

## ***Somnium Ovidi, or, Byblis and the Circle of Metamorphoses***

As Nietzsche saw dreams as the (unfortunate) origin of metaphysics (“Missverständniss des Traumes”), ancient philosophers and poets tended to see in dreams the birth of metamorphosis, as lived experience, as literary form, and as moral challenge: so Aristotle saw the body’s residuary movements affecting a sleeper’s sensory organs with shapes that “possess versimilitude in the way of cloud-shapes (ὁμοιότητα ὥσπερ τὰ ἐν τοῖς νέφεσιν), which in their rapid metamorphoses (μεταβάλλοντα) one likens now to a human being, now to a centaur” (*De Insomniis*, 461b16-21); so Lucretius’ fourth book sees dreams as states where objects deceptively transform (*mutare*) their appearance; so Virgil gives us our earliest portrait of Aeneas as he dreams of Hector much “transformed” from his historical self (*Aen.* 2.274-5 *ei mihi, qualis erat, quantum mutatus ab illo / Hectore*); so Horace begins and ends his *Ars Poetica* with hybrid metamorphic figures that resemble “the dreams of a fevered man” (7-8 *velut aegri somnia, vanae / fingentur species*); and so Augustine (*Civ. Dei* 18.18), seeing in metamorphosis the heart of paganism’s spiritual appeal and threat, inveighed against the apparent transformations that demons cause humans to experience in their sleep. As Leonard Barkan’s *The Gods Made Flesh: Metamorphosis and the Pursuit of Paganism* (1990) forcefully demonstrates, Augustine had good reason to fear the lasting appeal of both metamorphoses and dreams, nowhere moreso than in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, the book to which, for more than a millenium, Christian Europe turned in order to think freely.

This paper argues that dreams animate the structure of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, in particular, its beginning, its end, where the poet himself appears, and in what this paper shows to be the poem’s chronological center, the episode of Byblis, the work’s only dreamer of fully *human* dreams, as well as its first long-form writer. The paper divides into three parts: the first shows that Ovid placed the Byblis episode at one of the *Metamorphoses*’ chronological faultlines, so that she--as lover, dreamer, and writer--might inaugurate the period of human history that comes to a close with Ovid’s reappearance in the poem’s coda; the second analyzes the story of Byblis in detail; and the third shows how the episode of Byblis, along with Ovid’s retrospective self-commentary from exile, helps illuminate the dream-structure of the work as a whole.

### ***Tithoni prima quot abest ab origine Caesar***

The third book of Virgil’s *Georgics*, advertising the poet’s future work, adumbrates a chronological scheme that puts Caesar at its historical center (*G.* 3.46-8):

*mox tamen ardentis accingar dicere pugnas  
Caesaris et nomen fama tot ferre per annos,  
Tithoni prima quot abest ab origine Caesar.*

The Trojan prince Tithonus here mentioned—grandson of Ilus, son of perjured Laomedon, brother to Priam—was beloved by Ἥως (Lat. Aurora), and was, at her behest, rendered immortal by Zeus, but not, to their subsequent woes, eternally young; thus, although, at the time of Dawn’s coup de foudre, Tithonus seemed, as the Homeric Hymns put it (with considerable irony), “just like the immortals” (ἐπιείκελον ἀθανάτοισι—*H.H.* 5.219), with time he withered into a bedridden invalid, daily growing more voiceless and motionless, for all of eternity, or, according to

