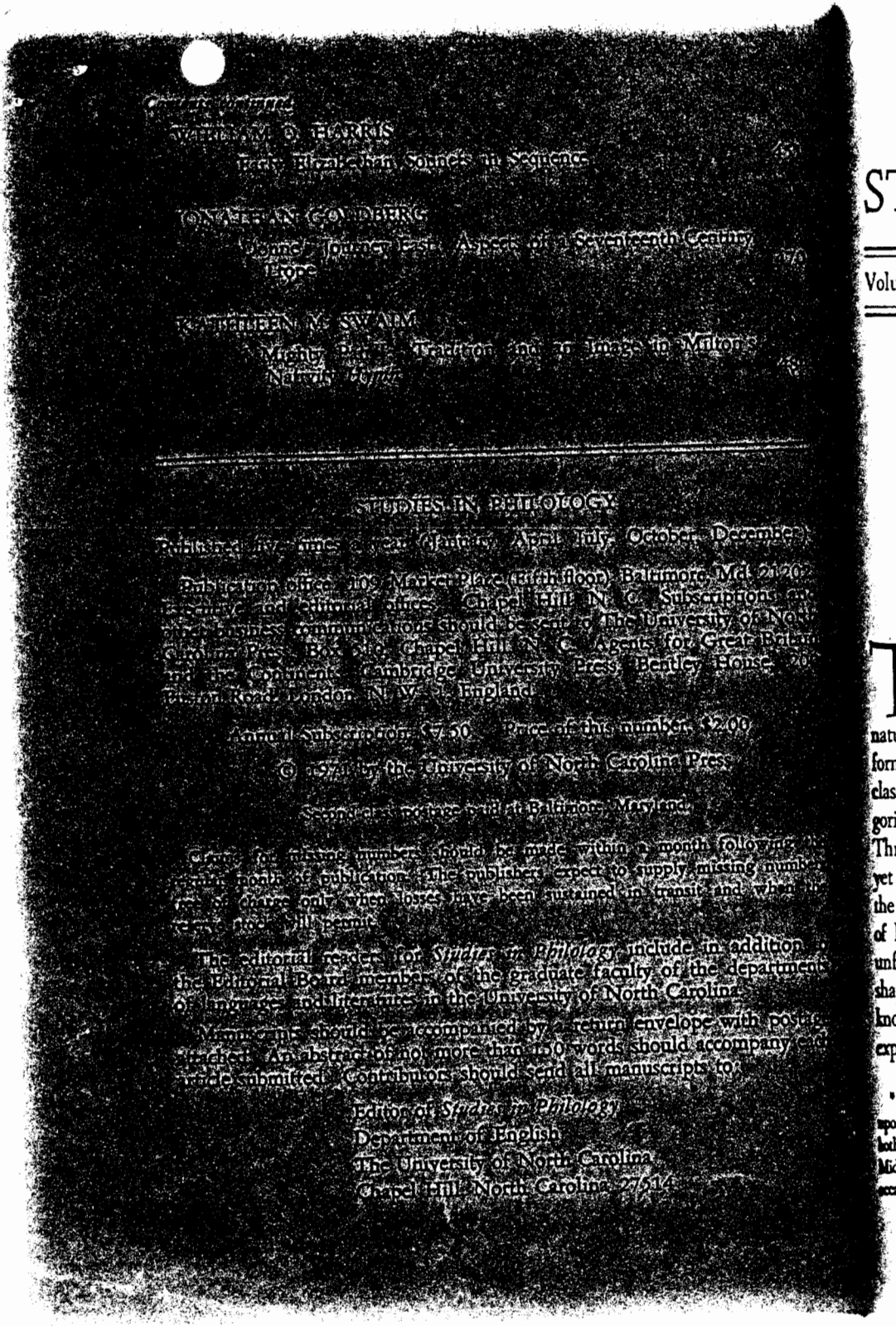

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Ovid's *Metamorphoses*: Greek Myth in Augustan Rome

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I.

THROUGHOUT ancient literature myth provides an essential means of posing and clarifying the questions of human existence. It enables ancient man to explore his relation to nature, society, and his own mortality. In a culture which was formed before the development of abstract thinking and logical classifications, the figures of myth constituted the large basic categories which men have always needed to understand their experience. Through these concrete lucid images, beyond familiar reality and yet part of it because rooted in local legend and song, man could grasp the mystery of his life, arrest its rushing movement in timeless figures of legend for reflection and contemplation. The unformed, freshly unfolding experience of each new generation could thus take on a shape, clarity, and coherence, for it could be matched against long-known intelligible counterparts in the great reservoir of archetypal experience which are the myths.

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The consequence of this integration of myth and experience, especially as it existed in archaic and classical Greece, was that personal experience and the heroic world were not sharply separable. In a prelogical age imagination and reality are not absolute opposites, a state of mind which modern man can grasp only dimly. The image of heroic figures could be present in the midst of contemporary reality and in some way mold it. Pindar, Aeschylus, Sophocles could not only interpret their present in mythical terms; they also felt the myths as alive and vital in the present reality, working within the experience of their people to shape their present. Even for Plato, critic of the traditional myths, Socrates' life gains meaning in the shadow of Homer's Achilles, to whom Plato implicitly compares his master in the *Apology* (28c-d) and the *Crito* (44b). Comedy, too, concerned though it was with the passing, local, trivial events of the every-day world, operated, as Cedric Whitman has suggested, against a backdrop of heroic greatness transmuted into new terms.[1]

True, Euripides and even Sophocles did not "believe" in the old myths exactly as Homer, Hesiod, or Pindar had. For Homer myth and legend were the repository of what could be known about the past. Homer does not distinguish between myth and history. When he invokes the Muses before his catalogue of ships in *Iliad*, 2, it is because they "know everything," while we mortals have only hearsay. But presumably what Homer relates, with the help of the Muses, is the truth which these goddesses really know. Even in the rationalistic mood of the latter half of the fifth century the cleavage between myth and history is not absolute. Herodotus, the contemporary of the Sophists and Euripides, still draws upon the forms of myth in stories like those of Croesus, the birth of Cyrus, the fate of Polycrates, the dreams of Xerxes before crossing the Hellespont. Protagoras, Gorgias, Prodicus, and later even Plato use myth, in rationalized form, as a vehicle for philosophic thought.

