THE SONG OF ORPHEUS

Ovid’s Meta-poetic Narratives in Books 10 and 11 of Metamorphoses (Theses)

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The dissertation is concerned with the story of Orpheus, as is related in Books 10–11 of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* (10, 1–11, 66). After summing up the results of previous research, the treatise examines the literary sources of the Orpheus-episode. It points out hitherto unrecognised literary patterns, thus shedding a new light on Ovid’s relationship to Virgil. The dissertation argues for a key-role of the Orpheus-song that exhibits a generic tension between epic and elegy. It seeks to prove the inter-textual and meta-poetic nature of the Orpheus-story by interpreting the death of Orpheus as well as the description of the River Hesperus, the legend of Midas and the embedded narrative. A close analysis of these texts, and particularly that of the tree catalogue, leads to the exposition of an inherent aesthetics in *Metamorphoses*. New insights are made into the unity of Ovid’s epic as well as into the problem of orality versus writtenness. The dissertation elaborates on the following theses:

(1) Ovid’s representation of Orpheus is closely related to Virgil’s texts. A wide range of studies have proved so far that the 10th book of *Metamorphoses* resembles the *Georgics* as far as its narrative structure and vocabulary are concerned. Nevertheless, it has been neglected that Ovid’s work contains a number of patterns deriving not from the Georgics but the *Eclogues*. Several important pieces of textual parallelism (e.g., the figure of Orpheus representing elegy as opposed to epic, the *recusatio*, the descent into the nether world, the motif of mourning nature, Hyacinthus, Adonis and Eurydice as well as the problem of the poet’s immortality) support the view that both Virgil’s and Ovid’s views of Orpheus are rooted in *Epitaphios Bionos* which can be seen as one of the most important literary sources of both texts.

(2) The song of Orpheus is of particular significance among the stories embedded in books 5, 10 and 15 of *Metamorphoses*. Going beyond the results of previous research, the treatise first deals with the general role of these stories, then it claims a specific role for the Orpheus song. Characteristically, the first-degree narrator in Ovid’s piece draws attention to his own composing activity with rather obtrusive linguistic measures. In a self-reflective way, he demonstrates his own narrative role in the embedded stories and represents himself in the persons of the second-degree narrators (Calliope, Orpheus and Pythagoras.) These stories can be regarded as meta-poetic texts interpreting the whole *Metamorphoses* (*mise en abîme*): they, and their protagonists, play a rele-
vant role in the work that keeps emphasising linguistic elaborateness. The song of Orpheus is of greater importance than those of Calliope and Pythagoras, respectively. In antique tradition, Orpheus was always connected to the problems of art and of poetic existence. His song is the longest of the embedded narratives. He tells the greater number of stories in the most varied manner. It is only the invocation of the Orpheus-song (10, 148–154) that refers to the first lines of *Metamorphoses* (1, 1–4) – this correspondence also underlines that the Orpheus-song can be interpreted as a model of the whole work.

(3) The song of Orpheus also tackles the problem of the elegy. It is quite obvious from the invocation of the song that builds upon the tradition of *re cusatio* and also refers to the tension between *carmen perpetuum* and *carmen deductum* by using the expression *levior lyra* (10, 152) Following the canonical motives of Alexandrian poetry, the stories of the Orphic song contain the classic topics of elegy, e.g., raving desire, ardent love and mourning (Myrrha: 10, 298–502). The story of Hyacinthus (10, 162–219) accounts for the origins of elegy (i.e., the poetry of mourning). The Orpheus-song, seen as the key-text of *Metamorphoses*, also reveals that Ovid’s work is preoccupied with the relationship between elegy and epic. So far, research has attributed the contrast between *plectrum gravius* and *levior lyra* to the influence of Callimachus’s *Aitia*, which uses the terms δηνεκές and λεπτόν in its prologue. However, crediting the literary principles inherent in the Orpheus-song, it is quite evident that Ovid followed not Callimachus but a fragment of Bion as well as *Epitaphios Bionos*. As an *alter Homerus*, Ovid treated the epic of equal importance with the elegy and tried to derive each genre, the elegy too, from the epic as their ultimate origin.

