

1650-1850: Ideas, Aesthetics, and Inquiries in the Early Modern Era

Volume 23

Article 4

2016

STABILITY TURNED INTO MOTION Erasmus Darwin's Recourse to Ovid's Metamorphoses

Sonja Fielitz

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/sixteenfifty>



Part of the [Aesthetics Commons](#)


Recommended Citation

Sonja Fielitz (2016) "STABILITY TURNED INTO MOTION Erasmus Darwin's Recourse to Ovid's Metamorphoses," *1650-1850: Ideas, Aesthetics, and Inquiries in the Early Modern Era*: Vol. 23, Article 4. Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/sixteenfifty/vol23/iss1/4>

STABILITY TURNED INTO MOTION

Erasmus Darwin's Recourse to Ovid's *Metamorphoses*

SONJA FIELITZ

vid is everywhere. "Vivam": with this self-assured statement the Roman poet Publius Ovidius Naso ends the fifteenth book of his *Metamorphoses* after about twelve-thousand verses. That Ovid's expectations of a long literary afterlife have been fulfilled becomes obvious in a number of laudatory contemporary evaluations, of which I can quote only a few: "The European imagination is a network of references that centers, to a large extent, on Ovid."¹

¹ Hans Blumenberg, *Work on Myth*, trans. Robert M. Wallace (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1985), 35. Quoted in Denis C. Feeney, *Literature and Religion at Rome. Cultures, Contexts, and Beliefs* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 74.

"Seldom has one poet offered so much to so many in such a variety of languages, periods and types of poetry."² Throughout the centuries, Ovid has not only been an important model for painters and composers,³ but also for dramatists, novelists, and poets. In 1997, the British Poet Laureate Ted Hughes was awarded the Whitbread Prize for his *Tales from Ovid*,⁴ which was staged by the Royal Shakespeare Company the following year. In the field of postcolonial literatures, the Australian author David Malouf engaged with Ovid's banishment to Tomis in his *An Imaginary Life* (1978), and Derek Walcott established Ovid as the permanent exile in his poem "The Hotel Normandie Pool,"⁵ to mention only a few examples. Modern and postmodern scholars and critics have rediscovered Ovid, because the "qualities of his poetry . . . make him especially appealing to a late twentieth century audience."⁶ With their border crossings between the fields of rationality and instinct, "Ovid's *Metamorphoses* take us through the whole scale of moans and groans, sighings, lowings, howlings, hissings, apesounds, croakings, whynnyings, bat-talk, bear-roaring, to the voicelessness of fishes [*sic*]."⁷ Furthermore, Ovid's narrative techniques have been described as particularly "modern"⁸ and film-like,⁹ and postmodernists have been fascinated by Ovid's depiction of the artist and the process of artistic creation as such.¹⁰ Last but not least, deconstructionists see in Ovid *the* poet of difference, since "literary knowledge is endlessly relational. This makes Ovid the great poet of *différance*, differentiation and endless deferral."¹¹

² Sara Mack, *Ovid* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988), 163.

³ See an edition of the *Metamorphoses* of 1931 with thirty engravings by Pablo Picasso, Richard Strauss's "Daphne," and Benjamin Britten's "Six Metamorphoses after Ovid."

⁴ In 1995 Hughes had contributed four versions of Ovidian myths to Michael Hofmann and James Lasdun, eds. *After Ovid. New Metamorphoses* (London: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1994).

⁵ In Derek Walcott, *Collected Poems 1948–1984* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1986; London: Faber and Faber, 1992).

⁶ Mack, *Ovid*, 2.

⁷ Charles Tomlinson, *Poetry and Metamorphosis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 16.

⁸ Cf. Niklas Holzberg, *Ovid. Dichter und Welt* (Munich: C.H. Beck, 1997), 29.

⁹ See Italo Calvino, *The Uses of Literature: Essays*, trans. Patrick Creagh (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1986). Quoted in Hofmann and Lasdun, *After Ovid. New Metamorphoses*, xii.

¹⁰ See, for instance, Christine Rees, "The Metamorphosis of Daphne in Sixteenth- and Seventeenth-Century English Poetry," *MLR* 66 (1971): 251–63; Charles Martindale, ed., *Ovid Renewed* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 15.

¹¹ Anthony D. Nuttall, "A Kind of Scandal. Shakespeare and Ovid by Jonathan Bate," *London Review of Books* (August 19, 1993), 15 and Martindale, *Ovid Renewed*, 17.

* Ovid in the Eighteenth Century *

Despite Ovid's popularity in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, he was not always held in high esteem. Critics have done surprisingly little on the status of Ovid in the so-called long eighteenth century—an epoch in literary history that is thought to have been particularly favorable of the classical authors.

