

OVID THE CHRISTIAN

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A spirit brings me to speak of forms changed into new bodies. Quite which spirit (alcoholic, divine or otherwise) I would rather pass over for the time being and only begin to remember a little later on. My theme, however, though often changing, will remain largely with forms, changed forms, and in particular with those which the poet Ovid and his *Metamorphoses* assumed during the Christianising readings of the Middle Ages. Of these readings, Dante's *Divina Commedia* (*Divine Comedy*), written in the early part of the 14th century and occasionally called the 'fifth Gospel', is arguably the most challenging and profound. Its incorporation and transformation (one might even say 'transfiguration') of Ovid and his poetry is so wide-ranging and renewing that it alone might stand as an example of how a dead, pagan poet and his corpus could once again be made animate within a living, Christian context.

This paper is consequently about one aspect of Ovid's reception, although it is also, I hope, be a paper about Ovid himself. For while it might on occasion be tempting to see Christianising readings of Classical authors as misguided or anachronistic, it is not at all obvious that the Ovids they tear out of their texts are any more or any less really 'there' than those uncovered by more orthodox critical practices. Indeed, this image of Ovid the poet as an ever-shifting figure, who is himself subject to the processes of metamorphosis and change, can even be traced to as far back as Ovid himself, to the final passage of the *Metamorphoses* (to which I will return) and to the

opening poem of the *Tristia*. In this later poem, Ovid seeks to include the story of his own changed countenance and fate within the body of the *Metamorphoses* itself, and in so doing himself initiates the practice of changing the appearance of that work by locating, and finding, ever more readings ‘in’ it¹.

When we read Ovid as a Christian, are we then really diverging from the spirit of the text, or are we simply reading Ovid as Ovid himself suggests we should? After all, reading as Ovid reads could be construed as the proper way to read Ovid. And, of course, to read Ovid as Ovid himself dictates would, perhaps, provide one further way of rescuing him from a Barthesian kind of authorial death and of allowing him instead to carry on controlling, and thereby living within, the reception and meaning of his text.

Be that as it may, it appears that, in one form or another, Ovid (and particularly the *Metamorphoses*) had continued to be read, by pagans and Christians alike, ever since the time of its first inscription². For Christian readers, however, the practice of reading pagan authors was far from straightforward, and required an ability to discern the wisdom and truth which seemed to lie beneath these often fantastical stories of immorality and deceit³: a process which the 6th century Christian mythographer Fulgentius described as separating the wheat from the chaff⁴. In the 8th or 9th century, Theodulf, the bishop of Orleans, famously justified his own use of Ovid’s erotic poetry in his verse by arguing that, “In his words, although there are

¹ Ovid *Trist.* 1.117-122.

² See Wilkinson (1955) 366f and Sowell’s introduction to Sowell, ed. (1991a).

³ Barkan (1986) ch. 3, “Metamorphosis in the Middle Ages: Figura and Cosmos”.

⁴ Barkan (1986) 103.

many frivolous things, very many true things lie hidden under a false cover”⁵.

This idea of a skin or cover fulfils an important function in allegorical readings of ancient authors, since it identifies the interpreter’s task as one of tearing away the outer surface of the text and of uncovering the true meanings which lie beneath. Dante uses this image as well, but before turning finally to him, I would like to cite the following lines in Theodulf’s argument, since they introduce yet another idea which is central to this paper. He continues: “The style conveys the lies of the poets but the truths of philosophers; such falsehoods can often be turned (*uertere*) to truth”⁶. Turning falsehoods to truth. What better image could there be for figuring the process of reading as itself a process of metamorphosis, a turning of one thing (falsity) into another (truth)?

As has just been mentioned, Dante also uses Theodulf’s image of a ‘cover’ as a way of upholding the idea that poetry, ancient as well as modern, can nonetheless still contain concealed elements of truth. In the second book of his theoretical treatise, the *Convivio* (or *Banquet*), he argues the following:

Writings can be understood and ought to be expounded principally in four senses. The first is called the literal, and this is the sense that does not go beyond the *surface* of the letter, as in the fables of the poets. The next is called the allegorical, and this is the one that is hidden beneath the *cloak* of these fables, and is a truth hidden beneath a beautiful fiction. Thus Ovid says that with his lyre Orpheus tamed wild beasts and made trees and rocks move toward him, which is to say that the wise man with the instrument of his voice makes cruel hearts grow tender and humble and moves to his will those who do not devote their lives to knowledge and art;

⁵ Barkan (1986) 113.

