
Ovid's Protean Epic of Art

PAUL BAROLSKY

I KNOW OF NO work of literature more wonderful than *Metamorphoses*. Even those who have never read Ovid or have read but fragments of his poem are familiar with many of his stories: Apollo and Daphne, Echo and Narcissus, Pyramus and Thisbe, Icarus and Daedalus, Orpheus and Eurydice, Venus and Adonis. Ovid's book may be popular but it is also radically searching: it is about the causes of things, about how birds, beasts, trees, flowers, and rocks came to be, a book about why things are the way they are. His poem is nothing less than a history of the world from its creation out of chaos through the writing of *Metamorphoses* itself in the age of Augustus Caesar. History, we might say, culminates with Ovid's poem, which is the artful mirror image of the cosmos in the multiplicity of all its forms.

When we read Ovid, we become part of a wide community, a community that embraces artists of various types in the modern European tradition who have responded to *Metamorphoses*—from the authors who forged the *Roman de la Rose* to the poets of our own day inspired by the Augustan bard. If Ovid has been read by great artists, he is also read by those who like a good story, a story told well, a story that gives pleasure. In that respect, Ovid belongs to everybody.

Metamorphoses is a poem about nature, both its physical beauty and the natural catastrophes that mark the world: flood, conflagration, famine, plague. In this respect, Ovid is a realist. *Metamorphoses* is also a history of desire, a multitude of stories of love, lust, passion and affection, a reminder that the intertwined histories of Western art and literature, enriched by Ovid, are the aggregation of such stories of desire.

As a sustained and radical exploration of form and transformation, *Metamorphoses* is a work about art, about artistic form. Although Ovid's acute attention to artifice of various kinds has often been discussed over the years, often incisively, there is still more to be said about Ovid's sense of art. The sum of Ovid's allusions to art in *Metamorphoses* is greater than the parts, and the full implications of his vision of art are still, I believe, only dimly surmised.

In order to clarify our understanding of Ovid's conception of art, let us recall a crucial, well-known fact about *Metamorphoses*. As a poem inspired in part by Homer and Virgil, by the *Iliad*, *Odyssey*, and *Aeneid*, *Metamorphoses* is an epic or, as some would say, a mock-epic, which, toward the end, braids the myths of Achilles, Odysseus, and Aeneas, all men of arms and great deeds—in a word, heroes. Yet Ovid's epic is an epic of a different kind, what I wish to call the "epic of art," in which artists of various types, not warriors, are the principal heroes and heroines. Ovid's understanding of mythic artists has its roots in Homer and Virgil—for example, their celebration of the prodigious artistic skill of Vulcan. But magnifying the theme of art in his own epic, giving it a far more extensive role in his poem than in previous epics, Ovid transforms the epic hero from soldier into artist.

Ovid's poem is a *carmen*, a song. In *Metamorphoses*, songs tell stories, and stories are sometimes rendered pictorially in woven images. In his work, Ovid achieves an even greater unity of the arts. Sculpture, architecture, painting, weaving, handicraft, poetry, song, storytelling, and rhetoric are brought together in *Metamorphoses* in a prodigious synthetic art, of which Ovid is the ultimate author, the artist who embodies and unifies all of the arts. In short, Ovid as artist is the supreme hero of his own epic.

In book one, Ovid makes it abundantly clear that his opus differs from previous epics, for unlike the poems of Homer and Virgil, Ovid's focuses attention on the central theme of his own epic—art. With a great flourish of stories about art, Ovid introduces the theme of artifice in its many forms. After

an unknown god molded the earth in the beginning, the son of Iapetus, Prometheus, made images of man out of the clay of the earth, whence the origins of sculpture. Ovid pursues this thread in the story of the son of Prometheus, Deucalion, and his wife Pyrrha, who, after the flood, toss behind them the stones that turn into human beings. Likening the human forms within stone to unfinished statues during this metamorphosis, Ovid thereby places Deucalion in the line of descent from his father, Prometheus. This genealogy of art reaches its apex later in book ten in the story of Pygmalion, whose statue made from ivory softens eventually to the sculptor's touch and comes to life.