From the early part of the fourth century B. C. on, the critical spirit of the philosophers, the habits of abstract thought, the increasing spread of literacy and with it the decreasing reliance upon orally

[1] Cedric H. Whitman, *Aristophanes and the Comic Hero* (Cambridge, Mass., 1964).

transmitted, mythic wisdom, the concern for the accurate documentation of past events, and the enfeeblement of the Olympian religion all weaken the validity of myth as a means of reaching the deepest truth about human existence. Myth continues to be the main subject matter of poetry, but it is not taken seriously as a way of knowing the world. Hellenistic poets like Callimachus exploit obscure myths to demonstrate their erudition, cleverness, or technical skill. Or a Theocritus treats subjects like the tale of Heracles and Hylas or the loves of Polyphemus and Galatea with subtlety, pathos, and humor, but not ultimate seriousness. We are far from the world of the *Prometheus* or the *Oedipus Rex* or the *Hippolytus*.

Hellenistic poetry tends to avoid or to denature the great heroic myths of the classical past. Tales of love and pathos are in vogue. In many ways Ovid is a Hellenistic poet and has often been recognized as such. Yet such a classification is only of very limited use in understanding him. He is also a very Roman poet. He works not in the literary entourage of a Callimachus or a Theocritus, but in the poetic tradition formed by Horace and Virgil. To understand the complexity of Ovid's treatment of myth we must glance briefly at the great Augustan poets who immediately preceded him.

The Greek poets, even in the Hellenistic period, were not by and large troubled by the question of the validity of myth. The myths were a given part of their cultural reality, an aesthetic *donnée* which every poet could use. The case is different for the Romans. Rome has no vast store of native mythology. The Greek myths, though readily assimilated, remain foreign. The very names of the mythical characters have an exotic ring to Roman ears and are often exploited by Augustan poets for just this quality. They open upon magic realms, remote places of imagined beauty and suggestive resonances. For Virgil Greek proper nouns have something of the function that Hebrew or Classical names have in Milton's *Paradise Lost*. Lines like *Amphion Dircaeus in Actaeo Aracyntho* (*E.* 2. 24) or phrases like *Aonie Aganippe* (*E.* 10. 12) or even *Pan deus Arcadiae* (*E.* 10. 26) are used with an intense self-consciousness of the foreign elements.

Though lacking a native mythology, Rome does have its historical legends. In Augustan Rome, with its historical self-consciousness, its desire to incorporate and recast the experience and culture of the past

into distinctively Roman terms, there is a natural wish to fuse Greek myth with Roman history. The *Aeneid*, of course, is the greatest and most successful example of this fusion. Virgil's tale of the legendary origins of Rome absorbs the two great mythic poems of ancient Greece, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. Virgil retains the fabulous elements of Odysseus' voyage and combines them with material from the voyage of Apollonius' *Argonautica*: the Cyclops, the Sirens, Circe, the Harpies. Yet these purely imaginary, mythic elements serve Virgil only as atmosphere for the historical themes. He places far greater emphasis on the great scenes foretelling Rome's future: Dido's curse which will be fulfilled in Hannibal, the panorama of Roman history in Book 6, the shield of Aeneas in Book 8. The mythical theme of the Golden Age, already used in the Fourth *Eclogue*, becomes linked with the contemporary Roman search for a new age of peace and order out of the chaos and suffering of the civil wars. Aeneas leaves the collapsed civilization of Troy, the war-ravaged, bloodstained old world, and travels to the Golden-Age realms of Latinus and Arcadian Evander, only to find war there too: *bella, horrida bella*, the Sibyl tells him (*Aen.* 6.86). But Augustus, his descendant, will achieve in this disturbed reality of warring people the goal which eludes Aeneas, the recovery of a Saturnian Age of peace and innocence:

> **Augustus Caesar, divi genus, aurea condet**
> **saecula qui rursus Latio regnata per arva**
> **Saturno quondam. (6.792-4)**

Aeneas' experiences reflect the experience of a whole people as neither Odysseus' nor Achilles' do. It has been suggested, with some plausibility, that Virgil harks back beyond the individualism of the Greek epic to an earlier type of mythic hero in the Mediterranean tradition, the divine champion of the Near-Eastern Creation Epics.[2] In these works, like the *Enuma Elish*, the main action is a contest between the gods, who stand for the orderly and fruitful processes of nature, and some disruptive, violent divinity whom the champion will defeat after a hard struggle. The emphasis here falls not upon the

[2] See Phillip Damon, "Myth, Metaphor, and the Epic Tradition," *Orbis Litterarum*, XXIV (1969), 84-100, especially 95 ff.

personal experiences of the champion (who, in any case, is not a human figure), but upon his restoration of order and the resultant safety of the community. I am hardly suggesting any direct influence of Mesopotamian literature upon Virgil, and there are enormous differences between the heroes of the *Aeneid* and these remote powers contesting in the heavens and the deep. Yet the recognition of this other stream in the epic tradition of the ancient world may help us to be less impatient with Aeneas for not being an Achilles or an Odysseus. He is not, nor was he meant to be.

For the Augustan poets the Greek myths are as much a challenge as a resource. As a foreign element, they have to be incorporated into new and peculiarly Roman structures. Horace too is especially concerned with this comprehensive inclusion of Greek culture into Roman forms, not only in the long *Epistles* like that to Augustus (2.1) or the *Ars Poetica*, but also, though on a smaller if more intricate scale, in the *Odes*. He can, of course, use Greek myths as paradigms and ornament; and he values the strange, resonant words and the possibilities of metrical *tours de force* which they offer. But, like Virgil, Horace also wishes to create a special fusion of Greek and Roman, myth and reality.[3] He enjoys the shock-effect and the expansion of imagination which results from bringing his poet's world of green-haired Nereids or glassy green Circe into contact with the name of a Roman consul or the odoriferous concreteness of Sabine goats (*Odes*, 3.38 and 1.17). In an ode on the troubles of a friend exiled in the recent civil wars, Horace can enframe a vivid description of near-by Tivoli with a radiant list of famous Greek cities on the one side and the heroic legend of Greek Teucer on the other (*Odes*, 1.7). He can set his imitation of Pindar into the context of the peculiarly Roman institution of the triumph (*Odes*, 4.2) or juxtapose his humble Apulian origins and his beloved Sabine hills and Tivoli with the Greek muse Calliope and the ancient Greek myths of the battles between the Gods and the Giants (*Odes*, 3.4). In all of this there is a conscious "blending of Greek and Roman," to use Gordon Williams' phrase, which in turn reflects an attempt to

[3] See Irene Troxler-Keller, *Die Dichterlandschaft des Horaz* (Heidelberg, 1964), pp. 14-5, 127, 159 ff.; Gordon Williams, *Tradition and Originality in Latin Poetry* (Oxford, 1968), chap. 5, especially pp. 296 ff.

give a Roman reality to the remote world of Greek myth and a desire to bridge the gap between a venerable, in fact indispensable, literary tradition and the immediacy and specificity of the Roman present. In different terms, Horace and Virgil and their contemporaries are attempting to join the ideal world of timeless forms constituted by Greek mythology with the transient, but intense, personally felt world of the here and now.

