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THE FUNCTION OF FORMAL IMAGERY IN OVID'S *METAMORPHOSES*

SINCE THE PUBLICATION of the two major studies on Ovid's use of imagery — J. A. Washietl, *De similitudinibus imaginibusque Ovidianis* (Vienna 1883), and S. G. Owen, "Ovid's use of the simile," *Classical review* 45 (1931) 97-106 — modern literary critics have greatly expanded our awareness of the significance of imagery in poetic composition. Directing their attention primarily to Renaissance and post-Renaissance poetry, they have used analyses of imagery for two types of discussions which shed new light upon the processes of poetic artistry. Within the scope of the individual poem, they have demonstrated how specific images function in relation to tone, meaning, and structure to produce effects to which the reader unconsciously responds without necessarily being aware of the source of his reaction. Isolating imagery from the whole corpus of a particular poet's work, they have drawn conclusions about the psychological operations of his mind and the development of his poetic imagination, as well as the nature of his likes, dislikes, interests, and experiences; and they have explicated individual techniques in the handling of figurative expression. For the contemporary student of literature, who is accustomed to the complexities which frequently result from this new concern for imagery, Washietl's invaluable study of the indebtedness of Ovid's similes to Greek and Latin predecessors and Owen's provocative discussion of the poet's "riotous fancy" leave unexplored one basic concern: the way in which the nature and use of the imagery contribute to the aesthetic whole of a given work. It is undeniably true to conclude, as Owen does, that "the beauty of Ovid's style . . . owes not a little to the frequent introduction of graceful and appropriate similes which decorate and enliven the tissue of his verse" (p. 101), but this observation tells us little about the way in which Ovid makes the similes function. If we re-examine the imagery in Ovid's best-known work, the *Metamorphoses*, in terms of some of the modern critical interests, we may perhaps augment what Washietl and Owen have said about Ovid's artistry in the use of figurative comparisons.

In the *Metamorphoses* the problem of analyzing the formal imagery resulting from figures of speech is complicated by the fact that the very nature of the subject matter demands extensive personification. Most of the stories told include gods who are not only manifestations of the natural objects over which their divinity extends but also beings endowed with human speech

and form, and a number of the characters who are transformed into such natural phenomena as trees and springs still retain some human traits after their metamorphosis. For example, in Book 11 when Pan dares to assert that his musical skill surpasses that of Phoebus, the mountain Tmolus serves as judge in the dispute. The description which Ovid gives of Tmolus vividly, though somewhat incongruously, intermingles human characteristics with literal geographic details so that, although the old judge is said to take a seat on the mountain, he simultaneously *is* that mountain: he must shake his ears free of trees, and when he turns his face toward Phoebus, the woods also turn:

Monte suo senior iudex consedit et aures
liberat arboribus; quercu coma caerula tantum
cingitur, et pendent circum cava tempora glandes.
isque deum pecoris spectans "In iudice" dixit
"nulla mora est." . . . post hunc sacer ora retorsit
Tmolus ad os Phoebi: vultum sua silva secuta est (11.157-64).

In similar fashion, when the river god Cephisus rapes the nymph who is to become Narcissus' mother, the poet pictures the action as if the god were only a river in form:

. . . Liriope, quam quondam flumine curvo
inplicuit clausaeque suis Cephisos in undis
vim tulit; enixa est utero pulcherrima pleno
infantem nymphe . . . (3.342-5).

In both of these instances, the human action is the major point of interest; the fact that the characters also have topographical form is, in a sense, merely incidental to the narrative. At times, however, Ovid reverses this method of personification and subordinates the human element to the natural phenomena. When in Book 1, for example, he describes the flood which destroys the evil race of man, the storm itself is the essential point and the humanized agents which create it are of secondary importance. The South Wind, a terrifying winged being with face, beard, hands and draped robes, creates the deluge while Iris draws up water from the earth and feeds the clouds which surround him (1.264-71). These two figures merely activate the natural phenomena, however, and never actually become characters in the narrative in the way that their counterparts in the two previous examples do. Ovid also at times uses simple symbolic personifications. Members of the court of Phoebus, for example, include the hours and seasons:

Verque novum stabat cinctum florente corona,
stabat nuda Aestas et spicea serta gerebat,
stabat et Autumnus calcatis sordidus uvis
et glacialis Hiems canos hirsuta capillos
(2.27-30).

