthon goes to the crossroads to beg and eat refuse. In short, Callimachus transposes the myth into the reality of everyday bourgeois life, and the narration takes its inner logic and consistency from there. The drawing of this genre scene thus is replete with concrete details, such as the exact number of the servants and a minute description of the various household animals.[4] The setting of the story is chosen accordingly, as Callimachus pictures himself and the reader as standing in the streets of Alexandria among the women who are expecting the approach of the procession of the Sacred Basket of Demeter. It is they, the worthy middle-class housewives, who tell the story of Erysichthon, and the milieu of the story is theirs. In sum, Callimachus gives his narration an orderly progression, a consistent tone, and a clear focus.

These qualities are virtually absent in Ovid's version. It is a fanci-

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[4] See H. Diller, "Die dichterische Eigenart von Ovids Metamorphosen," in *Ovid*, ed. M. von Albrecht and E. Zinn (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1968), p. 327. I have also benefited from K. Büchner's comparison of the Callimachean and the Ovidian version in *Humanitas Romana* (Heidelberg: Winter, 1957), pp. 208–220.

ful, almost discontinuous sequence of episodes, which Ovid develops independently of one another and which he delights in prolonging. Concurrently, the main story's slender thread, in a remarkable coincidence of form and content, is attenuating as rapidly as Erysichthon. The tone is not consistent, and only Ovid's narrative bravura receives special emphasis. In this regard, the Erysichthon episode typifies Ovid's narrative technique in most stories of the *Metamorphoses*. The initial tone of the description suggests seriousness. Ovid leads, or rather misleads, us into the story by making it appear at first to be a pendant to the story of Philemon and Baucis (8.616–724), whose piety was rewarded by the gods. Erysichthon is not a rash and unconcerned lad whose wish to build a banquet hall gets the better of any other considerations. Instead, he is a grown man *qui numina divum sperneret*—a *contemptor divum*, whom Vergil had portrayed so memorably as a type of human behavior in the person of Mezentius. The story of Philemon and Baucis had been told in response to the blasphemous remarks of precisely such a *deorum spretor* (8.612–613). Erysichthon is the very incarnation of wickedness, and his actions spring from his evil intentions.

The subsequent description of the grove matches in tone the gravity of this conception of Erysichthon's character. The sacredness of the place does not admit of nymphs "sporting at noontide" as in Callimachus's hymn (line 38). Instead, the nymphs lead festive choruses that are part of a religious rite (8.746–748). And whereas Callimachus simply speaks of a large poplar, Ovid describes an oak in terms deliberately reminiscent of a famous simile in *Aeneid* IV (441–446). This oak not only is huge—it towers above the other trees as these trees tower above the grass—but also is a rustic shrine in the agricultural tradition of Roman religion. Votive tablets and wreaths received by grateful supplicants hang from it. Not only does Ovid expand and change whatever he found in Callimachus's incidental description, a description that took up all of two lines (37–38), but also he evokes the numinous, an aspect of the Roman tradition that Vergil so brilliantly integrated into his epic. In this respect Ovid invests the myth with realities familiar to his readers.

Ovid's characterization of Erysichthon continues in its original vein. He is impious (761), he commits a *nefas* (766) and a *scelus*

(765) at which his companions are aghast (765: *obstipuere omnes*, which is another Vergilian echo), and he kills one of them with mocking words about the man's piety (767). The only sly note in the whole account is that Ovid's Erysichthon seems to know Callimachus's *Hymn*, as might be expected, for he says that, even if the goddess herself appeared to him, she could not stop him (755–756). But then the scene and the tone change, as Ovid again expands what occupies just one line in Callimachus's hymn. There Demeter perceives that her holy tree is in pain (line 40), whereas Ovid describes in detail a procession of the nymphs to Ceres and their reception by the goddess.

The passage (8.777–787) is a good example of Ovid's penchant for visualizing and painting a scene,[5] but it results in a break in the serious tone that Ovid has maintained up to this point. Ovid has built up the serious tone to a degree that surpasses its role in Callimachus's version, only to deflate it now. The deflation is gradual, and the scene of the procession of the nymphs serves as a transition. Everything is reduced to protocol: the nymphs, like Mediterranean wailing women, are properly attired in black, and Ceres, far from being a gigantic deity—for Ovid makes it a point to humanize even the appearance of the gods—is adorned with the attributes and the headdress we know from Roman art. Most importantly, even the matter of Erysichthon's punishment becomes a question of etiquette. In Callimachus's hymn, this punishment was suggested easily enough by Erysichthon's desire for banqueting. Ovid, by contrast, motivates it with the universal opposition between Hunger and Ceres, the goddess of plenty. But he only suggests this cosmic idea and does not develop it. What matters is that it would be against all protocol for Ceres to go to Hunger, and thus she has to send one of the nymphs.