(4) The tree-catalogue in the framework of the Orpheus-song, the death of Orpheus and the description of the river Hebrus are meta-poetic texts that contain several internal and external references. They throw new light on the Orpheus-song and the whole *Metamorphoses*. The murder of Orpheus builds upon the ancient theory of contrasting kithara and aulos: the poet falls victim to the ὀργιαστικός art that outbells his κιθαροδία. The Orpheus-song starts with a landscape description (the tree-catalogue), and is finished with a natural scene (the river Hebrus – 11, 41–61). Both the tree-catalogue, which conjures up the *locus amoenus* (the holy woodland of the poet’s vocation), and the motif of the river can be read as meta-poetic texts. The notion of the river was often used in ancient
literature as a metaphor of poetry. The flooding drifty stream stood for the sublime and often pompous style of the great epic, whereas the trickling, clean brook symbolized plain and short poetry. The river-metaphor was widely used in the elegiac tradition, in the work of Propertius, and also by Ovid. After the death of Orpheus, the river Hebrus turns into the river of the mourning elegy.

(5) The Midas-episode goes on with the themes of the Orpheus song: with fatal desire, devastating divine power and clashing arts. The figure of Midas recalls the tragic deaths of Arachné, Marsyas and Orpheus. The hundred-line long story consists of two equal-length parts, the first of which portrays *Midas aureus* – the ominous and covetous desire of the king for gold. The motif of this baleful yearning plays a central role from the middle of Book 9 (9, 447). The first part of the Midas-story is in tune with the stories of Byblis, Iphis, Cyparissus, Hyacinthus, Pygmalion, Myrrha, Adonis and Atalanta. Moreover, it foreshadows the tragic longing and fate of Orpheus. The second part of the story, that of *Midas auritus*, recounts the contest between Apollo and Pan, the ill-fated judgement of the king and the punishment inflicted on him by Apollo. Alike Arachne and Marsyas, Midas is also made a toy of an irascible and jealous god. The judgement on Midas is a variation on the theme of competition between the *aulos* and the *kithara*, just like the death of Orpheus.

(6) The song of Orpheus is a series of *exempla* that builds upon the elegiac motif of divine role-reversal: Iuppiter, Apollo and Venus choose new lives. The Ganymedes-episode (10, 155–161) resembles erotic Hellenistic epigrams whereas the stories of Hyacinthus (10, 162–219) and Adonis (10, 503–559; 708–739) draw on the milieu of love elegies and mourning elegies. Research says that the aition of love-elegy can be attributed to the figure of Daphne, whereas the origins of the mourning elegy (10, 204–205) and epigram (10, 215–216) can be put down to the death of Hyacinthus. In the research history of the Pygmalion-episode (10, 243–297) three different scholarly trends can be identified: some regard it as an erotic narrative, others see it as a moral parable, while the rest take it for a history of art. Now all these interpretations seem to be valid and inseparable, provided that their parallel parts (i.e., the corresponding motives) in *Metamorphoses* are taken into consideration. However, few researchers seem to have recognized the meta-poetic complexity of the episode. Modern literary history emphasizes the statue’s lifelessness as well as the false perception and desire of
The ambiguity and the openness of Ovid’s work gave the advantage to the deconstructionist, and partly to the feminist, critique – that is, to the hermeneutics of suspicion. Meta-poetic interpretations see the Cyprian sculptor as a representative of either the modern Genius aesthetics or contemporary “école du soupçon.” Hermeneutics is still in arrears with the explication of the Pygmalion-story. While the deconstructionist and feminist theory puts the stress on the recipient’s deception, the statue in Ovid’s work really comes to life. The creature is not lifeless but alive, and the artist is not a mere victim of his own yearning but an actual creator. The story, in accordance with modern hermeneutics, associates art with the notion of a recurring feast when a past event or an absent person is represented.