All fifteen books of the *Metamorphoses* are permeated with these three types of personifications but it seems unlikely that the poet would have expected such descriptions to serve any other purpose than to convey the simultaneously animistic and anthropomorphic nature of his characters. The personifications are inherent in the subject matter rather than being consciously contrived figures of speech used for some less intrinsic reason.

If we eliminate, then, this type of imagery from consideration, the poem is relatively unadorned. The stories advance in plain narrative style interspersed with dialogue, and only occasionally does Ovid heighten his description with metaphor and simile. Within the 865 lines of Book 7, for example, there are only ten such figurative comparisons (2 metaphors, 1 simple simile, 1 figurative use of comparative adjectives, 2 ablatives of manner, 4 epic similes),[1] and this propor-

tion, with several notable exceptions to be mentioned later, is fairly typical of the whole work. Owen has pointed out (p.99) that the number of similes in the *Metamorphoses* is "lavish" in contrast to the *Iliad,* the *Odyssey,* the *Argonautica,* and the *Aeneid,* yet his method of comparing the total number of similes in proportion to the number of lines in the various narratives gives a somewhat erroneous impression of what he calls Ovid's lack of "classical restraint." Because Ovid tends to use images in clusters, his narrative frequently consists of long passages without adornment followed by sections containing several figures of speech within a few lines. In relating the futile love of the monstrous Cyclops for Galatea, for example, the poet uses thirty-five images within twenty-eight lines (13.789-807, 844-53), while he retells some of the events following the Trojan War in a passage of five hundred lines which contain only one short simile (14.210-710). As Owen has noted (p.105), Ovid not infrequently links several images within the same comparison, as in his description of Hermaphroditus' blush:

hic color aprica pendentibus arbore pomis
aut ebori tincto est aut sub candore rubenti,
cum frustra resonant aera auxiliaria, lunae
(4.331-3).

This practice may indeed merely indicate what Owen designates as the poet's "riotous fancy," but the clustering of unlinked images is not adequately explained by this generalization. Unless his fancy fluctuated wildly, Ovid surely had some motive behind the irregular spacing of his imagery.

Before we consider this question, however, some further generalizations about the nature of his figurative passages may be of use. He favors the epic simile (or *similitudo per conlationem* as the *Rhetorica ad Herennium* terms it) over the simple comparison (*similitudo per brevitatem*), and he uses metaphor less frequently than either type of simile.[2] A mechanical tabulation of his images reveals that he draws his comparisons from a very limited range of subjects, which do not seem to be particularly indicative of the poet's personal interests or experiences. Images of warfare, for example, are noticeably prominent, yet Ovid lived most of his adult life under the peaceful reign of Augustus and was only a year old when Horace ran from the battlefield of Philippi leaving his shield behind. More than half of his images come from rural life, yet Ovid was educated in Rome, held minor official posts in the city, and became a popular figure in its fashionable, sophisticated circles.

In this top-ranking category arbitrarily labelled "rural life," comparisons to external nature predominate, and, indeed, they alone outnumber all other figures in the *Metamorphoses* (see chart). References to storms, rivers, trees, clouds, the winds, the seasons, action of the sun, moon, and stars, etc. appear in conjunction with a wide variety of subjects. Similes contrived from the habits of animals, especially beasts of prey, rank second in frequency. The only domesticated animals which he employs are herds, flocks, and hunting dogs, with the exception of one reference to the peacock. Images taken from farming rank third, but these are largely restricted to outdoor activities, the growing of crops and the tending of animals. Only three figures of speech in the entire work come from domestic arts: one from the weaving of wool, and two from the making of cheese.