At this point the next tableau begins (788–813). It is developed in its own right and none of its detail is necessary for the main story. After Ovid had infused the story with contemporary reality through descriptions of the grove in Roman religious terms, he now transposes us to the world of the wondrous and fantastic. And he will continue in the same grotesque and fantastic vein without ever

[5] Several scholars have rightly considered this tendency as one of the characteristics of the *Metamorphoses*. See, for example, Walther Kraus's survey article "Ovidius Naso" in *Ovid*, pp. 118–119.

returning to the realities of the early part of the story. First Ovid gives us a general description of the habitat of Hunger (a description, incidentally, that is strangely prophetic of the locale of his exile),[6] and then he follows it up with presenting a personification of Hunger. Here he pulls all the stops and presents us with the sort of graphic and grotesque detail that we know from allegories in Renaissance art (799–808):

> quaesitamque Famem lapidoso vidit in agro
> unguibus et raras vellentem dentibus herbas.
> hirtus erat crinis, cava lumina, pallor in ore,
> labra incana situ, scabrae rubigine fauces,
> dura cutis, per quam spectari viscera possent;
> ossa sub incurvis exstabant arida lumbis,
> ventris erat pro ventre locus; pendere putares
> pectus et a spinae tantummodo crate teneri.
> auxerat articulos macies, genuumque tumebat
> orbis, et inmodico prodibant tubere tali.
>
> [She looked for Famine
> And found her, in a stony field, her nails
> Digging the scanty grass, and her teeth gnawing
> The tundra moss. Her hair hung down all matted.
> Her face was ghastly pale, her eyes were hollow,
> Lips without color, the throat rough and scaly,
> The skin so tight the entrails could be seen,
> The hip-bones bulging at the loins, the belly
> Concave, only the place for a belly, really,
> And the breasts seemed to dangle, held up, barely,
> By a spine like a stick-figure's; and her thinness
> Made all her joints seem large; the knees were swollen
> Balloons, almost, the ankles lumpy tubers.]

It is entirely understandable that the poor messenger nymph should get hungry at the mere sight of this. She speeds back to Ceres, but we proceed on with Hunger to the next tableau, which describes

[6] See 8.788–789:

> est locus extremis Scythiae glacialis in oris,
> triste solum, sterilis, sine fruge, sine arbore tellus.
>
> [There is an icy place on the outermost shores of Scythia.
> It is a sad land, and the earth is barren, without fruit,
> without tree.]

her effect on Erysichthon (823–846), who now reappears after a long interval.

The tone in this passage is characterized by utterly grotesque hyperbole. Erysichthon's hunger is a crescendo of ravenousness, rising from its first manifestation in Erysichthon's sleep to climax in his insatiability. To that end, Ovid wildly exaggerates. Where Callimachus had shown pity for the parents, Ovid brings out the monstrousness of Erysichthon's affliction with descriptions that become increasingly hyperbolic. Erysichthon's hunger is of cosmic proportions; he demands what sea, earth, and sky produce. What is enough for cities and a whole people is only the hors d'oeuvre for him. Like a raging fire, like the ocean that drinks up all the earth's streams, is this hunger. In addition to grotesque exaggeration, Ovid concentrates on the paradox of the situation. All the food whets Erysichthon's appetite only more—*cibus omnis in illo / causa cibi est* (8.841–842)—and he seeks food in food (*inque epulis epulas quaerit*, 832).

At last, the metamorphosis theme is brought into the story in the person of Erysichthon's daughter. With Ovid's peculiar logic—Venus's clerk Ovyde—she calls on Neptune, her former ravisher, to save her because her father has put her up for sale so that he can buy himself more food. In Callimachus's hymn, a prayer was also addressed to Neptune, but the basis for it was rather different because Triopas, Erysichthon's father, was Neptune's son. Neptune saves the girl by giving her the power of metamorphosis.

It is typical again of Ovid's procedure that he barely dwells on the serious saving aspect of Neptune's action but instead entertains the reader by passing the various transformations of the girl in review. She is sold to one new master after another to bring in money for her father, who, however, is scarcely mentioned because Ovid's attention now centers on the girl and her transformations and not on Erysichthon or his hunger. Finally, to bring the story to an end, Ovid cavalierly (in two lines) dismisses its occasional protagonist: in a final act of desperation he eats himself up, just like that. Having disposed of Erysichthon, Ovid nonchalantly moves on to the next story.

In contrast to Callimachus's story, Ovid's narration proceeds by leaps and bounds. This is true of the *Metamorphoses* in general and of many of their individual stories. Ovid always surprises the read-

er and keeps his attention by introducing new, unexpected, and exhilarating developments.[7] The unique way in which he tells his stories is one essential element in his metamorphosis of myth. Merely from the geographical point of view, the Callimachean version stays in place as its only locales are the house of Erysichthon's parents and the nearby grove. In the *Metamorphoses*, we move with a procession of the nymphs from the numinous grove to Ceres (on Mount Olympus), from there to the outermost reaches of glacial Scythia, to the Caucasus, with the nymph back to Ceres, back to the Caucasus, back to Thessaly into Erysichthon's house, and then with his daughter to the shore of the sea, into the air, and to the meadows, and back we are with Erysichthon who eats himself up, presumably in his house. There is unity in this microcosm of the *Metamorphoses*, but it is the unity of imaginative association. A certain logic underlies the progression from one segment of the story to the next—for example, it is logical that the offended nymphs should go to Ceres and that Ceres should enlist the aid of her counterpart, Hunger. The overall effect is not one of strict coherence, but neither is it chaotic. Ovid's breathtaking skill—Quintilian for good reasons compared him to a juggler (*Inst. Or.* 4.1.77)—at maintaining a balance in the entire *Metamorphoses* between the centrifugal tendencies of each story and some suggestive overall unity is another attraction of his work.