Certain myths lent themselves especially well to this fusion. From late Republican poetry on, the legend of the primordial innocence of the Golden Age became a way of expressing and interpreting the movement of present events and the intense aspirations of contemporary society. Or Virgil in *Aeneid*, 6, could reach back into the deepest strata of Hellenic and pre-Hellenic myth to use the journey by water and the descent to the Underworld in order to present the agony of the search for, and the creation of, a new future out of a violent, destructive past.

II.

This perspective can help us to understand Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, the main topic of this paper. Ovid, like Virgil, desires to create a comprehensive fusion of Greek and Roman material into a single poem, a *carmen perpetuum*, which runs from the origins of the world to the poet's own time (*ad mea perpetuum deducite tempora carmen*, 1.4). Hence, though Greek myths constitute the bulk of the poem, in the last books Ovid includes a movement from Greek to Roman themes, from the East to Italy, which culminates in the voyage of Aesculapius up the Tiber and the divinization of Julius Caesar, the last metamorphosis in the poem.

Yet Ovid's incorporation of Greek myth into a Roman structure is fundamentally different from that of Virgil or Horace. Ovid's myths are not exempla, like Horace's, but the very substance of his poem. And unlike Virgil his mythical narrative is not supported on an armature of Augustan history. Virgil is able to incorporate the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* so successfully into a single Roman work precisely because he has a firm ideological framework into which even purely mythical and imaginary figures like Circe or Allecto can hold a natural, balanced place. These two figures, for instance, have a clear

function within Virgil's unifying Augustan symbolism of order struggling against disorder and passion.[4]

Virgil's fusion of myth with history enables him to overcome the artificiality of Greek myths in a Roman setting and to recover a measure of the original seriousness of the myths. Virgil can and does take his myths seriously because he has attached them to a Roman base to which, with whatever misgivings, his spirit is committed.

Virgil is, like Horace, a *vates*, a prophet and teacher. He transmits and interprets the ancient myths of his people with the same seriousness as he transmits and interprets ancient philosophical doctrine (e.g. *Aen.* 6.724-51), and we may recall Virgil's desire to devote his remaining years to the study of philosophy. Ovid also gives us a long philosophical exposition in the fifteenth book of the *Metamorphoses*, but the kind of seriousness which Virgil had shown is either lacking or at the least questionable.[5] Ovid's poetry reflects that separation, dominant since the Hellenistic period, between art and wisdom, literature and truth.

Lacking the conviction of an Augustan or other broad moral or philosophical framework, Ovid uses his myths less to interpret the mysteries and complexities of human experience (though that element is not entirely absent)[6] than to provide entertainment. His emphasis, with a few noteworthy exceptions, falls on the miraculous, the startling, and the grotesque rather than upon the universal or generic lineaments of human experience. Instead of giving us a tightly woven structure which makes possible multiple analogies and symbolical interrelations between different myths, as Virgil does, Ovid gives us separate, isolated episodes where, recent interpreters notwithstanding, an underlying order or deep unifying conception is either hard to find or else superficial and playful.

This lack of an overall structure accompanies the lack of an overall

[4] See my essay "Circean Temptations: Homer, Vergil, Ovid," *TAPA*, XCIX (1968), 430-1, 435-6.

[5] See my essay "Myth and Philosophy in the *Metamorphoses*: Ovid's Augustanism and the Augustan Conclusion of Book XV," *AJP*, XC (1969), 257-92.

[6] See, for example, Hermann Fränkel's interpretation of the Pygmalion episode in *Ovid, A Poet Between Two Worlds*, Sather Classical Lectures, XVIII (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1945) pp. 93-6, and in general 97-100, 107-10.

moral order and a firm goal or purpose.[7] As a result, suffering in the *Metamorphoses*, of which there is a great deal, has a chaotic and nightmarish quality. This kind of suffering appears in Virgil, too, notably in the fall of Troy in Book II or the confused wanderings of Book III. But in Virgil these sufferings are part of an intelligible pattern. An old ruined world is being left behind, and out of its ruins a better, stronger order will arise. In Ovid there is no exit from the nightmare, no ultimate purpose which this suffering seems to subserve.

Even more important, the suffering in Virgil, like that in Homer and Greek tragedy, is there precisely for the questions it raises about the meaning of human life: *Tantaene animis caelestibus irae?* "Such ire in breasts immortal?" the poet asks in his own person near the beginning of the *Aeneid* (1. 11). For Virgil the suffering itself is an issue to be examined and, if possible, understood. It is in itself one of the problems, perhaps ultimately *the* problem, in the structure of our universe. In Virgil this struggle for meaning is always present, behind and through the suffering contained in the mythical events. In Ovid it is, on the whole, rare that the myths are allowed so serious a function.

Ovid's figures, lacking a goal, are victims rather than agents. Many of the tales describe a sudden disaster which the protagonist has not deserved and can only endure. Io and Callisto, innocent and helpless maidens, attract the attention of Zeus and through no fault of their own are turned into a cow and a bear respectively. Actaeon blunders upon Diana nude in her rustic shower and is changed into a stag and gruesomely torn apart by his hounds. Dryope, innocently plucking a flower for her infant son, is turned into a tree amid the weeping of her companions. This kind of myth is not the only one recounted in the *Metamorphoses*, of course, but it is a major type.

