NEC ME MEA FALLIT IMAGO:
OVID’S POETICS OF IRONY AND REFLECTIONS OF
LUCRETIUS AND PYTHAGORAS IN THE METAMORPHOSES

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ABSTRACT

Clues in Ovid's work anticipate a certain kind of reading, even imply warnings against credulousness and metaphysical earnestness, and are perhaps well applied to our reading of him. Such clues in the parables of failure to recognise and misreadings of signs and the handling of philosophical material in the Metamorphoses are notably available in the Theban episodes and Pythagoras' speech. Ovid's irony is the effect of the poet's conception of the ambiguous status of appearances. Ovid tests and plays with the relationship between logos and imago and that of discourse and imagination to philosophical truth in the Metamorphoses, where knowing is set against innocence, rather than truth against untruth. Ovid's 'empty discourses' parody philosophy in using its topics while seeking no transformation in the audience, which was the aim of the properly philosophical discourse in Antiquity.

Introduction

... iuvat ire per alta
astra, iuvat terris et inerti sede relicta
nube vehi validique umeris insistere
Atlantis palantesque homines passim et rationes egentes
despectare procul trepidosque obitumque timentes
sic exhortari seriemque evolvere fati!

My will is to traverse the stars on high, to abandon this clogging abode on earth, to ride the clouds and to stand on the shoulders of mighty Atlas, gaze down from afar on men who are helplessly straying at random, empty of reason, trembling and troubled by
Why is irony a permanent motif in Ovid’s greatest poem and what is its nature? Irony is not only a tonal colour, it has a structuring effect in the *Metamorphoses* and is the force that governs and shapes its poetical syntax. In this paper I discuss ‘the pathos of distance’, its use in the *Metamorphoses* and its place in what I would call Ovid’s agnostic poetics of *avocatio* and spectacle. The implicit remoteness of audience from scene shapes the work, anticipates a certain kind of reading and parallels or contrasts with the experiences of many of the work’s actors. Ovid’s is a kind of compositional irony and that detachment is both its product and corollary. Ovid’s irony is not only a mix or concentrate of tragic drama’s *περιπέτεια* and *aporia* with the dilutions of comedy’s exaggeration, but also an avatar of Lucretian *avocatio*, a parody-enactment and permutation of the Roman Epicurean’s teachings on the value of distance and the therapeutic perspective that the affective spectacle can engender. Human suffering and folly and the vicissitudes of fate and absurdity of divinity are all shown in Ovid, but not as the catechism of a moral doctrine, not with the result that we are induced to learn about our place and the meaning of suffering. A certain remoteness is sustained, pity and fear are limited; it is the dispassionate perspective of philosophical objectivity, but without the philosophy.

**Philosophy and philosophical discourse**

As we reflect on reading Ovid and try to understand the nature of his work and the place of ideas in it, we should perhaps keep in mind the relationship between philosophy and philosophical discourse in the

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1 The text of the *Metamorphoses* is that of Tarrant 2004. All translations of the *Metamorphoses* are taken from Raeburn 2004.

2 Cf. Lyne 1984:14: ‘Ovid, we could say, is creating “effects” rather than composing *mimesis*… An “effect” excludes moral or profoundly emotional involvement; we contemplate it rather than live it… By his manipulation of style in relation to content Ovid can present the appalling as an “effect”; as something to be contemplated, to be sampled aesthetically’ (my italics).

3 Cf. Narcissus, a kind of pastoral Oedipus, who comes to realise that the answer was right there all along: the answer was himself.

4 Ovid’s worldly attitude towards the gods is already attested to in his *Ars Amatoria* 1.637: *expedit esse deos et, ut expedit, esse putemus* (text: Kenney 1961).
ancient world. There, philosophy was, properly, active and practical. Discourse worked out the implications of theory in order to make a better or more truthful, more meaningful life possible. Philosophical writing and speaking were pastoral, practical and therapeutic and wanted application as their end; they were not objectives in themselves but a means. Today still, philosophical living and philosophical discourse are at once 'incommensurable and inseparable' as Hadot puts it. Language is the supreme vehicle of philosophical insight, indispensable before philosophical action, but not all that is required for philosophical living. There is a tension inherent in language as an instrument: discourse is active and constitutive, but in figuring philosophical living it must not become a substitute for living philosophically. Lucretius outstandingly creates a philosophical poetry and advocates a way of seeing to induce *apatheia* and to spread as a virtual gospel the Epicurean way.