Along with the unpredictability of the narrative goes the unpredictability of its tone. This is a characteristic that will be found in many of his other stories and in the *Metamorphoses* in general. At the beginning of the Erysichthon story, he leads us to expect a tale of crime and punishment, a mythological theodicy,[8] but before long he completely ceases even hinting at this theme, and the exoteric aspects of the story run away with it. We witness Erysichthon's grotesque behavior and the transformations of his daughter, but these scenes are showpieces in their own right and there is no moralistic tag as in Callimachus's hymn. More strongly than in many other stories, Ovid suggests a serious theme and then refuses to develop it as such. Erysichthon's affliction is not presented in

[7] Cf. E. J. Bernbeck, *Beobachtungen zur Darstellungsart in Ovids Metamorphosen* (Munich: Beck, 1967).

[8] Cf. Brooks Otis, *Ovid as an Epic Poet*, 2d ed. (Cambridge: At the University Press, 1970), p. 344.

terms of merited punishment, and, unlike Callimachus, Ovid does not try to evoke compassion or to present the pathos of the situation. Instead, he is fascinated with Erysichthon's misery and death because they are so abnormal and grotesque. Erysichthon's gluttony is hilarious and his death is as bizarre as it is perfunctory. What happens to Erysichthon is actually quite horrid; it is agony, but Ovid does not present it that way.

A more extensive example of Ovid's ability to present a human tragedy untragically is the story of Narcissus (3.341–510). Here the interplay between the deadly seriousness, even horror, of the subject and the genial way Ovid overcomes it is even more remarkable than in many other stories. For Ovid was the first to emphasize in the myth the well-known gruesome motivation of its central character. One of the principal two Greek versions of the story provided only a banal motive for Narcissus's predicament, that is, basically his ignorance. According to the myth, Narcissus, an eighteen-year-old Boeotian boy, saw his image reflected in the river Lamos one day and became the victim of his fascination with it. It is, to be sure, rather incredible that a boy of his age would not know the difference between reality and reflection. Narcissus's ignorance prompted Pausanias (9.31.7–8) to note indignantly that, if a man was old enough to love, he should also know himself, an assumption that we perhaps would not make so readily today. To rescue this story, which plays only a tangential role in Greek mythology, from lapsing totally into a dumbbell fairy tale, Ovid had to provide some motivation that would compensate for the improbability of the paradox. The motivation he provides is Narcissus's inability to go beyond himself. As a result of this deficiency, he destroys others and ultimately himself.

Narcissus's new motivation is related to Ovid's decision to combine the stories of Echo and Narcissus. Echo loves Narcissus, but her love is not returned. She finally pines away, losing her body and becoming a mere voice. The juxtaposition of the fates of Echo and Narcissus, which has baffled many readers of the *Metamorphoses*, is quite meaningful. When Narcissus first encounters a reflection of his voice, it turns out to be another person. Thus when he encounters a reflection of his image, he, not without reason, assumes that this is also another person. Mainly, however, the story of Echo exemplifies Narcissus's tragic inability to extend beyond

himself. When he finally tries to do so, he falls in love with himself.

Ovid's intention to explore the psychological aspects of Narcissus's affliction stands out even more clearly when we compare his version to the other chief Greek version, that of the mythographer Konon.[9] In his account, which may well have existed by Ovid's time, Narcissus's fate is presented in terms of merited punishment. Narcissus spurns a lover, Ameinias; Ameinias commits suicide on the threshold of Narcissus's house and implores Eros to avenge him. The god does so, and Narcissus dies with the realization that he is suffering justly because of his *hybris* toward Ameinias's love. Hence, Konon continues, Eros is worshiped as a great god in Thespiai. In this version, moral retribution takes the place of intrinsic motivation.

Ovid, of course, as in the Erysichthon story and the *Metamorphoses* in general, eschews such moralistic emphasis. The motivation that he provides is serious, but he refuses to sound a constant note of tragic seriousness. As we have seen in the Erysichthon episode, the tonality of the narrative is varied and this again is true of the *Metamorphoses* in general. After freeing the story from the banality and morality that characterize the Greek legend, Ovid plays a game with the gruesome motivation that he attributes to Narcissus. His method is worth analyzing in some detail.