The tree-catalogue, preceding the song of Orpheus, is a meta-poetic text that builds upon the tradition of locus amoenus and ekphrasis. The botanical names refer to particular narratives and give an interpretation to the story of Orpheus. Elaborating on previous research, the treatise seeks to give a more comprehensive text-based analysis of the tree-catalogue, which may result in a better understanding of the song of Orpheus and the whole *Metamorphoses*. On one hand, the catalogue reveals a connection between the story of Orpheus and the *Eclogues*. On the other hand, the *est locus*-formula (10, 86) at the beginning of the enumeration announces *ekphrasis*. Now intertextuality played an important role in ancient narratives, consequently this point should not be downplayed when interpreting the catalogue. It is not only the particular trees but also the whole woodland that serves as a mythological and literary symbol which relates to the embedded song by corresponding motives. The rock, the vernal blossoming, the shade and the red colour should all be taken into consideration in this respect. It is of importance for the whole work that the description of the grove resembles the dreamlike landscapes of the third period of Pompeian painting as well as the sophisticated gardens of urban architecture and horticulture. The song of Orpheus sounds up in the aesthetical environment of the *urbanitas*. It is the city and the library that serves as the holy grove of the Hellenistic poet’s vocation.

The *Metamorphoses* builds upon diverse and sometimes contradicting literary tradition, consequently the problem of its unity should be tackled. Contemporary literary theory leaves the job mainly to the recipient: understanding the reader’s role is indispensable to solving the issue. Doing so, the Hellenistic term of *mimesis*
needs to be carefully examined. At the time of Ovid, it involved the pre-eminence of reception: a literary work gets accomplished only in its recipience. As early as the time of Aristotle, *mimesis* was also construed as an effect. The concept of ἐνάργεια, taken from rhetoric and widely used in Hellenistic literary theory, describes the way how *mimesis* is effectuated. This connotation of the term, supported by early imperial texts too, leads to a better understanding of what μίμησις and φαντασία exactly mean in Ovid’s work and how they are related to each other – a result that goes beyond oversimplifying explanations based on Platonic texts. Both words are epistemological terms, referring to various manifestations of representing and imaginative capabilities. *Metamorphoses* applies the principles of immediate effect and visualization. Taking the ἐνάργεια-based approach to *mimesis*, the cognitive discrepancy of description and narration – emphasized by modern narratology – is overridden. In rhetoric, *mimesis* can also be construed as following a literary prototype or contesting predecessors. An intertextual approach can also be taken to *mimesis*, from the recipient’s aspect: to interpret a text, one needs some background knowledge. Any work, heard or read for the first time, steps into dialogue with a particular literary canon. Metamorphoses abound in allusions to certain themes and genres. It even mocks on particular works. Now, the references must have presupposed an educated audience. Ovid’s epic turns out to be an intertextual piece of writing, concerned with the re-writability of myths and traditional stories.

(9) *Metamorphoses* seems to create an air of orality or unwrittenness. While the elegiac works of Ovid display a character of writtenness, and regard their recipients as readers, *Metamorphoses* presumes being oral: through the embedded songs of Calliope, Orpheus and Pythagoras, its narrator pretends to be a minstrel and calls for the recipient’s simultaneous listening. Doing so, it follows the epic tradition that presupposes the forcefulness of live speech and the presence of the rhapsodos. Although it makes a pretence of being oral, *Metamorphoses* is still a written piece, relying heavily on the genres of Alexandrian literature and their repository – the library. The tension between orality and writtenness is not completely different from that between elegy and epic. To understand the respective roles of writing and live speech in *Metamorphoses*, the theories of ancient rhetoric should be considered. The relationship of the improvised sermon and the recorded (written) speech was discussed by Platon, Alkimadas and Isokrates. According to the theory of *dissimulatio artis*, written texts should disguise
themselves as improvised speech. A written text can only be a derivative of live speech. On the other hand, the standard of literary perfection was set by the elaborateness of written texts. Orality could only be subsidiary in a culture that put so much stress on embellished writing. Augustan poetry built upon this tension: its texts reveal their complexity only to readers well versed in literature. Yet the same texts sought to create the illusion of archaic orality – that is, of live speech based on a simultaneous divine inspiration. However, the practice of contemporary poetic recitals belonged to written literary tradition rather than to orality. *Metamorphoses* was composed within, and addressed to, this culture of literary reception. Its oral and epic aspect builds on the pretence of divinely influenced live speech – a trait that derives from the notion of mimesis as an effect. On the other hand, its written (Alexandrian) aspect tries to satisfy the high-brow, widely-read audience of the libraries – thus applying *mimesis* in the sense of making rich inter-textual references.