As a sculptor in words, Ovid also describes the reverse effect of people in the flesh transformed into stone—Battus, Aglauros, Niobe and all the adversaries of Perseus subjected to Medusa's gaze. For Ovid, sculpture is neither the hard substance that softens and comes alive nor the living flesh transformed into stone. Rather, compounded both of the myths of Pygmalion and Medusa, sculpture in Ovid is ambiguously and more fully than in one myth or the other both a living presence in hard stone and the petrification of the flesh. Ovid gives us the fullest and deepest understanding in all of literature of the existential doubleness of sculpture, forever poised ambiguously between life and death.

In book one, Ovid also begins his sustained celebration of architecture, for example in his evocation of the marble halls of the gods. Although the builder of such sublime architecture is unnamed, we might well attribute it to the gods themselves, of whom Vulcan is the premier figure. Vulcan is the author of the Sun-god's dazzling palace made of bronze, gold, and ivory and adorned with an illustrated silver door—a work pictured by Ovid at the beginning of book two as he pursues one thread from a story in the first book.

The other principal architect of Ovid's poem is of course Daedalus, designer of the great labyrinth, a work of astonishing ingenuity that deceives the eye in its winding passages, which are likened in their ambiguities to those of the Mean-

der River as it flows back and forth, out to the sea but also, at times, back to its source. Daedalus's ambiguous structure is a fitting simile for the complexity of Ovid's poem, which is plotted with comparable complexity as its fables both foretell and echo each other—for example, the myth of Prometheus foreshadows the tale of Pygmalion, the sculptor whose art echoes in turn that of Prometheus. As sculpture is ambiguous in its play between life and death, so is daedalic architecture, which, like Ovid's poem, is ambiguous as it moves in two directions at once.

In book one again, Ovid introduces another principal art, painting, which emerges in the myth of Argus, whose head is cut off by the murderous Mercury, after which Juno adorns the peacock's feathers with the dead shepherd's one hundred eyes. When Juno reappears in book two, mounting her chariot borne aloft by peacocks, Ovid refers not once but twice to the fact that their pinions were *pictis*, "painted." Juno is for Ovid an originary painter.

Ovid also evokes the art of painting in the myth of Arachne's weaving contest with Minerva, especially when he uses the verb *pingere* to describe what the goddess depicts. By analogy, we can construe Arachne's woven stories as pictorial, for example, the myth she pictures of Jupiter's rape of Europa—a cunning revision of Ovid's own version of the story in book two in which the maiden was deceived by the "image of a bull." In other words, Arachne, picturing Jupiter as a bull, renders an image of an image. When Arachne weaves with one thousand colors, she stands for Ovid himself, whose richly chromatic text is shot through with colored threads. Blacks, whites, grays, silvers, golds, yellows, reds, purples, pinks, blues, and greens abound in the author's pictorial poetry. Ovid's identity with Arachne is often observed, for the poet, speaking of his text as something woven, thus identifies with the consummate weaver among mortals.

When Arachne weaves the story of Europa, which visually echoes Ovid's telling of the tale in book two, she alludes to a myth in which the poet celebrates the art of handicraft. For

the horns of Jupiter, who appears in the image of a bull, are so perfect in form that they seem to have been made by hand. Seeing the beauty of natural form here (as elsewhere in his poem), Ovid transforms a detail in nature into the artifice of craftsmanship.

Ovid's image of Jupiter as a beautiful snow-white bull at the end of book two resonates with the similar image of the beautiful, snow-white heifer into which Jupiter transforms Io in the final myth of book one. In the story of Jupiter and Io we come to one of the most delightful examples of art in the first book of Ovid's poem, the art of storytelling. After the Olympian god takes his pleasure with Io, he transforms the nymph into a cow in order to conceal her from his wife. No fool she, however, Juno is on to his little game and descends to ask, "where did the cow come from?" Quick to respond, Jupiter tells a very brief story; he says that the heifer sprang from the earth fully grown. Close readers of Ovid's poem will recognize a little joke in Jupiter's story. The god imitates Ovid, since one of the threads of book one is the series of stories of beings born of the earth: Prometheus' humans are formed out of the earth, the off-spring of the giants take on human form when they emerge from the earth, humans are born from the stones of the earth after the flood, and the Python is born from the earth at the same time. In this context, Jupiter's story of yet another earth-born creature reads like farce.