The very purpose to which Ovid assigns this myth and by which it is linked to the preceding story should put us on our guard not to read it as a tragic lesson in psychopathology. The story of Narcissus is meant to prove the accuracy of Tiresias's prophetic gifts. In the preceding story Ovid enlightened us about how Tiresias acquired these gifts. Jupiter and Juno were arguing about the comparative degree of pleasure derived by men and women from the sex act (3.316–338), and Tiresias decided the dispute in Jupiter's favor. Some of our contemporaries may construe this as another dastardly example of male chauvinism for which there ought to be no reward, not even prophecy, but it is more important for our purposes to note that it is a frivolous, relaxed, entertaining, slightly off-color episode, which leads into Ovid's narration of the fate of Narcissus.

But Ovid's tendency to shift tones becomes evident at the beginning of this narration. Tiresias's prophecy foreshadows the serious-

[9] F. Jacoby, *Die Fragmente der griechischen Historiker* (Berlin: Weidmann, 1932), I, 197–198 (26 F 1).

ness of Narcissus's affliction. He uses one of the most solemn admonitory phrases of antiquity, that of the Delphic Oracle, to phrase his prediction (3.348), *si se non noverit* [If he never knows himself (he will grow old)]. Nothing else will do to sum up the novelty of Narcissus's obsession (*novitas furoris*). But then the tonality changes again, and we are reminded of the earlier story because Juno is again shown in her role of punishing someone who did her husband a favor. This time it is Echo, who used her talents as a skillful conversationalist to distract Juno so that her fellow nymphs had time to escape from under Jove when Juno was trying to catch him in the act. The punishment is that Echo can repeat only the end of a sentence.

With this Ovid sets himself up and cannot resist the temptation to make the most of Echo's disability. Thus the conversation between Echo and Narcissus is the focal point of his account of Echo's frustrated love for Narcissus.[10] Ovid leads up to it with a rather conventional description of her pursuit of the boy. She follows him everywhere, sees him, blushes, catches fire like one torch from another, and wants to beseech and beg him. But, by nature unable to seize the initiative, she must wait for an opening.

And one day it happens. In spite of her handicap, Echo manages—with considerable assist from Ovid—to make a full confession of love to Narcissus. The conversation of Echo and Narcissus proceeds as follows (3.379-392):

> forte puer, comitum seductus ab agmine fido,
> dixerat "Ecquis adest?" et "Adest!" responderat Echo.
> hic stupet, utque aciem partes dimittit in omnes,
> voce "Veni" magna clamat: vocat illa vocantem.
> respicit et rursus nullo veniente "Quid" inquit.
> "me fugis?" et totidem, quot dixit, verba recepit.
> perstat, et alternae deceptus imagine vocis
> "Huc coeamus" ait, nullique libentius umquam
> responsura sono "Coeamus!" rettulit Echo,
> et verbis favet ipsa suis egressaque silva
> ibat, ut iniceret sperato bracchia collo.
> ille fugit fugiensque "Manus complexibus aufer!

[10] Cf. H. Dörrie, "Echo und Narcissus," *Altsprachl. Unterricht* 10, no. 1 (1967): 62-63. I am indebted to Dörrie's article (pp. 54-75) for some good insights into Ovid's treatment of the myth.

> ante" ait "emoriar, quam sit tibi copia nostri."
> rettulit illa nihil nisi "Sit tibi copia nostri!"

> [By chance Narcissus
> Lost track of his companions, started calling
> "Is anybody here?" and "Here!" said Echo.
> He looked around in wonderment, called louder
> "Come to me!" "Come to me!" came back the answer.
> He looked behind him, and saw no one coming;
> "Why do you run from me?" and heard his question
> Repeated in the woods. "Let us get together!"
> There was nothing Echo would ever say more gladly,
> "Let us get together!" And, to help her words,
> Out of the woods she came, with arms all ready
> To fling around his neck. But he retreated:
> "Keep your hands off," he cried, "and do not touch me!
> I would die before I give you a chance at me."
> "I give you a chance at me," and that was all
> She ever said thereafter.]

This is a perfect piece of tragicomedy. As in the case of the heroines in his *Epistulae Heroidum*, Ovid does not want the reader to deny his sympathy to poor Echo. But at the same time, her encounter with Narcissus is so contrived and so hilarious that the reader is kept from sharing too soulfully in her misfortune.

Even Ovid's very straightforward and brief description of her attenuation does not obliterate the effect of the preceding scene. His only aim is to explain briefly her transformation into a stone and voice, and his attitude to her metamorphosis into a stone, an event that he invented, is cavalier at best. Less than one hundred lines later, he has forgotten all about it, and Echo exists as she did before (3.494). As in most other stories, metamorphosis as an actual subject is of no consequence here. After this it is time for a serious note and Ovid reminds us briefly of the almost hybristic nature of Narcissus's hatred of others. The goddess of Justice finally assents to take revenge on him, and the fateful event takes its course. But in contrast to Konon's version, this point is relegated to peripheral mention and is not the keynote of what follows.

On a purely formal level, we may note that Ovid spends over 70 lines—the entire story is told in 170—before he reaches what is the starting point of the actual story of Narcissus, as the psychologists see it (416-417):

dumque bibit, visae conreptus imagine formae
spem sine corpore amat, corpus, putat esse, quod umbra est.