Warfare, as mentioned above, and the sea and ships form the two major categories for figurative material taken

from other sources than rural life, but Ovid uses only about one fifth as many images from each of these topics as he does from his chief source. He draws several figures from sacrificial and other religious rites, and three times each incorporates the tempering of metal and the melting of wax.

Surprisingly few of his images reflect city life or culture in any way, and he makes no figurative references to trade, government, or politics. Four simple similes refer to statues and two to painting; two images depict animals in the arena; and twice the use of awnings over courtyards is mentioned. One image, interesting for what it reveals about the Roman stage, comes from the theater: when Cadmus sows the dragon's teeth which spring up as a crop of armed men, the poet compares the marvel to the rising and unrolling of a painted curtain:

sic, ubi tolluntur festis aulaea theatris,
surgere signa solent primumque ostendere vultus,
cetera paullatim, placidoque educta tenore
tota patent imoque pedes in margine ponunt (3.111-14).

Only one figure of speech suggests the kind of social life which Ovid surely must have known in Rome before his exile. When Hercules commits himself to his funeral pyre, the poet says that he lies down as if reclining at a banquet:

haud alio vultu, quam si conviva iaceres
inter plena meri redimitus pocula sertis (9.237-8).

Thus it would seem that the subjects which provide materials for the imagery of the *Metamorphoses* have little relationship to what is known of Ovid's life, and that the reason for their choice does not stem from the poet's personal interests. Many of his images, of course, are borrowed from literary tradition, but it seems likely that in general the principle of decorum accounts for the fact that he draws so heavily upon rural pursuits and external nature and so neglects the urban life for which he despaired after his banishment to Tomi. Images of nature are appropriate for the mythical subject matter, which evolved — at least partially — as an attempt to explain external nature. Images of rural life, the sea, and warfare both parallel and harmonize with the settings and actions of the tales as a whole.

Just as decorum dictates his choice of imagery generally, so the principle which governs Ovid's use of specific metaphors and similes may be described as simple appropriateness. He chooses an image which has an immediate surface relationship to the object or action with which it is compared, and the juxtaposition serves to give a more precise impression of the narrative detail. Thus, Atalanta races with the speed of a Scythian arrow in flight (10.588), Hecuba rages as a lioness whose suckling cub has been stolen (13.547-9), the poison seeping into Hercules' blood causes it to hiss and boil as does the cold pond into which a piece of red-hot metal is plunged (9.170-71). With but one major exception, Ovid does not use imagery thematically so that it becomes exclusively pertinent to a particular tale and extends its significance beyond the immediate point of comparison.

He does, however, exhibit a strong tendency to employ figurative comparisons in connection with four different things: the metamorphosis scene, description of emotion, scenes of violence, and description of skin color. His fondness for elaborating upon this last is difficult to explain as anything other than a personal idiosyncrasy. Just as Shakespeare cannot mention dawn without resorting to metaphor, so Ovid

sensuously heightens with simile his descriptions of the tones of human flesh. For instance, when Narcissus sorrowfully beats his bare breast, the skin begins to glow as a red flush suffuses the ripening grape (3.484-5). Arachne, confronted by Pallas, flushes and then grows pale:

> . . . ut solet aer
> purpureus fieri, cum primum Aurora movetur,
> et breve post tempus candescere solis ab ortu (6.47-9).

Although the poet is particularly fascinated with changes in skin color, his interest also extends to unflushed complexion. As Hermaphroditus swims in the pool, for example, his bare flesh resembles ivory statues or white lilies enclosed in translucent glass (4.354-5). Ovid obviously found some peculiar challenge in creating vivid visual impressions for this one topic, since the detail frequently has no very relevant connection with the progress of the narrative. The resulting sensuality at times, of course, contributes to the erotic nature of a particular tale, but such is by no means consistently the case.