⁶ Barkan (1986) 113.

and those who have no rational life whatsoever are almost like stones⁷.

This citation of Ovid is typical of Dante's writings before the *Commedia*⁸ and has led scholars to wonder why Ovid is then consistently suppressed, and on one occasion openly disparaged, in that later work⁹ - especially since he provides the primary classical model for that poem after Virgil and Aristotle. Ovid does appear in person once in the poem¹⁰, in Limbo where the souls of the guiltless but unbaptised reside, but, unlike Virgil and Statius, he does not physically participate in Dante's own poetic pilgrimage from hell to heaven. He is, however, almost constantly there in spirit, and it is, I will argue, precisely because his is a disembodied spirit of metamorphosis, that it is consequently capable of an almost endless series of figurations and, eventually, transfigurations which will in turn enable it to endure, unlike the more obviously pious Virgil, even into the Christian Paradise of the *Commedia*'s final section.

To say, then, that Ovid's is a disembodied spirit of metamorphosis is very much to call into question the traditional notions of a stable identity which critics often seek to apply to authors, both ancient and modern, to whom (as with Ovid) they can assign a date, a place and a cultural environment. If we turn to the 25th canto of the *Inferno*, the second and final occasion in the *Commedia* in which Ovid is openly invoked, we can see how this more unstable, and metamorphic, notion of identity might work. This canto as a whole is concerned with the practice and processes of metamorphosis, and to this

⁷ Dante *Con.* 2.1.2-3. Emphases mine.

⁸ For a list of Dante's citations of Ovid, see Sowell's introduction to Sowell, ed. (1991a) 6, f.n. 6.

⁹ For a fuller discussion of this theme, see Hawkins (1991).

¹⁰ Dante *Inf.* 4.90.

extent alone, could be termed ‘Ovidian’. But at line 97, Dante explicitly invokes his predecessor and source:

Let Ovid be silent about Cadmus and Arethusa,
For if he makes one a snake and the other a fountain,
That is his art, and I do not envy him¹¹.

Ovid’s influence in this canto had already been signalled when Dante prevented Virgil from speaking by touching him on the nose¹². As ‘Naso’ in Latin signifies both ‘nose’ and Ovid’s final name (Publius Ovidius Naso), this gesture indicates that Virgil’s influence as a poetic model is here to be held temporarily in abeyance so that Ovid instead can come to the fore. And once this is acknowledged, then it soon becomes apparent that Ovid’s story of Salmacis and Hermaphrodite lies behind much of what Dante here relates¹³.

It is therefore somewhat paradoxical that, at the very moment when Ovid is explicitly invoked and is consequently brought to the surface of Dante’s text, he is instantly commanded to remain silent. Is Ovid’s voice really sounding in this canto or not? What is more, if we look at the final line of this stanza, the Italian for, “I do not envy him” (*io non lo ‘nvidio*) can easily be read as *io non Ovidio*, or, “I am not Ovid”¹⁴. Such a verbal trick could quite readily be characterised as particularly Ovidian, and would it not be a characteristically Ovidian move for Dante to deny his identity with Ovid at that very moment when he is most like him? Once again we might ask, is there an Ovid in this text or not? If there is, then, in order to find him, we the

¹¹ Dante *Inf* 25.97-99.

¹² For a further look into Ovid’s nose, see Sowell (1991b).

¹³ Barkan (1986) 155.

¹⁴ Dante *Inf*. 25. 97-99: *Taccia di Cadmo e d’Aretusa Ovidio;/ che se quello in serpente e quella in fonte/ converte poetando, io non lo ‘nvidio*. See Hawkins (1991) esp. 19.

readers will in our turn have to be prepared to metamorphose the surface meaning of “I do not envy him” into the inner one of “I am not Ovid”. And yet, if this inner meaning is taken to be the literal one, then we still have not found our definitive Ovid, unless we are again prepared to metamorphose this negative statement into a positive one. “I am not Ovid” becoming “I am Ovid”.

If what we are looking for is a single and stable identity for Dante’s Ovid, then this process of metamorphosis might have to continue indefinitely. However, if we return to the Ovid of the *Metamorphoses* and to the story of Salmacis and Hermaphrodite which I mentioned earlier, then we might just find that such a search is in any case somewhat futile. Concluding that story, Ovid writes:

So were these two bodies knit in close embrace,
They were no longer two, nor such as to be called,
one, woman, and one, man. They seemed neither and yet
both¹⁵.