[As he tried
To quench his thirst, inside him, deep within him,
Another thirst was growing, for he saw
An image in the pool, and fell in love
With that unbodied hope, and found a substance
In what was only shadow.]

Ovid had mentioned Narcissus's inability to love before, but by
several divertissements he avoided a one-sided psychological con-
centration on Narcissus's peculiar affliction. He continues to do so
even in the eighty-line-long description that the *novitas furoris* of
Narcissus requires.

The depiction of the symptoms of Narcissus's *furor*, with which
this description begins, is a testimony to Ovid's ability to cast a
spell over his readers when he cares to do so. Narcissus is in the
grip of his passion, and the portrait that Ovid develops of Narcissus
is immediate and meant to hold our attention and stir our feelings
(3.418–431):

adstupet ipse sibi vultuque inmotus eodem
haeret ut e Pario formatum marmore signum.
spectat humi positus geminum—sua lumina—sidus
et dignos Baccho, dignos et Apolline crines
inpubesque genas et eburnea colla decusque
oris et in niveo mixtum candore ruborem,
cunctaque miratur, quibus est mirabilis ipse.
se cupit inprudens, et qui probat, ipse probatur,
dumque petit, petitur pariterque accendit et ardet.
inrita fallaci quotiens dedit oscula fonti!
in mediis quotiens visum captantia collum
bracchia mersit aquis nec se deprendit in illis!
quid videat, nescit: sed, quod videt, uritur illo,
atque oculos idem, qui decipit, incitat error.

[He looks in wonder,
Charmed by himself, spell-bound, and no more moving
Than any marble statue. Lying prone
He sees his eyes, twin stars, and locks as comely
As those of Bacchus or the god Apollo,
Smooth cheeks, and ivory neck, and the bright beauty

Of countenance, and a flush of color rising
In the fair whiteness. Everything attracts him
That makes him so attractive. Foolish boy,
He wants himself; the loved becomes the lover,
The seeker sought, the kindler burns. How often
He tries to kiss the image in the water,
Dips in his arms to embrace the boy he sees there,
And finds the boy, himself, elusive always,
Not knowing what he sees, but burning for it,
The same delusion mocking his eyes and teasing.]

But just when we are at the point of being drawn totally into the
narrative and of confusing, like Narcissus, subject and object—some-
thing that Ovid expresses in the brilliant sequence of the juxtaposed
active and passive forms *probat-probatur* (425), *petit-petitur* (426),
accendit-ardet (426)—Ovid breaks the spell. Before Narcissus's
condition becomes totally absorbing to us, Ovid, the narrator, pro-
jects himself into the story by addressing Narcissus and lecturing
him on physical optics (432–436):

credule, quid frustra simulacra fugacia captas?
quod petis, est nusquam: quod amas, avertere, perdes!
ista repercussae, quam cernis, imaginis umbra est:
nil habet ipsa sui: tecum venitque manetque;
tecum discedet, si tu discedere possis!

[Why try to catch an always fleeing image,
poor credulous youngster? What you seek is nowhere,
and if you turn away, you will take with you
the boy you love. The vision is only shadow,
only reflection, lacking any substance.
It comes with you, it stays with you, it goes
away with you, if you can go away.]

Narcissus's infatuation, however, is immune to any reasoning.

In the next part of the narrative, which extends to Narcissus's
resolve to die (473), Ovid enlarges the tonality by making use of
a device that he had often used in his amatory poetry: he plays on
literary conventions. It needs to be noted, even if only in passing,
that literary parody is an important and much neglected aspect of
the *Metamorphoses*.[11] But Ovid maintains a skillful balance be-

[11] A laudable exception is D. L. Arnaud, *Aspects of Wit and Humor in Ovid's
Metamorphoses* (Ann Arbor: University Microfilms, 1968), pp. 98–142.

tween his play on literary conventions—which often was his exclusive point in the *Amores* and the *Art of Love*—and his efforts to set Narcissus's unique passion in relief.

Let us consider only the most prominent examples of Ovid's use of literary conventions. Beginning on line 442, Narcissus engages in a lover's lament similar to those we know from amatory poetry. Because of the lover's ignorance and awkwardness one can compare it, for instance, to the wooing song of the dimwitted Cyclops for the beautiful Galatea in Theocritus's eleventh *Idyll*. But Ovid uses the conventional motifs only to demonstrate their basic inappropriateness in a situation where Narcissus, unwittingly still, plays the role of both the lover and the loved one. In lines 442–445 he addresses the trees. This happens in conventional elegy for one of two reasons:[12] Either the trees—or nature in general—which saw the bliss of the lovers, now become witnesses of the reversal, or the loved one is unfeeling and does not listen to the poet—but the trees do. Neither is the case here. Narcissus is face to face with his beloved but cannot reach him. He then begins to recite a catalogue (448–450) of obstacles that traditionally separate lovers, such as the sea and the mountains, but he breaks off almost at once when he realizes that only a thin film of water separates him from his beloved. The loved one is not unwilling; he reaches out for Narcissus and even returns his kiss. Ovid emphasizes the irony of the situation by having Narcissus call his reflected image *puer unice* (454) [unique boy], an address with which no one would disagree. But, continuing the alternation of the tone of the story, Ovid at once recalls Narcissus's arrogance (456), *et amarunt me quoque nymphae*, and we now know that Narcissus was fully aware of his contempt for those who loved him. Serious undertone and playful elaboration are complementary strands in the Ovidian narrative.