The lack of a purposive goal and direction to the action also implies the loss of that heroic sense which we associate with epic and tragic poetry. Hence the *Metamorphoses* is not really an epic. The emphasis falls upon purely private experience rather than upon themes of social and cosmic order which had been the traditional

[7] See my *Landscapes in Ovid's Metamorphoses*, Hermes Einzelschrift, XXIII (Wiesbaden, 1969), chap. 5.

themes of ancient epic from the *Gilgamesh* to the *Aeneid*. Great deeds and martial themes occur, but they are usually undercut by grotesque exaggeration or by playful, often erotic wit. Ovid's motto might very well have been, "Make love, not war."

To take a typical example, the chains of Andromeda do not so much reflect a tragic fate as provide her rescuer, Perseus, with the opportunity for a pretty conceit (4. 678-80):

> ut stetit, "o," dixit, "non istis digna catenis,
> sed quibus inter se cupidi iunguntur amantes,
> pande requirenti nomen."
>
> "O, you should never wear the chains that hold you;
> Wear those that lovers cherish as they sleep
> In one another's arms. Tell me your name" (tr. Gregory)[8]

Elegiac refinement and wit deliberately intrude into the primevally heroic theme of battling a fierce monster.

The two long battle pieces (books 5 and 12) show the opposite, but complementary, techniques of deflation by erotic themes and inflation to the point of ridicule.[9] In book 5 Perseus kills a perfumed, handsome youth in this way (5. 56-8):

> tum quoque lenta manu flectentem cornua Perseus
> stipite, qui media positus fumabat in ara,
> perculit et fractis confudit in ossibus ora.
>
> (He) would have bent (the bow)
> Once more, but Perseus, snatching from the altar
> A smouldering brand, used it for a club and battered
> His face to splintered bones. (tr. Humphries)

Book 12 contains grim scenes of entrails being dragged from a Centaur's stomach and broken on the ground under the Centaur's own hooves until the creature finally "falls with empty belly" (*inani concidit alvo*, 12. 392). But a few lines later comes a tender scene

[8] The translations here cited are as follows: Horace Gregory, *Ovid, The Metamorphoses* (New York, 1960); Rolfe Humphries, *Ovid, Metamorphoses* (Bloomington, Ind., 1955); F. J. Miller, *Ovid, Metamorphoses*, Loeb Classical Library, I (Cambridge, 1921); II (London, 1916). Translations not otherwise indicated are by the author.

[9] For the weakness of the battle scenes, see L. P. Wilkinson, *Ovid Recalled* (Cambridge, 1955), p. 162.

of love between two Centaurs (12. 404 ff.) which gives amusing details about the female Centaur's concern with her toilet, performed twice daily (perhaps a necessary precaution for a Centauress) in the waterfalls around Mt. Pelion (12. 412-3). Ovid is obviously eager to find in such scenes openings for his wit and urbanity. But he runs the risk thereby of trivializing and degrading the suffering in the rest of the episode. Homer and Virgil, who take the suffering and the human dignity of the victim seriously, seldom tend in this direction, gory though their battle scenes are. There is nothing in these portions of the *Metamorphoses* that reaches the tragic, humane simplicity of the deaths of minor characters in Homer like Simoeisios (*Iliad*, 4. 473-89) or a figure like Antenor in *Aeneid*, 10, who, as he dies, a victim of a cast meant for another, "looks up to the sky and dying remembers sweet Argos" (*sternitur infelix alieno vulnere caelumque / aspicit, et dulcis moriens reminiscitur Argos*, 10. 781-2).

Ovid's lack of the heroic spirit has another implication. Because there is no central goal toward which a hero or group of heroes are bending all of their energies, we are not deeply involved in the fate of the individual characters. We do not feel that a given character's failure or success carries an ultimate importance or is essential for the well-being of the world in which he moves, as is, for example, the success or failure of an Aeneas or an Odysseus. There is nothing tragic about the suffering of the *Metamorphoses*, and this consequence also follows naturally upon the poet's divesting the myths of their deepest seriousness.

Few of Ovid's characters must stay alive until the completion of some vital deed and few, if they die, provoke a great crisis of questioning about the meaning of existence analogous, for instance, to the deaths of Priam or Dido or Palinurus or Pallas in the *Aeneid* or the death of Patroclus in the *Iliad*. Most of the characters in the *Metamorphoses* are dispensable. Anything can happen to them. There is no limit to the amount of physical outrage which can take place. The episodic nature of the work permits the author to break off and change to another tale at the point when the moral problems raised by a given myth become too pressing. Ovid is, of course, no De Sade. He has taste and compassion and a civilized man's horror of suffering. And these qualities, combined with the grace and limpidity of his language, and his easy mastery of the hexameter, enable us to read him with pleasure—if we do not look too carefully or think too much about the narrative material before us.

Ovid's problem is that his episodic form and his urbane style demand that the myths be as free as possible of their deepest, most disturbing content, those archaic layers of meaning embedded in the basic fabric of the tales. His task was to trim a redwood forest down to the man-scaled, symmetrical grace of Versailles, and some unevenness of success was probably inevitable.

III.

For large stretches of the work Ovid obviously does succeed, and his success occurs when his verbal skill can reinforce the fanciful unreality of the tale, dull the harsher edges of the pain, and thus generate a delicate pathos rather than grotesque and troubling discrepancies. Language and rhythm are all-important in achieving just the right tone. At the death of Phaethon, for example, a certain calm and serenity result from the vocabulary, the resonant rhythms, and the delicate simile describing his fall (2. 320-2):

> volvitur in praeceps longoque per aera tractu
> fertur, ut interdum de caelo stella sereno
> etsi non cecidit, potuit cecidisse videri.
>
> But Phaethon . . .
> Sailed earthward through clear skies as though he were
> A star that does not fall, yet seems to fall
> Through long horizons of the quiet air. (tr. Gregory)

The carefully balanced Ovidian repetition in the last line is essential to the distancing effect. A little later Ovid describes the plangent grief of the mourning sisters and the desperation of the mother as she tries to tear the bark away from their transformed bodies. He then subtly shifts to a more peaceful, resigned tone in the final farewell. He makes the most of the imaginative possibilities and of the sad beauty of the metamorphosis of the sisters' tears into amber, which hardens in the sun and is borne away on the "clear stream" (2. 363-6):

> "iamque vale"—cortex in verba novissima venit.
> inde fluunt lacrimae, stillataque sole rigescunt

de ramis electra novis, quae lucidus amnis
excipit et nuribus mittit gestanda Latinis.

