

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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Metamorphoses (2-8 A.D.)

Ovid

OVERVIEW Publius Ovidius Naso (43 B.C.- 17 AD) was born in Sulmo to an important equestrian family—*equestrian* meaning just below the highest patrician rank. He was sent to Rome for his education—as were his social and intellectual peers—and studied Rhetoric, as a prelude to the study and practice of law. (This educational pathway, leading toward Law, and beyond that toward politics, was generally expected of the aspiring young gentleman learning in Rome.) For some reason Ovid decided to stick with his initial instinct, and to give himself unreservedly to poetry. At this point Ovid went to Athens to study, and while studying there travelled to Asia Minor and Sicily. From 29 B.C.-25 B.C. Ovid returned to Rome to devote himself to poetry. It was at this period that he too—as was also part of the expected pattern-- found his patron. This time it was not the wealthy and magnanimous Maecenas, who was to become the central figure of the Emperor Augustus' literary circle, but Marcus Corvinus, who was long a defender of the Roman Republic against Augustus, and who found himself moving toward Augustus, as the tide of history swept in that direction. Thus Ovid too came ultimately under the supportive umbrella of the Emperor's largesse, and left us one more instance of the way money and connections paved the way to literary success.

Poetry. From this point on Ovid not only determined, but had the means to give, his life to poetry. To shorten the discussion, he was mentally preparing to write what would become a world famous series of erotic-social works—the *Heroides* (15 B.C.), the *Amores* (16 B.C.), the *Ars Amatoria* (10 B.C.), the *Metamorphoses* (starting 2 A.D) and the *Fasti*, begun around the same year—when a devastating blow of fate assaulted him. In the year 8 A.D. Ovid was banished--*relegated*-- from Rome by the Emperor Augustus, and sent to the distant city of Tomis, on the Black Sea. Even though *relegation* was different from exile, and gave a few more local privileges—he kept his books-- this life confinement to a remote sea port was a serious exile for any Roman, let alone for an urban sophisticate accustomed to the cultural interactions of the metropolis. (Rome was at this point becoming a thrilling center of literary and architectural growth.)

The Metamorphoses. This long poem, whose central theme is 'transformations,' and which was Ovid's most ambitious work, was published in 8 A.D., the year in which Caesar Augustus, the imperial and dominating emperor of Rome, relegated Ovid to Tomis, cutting him off from Rome, his wife, and the urban life he loved. It was the remarkable aspect of Ovid's literary works, and evidence of his lifelong intimacy to poetry, that in the end he assembled the power to rise above banishment to his most sustained imaginative work. (He adjusted remarkably well to his painful exile, taking part in the civic activities of Tomis, including a stint working with the local fire department.) The literary work he accomplished in Tomis was arguably his most ambitious, The completed version of the *Metamorphose.*, which can plausibly be called an epic, is a running dactylic account of some 250 Greek myths (11,995 lines, 15 books) in the course of which Ovid tracks, as his main theme, *transformations*—from human to animal, from order to disorder, from god to mortal and the reverse, from the magnificent diurnal path of the sun to a crash landing in the ocean, which leaves the earth scorched and the chariot driver, Phaethon, alive by the skin of his teeth. The ambition of this poem made it a darling of world literature and art, for such it has proven to be from the high Middle Ages through the Renaissance, when its lasting power stamped itself—to, in fact, our very own age, when the British poet, Ted Hughes, has once more proved the greatness of Ovid, in his *Tales from Ovid*(1984)

Big Picture.Ovid thinks largely, reaching out to forebears in the Hellenistic Greek tradition—like the epic creator Apollonius of Rhodes (b. 295 B.C.) —and of course to the corpus of great Greco-Roman poetries that made up the intelligent Roman's reading stockpile. This large literary thinking springs from even larger and wider cosmological thinking. Ovid introduces us from the start of the *Metamorphose*sto our

origins, 'a crude, unstructured mass, nothing but weight without motion, a general conglomeration of matter composed of disparate, incompatible elements...' (The reader will be hearing Lucretius throughout this exordium of physics.) By a patient and lengthy process the cosmos began to assume shape and order, the dusty cosmic winds subsided, and after an arduous working through—which we have to consider the myths themselves, through their sequencing, through their ultimate survival of historical time—into the apotheosis of Julius Caesar, who had adopted the future Emperor Augustus as his son—he was in fact the great-nephew of Caesar. Ovid's own posterity will be as secure as that of these grand stages in cosmology: 'the finer part of myself shall sweep me into eternity higher than all the stars....'

The nexus. History, from original chaos to the ultimate order in which Ovid's greatness will make him a participant, is an interwoven network of accounts of itself. (Ovid doesn't trouble himself, as much as we might like, over the relationship between history and myth. He provokes slack for much interweaving of events, in the course of the evolution of historical time, and he allows for little 'personal control' by any single regent of the universe. Jupiter, continually trapped by his wife, in escapades of amour, hardly seems to qualify for regent of cosmic history.)