If critics have dealt with Ovid's reception in the eighteenth century at all, they either did it in passing, or they have taken the reception of his works, especially the *Metamorphoses*, for granted, because he was a classical author—an assumption that would make sense at a first glance. Since Ovid had been a very popular author in the Middle Ages and the Early Modern Period, one could assume that his reputation as school author and poets' poet would continue, if not increase in the age of "neoclassicism," in which the works of classical poets became compulsory models for imitation. As we will see further below, however, this was not the case with Ovid. Some critics restrict themselves to sweeping statements concerning the history of Ovid's reception in the eighteenth century, claiming that his works, and especially his (irrational) *Metamorphoses*, could hardly be popular at a time dominated by reason.¹² Moreover, Ovid's style is seen as lacking symmetry and as overwrought with rhetorical devices;¹³ his *Metamorphoses* does not respond to the classical standards of an epic, and Ovid's "laxity in sexual matters was no longer condoned because the author was a classic."¹⁴

It was only in 1988 that Charles Martindale's essay collection *Ovid Renewed* paved the way for a serious and detailed critical engagement with

¹² "Above all, however, it was the impact of reason and 'common sense' on mythology that brought about its gradual disguise." Davis P. Harding, *Milton and the Renaissance Ovid* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1946), 25f. "The fundamental reason for the mythological bareness of the eighteenth century was the dominance of rationalism and realism, and the fundamental impulse for the mythological renaissance was contained in the romantic protest against a mechanical world." Douglas Bush, *Mythology and the Renaissance Tradition in English Poetry* (1932; repr., New York: Pageant Book Co., 1957), 526. "Accustomed to seeing the things in the light of reason, they had no taste for shadowy and inexplicit allegories." Richard F. Hardin, "Ovid in Seventeenth Century England," *Comparative Literature* 24 (1972), 51.

¹³ "Obviously there is a common ground between the suspicion of allegory, which caused the *Metamorphoses* to lose prestige toward the end of the seventeenth century, and the aversion to puns, paradoxes, and quibbles, which led to a widespread devaluation of the poet's chief currency, his language. Neither mystery nor mystification was acceptable to men of the English Enlightenment." Hardin, "Ovid in Seventeenth Century England," 56.

¹⁴ Lancelot P. Wilkinson, *Ovid Recalled* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1955), 442.

the reception of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* in the eighteenth century. Tellingly, however, even Martindale includes only one essay on the *Metamorphoses* in the eighteenth century, that is, an essay on Dryden and Ovid (Dryden died in 1700) and another essay on the reception of the *Epistles*! Ten years later, William S. Anderson's *Ovid: The Classical Heritage* (New York, London, 1995) includes only forty-six pages of an overall of 400 on "The Seventeenth to the Twentieth Century" (219–65) which, in any case, is largely a reprint of David Hopkins's essay on "Dryden and Ovid's 'Wit out of Season'" (219–52), which is included in Martindale's collection (167–91). Apart from this article, the eighteenth century is completely ignored in this distinguished publication, so that it is safe to agree with Martindale's statement that "No poet suffers more from a rigidly schematized critical approach than Ovid."¹⁵

* A Look into the Past: Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries *

The critical neglect of the reception of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* in the long eighteenth century is all the more surprising, since Ovid was especially popular during the Middle Ages and the Early Modern Period. There is no need to remind readers of this distinguished collection of essays of the medieval *Ovide moralisé* (which lived on in early modern translation and school editions of the *Metamorphoses*) and the fact that the study of Ovid's texts was compulsory in early modern grammar schools.¹⁶ Because Ovid was regarded as *the* master of poetic form,¹⁷ all of his works, including the *Ars Amatoria*, were read and studied in schools. In 1612, for instance, John Brinsley, *master* of grammar school in Ashby-de-la-Zouch in Leicestershire, testifies to Ovid's popularity¹⁸ as does Charles Hoole in his *A New Discovery of the Old Art of Teaching Schoole* (1637, published in 1660). Hoole recommends Ovid as a stylistic model "out of which Authour you may make choice of the most pleasing and profitable Arguments," since the "grammarians" should not only

¹⁵ William Keach, *Elizabethan Erotic Narratives* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1977), 4.

¹⁶ See Thomas W. Baldwin, *William Shakespeare's Small Latine and Lesse Greeke* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1944), I, 83, II, 382.

¹⁷ Cf. Franco Munari, *Ovid im Mittelalter* (Zürich, Stuttgart: Artemis, 1969), 10.

¹⁸ "Take *flores poetarum* and in every Common place make choice of Ovid's verses . . . lastly, read them over the verse of Ovid, that they may see they themselves have made the very same." John Brinsley, *Ludus Literarius* (London, 1612), 195. Quoted in Harding, *Milton and the Renaissance Ovid*, 33.

be taught the stories of the *Metamorphoses* but also "the moralitie therein couched."¹⁹ Ovid became a stylistic model also for early modern poetry, because his wealth of metaphors, images, and rhetorical devices as well as his elegant linguistic rhythm recommended him as a model for imitation. *Copia verborum* was best taught by Ovid, and as long as humanism propagated *copia verborum*, Ovid was admired and recommended, for instance, in Golding's translation of the *Metamorphoses*.