Imitating Ovid, Jupiter in effect becomes a poet and, although his story of a cow emerging from the ground is preposterous, its conformity to Ovid's series of stories of comparable births gives it, in context, a kind of verisimilitude. Nevertheless, as Ovid says elsewhere in a self-mocking manner, all poets are liars. In the style of Ovid, Jupiter is such a poet-liar. Jupiter's short story within Ovid's poetry is exemplary of the art of storytelling so prominent throughout *Metamorphoses*. It sometimes seems as if there are as many storytellers in Ovid's poem as there are stories. In book ten, for example, Ovid tells the story of Orpheus, who tells the

story of Venus and Adonis, within which Venus tells the story of Atalanta and Hippomenes—another example of Ovid's weaving.

In book one, we meet the consummate storyteller, Mercury, who is dispatched by Juno to assassinate Argus and thus liberate Jupiter's beloved Io from captivity. Disguised as a shepherd, Mercury tells Argus the wonderful story of the origins of Pan's pipes, and after his victim falls asleep during the story, the god dispatches him with a blow of the sword. Like all the other storytellers in *Metamorphoses*, Mercury stands for Ovid himself, since it is through the god's lips that he tells the story of the origins of the sweet new music of the pipes. With delicious, often-observed irony, Ovid mocks his own storytelling, since Mercury's story of Pan and Syrinx is obviously a version of Ovid's tale of Apollo and Daphne. Mercury's narrative, which is ultimately Ovid's own, should arouse interest, but it does not prevent Argus from nodding off. Ovid's capacity to laugh at himself is exemplary—a model to us all.

As verbal art, storytelling is not only linked to the art of poetry, it is also related to the art of rhetoric, the art of speaking well, indeed persuasively. Ovid exhibits this art in the story of the debate between Ulysses and Ajax over the arms of Achilles, in which the former is an exemplar of eloquence or *facunditas*. Ulysses argues ever so skillfully that Ajax is not worthy of the shield of Achilles because he is unable to appreciate its heavenly art, its virtuoso depiction of sea, sky, and cities. Here the art of rhetoric celebrates the art of craftsmanship.

The intertwined stories of sculpture, architecture, weaving, painting, poetry, storytelling and rhetoric in *Metamorphoses* grow out of the emphatic celebration of art in book one of the poem, as we have seen; but, of all the arts with which Ovid identifies, we have left to last the central art, that of music. Ovid's poem, his *carmen* or song, is a song about music and begins with Apollo, the god of the lyre, whose beloved Daphne is transformed into the laurel with

which his instrument will always be entwined. A little later on in book one, Ovid rewrites this myth, again as we have seen, transforming it into the similar story told by Mercury of Pan's pursuit of Syrinx, who is (in turn) transformed into reeds, which is then the origin of the sweet new music of the pipes. In what is arguably the single most beautiful sonority in all of *Metamorphoses*, Ovid evokes the phonic beauty of music as Syrinx prays to her sisters for assistance, *orasse sorores*, a sonorous suggestion of the sweet sussurations of the whispering reeds into which she will be transformed.

Many are the singers of whom Ovid sings throughout his symphonic work: Ochyroe, the singer of prophetic songs, the Pierides who compete in song with the Muses, Medea, whose songs, like those of Circe, are incantations, enchantments, Canens, whose name speaks of her role as singer, monstrous Polyphemus who seeks to woo his beloved by playing his Pan pipes; and let us not forget within this great chorus of singers at the very end of Ovid's song, Pythagoras, who gives voice to the poet's view of the world in flux. Ovid's use of the verb *cano* here tells us that Pythagoras' eloquent world-picture is more than speech; it is song. At bottom, it is Ovid's song.