Dante echoes this final statement, “they seemed neither and yet both”, in summation of one of the metamorphoses described in his 25th canto¹⁶, and such a conclusion could be applied to all metamorphoses of this kind. When two separate entities come together and inhabit the same language, or the same narrative space, what results is a changed, and ever changing, identity. Dante changes Ovid in the very act of speaking like him and of incorporating Ovid’s words within his own poetic corpus. And yet, at the very same time, Dante and his corpus are themselves changed by their taking on of Ovidian forms. If we were to ask of the passage from the 25th canto which I have recently cited, *is this Dante-esque or Ovidian? or, has the figure of*

¹⁵ Ovid *Met.* 4.377-379.

the poet become Ovid or not?, the answer is most probably that which both Ovid and Dante have already given: it seems neither and yet both.

In a similar way, when a reader recites or repeats the language of a particular author, neither the reader nor the author remain as they were. When, for example, at the outset of this piece I said, “A spirit brings me to speak of forms changed into new bodies”, I was both speaking as Ovid speaks at the outset of the *Metamorphoses*, and thereby not simply in the guise of my own distinctive self, and yet I was also transforming the meaning of Ovid and his words to my own particular end.

This happens if one reads Ovid as a Christian, as a 20th century classical scholar, or as anything else. The process of reading, as I suggested earlier, is itself a process of metamorphosis. What is distinctive about Christianising readings of Ovid, however, is the conceptual framework in which they are performed. This includes ideas of ‘type’ and ‘antitype’, of individual actions, figures and events prefiguring those yet to come and re-echoing those already past - an interpretative tool, incidentally, which has proved particularly fruitful in the study of Virgil’s *Aeneid*¹⁷.

Staying, however, with Dante’s *Commedia* and Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, one reading of the *Commedia* suggests that Dante found in the world of Ovid’s poem an antitype, or direct antithesis to, his own vision of God’s Paradise¹⁸. As such an antitype, its author

¹⁶ Dante *Inf.* 25.77.

¹⁷ Gransden (1976) 14-20, Horsfall (1995) 163f. For Dante, see Barkan (1986) 137-138.

¹⁸ Hawkins (1991) 21: “What [Dante] found there [i.e. in the *Metamorphoses*] was not a quasi-biblical writer almost as authoritative as Virgil,.., but a curator of the fallen world in all its hideous permutations: a pagan master who would provide Dante not with a meditation on the cosmic power of providence but a sustained

consequently deserves the same punishment meted out to all those who dare speak out against God, namely an imposed silence¹⁹. Yet, at the same time, this and other readings of the *Commedia* also have to acknowledge the surprising observation that the *Metamorphoses* has an even greater influence upon the narrative of the *Commedia*'s third and final section, the *Paradiso*. Indeed, it is the *primary* classical model for that section²⁰. The antitype, it seems, has now become the type.

This particular metamorphosis, a turning inside out of one thing into its opposite, seems to have peculiarly Christian connotations²¹. In medieval conceptions of martyrdom, for example, it was believed that martyrs who were punished in the body were baptised and purged in one and could thereby proceed directly into paradise after death. In this account of the martyrdom of St. Agatha, published a few decades before the *Commedia* and widely disseminated throughout Europe, the martyr's pleas for punishment startlingly seem to parallel the processes by which pagan authors were enabled to be incorporated into Christian works. That is, through the threshing of wheat and through the purgation of their *corpora*, or texts:

The next day Quintianus said to her: "Forswear Christ and adore the gods!". When she refused, he ordered her stretched on the rack and tortured, and Agatha said: "These

nightmare of rage, rape, and human loss. There Dante would find powerful images for the horrific inversions of *Inferno* and failed analogies for the redeemed reality he intended to intimate in the other *cantiche*".

¹⁹ As, notably, in *Inferno* 25 itself, 1-6.

²⁰ Brownlee (1991).

²¹ Brownlee (1991) 207: "Dante's invocation [in *Paradiso* 1.19-21] rewrites the flaying of Marsyas *in bono*, for it is presented as a kind of liberation from the body by means of divine inspiration. When the Ovidian text is read against the Dantean rewriting, what results is the suggestion that Marsyas's suffering constitutes a kind of martyrdom." And indeed, the sort of graphic description of physical suffering found in the Ovidian story is reminiscent of the martyrdom sequences in many medieval saints' lives.

pains are my delight! It's as if I were hearing some good news, or seeing someone I had long wished to see, or had found a great treasure. The wheat cannot be stored in the barn unless it has been thoroughly threshed and separated from the chaff: so my soul cannot enter paradise unless you make the headsmen give my body harsh treatment"²².