As early as the first half of the seventeenth century, however, poets and critics with a strong neoclassical bias, such as Ben Jonson, for instance, began to criticize Ovid and his way of writing. He was first of all censured for his style, that is, for the way of presenting and commenting on his characters. Ben Jonson's claim for *plain style* led to the demand of the abolishment of ornaments and Ovidian mythological comparisons.²⁰ Simplicity became the new ideal, best described by Ben Jonson's dictum "more matter, less words." In *Timber or Discoveries* (1640),²¹ Jonson saw Ovid as an author who does not keep to "doctrines and precepts" but creates his works "by nature and instinct." Vergil is the one who writes "proper" verses according to the laws of *reason*. Further testimonies are to be found in *The Spectator* No. 279 (Saturday, 19 January 1712)²² and *The Spectator* No. 363 of Saturday 26 April 1712,²³ in which the description of the universal Deluge in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* [*Met.* I, 260–312] is described as "idle and superfluous [in Ovid]; but just and beautiful in Milton['s *Paradise Lost*]." Due to his "judgment" Milton succeed-

¹⁹ See Robert M. Ogilvie, *Latin and Greek. A History of the Classics on English Life from 1600 to 1918* (London: Routledge, 1964), 10 and Harding, *Milton and the Renaissance Ovid* Press, 12.

²⁰ A detailed testimony for Ovid's declining popularity in the seventeenth century can be found in Sandys' "Ovid Defended" (London, 1628), who is one of the last to defend Ovid's "art," which is characterized by "wit" and the "form" of the *Metamorphoses*. But the battle was already lost by the time Sandys praised him.

²¹ Quoted in Joel E. Spingarn, *Critical Essays of the 17th Century* (1908; repr. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1957), 1:52.

²² "As there are two kinds of Sentiments, the Natural and the Sublime, which are always to be pursued in an Heroic Poem, there are also two kinds of Thoughts which are carefully to be avoided. The first are such as are affected and unnatural; the second such as are mean and vulgar. As for the first kind of Thoughts we meet with little or nothing that is like them in *Virgil*: He has none of those trifling Points and Puerilities that are so often to be met with *Ovid*, none of the Epigrammatick Terms of *Lucan*, none of those swelling Sentiments which are so frequent in *Statius* and *Claudian*, none of those mixed Embellishments of *Tasso*. Every thing is just and natural. His sentiments shew that he had a perfect Insight into Human Nature, and that he knew every thing which was the most proper to affect it." Donald F. Bond, ed., *The Spectator*, vol. 2 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1965), 585–90.

²³ Bond, *The Spectator*, 5:364.

ed in revising Ovid's "redundancies," and "puerilities."²⁴ Here, redundancy is Ovid's greatest fault, since he had not curtailed his genius by judgment and purity of style.²⁵

Ovid and his *Metamorphoses* were not only censured for matters of style, but also for its genre. Since the *Metamorphoses* is a "perpetuum carmen" of about 250 tales of transformations that run into each other in a permanent flux, there is no single hero as would be necessary for an epic poem. And indeed, in 1675 Thomas Hobbes applied Ben Jonson's demand for *plain style* to the all-but-clear structure of the *Metamorphoses*: "Another Vertue of an Heroick Poem is the Perspicuity and the Facility of Construction, and consisteth in a natural contexture of the words, so as not to discover the labour but the natural ability of the Poet; and this is usually called a good Style."²⁶

As we can see from these few examples, Ovid's *Metamorphoses* contradicted numerous expectations vis-à-vis the static rules of classicism. Since the natural sciences and literature were both seen as representations of a divine plan of a world ordered by reason and characterized by the harmony of nature (and both disciplines worked with the same terms such as *art*, *imitation* and *nature*), writing according to rules was seen as the appropriate form of poetry. A poet was expected to imitate nature's laws by obeying poetical laws, which is best represented by Alexander Pope's statement: "First follow nature, and your Judgment frame / By her just Standard, which is still the same: / Unerring Nature still divinely bright / One clear and universal light" (*Essay on*

²⁴ See also Leonard Welsted in his *A Dissertation Concerning the Perfection of the English Language, the State of Poetry, etc.* (London, 1724) who saw "puerilities, indelicacy of language, and other vices" in Ovid. His *copia verborum* "was Ovid's great defect; his style of verse is otherwise wonderfully pleasing, and would not fail to shine in the hands of a writer turned happily by nature for it, as he was, with more judgement and purity." Quoted in Scott Elledge, ed., *Eighteenth Century Critical Essays*, vol. 2 (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1961), 347.

²⁵ How long this criticism of Ovid's language was to persist becomes obvious from Laurence Sterne's Letter 38a of summer 1759 when he applies Quintilian's criticism of Ovid to his *Tristram Shandy*: "I know not whether I am entirely free from the fault Ovid is so justly censured for—of being *Nimium ingenii sui amator*. The hint however is right—to sport too much with a Man's own wit is surfeiting . . . after all I fear *Tristram Shandy* must go into the world with a hundred faults." Lewis P. Curtis, ed. *Letters of Laurence Sterne* (1935; repr., Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965), 79.

²⁶ Thomas Hobbes, "To The Reader, Concerning the Vertues of an Heroique Poem prefixed to Homer's Odyssees," in Thomas Hobbes, *Homer's Odyssees Translated by Thomas Hobbes of Malmsbury. With a Large Preface Concerning the Vertues of an Heroique Poem Written by the Translator* (London, 1675). Quoted in John Wain, *Preliminary Essays* (London: Macmillan, 1957), 47.

Criticism, 68–71). Ovid, who did not keep to these rules in his *Metamorphoses* at all, was accordingly banned from the critical discourse of the time.

✱ New Discoveries ✱

Nevertheless, if one pries more deeply into the texts of the long eighteenth century, there are numerous fascinating discoveries to be made, because a few critics indeed had recourse to Ovid's excellence and high poetical status and tried to "excuse" Ovid's *Metamorphoses* in various ways.