This mixture of playfulness and seriousness also characterizes the final and most serious psychological event in the story, that is, Narcissus's realization that the image is himself, *iste ego sum* [He is myself, 463]. He knows that only death can set an end to his love. In spite of his situation, Narcissus makes a wish that would be appropriate only if the lovers were two different persons. He utters the clichéd conventional wish of many an unfortunate lover: that the loved one may have a long life. In Narcissus's case, of course, this

12 Dörrie, "Echo und Narcissus," p. 69.

amounts to another joke[13] and is the culminating paradox (472): *hic qui diligitur vellem diuturnior esset!* [I wish that he, who is loved, would outlive me]. Conversely, the final cliché that Narcissus utters (473), *nunc duo concordes anima moriemur in una* [Now we two will die together in one breath], is far truer of Narcissus and his love than it is of any lovers in elegy or elsewhere.

At this point, the tone changes once more and, in describing Narcissus's death, Ovid casts a spell over the reader, as he had at the beginning of Narcissus's infatuation. This account is the psychologically most powerful and moving part of the story. In his grief Narcissus beats his breast with such force that it turns red, and seeing the effect of his flagellation in his reflected image, he collapses in an autoerotic paroxysm (480–487):

> dumque dolet, summa vestem deduxit ab ora
> nudaque marmoreis percussit pectora palmis.
> pectora traxerunt roseum percussa ruborem;
> non aliter quam poma solent, quae candida parte,
> parte rubent, aut ut variis solet uva racemis
> ducere purpureum nondum matura colorem.
> quae simul adspexit liquefacta rursus in unda,
> non tulit ulterius.

> [In his grief,
> he tore his garment from the upper margin,
> beat his bare breast with hands as pale as marble,
> and the breast took on a glow, a rosy color,
> as apples are white and red, sometimes, or grapes
> can be both green and purple. The water clears,
> he sees it all once more, and cannot bear it.]

And he fades away as Echo had faded away (487–493):

> sed, ut intabescere flavae
> igne levis cerae, matutinaeque pruinae
> sole tepente solent, sic adtenuatus amore
> liquitur et tecto paulatim carpitur igni,

13 John Dryden, for whom Ovid was the poet of "wit," is one of the few to have recognized the spirit behind these paradoxes, although he disapproves of it: "If this were wit, was this a time to be witty when the poor wretch was in the agony of death?" (from "Preface to Fables Ancient and Modern: Translated into Verse," in *John Dryden: Of Dramatic Poesy and Other Critical Essays*, ed. G. Watson [London: Everyman, 1962], II, 279).

et neque iam color est mixto candore rubori,
nec vigor et vires et quae modo visa placebant,
nec corpus remanet, quondam quod amaverat Echo.

[As yellow wax dissolves with warmth around it,
as the white frost is gone in morning sunshine,
Narcissus, in the hidden fire of passion,
wanes slowly, with the ruddy color going,
the strength, the hardihood and comeliness,
fading away, and even the very body
Echo had loved.]

But Ovid does not mean for us to leave the story in the grip of psychopathology. Reversing his earlier metamorphosis of Echo, Ovid has her appear again and repeat Narcissus's moans. Ovid detracts from the seriousness of Narcissus's self-infatuation by exaggerating its morbid qualities at the moment of Narcissus's death: not only does Narcissus not see anything but the reflection of his image, but also he does not hear anything but the reflection of his voice. The element of exaggeration persists even after Narcissus's death, when Ovid tells us that "even in the underworld Narcissus found a pool to gaze in, and he keeps looking at himself forever" (504–505):

tum quoque se, postquam est inferna sede receptus,
in Stygia spectabat aqua.

As in the Phaethon story (1.750–2.400), the metamorphosis theme is incidental and perfunctorily tacked on at the end. When Narcissus's brothers and sisters come to the site of his death, they find only the flower that bears his name. No intrinsic relation existed between Narcissus's particular predicament and his metamorphosis into the flower even in Greek myth, and Ovid did not choose to give it one. Instead, as we have seen, he revived this story, which had been at the periphery of Greek myth, by two means. First, he substituted a sophisticated and serious psychological motive for a simple-minded motive. The function of the metamorphosis theme, as in the story of Phaethon,[14] was that it made possible the em-

[14] The novel element in Ovid's version, especially in comparison to Euripides's drama, is the emphasis on Phaethon's quest for his identity; see James Diggle, *Euripides: Phaethon* (Cambridge: At the University Press, 1970), especially pp. 180ff., "Ovid and Nonnus." There is a stimulating discussion, without

phasis on the psychology of the main character. Second, he finely differentiated the tonality of his narrative, and this resulted in an untragic presentation of a very tragic event. It would be wrong to consider these two techniques in isolation from one another.