All of the songsters in *Metamorphoses* are but a chorus to the great soloist who dominates Ovid's own work of music: Orpheus, the son of Apollo, who gives mythic meaning to the often-used phrase, "the power of music." With his lyre Orpheus casts a spell over all of nature. The stones of the earth follow in his path, and trees draw near as he plays his lyre.

After his beloved Eurydice is bitten by a snake and dies, Orpheus's grief is so stunningly intense that everything stops. Even Ovid's perpetual poem, which captures the continuous motion of nature, the pulsating flux of life itself, is now suddenly arrested, and Sisyphus sits still upon his rock to listen. For an unforgettably enduring moment, Ovid's poem is itself still—the ultimate rest in the poet's score.

When the world resumes and Orpheus plays his lyre in grief, all the birds and beasts draw near to listen. He sings many songs, among them that of Pygmalion. It should not

escape our attention that the story of a hard statue that comes alive is sung by a singer who is himself seemingly turned to stone in grief at the death of his beloved. Ovid's song about Orpheus' music is not about life or death but about the rhythms of life and death, about how life defines death, about how death gives definition to life.

Ovid sustains his story of stone when he sings of Orpheus' own death, for he is stoned to death by Ciconian women. Whereas stones had previously fallen under the spell of Orpheus, such stones are now the instruments of his demise. But the story of stone does not end here, since stones also mourn the bard's death. When the limbs of the dead Orpheus are scattered, his head and lyre float upon the river Hebrus. His instrument makes mournful sounds, his tongue murmurs in doleful harmony with the lyre. When a serpent strikes at Orpheus' head, Apollo intervenes and petrifies the creature's open jaws. Thus ends another of Ovid's stories of stone, in this case a tale of stone interwoven with music.

Stone and song are also closely interwoven in another story, which is a myth of the transformation of one form of art into another. In the tale of the treacherous Scylla who seeks to betray her father Nisus, architecture is metamorphosed into music. The palace of the king rose from walls that sang, because Apollo had once placed his lyre upon its stones, which still resonated with the sound of the god's instrument. Imagine that!

Even the form of a musical instrument provides Ovid with the opportunity to intertwine the arts. Describing the wings Daedalus fashions for Icarus and thus moving beyond "the fine arts" as they have been called, the poet likens their form to that of the pipes of Pan. Through form Ovid unites the art of aviation with the art of music. It would almost seem that Ovid, long before Walter Pater, saw all art aspiring to the condition of music.

No less does art aspire in Ovid, as is often observed, to the condition of weaving. The threads of Ovid are woven into the larger fabric of his work as he spins yarns. Ovid is like

the daughters of Minyas who in fact spin yarn as they tell tales, in other words, spin yarns. They tell the story of Mars and Venus in which Vulcan makes a net to capture his adulterous wife and her lover, a net so finely spun that it is like the delicate, gracile threads with which Arachne weaves and thus tells her stories. Arachne's weaving is as subtle, Ovid suggests, as the labyrinth of Daedalus, which is threaded by Ariadne. Her golden thread is the clue to the building's form—a form mirrored in the labyrinthian structure of Ovid's own poem. The threads of Ovid's text are also implicitly tied to the strings of the lyres of Apollo and Orpheus, through whom Ovid makes his own music.

Although Ovid's poem is filled with artistic contests, those of Apollo and Pan, Apollo and Marsyas, the Pierides and the Muses, Arachne and Minerva, Ulysses and Ajax, the poet nevertheless achieves a unity or concord of all the arts out of such discord. Ovid in a sense competes with Orpheus in song, with Pygmalion and Medusa in sculptural effects, with Daedalus in plotting, with Arachne in the weaving of pictures, but he ultimately achieves an implicit identity with all of these artists who, in a sense, are his own personae. In the end, all of the arts are united in the poet himself. The poet is a kind of super-artist who presides over his magnum opus of all the arts.