✱ Excuse 1: Ovid the Would-be Dramatist ✱

In Dryden's *Essay on Dramatic Poesy* (1668),²⁷ Eugenius sees Ovid's *Metamorphoses* as closest to Aristotelian tragedy:

Though I see many excellent thoughts in Seneca, yet he of them who had a genius most proper for the stage, was Ovid; he had a way of writing so fit to stir up a pleasing admiration and concernment, which are the objects of a tragedy, and to show the various movements of a soul combating betwixt two different passions, that, had he lived in our age, or in his own could have writ with our advantages, no man but must have yielded to him; and therefore I am confident the *Medea* is none of his: . . . yet it moves not my soul enough to judge that he, who in the epic way wrote things so near the drama as the story of Myrrha, of Caunus and Biblis, and the rest, should stir up no more concernment where he most endeavoured it.

Tragedy, that is, the *heroic play* of the time, aimed at evoking passions by Aristotelian "admiration" and "concernment," whereas the epic was designed to depict norms and heroes. Ovid's depiction of individual fates would thus have been appropriate for drama and not for the epic.

²⁷ "Revised and republished edition" of 1684 according to Dennis J. Enright, Ernst de Chickera, eds., *English Critical Texts. 16th Century to 20th Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987).

* Excuse 2: Ovid as the Master of the Grotesque *

Another excuse for Ovid's *Metamorphoses* was furnished by Joseph Addison in *The Spectator* No. 417 (1712) of Saturday, June 28, 1712,²⁸ "as the continuous and well-timed exploitation of novelty." Addison sees Homer as the one who "strikes the Imagination wonderfully with what is Great," Virgil as the one "with what is Beautiful, and the last [i.e. Ovid] with what is Strange." In the following, Homer is he depicted as the master of the *sublime*, Vergil of the ordered art, and Ovid of the grotesque:

Reading the *Iliad* is like travelling through a Country uninhabited, where the Fancy is entertained with a thousand Savage Prospects of vast Deserts, wilde, uncultivated Marshes, huge Forests, mis-shapen Rocks, and Precipices. On the contrary, the *Aeneid* is like a well-ordered Garden, where it is impossible to find out any Part unadorned or to cast our Eyes upon a single Spot that does not produce some beautiful Plant or Flower. But when we are in the *Metamorphoses*, we are walking on enchanted Ground and see nothing but Scenes of Magic lying round us. . . . In a word . . . Ovid, in his *Metamorphoses* has shown us how the Imagination may be affected by what is Strange. He describes a Miracle in every Story and always gives us the Sight of some new Creature at the end of it. His Art consists chiefly in well-timing his Description, before the first Shape is quite worn off and the new one perfectly finish'd; so that he everywhere entertains us with something we never saw before, and shews Monster after Monster to the end of the *Metamorphoses*.

As we have seen so far, the strong neoclassical system of static rules forced some critics of the time to find new ways to integrate Ovid into the critical discourse of their time. For Dryden, he is a dramatist who unfortunately chose the wrong genre; Addison tries to establish the genre of the grotesque for Ovid.

²⁸ Bond, *The Spectator*, 5:563–566.

✱ The Winds of Change ✱

Despite the overall derogatory statements on Ovid and his *Metamorphoses*, the latter appear to have been re-integrated into the literary discourse of the long eighteenth century from the middle of the century on, and this was due to fundamental changes in poetical and aesthetic discourses—a move away from (rigid) stability toward motion, which I need only sketch here.

✱ Ovid as the Master of Passion ✱

As early as the beginning of the eighteenth century, Ovid was seen as a master of passion, when Joseph Trapp praises Ovid as follows in his ninth *Lecture on Poetry* (1711–1719):

How sweet is that complaint of Phyllis to Demophon, in Ovid!
How wonderfully adapted to move compassion. No one was a greater master of this secret than Ovid; none understood nature more than he or expressed her various conflicts better, and has left us abundance of instances of it in his *Epistles* and *Metamorphoses*.²⁹

✱ The Sublime ✱

In his *Notes on some of the foregoing Stories in Ovid's Metamorphoses*,³⁰ Joseph Addison refers to the

²⁹ Quoted in Elledge, *Eighteenth Century Critical Essays*, 2:241–43.

³⁰ Adolph C. Guthkelch, ed., *The Miscellaneous Works of Joseph Addison* (London: Bell, 1914; St. Clair Shores: Scholarly Press, 1978), 132–47. Citations refer to the Scholarly Press edition. The first translation of *Peri Hypsous* into Latin was done by Gerard Langbaine (Oxford, 1636), the first English translations dates from John Hall (1652). Boileau's treatise of 1674 was translated into English by J. Pultney (1680). Further English translations are by Leonard Welsted (1711) and William Smith (1739). There were no fewer than fourteen editions of *Peri Hypsous* in eighteenth-century England. See Samuel H. Monk, *The Sublime. A Study of Critical Theories in XVIII-Century England* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1963).

story of Phaeton [which] is told with a greater air of majesty and grandeur than any other in all Ovid. . . . And indeed we may every where observe in Ovid, that he never fails of a due Loftiness in his Ideas, tho' he wants it in his Words. . . . The image we have here [in his description of Enceladus] is truly great and sublime, of a Giant vomiting out a tempest of fire, or heaving up all Sicily, with the body of an Island upon his Breast, and a vast Promontory on either Arm.³¹

An "air of majesty and grandeur" signals the influence of *Peri Hypsous*: Ovid's "loftiness in his ideas" is more important than the fact that "he wants it in his words."