For both the psychological interest, which Ovid takes in many of his characters, and his untragic manner of treating many stories in the *Metamorphoses* are closely related to his choice of metamorphosis as the titular theme of his poem. Several scholars, Hermann Fränkel in particular, have suggested that Ovid was attracted to the theme of metamorphosis because it is an untragic alternative to death. Metamorphosis indeed saves many a character from a crushing finale—think of Daphne, Syrinx, Alcyone, and even Niobe. Ovid's preference for such avoidance of the tragic is usually explained in biographic terms. Ovid's "mild disposition," Fränkel claims, preferred such endings,[15] but we will see shortly that at least one other reason can be suggested. Similarly, the subject of metamorphosis naturally bears on the identity of the persons involved. "It is obvious," as one psychologist has observed, "that the place one occupies in society is altered when one changes into a tree, and we ask whether the metamorphosis—even when interpreted as symbol—does not lay a strong accent on the identity aspects of the psychic changes it represents." As one might expect, he answers the question affirmatively.[16] By the time of Ovid, there had been a considerable tradition of philosophical speculation[17] on the problem

reference to the pre-Ovidian versions of the Phaethon myth, of the psychological aspects of Ovid's *Phaethon* by D. J. de Levita, *The Concept of Identity* (New York: Basic Books, 1965), pp. 76–83.

[15] H. Fränkel, *Ovid: A Poet between Two Worlds* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1945), p. 99.

[16] De Levita, *Identity*, p. 77.

[17] Especially among the Stoics, Posidonius in particular, and the Pythagoreans, but see also Aristotle, *Physics* I, vii, 190b 5–23. Some recent books attest the continuing preoccupation with the problem of identity amid change: De Levita, *Identity*; Martin Heidegger, "Der Satz der Identität," in *Identität und Differenz* (Pfullingen: Neske, 1957), pp. 11–34; D. Wiggins, *Identity and Spatio-Temporal Continuity* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1967); R. M. Chisholm, "The Loose and the Popular and the Strict and Philosophical Senses of Identity," with the comments of S. S. Shoemaker and Chisholm's reply, in *Perception and Personal Identity*, ed. N. S. Care and R. H. Grimm (Cleveland: Press of Case Western Reserve University, 1969), pp. 82–139.

of *alloiosis* or *heteroiosis* ("metamorphosis") in human nature and on the related question of what represents a person's identity. Untragic nature and psychological interest, especially in the question of identity, thus are characteristics associated with the metamorphosis theme.

What Ovid does, however, in the stories of Erysichthon and Narcissus and others, is to use these characteristics in their own right without making them dependent on an actual metamorphosis. More often than not, metamorphosis is *not* the dominating element of the stories told in the *Metamorphoses*. In both the Narcissus and the Erysichthon stories, the protagonists come to a fatal end. The tragic nature of their fate is mitigated not by a metamorphosis, but by Ovid's untragic manner of narration. Similarly, interest in the psychology of the protagonists is an important element in the stories of Narcissus and Phaethon, and in many others, but such psychological interest again is not dependent on a metamorphosis. On the other hand, it is unlikely that Ovid would have explored psychological questions, such as the identity problem, to so great an extent and that he would have shied away from the tragic tone with which so many of the myths had traditionally been invested, if he had not thought that his chosen theme gave him the right to do so. In other words, the choice of metamorphosis as the titular theme set the tone for his work, while the actual place of metamorphosis in each story ranges from being the focal point to being a perfunctory addendum. The imaginative and tonal qualities of the theme are more important than the theme itself.

I am not postulating that Ovid's untragic manner of narration applies to all the stories in the *Metamorphoses*, because Ovid imposed no restrictions on the tonality of his *maius opus*. In the story of Cephalus and Procris (7.661–865), for instance, unmitigated tragedy comes to the fore—mostly because Ovid's Hellenistic predecessors[18] had not told this particular story in that vein—but such stories are the exception and not the rule. Ovid narrates few genuinely tragic stories in the *Metamorphoses*. Nor had he been averse to tragedy, as is shown by *Amores* 3.1, which depicts the struggle in his soul between Elegy and Tragedy, and subsequently, by his *Medea*. Perhaps the attitude of the Roman public was the

18 See V. Pöschl, "Kephalos und Prokris in Ovids Metamorphosen," *Hermes* 87 (1959): 328–343.

decisive factor in encouraging the *lusor* to turn his back to the *gravitas* (*Amores* 3.1.35–36) of tragedy. For all we can tell, it was a public saturated with tragic subjects and totally unwilling to experience pity and fear through the brutal and immediate presentation of mythological horror on the tragic stage. Full-blown tragic and comic performances still had flourished during the final decades of the Republic when the tragic horror corresponded to contemporary realities. By contrast, the public of the Pax Augusta was bored with the endlessly repeated subjects of tragedy, but it did not want to part with them either.