Neither Wagner's *Gesamtkunstwerk* nor Baudelaire's *correspondances* of the arts, Ovid's synthesis of the arts in *Metamorphoses* is nevertheless an ancient antecedent to all modern explorations of the unity of the arts, just as the poet's self-conscious celebration of himself as a prodigious and multifaceted artist in many forms foreshadows the modern idea of the artist as hero.

Ovid's unified embodiment of all the arts is itself mythic, for the poet is the Protean artist par excellence. Ovid thinks in no uncertain terms of Proteus' capacity to transform himself into a lion, boar, bull, stone, tree, river, or flame as art. Ovid embellishes this art of self-transformation by surrounding Proteus with a cluster of other characters who similarly practice the art of self-transformation: the daughter of

Erychthon transforms herself into a mare, a heifer, and a bull; the river god Achelous transforms himself into a serpent and a bull; the mother of Achilles, Thetis, transforms herself into a bird, a tree, and a tiger; and the sons of Sleep assume the forms of beast, bird and serpent—among these children, Phantasos wears the forms of earth, rocks, water, and trees. Like Proteus and other Protean figures, ever changing their form, Ovid is himself a type of Proteus. He appears now in one form, now in another, as he elusively assumes the masks of Pygmalion, Orpheus, Daedalus, Arachne, and the other artists whose stories he tells.

When Ovid transforms himself into a type of Proteus he does so with extraordinary subtlety. The poet's artful self-transformation thus evokes his definition of art in the story of Pygmalion where he says that the sculptor's artifice conceals his very art. We can therefore read *Metamorphoses* over and over again without ever seeing that in his extensive celebration of art the core myth is that of Proteus. As Proteus transforms himself into a bull, lion, or serpent, for example, so Ovid transforms himself into an architect, sculptor, or painter.

Of the various metamorphoses in Ovid's poem, the most exalted is that of apotheosis or deification. *Metamorphoses* rises to a series of such transformations towards its conclusion. In the wake of the deification of Hercules, who put off his mortal body and rose beyond the clouds to the stars in a chariot drawn by four heavenly horses, Ovid turns in the final books of the poem to those apotheoses that address the glory of Rome. When Aeneas was purged of his mortal body he was made a god, as was Romulus, who similarly rose as Quirinus to heaven and took on a new and more beautiful form worthy of the gods, after which his wife also soared heavenward to the stars. These apotheoses, metamorphoses of mortals into gods, are the preparation for the deification of Caesar, whose soul rose to heaven where he too became a star.

As a prophetic singer, Ovid speaks next of the day when his patron Augustus, who now rules the world, will ascend to the heavens. But this series of metamorphoses as deifica-

tion, both historical and prophetic, is not yet complete. For in the last lines of his poem or song, which are no mere epilogue, Ovid makes a poetic prophecy of his own fame and glory. He imagines a future when his work will transcend the wrath of Jupiter or time's capacity to consume, a future where the better part of himself will be borne beyond the stars and, if the prophecies of poets are truthful, he will live forever. Thus, the ultimate metamorphosis of *Metamorphoses*, the final transformation of the Protean poet.

The story of Ovid's ascent to the stars does not end with his poem, however, for over a millennium later Dante would metamorphose Ovid's ascent into the epic of his own heavenward journey in the *Divine Comedy*. Although ostensibly guided toward the stars by Virgil, Dante, as the poet-hero of his own poem, also writes under the star of Ovid's "epic of art," which provided the modern poet with an example of extreme artistic self-consciousness. In other words, Ovid's self-formation as artist, his identity with various mythic artists whose personae he assumes, inspired Dante to shape his own self-reflexive persona as poet. Whereas Ovid appears in multiple guises in *Metamorphoses*, Dante portrays himself as the singular subject of his own "epic of art," which becomes a foundational text for the modern celebration of the artist as hero.

Dante's great epic was in turn important for Vasari's *Lives* of the artists, a work of epic proportions that traces the rise of art from Giotto, who is glorified by association with Dante, to its perfection in the work of Michelangelo, who is portrayed as a new Dante. Vasari's history of art is grounded in one of Ovid's central myths, the story of Narcissus, whose self-reflection in a pool of water the poet likens to a work of art. As Vasari suggests over and over throughout the *Lives*, works of art are, in a sense, reflections of their makers. The paintings of Piero di Cosimo, for example, which portray a primordial humanity, are the reflection of an artist who is a savage or wild man, whereas, antithetically, the works of Leonardo, marked by extraordinary grace, are reflections of an artist who was said to be exceedingly graceful.