When Lucretius exhorts his audience to get some perspective and learn equanimity through a certain kind of view of this world of obdurate and untranscended materiality, with its pathetic catastrophes and fatal contingency, he is reversing the ordinary logic and traditional objective of *mimesis* as it had been conceived since Aristotle (Lucr. 1.1-61; 3.978-1094). For the artist (powerful and threatening as he is to any idea of order that is posited on reason) calls to presence, in the imagination, scenes of dramatic intensity, tragic pathos and deep sympathy or aversion, precisely to draw in, make the subject feel and transform his state. The Epicurean poet Lucretius makes spectacle an instrument for quiet, the dramatic poet exploits its power to stir. The Epicurean makes the promise of a life of freedom through self-mastery, the tragic poet shows humans mastered by their passions or circumstances. Thereby he inspires compassion. Lucretius perfectly marries philosophical discourse with the figurative language of poetry as he works out in his Epicurean manifesto the important theme of movement between engagement and detachment. Ovid's intellectualising poetics play between involvement and disengagement through his control over rhetorical devices and narrative content. It permits the audience to revel in fantasy without consequences. It brings the sweetness of seeing and surveying without the ethical lesson intended by the Epicurean psychotherapy of perspective.

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4 For a discussion of the Epicurean attitude to poets and poetry as discernible particularly in Philodemus, and a reconsideration of the 'Epicurean' idea expressed in Diogenes Laertius that 'the wise man does not compose poems', see Wigodsky 1995.
What Lucretius is to Epicurus, one may suggest, so in his own way, is Ovid to Pythagoras. Lucretius’ *Graius homo* (DRN 1.66), can seem to be an avatar of Ovid’s *Vir Samius* (Met. 15.60). Yet, Ovid paradoxically borrows nothing less from Lucretian Epicureanism than Neopythagorean metaphysics. Indeed, at a high point of Pythagoras’ speech itself in *Metamorphoses* 15, the language takes on, with exemplary Ovidian hybridity, an unmistakably Lucretian turn, another yoking of the supposedly incompatible, which is the technique of the *Metamorphoses* throughout:

... isque, licet caeli regione remotos
mente deos adiit et, quae natura negabat
victibus humanis, ovulis ex pectoris havit,
cumque animo et vigili persequerant omnia cura,
in medium discenda dabat coetusque silentum
dictaque mirantium magis primordia mundi
et rerum causas et, quid natura, docebat,
quit deus, unde nive, quae fulminis esset origo,
Iuppiter an venti discusae nube tonarent,
quid quateret terras, qua sidera lege mearent,
et quodcumque latet.

His mind came close to the gods, remote as they are in the heavens above; what nature debarred to human vision he saw with the eyes of the spirit within him. All that this insight, backed by untiring effort, discovered, he wanted to share with others. His audiences listened in wondering silence while he explained how the universe first began, discoursed at length upon causes, defined what Nature and God were, showed how the snow was formed and what was the source of the lightning; whether the winds or Jupiter thundered from the clouds in collision; the reason for earthquakes, the laws which govern the stars in their courses, and all the secrets of nature. (Met. 15.62-72)

7 ‘The immense and unpredictable variety of human (and divine) behaviour so entertainingly reviewed in the first fourteen books of the poem is finally accounted for and justified only after the evidence had been produced. Pythagoras’ exposition, that is to say, may be seen as a kind of theodicy’ (Kenney in Melville 1986:xix.

8 Met. 15.60-478.

9 Since Lucretian materialism, mortalist and final, is antithetical to Pythagorean immortality, Ovid can still fuse the two and come to the shared conclusion that ‘death is nothing to us’; this is the kind of antinomy on which he thrives.