scholiastic tradition, until “Aurora, able to do nothing else (ἀδυνατοῦσα) transforms him (μεταβάλλει) into a cicada, so that she might enjoy his voice continually (διηνεκῶς).”<sup>1</sup> Since Tithonus is brother to Priam, the Trojan king who loses Troy to the Greeks, Virgil’s *Aeneid*, as Richard Thomas has noted, does vaguely satisfy this temporal scale, with a narrative that is set in and after the Trojan War, but that also proleptically prefigures, and predicts, the march of Roman time down to that of Caesar himself, whose name, and fame, the *Aeneid* will long herald. It is important to note, however, that the duration of fame that Virgil’s *Georgics* predicts is, if long, still of limited duration: whether one adopts the date of the Trojan War given by Herodotus (1250 BCE—*Hist.* 2.145), the *Marmor Parium* (1209/8), or the later Hellenistic chronographers (1184/3—Eratosth. FGrH 241 F 1; Apollod. FGrH 244 F 61), from Tithonus to Augustus comes to about 1,200 years (*paulo plus aut minus*, in Ennius’ phrase (*Ann.* 154-5 Sk.)), so that Virgil’s promise, at the middle of his *Georgics*, to put Caesar and Caesar’s temple “in the middle” of his imagined *locus amoenus*, also enthrones Caesar at the midpoint of historical time itself, looking 1,200 years back to the beginning of history (rather than, say, ‘myth’), and 1,200 years forward to the end of Caesar’s name, and, one assumes, Virgilian fame.

Dividing history into two equal periods of specifically 1,200 years—bisected by Augustus—is far from random within Roman mythohistorical numerological imagination: the eighteenth book of Varro’s *Antiquities* (*apud Cens. De die natali* 17.5) records the augur Vettius’ notice—about which mytho-historical secret, Censorinus “will not remain silent” (*non tacebo*)—that the twelve birds (eagles or vultures) that appeared to Romulus in his augural contest with Remus over the foundation of the city (Ovid and Propertius’ *Palatinae aues*<sup>2</sup>), indicated that the Roman people would last for 1,200 years, with one *saeculum* (=100 years, according to Varro’s *De Lingua Latina* 6.11).<sup>3</sup> This represented a Roman version of the Etruscan legend that the Etruscan name itself would only last for 10 *seacula*, after which, it was fated to disappear. Varro’s request that his friend Tarrutius, the astrologer and mathematician, determine the date of Romulus’ birth and augury to the year, month, day, and hour is related to precisely such anxieties, though such as would be put to rest, in official ideology, by the new *saeculum Augusteum*, as it came shortly to be called. For in the framework suggested by Virgil’s *Georgics*, Augustus’ arrival marks what Rome’s neo-Pythagoreans would have called Rome’s *palingenesis*, or “re-creation”: Rome is dead, long live Rome! One 1,200 year-age, predicted and initiated by Romulus’ auguries, has turned seamlessly into a new 1,200 year age foreseen by Virgil’s fourth *Eclogue* as retrospectively read by his *Georgics*.

From a temporal perspective, the ostensible structure of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* doubles Virgil’s ambitions: if Virgil’s poem goes “from the initial origin of Tithonus” (*Tithoni prima...ab origine*—*Geo.* 3.48) down to Caesar, Ovid’s, picking up the ambitions of Plato’s *Timaeus* to proceed from the beginning of time to the age of man, will proceed “from the initial origin of the world down to my own

<sup>1</sup> Sch. Il. 11.1 ἡ δὲ ἀδυνατοῦσα εἰς τέττιγα αὐτὸν μεταβάλλει, ὅπως ἦδοιτο διηνεκῶς τῆς φωνῆς αὐτοῦ ἀκούουσα.

<sup>2</sup> Housman, “Carm. Bucol.Einsidl. II 34,” *CQ* 4 (1910), 47-8.

<sup>3</sup> On the significance of the number twelve to the foundation of Rome, see Hubaux 1-16 (‘Romulus et l’horoscope de Rome’), who points i.a. to the number of lictors, months (in the augmented calendar), to Varro’s two twelve-volume works on philosophy and religion (per Valerius of Antium in Plutarch, *Numa* 28), the Twelve Tables, the Twelve “Great Gods” of Rome, the twelve Ancillae (one fallen from heaven, eleven fabricated), as well as the 12 hours of day, 12 of night, in the Roman temporal system (and for which the apotheotic transformation of Romulus’ wife Hersilia into *Hora* is possibly significant).