This is the kind of conceit which Arthur Golding's version manages so well, and I quote his rendering:

And now farewell. The word once said, the bark grew over all,
Now from these trees flow gummy tears that amber men do call.
Which hardened with the heat of sun as from the boughs they fall,
The trickling river doth receive, and sends as things of price
To deck the dainty dames of Rome and make them fine and nice.[10]

Ovid's final line is irreverent, even unfeeling. Yet he has softened the shock of a discrepancy of tones through his careful modulation from human grief to the imaginary realm of metamorphosis and through his evocation of nature's clear, calm expansive world in the description of the amber itself.

Ovid sometimes achieves a similar softening effect by intruding everyday human reactions at the moment of a grotesque and potentially horrible transformation. The humor resulting from the incongruity thus makes light of the grimness of the tale. When the aged Cadmus is suddenly transformed into a snake, for instance, his wife calls out with a surprise and indignation worthy of her rank and age (4. 591-2):

"Cadme, mane teque, infelix, his exue monstris!
Cadme, quid hoc?"

"O Cadmus, stay, unhappy man, and put off this monstrous form! Cadmus, what does this mean?" (tr. Miller)

The humor prepares for the tenderness and pathos of his wife's request to be similarly transformed. Cadmus then "licks the face of his wife" (4. 595), embraces her, and she too becomes a serpent. The language of this metamorphosis skillfully overlays the serpentine convolutions of these potentially dangerous creatures with an element of humor and with the gentle eroticism of a familiar, conjugal embrace (4. 595-7):

[10] Arthur Golding's translation is cited from the edition of W. H. D. Rouse, *Shakespeare's Ovid, Being Arthur Golding's Translation of the Metamorphoses* (New York, 1966), with some modernization of the spelling.

ille suae lambebat coniugis ora
inque sinus caros, veluti cognosceret, ibat
et dabat amplexus adsuetaque colla petebat.

He licked his wife's face and glided into her dear breasts as if familiar there, embraced her, and sought his wonted place about her neck. (tr. Miller)

The tone is somewhat similar to that of the Philemon-Baucis episode (see 8. 711-24); and the depiction of a stable human relationship and tender human emotions points away from the elemental, mysterious violence of the snakes of the preceding book (i. e., the serpent killed by Cadmus in 3. 31-98 and the serpents disastrously interrupted in their union by Teiresias in 3. 324-5). This gentleness continues to the end of the episode and contrasts both with the grotesqueness of the metamorphosis itself and with the terror of the bystanders (4. 602-3):

nunc quoque nec fugiunt hominem nec vulnere laedunt,
quidque prius fuerint placidi meminere dracones.

Now, also, as of yore, they neither fear mankind nor wound them, mild creatures, remembering what once they were. (tr. Miller)

Humor and pathos mingle in a similar way to retain a light tone in the story of Io. The fear and horror she feels when she first finds herself changed into a cow (1. 635-41) become pathetic when, in her animal shape, she licks her father's hands and weeps as he bewails her fate (642-66). But at the happy ending the pathos and grotesqueness issue into a gentle humor when Io, changed back to human shape, is afraid to speak lest she utter a moo, and she tries her newly reacquired power of speech only hesitantly (1. 745-6):

erigitur metuitque loqui ne more iuvencae
mugiat, et timide verba intermissa retemptat.

She stands erect a nymph again, still fearful
That speech may still be mooing, but she tries
And little by little gains back the use of language. (tr. Humphries)

In other, less happy tales, however, the atmosphere of sudden, arbitrary metamorphosis can produce a sense of nightmarish horror. In one of the bloodiest tales of the poem Procne and Philomela kill and savagely tear apart Procne's own child, who cries out *mater*,

mater and attempts to embrace his mother, but she does not even avert her face as she strikes (*nec vultum vertit*, 6.642). The limbs still twitch with life (*vivaque adhuc animaeque aliquid retinentia membra*, 6.644) as the two women tear them from the body to serve them to Tereus, and the chamber flows with gore (*manant penetralia tabo*, 6.646). Though justice is done at the end, the tale rises to a pitch of violence and horror which is not resolved in any satisfactory manner nor integrated into any consistent image of human nature in the work.[11]

In some cases the horror surrounding the metamorphosis only reinforces the impression of the chaotic state of the world-order. After her seduction by Jupiter and transformation into a bear, Callisto wanders terrified among wild beasts (2.493-5):

> saepe feris latuit visis, oblita quid esset,
> ursaque conspectos in montibus horruit ursos
> pertimuitque lupos, quamvis pater esset in illis.

Often she hid at sight of the wild beasts, forgetting what she was; and, though herself a bear, shuddered at sight of other bears which she saw on the mountain-slopes. She even feared the wolves, although her own father, Lycaon, ran with the pack. (tr. Miller)

The pathos conveyed in the repeated *a . . . a* of the preceding lines (2.489-92) alternates with the confusion and hostility of this wild world into which she is cast, the world of the evil Lycaon, her father, now a wolf (cf. also *Lycaoniae proles . . . parentis*, 2.496). The implication of parents turning against children, which is contained in the menace of this wolf-father (2.495), is intensified in Callisto's near-death at the hands of her son, Arcas, in the immediately following lines (2.496-504). At the last moment Jupiter intervenes and places mother and son among the constellations. Yet Ovid gives Jupiter's interference only three rapid lines (2.505-7) and then turns back to the "comedy of the gods," again with the jealousy of Juno (2.508 ff.).