Flow. The flow, the onstreaming of events, the metamorphic four books and onflow of myths is loose and jumpy, and except for the overall recurrence to questions of 'metamorphosis,' there is little consistent movement in the text we follow. To be sure there is a rough division of our book into four large categories—much of the material erotic, and in general played out at the expense and humiliation of the gods. And there are uncountable transitions in and out of new forms of life, an illustration of the points made toward the final chapters of the epic, in the lengthy discussion of the philosophy of Pythagoras. In one striking instance we are invited, for example, to consider the fateful destiny of an elderly pair, Deucalion and Pyrrha, who find themselves left, the last couple-vestige of the human race, after a devastating world-destructive flood. Abandoned on the wreckage of mountain crags, and infertile valleys, the couple consults an oracle, which advises them to scatter pebbles across the lands, as they cross it:

The stones started to lose their essential hardness, slowly to soften, and then to assume a new shape. They soon grew larger and gathered a nature more gentle than stone. An outline of human form could be seen., not perfectly clear, like a rough hewn statue...

You see what's coming? Men were becoming emergent, as were women, and in a turn that reminds us not only of our nature and origin but of the stony heritage that humans must endure.

Transition. Only a brief example can illustrate the texture of this kind of fluid metamorphosis, which constitutes Ovid's brilliant text. Look at the opening of the tale that follows Deucalion and Pyrrha. The next tale, Python, is going to develop the idea of the 'spontaneous self-generation' of the earth, by which new life, and unexpected, dreadful life can emerge from the mud and slime of the post flood world, and call for its own new explanatory tales. The emergent Python, a terror to the new genus of mankind, is finally slain by the intrepid god Apollo, who emerges—at the onset of the next episode-- strutting his confident self around the world, and taunting other myth figures like Cupid, who pulls out his quiver and fires the fatal dart at overconfident Apollo and at shy virginal Daphne, throwing the two into a mad mutual love, terminating as Daphne, forever cut off from her lover, metamorphoses into the laurel, with which she becomes one, as Apollo, forever reaching toward her, freezes into an immortal love which, a panel later, becomes the lust filled love of Jupiter for Io.

THEMES

Continuity. It is a central tenet, of *The Metamorphoses*, that everything in the created world flows, and has renewed existence in what follows it. This perspective roots in the fundamental premises of Greco Roman classicism. At the hero of Homer's *Odyssey*, Odysseus is fated to continue wandering until he reaches a new and distant place, where no one knows where he has come from. Homer builds into the conclusion of his epic that sense of indefinite and continuous ongoing. The same sense of flowing into the future pervades Virgil's *Aeneid*, in which Aeneas' actions and wanderings remorselessly point toward the oncoming foundation of the Empire of Rome.

Pity. In the interplay of love and transformation, Ovid transfuses his *Metamorphoses* into a showpiece of connectedness, in which the binding of all to all is fundamental. Ovid's physics is unitive, presuming fundamental particles so aligned with one another that the higher order beings, into which those formative particles unite, understand and sympathize with one another from deep inside themselves. This *pity* expresses itself with peculiar subtlety, as when does, heifers, or bulls emerge whose lovable gentleness transports the human, and Pythagoras; a flash of creative kinship makes an electrical jolt across the organic realm. The treatment of Pythagoras' thought, at the end of the *Metamorphoses*, provides our most startling insight into Ovid's sympathy with the whole breathing cosmos. Pythagoras' horror at the slaughter of animals, his fidelity to the patience and labor of animals, these chords of world sympathy touch the feelings we take from Shakespeare, on those beautiful occasions when he empathizes with the most imperiled feelings of vulnerability in the hunted prey.

Immortality. In the Prologue to the *Metamorphoses*, Ovid asks the gods to 'spin me a thread from the world's beginning down to my own lifetime, in one continuous poem.' Ovid gets what he wants, *plus*, for he includes himself in the world he invites into creation. He becomes part of the whole of that creation. One might say that Ovid the poet of the *Metamorphoses*, becomes the creator of his own immortality. Immortality becomes a theme of the entire epic.

Modernity. We inevitably read the *Metamorphoses* as a great work of imagination reaching out into our post classical modern world. It is no accident that painting, music, and literature have been touched, since the Renaissance, by the influence of Ovid; Chaucer, Shakespeare, and in our moment Ted Hughes have released formative imagination under the inspiration of Ovid. More perhaps than any other ancient writer Ovid sees into a future in which environmental issues, issues of personal identity—and the question of genetic experimentation are analyzed as part of the human repertoire. On what burning issue of contemporary thought would we not value Ovid's opinion?