Vasari's biography of Leonardo is a crucial source for what is arguably the central fable of art in the world of what is called "modernism"—Balzac's "The Unknown Masterpiece." Building on Vasari's portrayal of a painter who, aspiring to a perfection beyond perfection, cannot bring his paintings to completion, Balzac metamorphoses Leonardo into Frenhofer, a painter, who, seeking to achieve a great masterpiece, is unable to realize his ambition. Although Balzac's tale is a short story, it is epic in scope and in its portrayal of an artist's heroic struggle. For when the painter lays siege to his canvas over a period of ten years, his mighty attempt to achieve greatness evokes the duration of the siege of Troy.

Balzac's story, which was to haunt the imagination of countless modern artists and writers, including Zola, Henry James, Cézanne and Picasso, to name only a few, turns the heroic battle of the artist into a tragic tale of failure. Ultimately unable to realize his elusive masterpiece, the artist destroys his failed painting and commits suicide. The glory of the artist from Ovid to Dante, from Dante to Michelangelo, from Michelangelo to Balzac, is here transformed into the story of defeat—a plot that still echoes in all the recent claims of the death of the artist, the end of art history, or the failure of modernism.

When we read Balzac's story today, dwelling on it as it pertains to the high modernism of the final centuries of the last millennium, we do so with an excessively narrow focus if we fail to see also its taproots in the tradition of the "epic of art"—a tradition that brings us full circle to Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. Although Balzac's Frenhofer is indeed a paradigmatic figure in the story of modern art, he is also a mythic figure who assumes the same Protean personae as Ovid.

Frenhofer aspires to be a type of Pygmalion. Whereas his fellow painter, Pourbus, paints a figure in which the blood does not flow beneath the skin (as it does in Pygmalion's creation), Frenhofer expressly compares himself to the mythic artist when, after all the years of his epic quest in art, he contemplates how long it must have taken Pygmalion to real-

ize his masterpiece. Condemning the work of Pourbus for its lack of the life-giving fire of Prometheus, Frenhofer proclaims his own Promethean aspirations and identity. With an ultimate ironic twist, however, the very fire of Prometheus which provides the heat that animates his figures becomes in Frenhofer's hands the instrument of destruction when he burns his paintings. Art for Frenhofer is a struggle between life and death, and he boldly states that, like Orpheus, he would descend into the Hades of art to bring the ancient ideal of beauty back to life.

The myths of Prometheus, Pygmalion, and Orpheus essential to Ovid's shifting artistic personae are thus essential to Balzac's modern but still mythic hero of art. Although none of his heroes is particularly Ovidian, what is Ovidian about Balzac's painter in general is the way in which, like Ovid, he assumes the multiple personae of mythic artists. Doing so, he is himself a Protean hero in the epic quest of his own art. Not surprisingly, Frenhofer in fact invokes Proteus in his long discourse on art, but there is a peculiarly ambiguous turn in his mythic allusion.

Although Balzac's painter as a type of Prometheus, Pygmalion, and Orpheus is a Protean figure like Ovid, Frenhofer nevertheless does not compare himself to Proteus, the mythic artist of self-transformation. Rather, pursuing the implications of Ovid, he says that Proteus stands for the multiplicity of forms with which the artist struggles in order to realize a great work of art—a struggle that still evokes, for example, Menelaos wrestling with the elusive Proteus or Peleus attempting to grasp the evasive Thetis. The struggle of Frenhofer, the embattled modern artist par excellence, who wrestles with the multiple forms of his art, not only transforms ancient myth into a parable of modern art history, it also simultaneously leads us back to *Metamorphoses*—a book about transformation, where Ovid gave form in the first place to the “epic of art” in which the poet himself is the supreme, transformative hero.