Even where Ovid attempts to deal with the question of justice, his lack of a unified, overarching conception militates against a satisfactory resolution of the problems raised. In the story of Actaeon, for example, he makes a point of Actaeon's innocence at the beginning (3.140-1)[12] and of Diana's cruelty at the end (3.253-5).[13] But his examination of the issue does not go beyond this superficial level. In the story of Arachne, Ovid suggests that the protagonist deserves her punishment. She speaks harshly and rashly to the disguised Minerva (6.26-42), a scene which recalls Turnus' rashness with Allecto in the *Aeneid* (7.435-59). But the situation is more complex. The weaving with which Arachne competes might be said to exemplify a certain disrespect and brashness toward the gods, for it contains *caelestia crimina*, "the crimes of the gods" (6.131), and shows Jupiter, Neptune, Apollo, Bacchus, and Saturn deceiving and seducing mortal women (6.103-28). Ironically, however, these scenes reflect exactly what the previous books have described; and the first episode mentioned, the rape of Europa, has in fact figured prominently in the preceding narrative (2.836-75). Thus Arachne's presumptuous flaunting of the gods' arbitrariness and selfishness has a sound basis of truth, and this fact beclouds the clarity of Pallas' justice. Pallas, in fact, reacts not as a representative of a cool, objective divine justice, but as an angry woman who cannot stand losing. She is pained (*doluit*, 130) at Arachne's success and tears apart the work (130-1). The sound of *rupit pictas* (131) emphasizes the violence:

> doluit successu flava virago
> et rupit pictas, caelestia crimina, vestes.

The yellow-haired goddess felt pain at her success and tore apart the woven fabric, with its divine crimes.

The ending is especially horrible, and the horror is intensified by the implication that the goddess acts as much out of anger and jealousy as righteousness. She strikes Arachne three or four times on the forehead, and Arachne tries to hang herself (6.133-5). The

[11] Contrast the very different image of man in 1.76-86 and see *AJP*, XC, 262-4 (note 5 above), with the references there cited.

[12] *At bene si quaeras, Fortunae crimen in illo, / non scelus invenies; quod enim scelus error habebat?*

[13] Rumor in ambiguo est; aliis violentior aequo
visa dea est, alii laudant dignamque severa
virginitate vocant: pars invenit utraque causas.

goddess finally pities her, but the result of the pity is one of the ugliest metamorphoses in the poem (6. 140-5):

> et extemplo tristi medicamine tactae
> defluxere comae, cum quis et naris et aures,
> fitque caput minimum; toto quoque corpore parva est:
> in latere exiles digiti pro cruribus haerent,
> cetera venter habet, de quo tamen illa remittit
> stamen et antiquas exercet aranea telas.
>
> She sprinkled her with hell-bane, and her hair
> Fell off, and nose and ears fell off, and head
> Was shrunken, and the body very tiny,
> Nothing but belly, with little fingers clinging
> Along the side as legs, but from the belly
> She still kept spinning; the spider has not forgotten
> The arts she used to practice. (tr. Humphries)

Ovid's fascination for the literary possibilities of some of the transformations can outweigh his sense of moral balance. His rhetoric can glide over the most excruciating carnage, as we have noted in the battle scenes of books 5 and 12. In the Phaethon story the damage wrought by the runaway chariot of the sun includes the incineration of whole peoples (2. 214-6):

> magnae pereunt cum moenibus urbes,
> cumque suis totas populis incendia gentis
> in cinerem vertunt.
>
> The great cities
> Perish, and their great walls; and nations perish
> With all their people: everything is in ashes. (tr. Humphries)

Ovid prefaces this holocaust with an indication of its special gravity: *parva queror,* "I lament small things" (214) he says, comparing the loss of life with the damage to the earth just preceding. Yet this detail of vast human suffering is given barely three lines in a rapid, rhetorical narrative which continues at once with a long list of famous mountains (217-26), as if, despite the disclaimer of line 214, the cities, peoples, and races are of minor importance and almost casual interest. The modern reader, perhaps excessively sensitive to mass incinerations and universal destruction of *magnae urbes* and *totae gentes,* can only wince. Why does Ovid include such a detail at all? His imagination and humane sensitivity, I suggest, could embrace the fact of suffering, but his outlook, style, and literary aims could not include it in a comprehensive moral vision.

The conclusion to be drawn from the above analysis is not that Ovid is necessarily insensitive or lacking in compassion, but rather that his mythic material was not as tractable, not as fully capable of reduction to facile, rapid narration and light, clever wit as he seems to have thought. The rhetorical coloring of the work is not always able to give a sufficient blur of unreality to the nightmarishness and violence of metamorphosis. The scope and style of his poem and the superficiality of his thought are not always adequate to the large moral issues of suffering, guilt, and justice inherent in the myths themselves.

IV.

These limitations in Ovid's work do not detract, of course, from his sustained elegance, wit, and charm, which are his peculiar contribution to Augustan literature and hence to the Western literary tradition. The *Metamorphoses* stamped their quality of secular grace and sensuous freedom upon the ancient myths for the centuries since the Renaissance. Titian, Tintoretto, Veronese found in Ovid's imaginative sensuousness inspiration for their own art, akin to Ovid's in many ways. Raphael's Galatea, Bernini's Daphne and Proserpina, Rubens' Baucis and Philemon, scores of ravished Europas and embarrassed Dianas are directly or indirectly traceable back to Ovid. Francis Meres could write of Shakespeare in 1578, "As the soul of Euphorbus was thought to live in Pythagoras, so the witty soul of Ovid lives in mellifluous and honey-tongued Shakespeare." Even austere Milton, so far in spirit from Ovidian levity, is full of allusions to the *Metamorphoses.*

The naturalness and perspicuity of Ovidian narrative seem so easy and so delightful that we scarcely realize how extraordinary an accomplishment it is. Ovid achieves this naturalness in part by keeping a firm common-sense perspective amid his fanciful mythologies. The wit and pointedness of his style make a virtue of his inability to immerse the reader in a serious, unified mythical universe, for his style peeks around the corners of the myths, as it were, and implicitly criticizes or even ridicules them. His worldliness forestalls the poten-

tially cloying effect of unmixed fantasy. The salt of wit, if I may borrow the Latin metaphor, cuts through the heavy sweetness which might result from too long a sojourn among totally mythical subjects. Even the *Odyssey* indulges the imagination for only eight books of fairyland before returning us to the firmer realities of Ithaca.