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Compare Lucretius:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{ergo vivida vis animi pervicit et extra} \\
\text{processit longe flammanitii moenia mundi} \\
\text{atque omne immensum persperavit mente animique,} \\
\text{unde refert nobis victor quid possit ori,} \\
\text{quid nequart, finita potestas denique cuique} \\
\text{qua sum sit natiore atque alte terminus haereu.} \\
\text{quare religio pedibus subjecta vicissim} \\
\text{opteritur, nos exaequat victoria caelo.}
\end{align*}
\]

The vital vigour of his mind prevailed. He ventured far out beyond the flaming ramparts of the world and voyaged in mind throughout infinity. Returning victorious, he proclaimed to us what can be and what cannot: how a limit is fixed to everything and an immovable frontier post. Therefore superstition in its turn lies crushed beneath his feet, and we, by his triumph, are lifted level with the skies.

(Locr. 1.72-79)

Ovid's inverting philosophical mirror

From its opening lines, Book 15 can be seen to stand in an architectural relationship to Book 1, where we find a densely allusive cosmogony clearly derived from various physical and metaphysical theories (Met. 1.5-88). It prepares for a ring-effect closure that is realised with the return in the last book to the superhistorical and universal tone of science and philosophy. Pythagoras’ extended sermon in Book 15 of the Metamorphoses is replete with Lucretian formulations and ideas serving a doctrine at odds with Lucretian materialism:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{non ille satis cognosse Sabinae gentis: animo maiora capaci} \\
\text{concipt et, quaet sit rerum natura, requirit.} \\
\text{(Met. 15.4-6)}
\end{align*}
\]
O genus attonitum gelidae formidine mortis, 
quid Styga, quid teubras et nominia vanus timetis, 
materiem vatum, falsi terricula mundi?

Oh why does the human race, paralysed by the terror of chill death, why does it fear the Styx and its darkness, the meaningless names that are bandied by poets, the bogeys of life in imaginary worlds?
(Met. 15.153-55)

Quem neque fama deum nec fulmina minitanti 
Murmure compressit caelum, sed eo magis acrem 
Irritat animi virtutem, effringere ut arta 
Naturae primus portarum claustra cupiret.

Fables of the gods did not crush him, nor the lightning flash and the growling menace of the sky. Rather, they quickened his manhood, so that he, first of all men, longed to smash the constraining locks of nature’s doors.
(Locr. 1.68-71)

Scholars have long appreciated the Lucretian correspondences in Ovid’s poetry. Despite numerous earlier interpretations treating of the philosophical underpinnings, mythopoeic seriousness and Ovid’s political programme, DeLacy and more recently Hardie have written most convincingly of the place of philosophy in Ovid, a place shaped by the ‘appropriateness’ of his material to the objective of his poetic project (DeLacy) and an ontology of the world of art and nature that derives from an aesthetic of illusionism and of calling up from absence and thereby representing material (Hardie).

Philosophical, along with mythic and scientific material, is suborned to literary, which is to say dramatic, artistic ends in the Metamorphoses. There is a rich sense in Ovid of the complex dialectics of representation, the relationship of art to reality, and the artful to the natural, paralleled in the dynamic relations of subject and object. ‘Philosophical’ insights form part of what animates a creativity that refuses to be faithful to any one particular philosophical school but eclectically draws from several.

It is, nevertheless, of some interest to understand the ways in which the speculative systems marshalled in Ovid’s epic reveal, in their usefulness and manner of pretending to ‘appropriateness’, the formative poetics that most inspired Ovid’s thought. Pythagoreanism offers him the obviously consonant idea of metempsychosis, and Pythagoras’ sermon forms a neat recapitulating coda in the pattern of human, vegetable, animal, mineral and (metatextually) literary transformations which make up the *Metamorphoses*. Pythagorean re-incarnation is scarcely an idea Ovid could resist in his philosophically inflected, concatenated *epyllia* of transformations, where we may also trace Stoic, Heraclitean, Empedoclean, Anaxagorean as well as Epicurean vestiges.13 In its exposition of re-incarnation and vegetarianism Pythagoras’ speech in Book 15 is also set distinctly and ironically against the many stories the reader has enjoyed of peace shattered by violence, of hunters and hunted, venatic and erotic pursuit suggestively juxtaposed. The passage is a bracket or frame that closes off and responds to the opening cosmogony in Book 1.5-88 and, like so many contra-distinctions, it enhances and is heightened by its ironic relation to what has preceded throughout the work.