* General Nature *

In addition, we have to consider Dr. Johnson's notion of *species and individual* which coined the idea of "general nature": For Pope, "to copy nature" had implied only to imitate the classical authors ("is to copy them"), as eternal rules could be deduced from them. For Johnson, on the contrary³² literature is no more imitation of the ancients, but the depiction of the common and universal, that is, "general manners of common life" (*The Life of Pope*), because "reason and nature" are "uniform and inflexible" (*The Rambler*, 125), and "human nature . . . always stays the same" (*The Adventurer*, 99).

³¹ Guthkelch, *The Miscellaneous Works*, 133.

³² See *Rasselas*, chapter 10: "The business of the poet . . . is to examine, not the individual, but the species; to remark general properties and large appearances; he does not number the streaks of a tulip, or describe the different shades in the verdure of the forest. He is to exhibit in his portraits of nature such prominent and striking features, as recall the original to every mind; and must neglect the minute discriminations, which one may have remarked, and another have neglected, for those characteristics which are alike obvious to vigilance and carelessness. . . . He must divest himself of the prejudices of his age or country; he must consider right and wrong in their abstracted and invariable state, he must disregard present laws and opinions, and rise to general and transcendental truths, which will always be the same."

✱ Blending of Genres ✱

The new orientation in the field of genre found its most prominent voice in Henry Home, Lord Kames's *Elements of Criticism* (1762): "Literary compositions run into each other, precisely like colours: in their strong tints they are easily distinguished; but are susceptible of so much variety and of so many different forms that we never can say where one species ends and another begins"³³—and this represents exactly the structural principle of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*.

✱ Decreasing Authority of the Bible ✱

Another form of reintegration of the *Metamorphoses* was determined by Bernard Mandeville (1670–1732) in his *The Fable of the Bees* (1729/32),³⁴ in which he relates the *Metamorphoses* to the Bible and discusses the credibility of the two versions of the Creation. Horatio and Cleomenes discuss the reliability of classical authors:

Hor: Yes, yes. Do you believe Hesiod?

Cleo: No.

Hor: Ovid's Metamorphosis?

Cleo: No.

Hor: But you believe the story of Adam and Eve, and Paradise?

Cleo: Yes.

Hor: That they were produced at once, I mean at their full Growth; he from a lump of Earth, and she from one of his Ribbs?

Cleo: Yes.

Hor: And that as soon as they were made, they could speak, reason, and were endued with Knowledge?

Cleo: Yes.

³³ See Aisso Bosker, *Literary Criticism in the Age of Johnson*, 2nd rev. ed. (Groningen, 1952), 140–43.

³⁴ Bernard Mandeville, *The Fable of the Bees: or, Private Vices, Publick Benefits*. With a Commentary Critical, Historical, and Explanatory by Frederick B. Kaye, 2 vols. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1923).

Hor: In short, you believe the Innocence, the Delight, and all the Wonders of Paradise, that are related by one Man; at the same time that you will not believe what has been told us by many, of the Uprightness, the Concord, and the Happiness of a Golden Age.

Cleo: That's very true.

Even if the way of argumentation is not consistent, because the initial question of the credibility of classical authors gradually slides into the background, we can state that in Mandeville's *Fable of the Bees*, the creation of the world as it is depicted in the *Metamorphoses* is as satisfactory as the biblical description.

* Descriptive Poetry *

The increasingly popular descriptive poetry in the tradition of Horace's "ut pictura poesis" (*Ars poetica* 361ff) boasts detailed descriptions and perceptions—as they can be found in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. In the seventeenth century, Dryden's preface of "A Parallel of Poetry and Painting"³⁵ had started with a comparison of *artist* and *nature* which takes up about two thirds of his *Preface* and then develops a parallel between the *sister arts* of poetry and painting: "in both these arts, it follows, that some rules of imitation are necessary to obtain the end; for without rules there can be no art" (138). For Dryden, rules are still to be obeyed. At the end of the eighteenth century, however, Hugh Blair expresses in his *Descriptions* of 1790 that a real poet "catches the distinguishing features; he gives the colours of life and reality [to his description]; he places it in such a light that a Painter could copy after him. This happy talent is chiefly owing to a strong imagination."³⁶ Against this background, it becomes obvious that Ovid as a highly "visual" poet must have been newly discovered, which I will exemplify by two texts.

³⁵ William P. Ker, ed., *The Essays of John Dryden*, vol. 2 (New York: Russel, 1961), 115–53.

³⁶ *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres*, 4th ed. (London, 1790), III, 3.3. Quoted in Jean H. Hagstrum, *The Sister Arts. The Tradition of Literary Pictorialism and English Poetry from Dryden to Gray* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), 138. See also Joseph Warton, *An Essay on the Genius and Writings of Pope* (London, 1782), II, 165: "The use, the force, and the excellence of language, certainly consists in raising clear, complete and circumstantial images, and in turning readers into spectators." Quoted in Hagstrum, *The Sister Arts*, 153.