A similar desire for vividness undoubtedly motivates his frequent use of simile in describing scenes of violence. When, in the beginning of Book 5, for example, the feast at which Perseus has been relating his exploits disintegrates into a bloody riot, the upheaval is likened to a sea whose peaceful waters are lashed into tumultuous waves by a raging wind; Pettalus falls to the earth like a slaughtered bullock; spears fly thicker than winter hail; and Perseus turns now to the right, now to the left, doubtful where to strike, just as a famished tigress that hears the lowing of two herds in two separate valleys is torn by ravenous desire to rush in both directions and knows not which to choose. The Calydonian river god, fighting with Hercules, first stands like a cliff against the dashing waves (9.40), and then the two rush together like strong bulls fighting to win a sleek heifer (9.46-9). Achilles, frustrated in his attack on Cygnus, resembles a bull charging an elusive cloak (12.102-3) and his useless spear springs back from Cygnus' shoulder as from a wall or solid rock (12.124). The use of figurative language in such instances also serves a rhetorical function, however. The resultant heightening of effect emphasizes the climactic nature of the scenes, not only by redoubling the impressions but also by merely lengthening the passages. Moreover, the climaxes embellished by figurative expression stand out boldly in contrast to the customary plainness of the narrative.

In some of his scenes of violence, such as the riot in Book 5 mentioned above, Ovid may be resorting to imagery for yet another purpose: parody. By employing the embellishments of the grand style ordinarily devoted to heroic battle, he may intend to render such an inglorious brawl ludicrous. Parody, at any rate, is certainly his intention in the section of the *Metamorphoses* most adorned with figurative comparisons: the story of Galatea and the Cyclops in Book 13. Abandoning his usual sparing use of imagery, the poet loads the love-lament of his repulsive, ridiculous character with figurative contrasts. The Cyclops pours out his vain pleas to a Galatea who is whiter than snowy privet leaves, more blooming than the meadows, more slender than the tall alder, more sparkling than glass, more sportive than a young kid, smoother than shells worn by the constant waves, more pleasing than the winter's

sun and the summer's shade, more excellent than fruit, fairer than the tall plane tree, clearer than ice, softer than swan's down or curdled milk, more beautiful than a well-watered garden; yet wilder than an untamed heifer, harder than an aged oak, falser than water, tougher than willow twigs or white vines, more immovable than cliffs, more impetuous than a stream, prouder than a peacock, more painful than fire, sharper than thorns, more savage than a bear with cubs, deafer than the sea, more pitiless than an aroused snake, fleeter than a stag pursued by hounds or than the winds and flying breezes (13.789-807). As Owen has noted (p.106), this incredible verbosity is an expansion of the four comparisons Theocritus gives (9.19-21) to his Cyclops, and it is obvious that Ovid is using excesses of a poetic device both to characterize and ridicule his lovesick monster. Although none of the images, with the possible exception of *mollior . . . lacte coacto*, is ridiculous in itself, such a flood of poetic language from a being so grossly unpoetic in appearance is decidedly so, and when the Cyclops proceeds to defend his ugliness, Ovid's humorous intention in this use of figurative expression becomes even more apparent: Galatea must not think him hideous because his hair hangs over his face and shades his shoulders like a grove and because his whole body bristles with thick, stiff hair. A tree is ugly without leaves, a horse without a mane, a bird without feathers, a sheep without wool. And what if he does have only one eye? It is as big as a shield, and what is more, the sun itself has only one eye (13.844-53)!

Ovid does not employ figurative language in describing all the metamorphoses, but he does do so quite frequently. For example, when the weeping Byblis turns into a fountain, the transformation is compared to pitch dripping forth from the gashed bark of a pine, to sticky bitumen oozing up from the heavy earth, and to ice melting slowly under the combined warmth of the sun and the soft west wind (9.659-64). As the Thracian women who have dismembered Orpheus gradually turn into oak trees, they struggle like birds caught in fowlers' snares and draw their bonds ever tighter by their flutterings (11.73-7). Although these scenes share the climactic nature of the scenes of violence, and the imagery of the metamorphoses may be considered to function in the same rhetorical way, Ovid also clarifies the transformation process by his use of comparisons. The imagery serves to give a concrete impression to a purely imaginative action.