The new dramatic form that made allowance for the public's changed taste was the pantomime. The tragic pantomime, which survived through all of antiquity, took the place of tragedy. Sometimes the subjects were taken from Greek mythology, and sometimes the pantomime consisted of single scenes taken from tragedies. The scenes were taken out of their context and thus the tragic impact of the total drama disappeared. What mattered was not the tragic content or the message, but the actor's versatility. Even the element of change was involved: "One actor performed the most diverse roles with changing masks while either a chorus or one interpreter sang or declaimed the content of the story."[19] It amounted to a cultivated solo performance, which required, on the actor's part, a good knowledge of mythology and a higher education. The pantomime, especially in the form of a solo performance, without a troupe, was popular with the higher classes, and its stars became their darlings. This was precisely the public for which Ovid wrote.

To the conventions of Hellenistic poetry, to the influence of the *Aeneid*, and to Ovid's own *ingenium*, we must therefore add the spirit of the times as a determining factor for the peculiar character of the *Metamorphoses*. The representation of mythology in a tragic, serious vein was out of fashion. I do not wish to press the analogies between the *Metamorphoses* and the pantomime too closely, but the individualized scenes in the *Metamorphoses*, the narrator's bravura performance, his sophistication, the constant shifts and changes in the scenes, as well as the graphic, visual appeal of many of the

19 M. Bieber, *The History of the Greek and Roman Theater*, 2d ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1961), p. 165. Extensive information on the pantomime and a list of known titles of pantomimes are found in Pauly-Wissowa, *Realencyclopaedie*, s.v. "Pantomimus."

scenes, all have their counterpart in the pantomime. And the pantomimic qualities of an episode like that of Narcissus are striking. Besides, we cannot ignore that in the most comprehensive ancient discussion of the nature of the pantomime, Lucian's *On Dance*, the scope of the pantomimic artist's undertaking is defined in terms startlingly similar to Ovid's *primaque ab origine mundi ad mea . . . tempora* (*Met.* 1.3–4): "Beginning with chaos and the primal origin of the world, he must know everything down to the story of Cleopatra the Egyptian" (Lucian, *Salt.* 37). Lucian's speaker follows this with a catalogue of myths that has been supplemented with the titles of pantomimes mentioned by other authors, and only a very few are not among the myths that Ovid tells in the *Metamorphoses*.

Ovid's unconventional and variegated treatment of myth often results from his desire to deprive myth of its tragic immediacy. The themes of many of the stories are inherently serious as is exemplified by the stories of Erysichthon and Narcissus, but most often Ovid relegates the seriousness to an undertone. It is the discrepancy between this inherent seriousness and Ovid's playfully distancing treatment of it that accounts for one of the basic tensions of the *Metamorphoses* and also for the widely differing judgments that individual stories and the work in general have received in the course of the centuries. Ovid's narrative strikes up many tones, and each reader, according to his own temperamental disposition, will remember the tones that most appeal to him. Different persons who have listened to a musical work—and Ovid has often been compared to Mozart—whose movements are andante, allegro, and scherzo will single out different movements as establishing the basic tone of the work. Their judgment, of course, may be at variance with the intent of the composer. Ovid does leave his reader as much freedom as he left for himself when he adapted the material. His narrative manner is not so rigid, to give but one example, as to prevent the reader, who is moved to tears by the fate of Narcissus and Echo, from being so affected by the narrative. At the same time, he did give many hints about his own intentions, and we must be open to them.

It would be wrong, however, to consider the inconsistent tonality of the *Metamorphoses* merely as a concession to the public taste or as Ovid's reaction to Vergil's use of myth in the *Aeneid*. In the

history of western literature, mythological literature in particular, Ovid's *Metamorphoses* marks the triumph of the *homo ludens* as brilliantly defined by Johan Huizinga in his study of the play element in culture. For good reasons, Huizinga questions the assumption that myth, at the stage of its inception, was ever entirely serious or whether "the savage's belief in his holiest myths is not, even from the beginning, tinged with a certain element of humor."[20] We can view Ovid in the light of the historical process that is outlined by Huizinga: "To the degree that belief in the literal truth of the myth diminishes, the play-element, which had been proper to it from the beginning, will re-assert itself with increasing force."[21] In that case—and few, if any, of Ovid's contemporaries believed in the literal truth of Graeco-Roman myth—the *Metamorphoses* may simply be the culmination of an evolution that had long been in the making. But I am reluctant to stop with that conclusion because it would place too much emphasis on Ovid as an agent of an evolutionary process and too little on his own personality and conscious artistry. To my mind, Ovid quite consciously re-endowed myth with the elements of play and humor, on a far larger scale than anyone else, because he realized that these elements were essential to the very nature of myth. This is another reason for the timelessness of the *Metamorphoses* and for its lasting success. Although an accident of chronology prevented Ovid from meeting Professor Huizinga at least in this world, Ovid had more insight into the nature of myth and a far better understanding of it than he is often credited with. Ovid's metamorphosis of myth is not extraneous but a profoundly meaningful restoration of some inherent qualities of myth.

[20] J. Huizinga, *Homo ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1955), p. 129.

[21] Huizinga, *Homo ludens*, p. 130.

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