✱ Alexander Pope, *Windsor Forest* ✱

In Pope's *Windsor Forest*³⁷ (1713), the "Tale of Lodona" is based on Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, namely, the myths of Pan and Syrinx (I, 698–712), Daphne (I, 452–567) and Byblis (IX, 454–665). The tale of Pan and Syrinx in particular is newly interpreted by Pope. The "rural nymph" (171), "the fair Lodona nam'd" (172), Thames's "offspring" (172), is chased by Pan, because she has left the well ordered world of Diana's train at Windsor Forest and has thus entered a chaotic realm:

It chanc'd, as eager of the Chase the Maid
Beyond the Forest's verdant Limits stray'd,
Pan saw and lov'd, and burning with Desire
Pursu'd her Flight; her Flight increas'd his Fire. (181–84)

Her flight is compared to the swift flight of the "doves" and the "Eagle" (185–88), but (as in the case of Daphne in the *Metamorphoses*), "In vain on Father Thames she calls for aid" (197) Nevertheless, her laments are heard by the Gods: "Ah, Cynthia, . . . / O Let me, to the Shades repair, / My native Shades—there weep and murmur there" (200–2): "and melting as in tears she lay, / In a soft, silver Stream dissolv'd away." (203ff.). In contrast to Ovid's Syrinx, Pope's Lodona is not turned into reed but—like Byblis—dissolves into her own tears.

The influence of Ovid becomes particularly obvious in the depiction of the great "Father of the British Floods" (219), "Old Father Thames" (330):

In that blest Moment, from his Oozy Bed
Old Father Thames advanc'd his rev'rend Head.
His Tresses dropt with Dews, and o'er the Stream
His shining Horns diffus'd a golden Gleam:
Grav'd on his Urn appear'd the Moon, that guides
His swelling Waters, and alternate Tydes;
The figur'd Streams in Waves of Silver roll'd
And on their Banks Augusta rose in Gold.
Around his Throne the Sea-born Brothers stood,
Who swell with Tributary Urns his Flood. (329–38)

³⁷ John E. Butt, ed., *The Poems of Alexander Pope. A One Volume Edition of the Twickenham Pope* (1963; repr., London: Routledge, 1992), 195–210.

The embellishment of Father Thames becomes obvious when we compare it with Dryden's *Annus Mirabilis* (1666):

Old father Thames rais'd up his reverend Head,
But fear'd the fate of Simoeis would return:
Deep in his ooze he sought his sedgy bed,
And shrunk his waters back into his urn (925–28)³⁸

Clearly, in Pope's version, Ovid's wealth of descriptive details has found its way back to eighteenth-century poetry.

✱ James Thomson, *The Seasons* ✱

In his *The Seasons* (1730), James Thomson's tried to revive the classic "world poem" in the tradition of Lucretius's *De rerum natura* and Vergil's *Georgica*.³⁹ *The Seasons*—which are concerned with "motion," that is, the change of seasons themselves—were a novelty in their time and were received differently by literary critics. In 1732, in a letter to Wogan, Jonathan Swift complained about their relative lack of plot "because they are all descriptions, and nothing is doing."⁴⁰ In 1735, however, Thomas Blackwell praised the extensive description of the landscape in Thomson's poem as "nobly executed."⁴¹

It is in *Spring*, 358–70, that an almost verbal quotation of the *Metamorphoses* is to be found. In the speech of Pythagoras (*Met.*, XV, 116–26; *Spring*, 358–70) Thomson even tries to supersede his model, that is Ovid, by lengthening the chain of rhetorical apostrophs and thus enhancing the impression of emotional excitement. The boar does not only assist humans at

³⁸ Quoted in Hagstrum, *The Sister Arts*, 217.

³⁹ "The Seasons echoes *De rerum natura* in passages on science and social evolution, and, notably, in accounts of human misery (e.g. *Sp.* 983–1112, *Su.* 1052–91, *Wz.* 311–21)." James Thomson, *The Seasons*, ed. James Sambrook (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981), xxiv. In his Preface to the second edition of *Winter* Thomson translates *Georgica* II, 475–486. See *ibid.*, xxivf.

⁴⁰ In a letter to Wogan of 1732 Swift declares: "One Thomson, a Scotchman, has succeeded in the best in that way [i.e. blank verse], in four poems he has writ on the four seasons; yet I am not over fond of them, because they are all description, nothing is doing." See Ralph Cohen, *The Art of Discrimination. Thomson's The Seasons and the Language of Criticism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1964), 87.

⁴¹ See Thomson, *The Seasons*, xxix.

the time of harvest, but must, after having been slain, enhance the splendor of the harvest feast. Here Thomson breaks up:

'tis but enough,
In this late age, adventurous to have touched
Light on the numbers of the Samian Sage (*Spring*, 371–73).

He thereby explicitly refers to Ovid's Pythagoras, because in his complete passage of more than four-hundred verses Ovid never uses Pythagoras's proper name but only speaks of "vir fuit his, ortu Samius" (XV, 60).