The description of the carved scenes on the gates of the Sun God's palace in the Phaethon episode is a good example of this blending of luxuriant fantasy and common-sense experience in small details (2. 8-13):

> caeruleos habet unda deos, Tritona canorum
> Proteaque ambiguum ballaenarumque prementem
> Aegaeona suis immania terga lacertis
> Doridaque et natas quarum pars nare videtur,
> pars in mole sedens viridis siccare capillos,
> pisce vehi quaedam: *facies non omnibus una,*
> *non diversa tamen, qualem decet esse sororum.*
>
> The sea holds blue-green gods, resounding Triton,
> Proteus who changes always, and Aegaeon
> Gripping the backs of whales, the sea-nymph Doris
> And all her daughters, swimming, some, and others
> Sitting on sea-wet rocks, their green hair drying.
> And others riding fishes. *All the sea-girls*
> *Seem different, but alike, as sisters ought to.* (tr. Humphries)

Amid the details of Triton, whales, mermaids with green hair, Ovid gives the pointed apothegm on the resemblance among sisters, nicely rendered by Golding:

> Not one in all points fully like another could ye see,
> Nor very far unlike, but such as sisters ought to be.

This last passage, with its epigrammatic generalization, is typical of the way in which Ovid can break out of the stylized set description or ecphrasis which he inherited from Hellenistic and earlier Roman poetry. He handles such descriptions with tact and restraint as well as wit. In descriptions of natural scenery he avoids artificiality by mingling the mythical unreality with an almost lyrical feeling for the beauty of the real world. In his celebrated description of the vale of Tempe (1. 568-76), he gives us a mythical vignette of a river god in his grotto and his entourage of water nymphs; and he follows this

up with a list of exotic, resonantly titled aqueous deities (1. 579-80). But the rhetorical description includes one of the finest bits of naturalistic observation in the poem, a line and a half describing the spray from a waterfall (1. 571-2):

> deiectuque gravi tenues agitantia fumos
> nubila conducit.
>
> (The Peneius) by its heavy fall forms clouds which drive along fine, smoke-like mist. (tr. Miller)

Golding's "a misty steam like flakes of smoke" is worth quoting, and one may be reminded of Tennyson's "thousand wreaths of dangling water-smoke" (*The Princess*).

My second example is drawn from the Phaethon story. It is dawn, and Phaethon is about to set out on his fatal journey across the sky. Aurora throws open the gates. Ovid gives an elaborate description of the Sun's chariot; and these ornate details, along with the personification of the dawn, the Hours, the deliberately artificial description of the dawn light (*purpureas . . . foras et plena rosarum / atria*, 2. 113-4) are all in keeping with the lofty epic tone of the whole episode.[14] But Ovid tempers the artificiality by means of a simpler, more delicate, and more naturalistic description of the scattering stars and the vanishing of the extreme tips of the fading moon's horns (2. 114-7):

> diffugiunt stellae, quarum agmina cogit
> Lucifer et caeli statione novissimus exit,
> quem petere ut terras mundumque rubescere vidit
> cornuaque extremae velut evanescere lunae,
> iungere equos Titan velocibus imperat Horis.
>
> The stars were gone,
> Whom Lucifer, last of all to leave the heaven,
> Marshalled along their way. The Sun-god saw him,
> Saw the world redden, and the moon's thin crescent
> Vanish from sight, and bade the speedy Hours
> To yoke the horses. (tr. Humphries)

The fancy is still high-flown, as the situation demands; but Ovid has chastened the luxuriance by the fineness of the observation and the

[14] Ovid has borrowed details (especially the Horae) from *Iliad* 5. 749-51, 8. 393-5, 8. 433-5.

directness of the diction in *diffugiunt stellae* and *cornuaque extremae velut evanescere lunae.*

Another major source of Ovid's freshness and naturalness is his sensitivity to human relationships and his ability to convey clear, convincing human motivations, usually with a sparkle of worldly humor, even in the strangest setting or most outlandish situations. This humanization of myth is one of Ovid's greatest contributions to the refinement of sensibility achieved in the *Metamorphoses.*[15]

Nearly every tale exemplifies this juxtaposition of everyday human reactions and the fantastic settings of the myths. The gods lend themselves particularly well to this *reductio ad humanum.* Jupiter's philanderings and Juno's jealousies only carry to logical extremes what is implicit in Homer's view of Olympian domesticity, save that Homer's gods retain an ultimate seriousness and austerity lacking in Ovid. Robert Graves's interpretation of Homer is really Ovidian.

Much of Ovid's grace and humanity appears in little touches or small observations of characteristic behavior, which gain a special charm from appearing unexpectedly in the midst of remote myths: details like Proserpina's concern with dropping her flowers when Pluto carries her off, or the tile with which Baucis and Philemon stabilize their tottering table. Such details, expressive of a whimsical and warm humanity, are the heart of Ovid's charm, and no bald summary can do them justice.

Ovid's detachment from his mythical material gives him the opportunity to see humorous possibilities in unlikely situations, and he sometimes catches them in a single turn of phrase or a subtle shift of tone. To take a familiar instance, Apollo, chasing the reluctant Daphne through the woods, cries out to her to wait (1. 504-9):

> "nympha, precor, Penei, mane! non insequor hostis;
> nympha mane! sic agna lupum, sic cerva leonem,
> sic aquilam penna fugiunt trepidante columbae,
> hostes quaeque suos: amor est mihi causa sequendi!
> me miserum! ne prona cadas indignave laedi
> crura notent sentes et sim tibi causa doloris."
>
> "Don't run away, dear nymph! Daughter of Peneus,
> Don't run away! I am no enemy,

[15] See my "Narrative Art in the *Metamorphoses*," *CJ*, LXVI (1971), 331-7.

> Only your follower: don't run away!
> The lamb flees from the wolf, the deer the lion,
> The dove, on trembling wing, flees from the eagle.
> All creatures flee their foes. But I, who follow,
> Am not a foe at all. Love makes me follow,
> Unhappy fellow that I am, and fearful
> You may fall down, perhaps, or have the briars
> Make scratches on those lovely legs, unworthy
> To be hurt so, and I would be the reason." (tr. Humphries)

The concern of the lover for the safety of his beloved contrasts with the violence of the pursuit which is present in the rhetorical elaboration of the animal imagery in lines 505-6, a device which recurs later when Apollo, about to catch the girl, is compared to a hound gaining on a hare (1. 533-8). The two lines with which Apollo continues his plea are especially instructive (1. 510-1):

> "aspera qua properas loca sunt: moderatius, oro,
> curre fugamque inhibe, moderatius insequar ipse."
>
> "Rough are the places where you hasten. Run, I beg, more moderately and check your flight. I myself will pursue more moderately."