Ovid, I suggest, undergoes a similar punishment in the *Commedia*. His skin, or surface meaning, has been ripped from him, rendering him often unrecognisable within the body of Dante's own text. At the same time, however, it also enables this unbaptised, pagan poet to be baptised and purged in one, rescued from the still air of his 1st century Limbo, and transfigured bodiless into a spirit worthy of paradise. Here is Dante's invocation to Apollo in the opening canto of the *Paradiso*, a plea to be enabled to enter such a sanctified and hitherto uncharted poetic space:

Come into my heart, and so breathe
As you did when you extracted Marsyas
From the skin in which his limbs were enclosed²³.

The story of Marsyas is told in book 6 of the *Metamorphoses* and commentators have long been struck by this inversion of what in Ovid is a story of human presumption and divine cruelty into what in Dante is a positive image of union between a poet and his God. Dante, it is often remarked, has here done violence to an already-violated Ovidian figure²⁴. But in so doing, has he really torn Ovid too far from himself? Here is Ovid's own account of Marsyas and his fate:

²² From Jacobus de Voraigne, "The Golden Legend: Readings on the Saints", translated by William Granger Ryan, vol. 1 (1993) 155. This was first published in around 1260.

²³ Dante *Par.* 1.19-21.

Another man remembered the tale of the satyr whom Apollo punished, after having defeated him in a competition on the reed-pipes, the instrument Minerva invented. Help!' he cried. Why are you tearing me from myself? Never again, I promise! Playing a pipe is not worth this!' But in spite of his cries the skin was torn off the whole surface of his body: it was all one raw wound. Blood flowed everywhere, his nerves were exposed, unprotected, his veins pulsed with no skin to cover them. It was possible to count his throbbing organs, and the chambers of the lungs, clearly visible within his breast²⁵.

Critical reaction to this passage has generally been rather lame. L. P. Wilkinson²⁶, for example, found it gratuitously gruesome, while Karl Galinsky²⁷ dismisses the pastoral lament which follows as nothing more than an empty *topos*. Dante's reading, of Marsyas *and* of Ovid, is, I suggest, far more penetrating. The *Commedia* figures the process of both reading and writing as a process of metamorphosis, or transformation. In reading one is read, in writing one is written, and in both instances one's surface is torn away to expose the inner being within. Dante's reading of Marsyas both re-enacts the violence involved in art and in metamorphosis (indeed, the *Commedia* seems to figure itself as an act of martyrdom²⁸) and it thereby opens up further readings in that Ovidian passage. These readings might seem to do violence to Ovid's text, and yet, when we take these texts only at their surface level and leave them as they are, as Ovid seems to with his pastoral lament, all we have left (as Ovid himself seems to show) is an empty *topos*.

²⁴ Brownlee (1991) 209, Hawkins (1991) 33.

²⁵ Ovid *Met.* 6. 382-391.

²⁶ Wilkinson (1955) 162.

²⁷ Galinsky [?].

²⁸ Brownlee (1991) [?].

“Why me from me are you tearing?”. The juxtaposition of the two personal pronouns which denote Marsyas’ being re-enacts both the initial unity and the current rending of that being²⁹. What happens to Marsyas here could be seen as emblematic of what happens to Ovid, or any other author, whenever he is read and correspondingly transformed. What remains can be figured either as a direct reading of Ovid or Marsyas (denoted by the direct pronoun *me*) or an indirect one (*mihi*), though in each case the metamorphosed figure we then have is at the same time both Ovid and not Ovid; although before we privilege what appears to be the direct reading we might like to note that, in the context of the Marsyas story, this pronoun probably denotes the skin rather than the inner being. And, as both Dante in the opening of the *Paradiso* and Ovid at the end of the *Metamorphoses* seem to imply, what will live is not the body or corpus but the spirit which animates it.

My work is complete. That day which has power over nothing but my body may, when it pleases put an end to my uncertain span of years. Yet with my better part I shall soar, undying, far above the stars, and my name will be imperishable. I shall live.

With lines torn from the text of the *Metamorphoses*, this paper both begins and ends. Though who, or what, is the author of its being, I would rather pass over for the time being and re-member on another occasion.

²⁹ Tissol (1997) 58-61, 125-129.