* The Interest in Botany *

Perhaps the most fascinating new orientation in the history of ideas in the long eighteenth century can be found in the field of natural sciences where critics turn their back on the static world picture of physics and its an-organic bodies and turn toward biology which replaces *stability* by *motion*, and *being* by *coming into being*.⁴² In the humanities, Coleridge established the idea of *organic form* without any mechanistic rules. In the sciences, systematic thought was replaced by the upcoming thought of evolution—and it should be this development which reintegrated the *Metamorphoses* most prominently in the critical discourse of the long eighteenth century.

* Erasmus Darwin *

The overall driving force for the promotion of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* was Erasmus Darwin's *The Love of the Plants* (1789), published in two parts, that is, *The Economy of Vegetation* (Part I, 1792) and *The Botanic Garden* (Part II,

⁴² "The form is mechanic when on any given material we impress a predetermined form, not necessarily arising out of the properties of the material—as when to a mass of wet clay we give whatever shape we wish to retain when hardened. The organic form, on the other hand, is innate, it shapes as it develops itself from within, and the fullness of its development is one and the same with the perfection of its outward form." Reginald A. Foakes et al., eds., *The Collected Works of S. T. Coleridge*, vol. 5 *Lectures on Belles Lettres 1808–1819: On Literature* (London: Routledge, 1987). Reginald A. Foakes et al., eds., *The Collected Works of S. T. Coleridge*, vol. 6 *Lectures on Belles Lettres 1812–1813* (London: Routledge, 1987), Lecture 8, 495.

1789): after the long period of derogatory evaluations of Ovid's epic, Darwin was the first to have recourse to it for his explanation of the world's living phenomena. As we will see below in more detail, Darwin liberates the human forms that Ovid had changed into plants and trees and restores them to their original state again. He takes the immortality of the organic material for granted and considers only the outer appearance of a phenomenon as object to continuous change.

As I have tried to sketch above, ordering, tracing lineages, classifying and naming, in sum, taking control of all realms of knowledge were key concepts of the beginning of the long eighteenth century. The pressure to classify plants had been intensified by the discovery of thousands of new species in remote parts of the world, brought home by colonists, traders and explorers. Most important of all, Carl Linnaeus (1707–78) revolutionized taxonomy by taking the idea of species and the notion of a hierarchic organic life (a vital foundation of later theories of evolution). He saw the animal and plant worlds as linked by shared characteristics, and his ideas were diffused across Europe in several works, especially in his *Systema Naturae*, first published in 1735. Here, Linnaeus divided plants into classes by the number of "male genitals," the stamens, and then into orders by their pistils, the "female genitals." The supporting structure, the calyx, became the "nuptial bed." Like Newton in physics, Linnaeus had discovered the laws of botany.

In Britain, botany was immensely fashionable, especially after Cook's first voyage which yielded a rich harvest including about 1,300 previously unknown plants.⁴³ Furthermore, botany was a court pursuit, patronized by King George III, so that natural history societies sprang up across Britain, and a plethora of books was published.

Darwin's intention in *The Botanic Garden* was "to enlist Imagination under the Banner of Science" (*The Advertisement*) and to turn Linnaeus's Latin plant taxonomy to a more comprehensible English reading. Darwin takes over "the sexual system of Linnaeus" (*Advertisement*) to poetry by declaring the Linnaean system to be unexplored poetic ground and rich in metaphoric possibilities—as rich as Ovid. For Darwin, classification was not enough, since he became increasingly interested in plant development: how had the "families" that formed the basis of classification come about? If families exist, they could only have been formed by crossing, successive variation

⁴³ See Jenny Uglow, *The Lunar Men. The Friends who made the Future 1730–1810* (London: Faber and Faber, 2002), 267ff.

and degeneration of the original species. In order to find an explanation, he refers to Ovid's *Metamorphoses* in the *Prooemium* of *The Botanic Garden*:

Gentle Reader!

Lo, here a Camera Obscura is presented to thy view, in which are lights and shades dancing on a white canvas, and magnified into apparent life!—if thou art perfectly at leisure for such a trivial amusement, walk in and view the wonders of my enchanted garden.

Whereas P. Ovidius Naso, a great Necromancer in the famous Court of Augustus Caesar, did by art poetic transmute Men, Women, and even Gods and Goddesses, into Trees and Flowers; I have undertaken by similar art to restore some of them to their original animality, after having remained prisoners so long in their respective vegetable mansions; and have here exhibited them before thee. Which thou may'st contemplate as diverse little pictures suspended over the chimney of a Lady's dressing-room connected only by a slight festoon of ribbons. And which, though thou may'st not be acquainted with the originals, may amuse thee by the beauty of their persons, their graceful attitudes, or the brilliancy of their dress. Farewell.⁴⁴

Darwin reverses "by similar art" what the "necromancer" Ovid had created "by poetic art" at the court of Emperor Augustus. He frees men and women from their green prisons, brings them back to their original states and thus gives a living to nature's rigid forms. The precondition of this process is that organic material is immortal, and only the outer appearance is subject to a continuous transformation process.

* Johann Wolfgang von Goethe,
Die Metamorphose der Pflanzen (1790) *

Another scientist and poet who had recourse to Ovid's *Metamorphoses* as a central text of a new episteme was Johann Wolfgang von Goethe. The

⁴⁴ Erasmus Darwin, *The Botanic Garden, Part II, containing the Loves of the Plants* (Lichfield, 1789).