His fondness for imagery as a means of describing emotion is even more prominent than his use of it in the previously mentioned situations. He compares envy to a fire smothered under a pile of weeds (2.810-11); rage to a dammed river (3.568-71), to lightning (8.339), to a bull rushing at a scarlet cloak (12.102-4), to a lioness pursuing her stolen cub (13.547-9); the first pangs of love to melting wax and dissolving frost (3.487-9), to a fire set in dried leaves or grasses stored in a barn (6.456-7), to the heat generated by a lead bolt speeding through the air (2.727-9); grief to a swan's dying song (14.429-30); terror to a wounded dove suddenly freed from the claws of its attacker (6.529-30); the struggle of lust against shame to the tottering of a huge tree before the final blow of the ax (10.372-4); etc. Again his purpose in such cases is partially to clarify the abstract. By the use of figurative comparisons he can both define precisely the nature of the emotion he wishes to

IMAGE FREQUENCY CHART

NATURE (TREES, RIVERS, SKIES, ETC.)

1. 420-9, 498-9, 502-3
2. 321-2, 382-3, 722-4, 808, 852-3, 861, 865
3. 44-5, 78-80, 183-5, 209, 488-9, 568-71, 682, 729-31
4. 134, 332-3, 365, 622
5. 158, 570-1
6. 21, 47-9, 63-7
8. 162-6, 289, 339, 373, 355
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12. 51-2, 480, 521
13. 540, 602-3, 789, 790, 793, 795, 799, 800, 801, 803, 807, 845, 847, 852-3, 858
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2. 623-5, 810-11
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5. 164-7, 605-6, 626-9
6. 516-18, 527-30, 636-7
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13. 791, 802, 803, 804, 849
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2. 163-4, 184-6
4. 135-6, 440, 706-7
5. 6-7
6. 231-3
8. 470-1, 835-6
9. 40-1, 589-94
11. 330-1
12. 50-1
13. 366-7; 792, 799, 804
14. 711
15. 176-7, 604-5

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3. 63, 704-5
4. 709-10, 518
7. 776-8
8. 285, 357-8, 695-6
9. 218, 543-4
10. 588
11. 490-1, 508-9, 525-8, 534-6, 552-3
12. 225, 592
13. 252, 367, 851-2
14. 183, 825-6

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3. 111-14, 685
11. 25-7
12. 102-4

WAX

3. 487-8
10. 284-6
12. 818
15. 169-71

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2. 716-20
3. 240-1
4. 333
7. 258
8. 762-4
9. 641-2
12. 248-9

FURNACES AND METAL

2. 229-30
7. 106-8
9. 170-1
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ART (STATUES, ETC.)

1. 405-6
2. 855-6
3. 419, 422
4. 332, 354-5, 675
10. 515-17
12. 398

convey and make it vividly realized. Since powerful emotions motivate much of the action in the various tales, this precision and the resulting emphasis provide an emotional verisimitude which relates the fantasy of the plot to human experience.

Thus, with the exception of those passages which are or may be parody, Ovid most frequently uses imagery either for rhetorical emphasis or for explication of the abstract by means of the concrete, and the figures of speech function directly in terms of their immediate appropriateness to the point of comparison. The one remaining exception to these generalizations is the story of Ceyx and Alcyone.

In this tale Ovid heightens his description of the fatal storm which wrecks Ceyx's ship with a series of extended warfare images which stand out not only for their thematic consistency but also for their unusual frequency. Twenty-seven percent of the seventy-eight lines used to describe the sinking of the ship are devoted to images which depict battle scenes. When the storm first arises, Ovid writes *omnique e parte feroces/ bella gerunt venti* (11.490-91), and as the waves pound against the sides of the ship, he compares them to a battering ram attacking a citadel:

> saepe dat ingentem fluctu latus icta fragorem
> nec levius pulsata sonat, quam ferreus olim
> cum laceras aries balistave concutit arces
> (11.507-9).