However, Ovid is not to Pythagoras the popularising disciple that Lucretius was to Epicurus. His Pythagoras sermonises with the earnest righteousness of Lucretius in a parody of evangelical zeal. His lessons to Numa bear that mark of philosophical eclecticism found in the cosmogony of *Met.* 1.5-88, which must make us suspect its doctrinal seriousness. Heraclitean flux is included (\textit{nihil est toto, quod perstet, in orbe. cuncta fluunt, omnisque vagans formatur image.}) in *Met.* 15.177-78:

\begin{verbatim}
... nihil est toto, quod perstet, in orbe. 
cuncta fluunt, omnisque vagans formatur image.
\end{verbatim}

In the whole of the world there is nothing that stays unchanged. All is in flux. Any shape that is formed is constantly shifting.

The Empedoclean and Stoic notion of the four elements, rejected by Lucretius,14 is ascribed to Pythagoras who uses typically Lucretian language such as \textit{genitalia corpora} (239).

\footnotesize{13} See especially *Met.* 1.5-88 and on its cosmogony, Wheeler 1995; for an exhaustive list of philosophical allusions in the passage, see Bömer 1969 \textit{ad loc.}

\footnotesize{14} Lucr. 1.714ff.
Haec quoque non perstant, quae nos elementa vocamus, quasque vices peragant, animos adhibete: docebo. quattuor aeternus genitalia corpora mundus continet; ex illis duo sunt onerosa suoque pondere in inferius, tellus atque unda, feruntur, et totidem gravitate carent nilloque premente alta petunt, aer atque aere purior ignis.

This law of impermanence also applies to what we call elements. Pay attention, and I shall explain the changes they pass through. The world eternal contains four bodies which generate matter. Two of them, earth and water, are heavy and gravitate downwards; the other two, air and fire, which is even purer, are weightless and tend to make their way up, if nothing is pressing them down.

(Met. 15.237-43) 

With exemplary Ovidian irony, Lucretian arguments and diction are used to inflect and contradict Lucretian ideas (our bodies can suffer no real harm, our souls are immortal):

\[
\begin{align*}
corpora, sive rogus flamma seu tabe vetustas abulatori, mala passa pati non silla patetis! \\
morte carent animae semperque priore relicta
\end{align*}
\]

Our bodies, you know, can suffer no further ills, whether flames on the funeral pyre or rotting time in the grave has destroyed them. Our souls, however, are free from death. They simply depart from their former homes and continue their lives in new habitations.

(Met. 15.156-59)

There are many stories of hunters in the *Metamorphoses*, and their sorrows are never invoked to illustrate or substantiate the idea of the wickedness of non-vegetarianism as it is later preached (at length and with passion) by Ovid’s Pythagoras. The latter’s argument against hunting and killing has that oratorical tone that characterises many of Ovid’s extended speeches (cf. Medea, 7.11-71; Byblis, 9.474-516; Myrrha, 10.319-55). Here, too, we encounter the studied appeal to emotion of a forensic

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15 The ring-effect is very distinct in the echoing in lines 238-58 of Met. 1.28-60.
16 Compare, for example, Lucr. 3.864-69.
17 Diana’s faithful followers include Arcas, Cadmus, Actaeon, Narcissus. On hunters and hunted see esp. Parry 1964:272-73.
exercise. In this passage, the idea of vegetarianism as the reasoned practice of those who understand re-incarnation is taken to its logical conclusion and dramatised. Ovid introduces, as so often, elements of a comic, not a tragic, pathetic irony, which gently undercut any moral exaltedness that the passage may have been imagined to be striving toward. At Met. 15.130-40, for example, we find a typical vignette:

A victim unblemished and perfectly formed (its beauty its downfall), adorned with ribbons and gold on its horns, is set by the altar. It listens to prayers which it can’t understand and can feel the sprinkling, between the horns of its forehead, of barley it helped to produce. Its throat is cut and the blood runs on to the knife, whose reflection the animal may already have seen in the lustral water. The priests move quickly to snatch and inspect the lungs from the throbbing breast of the victim, in order to scan the purpose divine.

And then O race of mortals, so great is man’s lust for prohibited food – o you dare to gorge on your victim’s flesh. Now stop, I implore you and mark my words.

(Met. 15.130-40)

Here we have the sensational ironic touch that Ovid can never resist: nam placuisse nocet (131), auditque ignara (132), quas cohit (134). There is pathos in the ingeniously observed realism of the detail percussaque sanguine cultros inficit in liquida praevius foritan unda (134-35), which is a borrowing from Callimachus, Fr. 75.10-11 Pfeiffer and is repeated at Fasti 1.327. Not only in its literary allusiveness, but as an example of the

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18 And, equally, through another echo in Book 1 in the very proem we are made to anticipate a Callimachean aesthetics ad mea perpetuum deducite tempora carmen (Met. 1.4).
particular pathos of characters seeing themselves suffering, dying or changing and the audience being shown a figure recognising finally, its fate, this touch is thoroughly in keeping with the technique of description throughout the work. There is a Lucretian tone of plaintive admonition in auditis vesci, genus o mortale! quod, oro, | ne facite, et monitis animos advertite nostris! (139-40). When we read the lines, 

\[ \text{cumque bovum davitis caeorum membra palato,} \]
\[ \text{mandere vos vestros scite et sentite colonos.} \]

When you cram your mouths with the members of slaughtered oxen, remember you're eating your own farm-workers!

(Met. 15.141-42)

are we really to recall Actaeon's fate, for instance, and reflect on the error of slaughter, or is it this typical humorous extension of an idea to its logical and impressive limit?

Personified Nature as the Stoic Demiurge figure, seen at Met. 1.21 and 57, is met again at Met. 15.252-53:

\[ \text{Nec species sua cuique manet, rerumque novatrix} \]
\[ \text{ex aliis alius reddit natura figuras:} \]

Nothing retains its original form, but Nature, the goddess of all renewal, keeps altering one shape into another.

Ovid continues to press the assorted, malleable material of philosophical concepts into the service of his poetic design. Met. 15.254-57 can be read as Ovid's Pythagorean version of Lucretius' famous 'death is nothing to us':

\[ \text{nec perit in toto quicquam, mihi crede, mundo,} \]
\[ \text{sed variet faciemque novat, nascique vocatur} \]
\[ \text{incipere esse aliud, quam quod fuit ante, mortisque} \]
\[ \text{desinere illud idem.} \]

Nothing at all in the world can perish, you have to believe me: things merely vary and change their appearance. What we call birth is merely becoming a different entity; what we call death is ceasing to be the same.

(Met. 15.254-57)

\[ 19 \text{ Cf. DeLacy's remarks (1947:156) on the Callisto and Arcas episode and its relation to Pythagoras' speech.} \]
Nil igitur mors est ad nos neque pertinet hilum, quandoquidem natura animi mortalis habetur.