Metamorphose der Pflanzen [*The Metamorphosis of the Plants*] was Goethe's first publication in the field of natural sciences. He published it only one year after Darwin's *The Love of the Plants*, and he also transgressed the boundaries of natural science and poetry when he designed a model for the order of creation and its forces. Goethe knew Darwin's work: in his diary entries of 1795, 1798, 1810 und 1817 he refers to *The Botanic Garden* and *Zoonomia*, and in a letter to Friedrich Schiller of 1798 he declares his agreement with Darwin's theses.⁴⁵

The works of Goethe and Darwin present us with two different conceptions of biological science, both capable in their own right of organizing the phenomena of life and serving as a basis for progressive empirical research. For Goethe, there are eternal laws of biological organisation, and these laws are expressed phenomenologically as morphotypes.

In *The Metamorphosis of the Plants*, Goethe addresses a very particular transformation of structurally similar elements arranged along an axis, what we today call "serial metamorphosis." The idea of gradual change of form throughout the history of the earth, the fundamental ideal underlying the theory of evolution, shatters precisely the idea of clearly delineated types and emphasizes the flux of random variation. The new mode of thinking also assumes a transformation of a serial, continuous transformation of structures which rich potentials. Goethe stated very clearly the idea of gradual differentiation. For him, leaves, stamens and pistils are all identical organs which have been gradually altered beyond recognition by a series of vegetative processes—and thus he takes recourse to Ovid's model of gradual change and continuous flux and motion.

Goethe sums up his services to morphology by saying that the intermaxillary bone secured the admission that a single osteological type pervades all forms; and that the construction of the skull from vertebrae establishes the identity of all the segments of this osteological type, however different they may look from each other. The consistency of the osteological type in all forms, and the identity of all the units of this type, however unique their structure, are the two principles on which everything else in anatomy and zoology rest. Analogous to the concept of the intermaxillary bone Goethe also describes the development of the individual plant. The constant is the species of the plant with its specific properties; even abnormal or induced malformations are still subjects to the laws of formation.

⁴⁵ See Desmond King-Hele, *Erasmus Darwin and the Romantic Poets* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1986), 170ff.

Just as in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, there is no linear order, but all individual myths are subjected to an overall idea of the same process. The narrative in all its diversity presents variations of one (archetypal) idea. Diversity is not forced into a distinct order, and the system of diversity rather represents a plethora of possible combinations. Ovid's *Metamorphoses* thus provides an open model for the idea of a structure which identifies itself as a structure in the course of its developing process. In short, it is a pattern of permanent flux and motion. Nature's aim is no form but the dynamic process itself and thus a concept that is contradictory to Linnaeus's system.

All in all, Goethe's way of thinking defines the process of metamorphosis as a serial phenomenon with rich potential of which various possibilities can be activated, be it in the realm of plants, vertebrae or stones.

* Conclusion *

In the Middle Ages and the Early Modern Period, Ovid and his *Metamorphoses* were held in high esteem. As early as the first half of the seventeenth century, however, poets and critics with a strong neo-classical bias, such as Ben Jonson, began to criticize Ovid and his way of writing: he was censured for his treatment of the epic genre (there is no unity of action and no single hero in the *Metamorphoses*) and also for epistemological reasons. As Michel Foucault and others have suggested, the episteme of the period between the middle of the seventeenth century and the beginning of the nineteenth century was characterized by clear divisions between the realms of men, animals and plants, and a preordained stability of the world. A "floating" world as it is presented in the *Metamorphoses*, in which all things are in a state of constant motion and change, not only contradicted this preordained stability of the world but also violated the principle of verisimilitude. Ovid's epic was considered to be an insult to human rationality and thus excluded from the critical discourse of the time.

Due to various poetological changes in eighteenth-century Britain, Ovid's *Metamorphoses* were reintegrated into the literary discourse of the time. The weakening of numerous classical rules and the theory of the sublime imply a new notion of *art* and *nature*. Ovid's increasing influence becomes particularly obvious in the field of *descriptive poetry*, as Pope's *Windsor Forest* and Thomson's *The Seasons* show. Mandeville reintegrates

the *Metamorphoses* with regard to credibility of the depicted stories and thus testifies to the dissolution of the classical claim of verisimilitude.

The *Metamorphoses* becomes a poetic model of the world with the scientific works of Erasmus Darwin and Johann Wolfgang von Goethe: Darwin as well as Goethe mark the beginning of evolutionary thinking, which does not look for clear distinguished types but for the continuous flux of permanent change. The process of metamorphosis is hereby seen as a repetitive phenomenon with a high potential of yielding various forms and expressions.

Darwin and Goethe propagated the idea of systematic evolution, and evolutionary theory states that there is a continuous and progressive relation between things distant in time. For Darwin, who reversed Ovid's process of turning men and women into plants and restored their original states, Ovid's *Metamorphoses* anticipate the scientific discovery of botany.

Last but not least, due to Darwin's *The Love of the Plants* and his promotion of Ovid and the *Metamorphoses* (with their structural concept of motion) the *Metamorphoses* has turned out to be a particularly interesting "test text" of the long eighteenth century as one of the central epochs of fundamental change in intellectual history. It was the long eighteenth century that reestablished Ovid as the poet of evolutionary thinking and the *Metamorphoses* as the model for the still current view of continuous organic development and motion.