The violence of the storm increases until huge billows are leaping above the sides of the ship, and as the tenth of these monstrous waves attacks, it pours over the ramparts of the conquered ship as the first soldier who succeeds in scaling the walls of a besieged city leaps down in his eagerness for glory and stands one man amidst a thousand (11.525-8). Other waves follow, and the ship is thrown into utter confusion like a city with men outside trying to undermine the walls and others within to hold the walls (11.535-6). Mast and rudder are broken, and finally one last towering wave, which is compared to a victor rejoicing in his spoils, submerges the ship and bears it to the very bottom of the ocean:

> . . . spoliisque animosa superstes
> unda, velut victrix, sinuataque despicit undas (11.552-3).

These images, of course, effectively serve the immediate purpose of intensifying the furor of the storm and emphasizing the mortal nature of the struggle, and it may well be that Ovid is emulating the descriptive power which Virgil displayed for this subject. His emphasis of the storm as battle, however, also produces an ironic effect on the tale as a whole.

When Ceyx, king of Trachis, first appears in Book 11, he is described as a gentle, peace-loving man who rules nobly and benevolently *sine vi, sine caede* (11.270). He graciously welcomes the fleeing Peleus, for, as he says, the opportunities of his realm lie open to all, humble and illustrious alike. Ceyx, however, is greatly distressed at this time, and he cannot hide from the stranger the cause of his grief. He states that his brother, Daedalion, has recently been transformed into a hawk, and as he proceeds to relate the story, Ovid chooses to have him emphasize explicitly the differences between the brother's character and his own. Daedalion was always *acer . . . belloque ferox ad vimque paratus* (11.294). Cruel war was his major pleasure and he subdued many kings and nations. Even now, as a hawk, he is the terror of all other birds and he preys especially upon the dove, the bird of peace. Of himself, however, Ceyx says humbly: *culta mihi pax est* (11.297).

Somewhat later the sorrowing king decides to consult the oracle about his brother's death and subsequent metamorphosis. Disregarding the fears and protests of Alcyone, he sets sail for Claros, having decided not to go to Delphi because the hostile activities of Phorbas make this journey dangerous. Yet all his precautions, all his devoutness, all his noble idealism are to prove vain. Despite the difference in character between the two brothers, despite the king's attempt to avoid battle by going to Claros instead of Delphi, despite the fact that he goes for divine guidance in regard to his brother's death, Alcyone's fears are realized. Ceyx dies at sea in a storm which the imagery clearly and paradoxically equates to the warfare he has conscientiously shunned for humane reasons, and shortly thereafter both he and she are transformed into birds. Thus, ironically, he shares his brother's fate. He, who has sought only peace among men, is pushed into battle with the forces of nature by a fate which seems both erratic and unjust. Without the images which relate the storm to warfare, the paradox would rest merely upon the final metamorphosis; with them — and because of them — the story achieves a cynical ambiguity which suggests either the futility of human endeavor in a universe indifferent to moral values or some flaw in Ceyx's seeming benevolence. In either case, the imagery functions organically within the aesthetic whole of the narrative, and its ironic relationship to the details of action and character produces an additional level of meaning within the story.

It would seem, then, that Ovid's "riotous fancy" in the use of figurative comparisons is at least partially controlled by a stringent artistry. Rather than incorporating imagery merely for decoration, he tends to use his figures of speech for specific purposes which contribute significantly to the narrative progress of the various tales in terms of tone, clarification, or emphasis.

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This paper was originally read before the classics section at the 1961 meeting of the Philological Association of the Pacific Coast.

1 Lines 33, 61; 770; 776-8; 258, 387; 79-81, 106-8, 125-7, 585-6. I have not counted Ovid's metaphoric methods of describing love or lust in terms of flames and burning because he, like many other Latin poets, uses this image so consistently that one is led to conclude that the concept was at least a stereotyped if not a dead metaphor.

2 Again, this generalization does not consider the single use of forms of *flagrare, urere, exarsi, accipere ignes,* and the like as metaphors designed for any purpose other than statement of fact. The use seems comparable to the modern "to fall in love," which certainly evokes no comparative image.