The conceit of an agreed upon relaxation of the pace belongs to the stylized courtesy characteristic of this gallant, if impatient, young god. But it is sharply at odds with the rather primitive and elemental method of courtship to which he is reduced. This speech, then, points away from a realistic presentation of the flight and adds to the light, fanciful quality. Bernini's airy grace is not far wrong in rendering the scene. At the same time this lightness makes possible a more sympathetic reading of the lover's plight. Apollo is not just a lustful pursuer like Pluto in Book 5 or Jupiter in Books 1 and 2. He is a self-conscious, pompous, and slightly ridiculous young man, rather carried away by his own self-image (1. 513-8) and even a bit self-pitying at the affront offered his dignity (1. 519-24). The repeated word *moderatius* in lines 510-11 adds to this effect: it reinforces the sudden and paradoxical politeness of the god's offer and, in its heavy and somewhat prosaic quality, adds something to the pomposity of the god and the ridiculousness of setting terms to Daphne's flight.[16]

[16] Translators have had difficulty with Ovid's subtlety of tone here. Gregory does not translate lines 510-1 at all. Humphries is curt, prosaic, and chidish-sounding:

Heine, transferring this narrative with a bump into an atmosphere of unheroic parody, nicely caught this side of Ovid's Apollo, "der göttliche Schlemihl":

> Ja, der hohe Delphier ist
> Ein Schlemihl, und gar der Lorbeer,
> Der so stolz die Stirne krönet,
> Ist ein Zeichen des Schlemihltums.[17]
>
> The Delphian god of high renown
> Schlemihl is proven, and the crown
> Which adorns his brow sublime
> Of his schlemihlhood is the sign.

V.

Related to this humanization of myth is that side of Ovid which is least Augustan, or at any rate least in keeping with the formally avowed Augustan ideology of moral purpose and high seriousness. This is Ovid's willingness to depart from the Roman values of *dignitas*, from the themes of checking violence, imposing order, righting the wrongs in the world-order: *parcere subiectis et debellare superbos* (*Aen.* 6.853). From this point of view the *Metamorphoses* has much in common with the *Ars Amatoria*: it can be seen, in part, as a protest against Augustan ideology, a vindication of personal life, playfulness, wit, even irresponsibility. Ovid's gods are at the opposite extreme from the solemn deities of Virgil or Horace's *Roman Odes*: they are free to enjoy a full and rather scandalous private life, unburdened by their high position and their responsibilities to the rest of

> The ground is rough here. Run a little slower,
> And I will run, I promise, a little slower.

Dryden gets Ovid's pointedness and elegant precision of diction:

> To sharp uneven ways thy steps decline;
> Abate thy speed, and I will bate of mine.

Golding's longer line enables him to come closer to the effect of word-separation in Latin and to convey something of the panting effect of Ovid's short simple clauses and the anxious series of imperatives and urgent verbs like *oro, curre, inhibe*:

> The place is rough to which thou runst, take leisure, I thee pray;
> Abate thy flight, and I myself my running pace will stay.

Also his "take leisure, I thee pray" comes closer to the touch of playful pomposity in Ovid's Apollo.

[17] Heinrich Heine, "Jehuda ben Halevy," IV. I owe this reference to Professor Martin Ostwald.

the universe. And Ovid the poet makes only the feeblest of gestures toward ideals or moral reform or vatic wisdom. No wonder he was exiled.

We have lately become more sensitive to the complexities and ambiguities involved in the "Augustanism" of poets like Virgil, Horace, and Ovid.[18] Indeed, it is likely that the current revival of interest in the *Metamorphoses* owes something to this greater awareness of, and receptivity to, the "un-Augustan" features of the poem. We too are likely to suspect political ideologies in literature. We are likely also to sympathize with the victims of a sudden, drastic alteration of life coming from a remote, dimly comprehensible power; and we are likely to feel in the existence of an absolute power in human affairs a threat of arbitrary, Kafkaesque intervention rather than an assurance of harmony and good order.

To what extent may the sudden, undeserved metamorphoses of Ovid's poem reflect his image of the world-order about him, the instability of living in a world ruled by all-powerful, potentially arbitrary, divinized emperors? Has Ovid expanded into an entire poem those hints of questioning and despair, that sense of the degeneration of the heroic ideal, that puzzle the reader of Virgil's *Aeneid* and darken that poem's apparent lucidity of purpose and confidence? These are questions which the modern reader of the *Metamorphoses* cannot entirely escape, even if he may never be able to give a final answer.

If the answer to the above questions is at least partially in the affirmative, as I suspect it is, then Ovid's myths do after all perform something of their ancient role of exploring man's relation to his world. But in Ovid, unlike the Greek poets who preceded him, the myths do so only indirectly and, as it were, unwillingly. No single myth is strong enough to convey the force of meaning that the single myth of an Oedipus or even of an Aeneas could for Sophocles or

[18] For example, Kenneth Quinn, *Virgil's Aeneid: A Critical Description* (London, 1968), chap. 1; Adam Parry, "The Two Voices of Virgil's *Aeneid*," *Arion*, II.4 (1963), 66-80; M. C. J. Putnam, *The Poetry of the Aeneid* (Cambridge, Mass., 1965); C. G. Starr, "Horace and Augustus," *AJP*, XC (1969), 58-64; Brooks Otis, "A Reading of the Cleopatra Ode," *Arethusa*, I (1968), 48-61; G. K. Galinsky, "The Cipus Episode in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*," *TAPA*, XCVIII (1967), 181-91.

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for Virg." Yet some kind of large interpretation of human existence emerges from that total complex of myths that is the Metamorphoses. And it emerges in a way which leaves an ambiguity as to/how much of this interpretation of the world through myth the poet intended, or indeed whether he intended any interpretation at all. On the one hand Ovid seems determined to escape the seriousness of his myths. On the other hand that flight into myth enables him to hint at things about the order of his world which he could not or dared not say in any other manner.

The Met... both in its form as a catalogue of myths and in its content as a burlesque of myth seems to mark the end of the ancient attitude of seriousness toward myth as an interpretation of/human experience. Yet, ironically, O. through his myths found a/way to the expression of something v. real in the real. by about him, something perhaps not even fully conscious or openly avowed to himself. Thus, however faintly, he is still in touch w/ the function which myth had from the earliest beginnings of ancient civ: the unlocking of unspoken and unspeakable truth.

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