From all this it follows that death is nothing to us and no concern of ours, since our tenure of the mind is mortal. (Lucr. 3.830-31)

'The sum of things remains the same' (summa tamen omnia constant 258) in Ovid, and hence death is really nothing. Yet, throughout the work we have witnessed terrific spectacles of death, drawn with pathos and coloured with epic and tragic intensity, and the Metamorphoses has not been a work of consolation, a proclamation of immortality. The thought of death and images of bodily decay and destruction held before the Epicurean mind can cultivate a victory over death. The perspective of its true significance can lead a reader to a sense of the emptiness of fantasies about future immortality and the verity of earthly life, the value of its pleasures and the freedom available to the disciples of Epicurus. Ovid plays a complex dialectical game of assimilation and contradiction with Lucretius. The rest of Pythagoras' speech, in the spirit of a philosophical mood unburdened by any specific philosophical moral, is a Hellenistic catalogue of marvels (Met. 15.259-470), indebted not only to Hellenistic scholarship, but once again to Lucretius (Lucr. 6.96-1286).20

Pythagoras' speech is no 'theodicy,' but a follow-up, here in the last book antiphonal to the philosophically accented opening of the first book. Its function is aesthetic and formal, and rather than serving as an explanatory homily for the entire poem, it serves to give it shape and the appropriate aura of universality. Its obvious usefulness as a framing device in a ring-effect with the cosmogony; its literariness in intertextual allusion to Callimachus; the stylised, oratorical tone; the eclecticism of philosophical reference; the comical pathos of the depiction of animal victims and the thorough and ironic Lucretianism of the passage all combine to offer a strong basis against reading it as a serious explanation of the foregoing fourteen books and of Ovid's philosophy.

20 Cf. Kenney in Melville 1986:461 n. 259: 'Callimachus had shown the way with his "Collection of Wonders from all over the World" (Fr. 407 Pfeiffer). Here too the similar catalogue in Lucretius (De Rerum Natura vi) was clearly in Ovid's mind.'
Helpful to a conceptualisation of Ovid’s irony is an understanding of the Epicurean technique of envisioning its literary permutation as the ‘pathos of distance’ and the place this technique may find in Ovid’s poetics. Ovid configures an amphitheatrical order in which the reader looks down on his characters from a safe distance. Pathos is limited and often neutralised through humour and that distance which is insistently placed between audience and action. Developing a proper perspective to learn the true significance of events would serve for ancient philosophers, here, most pertinently, for Epicureans, as a spiritual exercise aimed at revealing the true nature of things. Ovid playfully vacillates between engagement and detachment in what is tantamount to a parody of that technique which the Epicurean advises us to practise in order to achieve ataraxia.

If in Ovid’s evocations there is a descriptive realism and wealth of detail, which add little to the narrative other than to say ‘We are the real’, then it is a realism somewhat germane to and implicated within the ‘naturalistic’ effect by which many characters are deceived. By ‘naturalistic’ I mean the concept Elsner defines as ‘… that mode of representation and that mode of viewing images in which the spectator is encouraged (if only momentarily) to imagine that the impossible might be possible, that the painted or sculpted image might in fact be what it represented. This is of course an ideal aimed at by particular pictures and sculptures (as well as artists and viewers) rather than an objectively verifiable actuality, but it is nonetheless crucial to much of the subjective response to art and to some

21 See Lyne 1984:12: ‘Ovid works it so that we can sample life safely. He controls our dose. Some people might think it was, in a way, rather an immoral form of art. Metamorphosis therefore insulates the reader from the full implications of an action imitated.’

22 For a good discussion of the ekphrastic technique and the significance of forms of description to narration, see Fowler’s essay ‘Narrate and describe: the problem of ekphrasis’ (2000:64-85). This is a quotation from Roland Barthes’s The Rustle of Language. Any sample of the work will yield examples of the kind of realistic touches I mean, and which Fowler discusses. In the early Deucalion and Pyrrha episode, for example, the flood has subsided and the couple make their way to the river Cephisus, ‘the river was still disturbed but cutting its usual channel. Drawing some water, they sprinkled it over their heads and their garments, and bent their footsteps towards the shrine of the holy goddess. Its gable was pale with unsightly moss, and the fires on the altar were dead’ (Met. 1.370-75; transl. Raeburn 2004:23). Ovid consistently demonstrates a control over details; the ironic result is realistic effect rather than fully credible situation.
of the intentions of artists. Narcissus is the outstanding victim of this ‘naturalism’ of the sign. The implied reader of Ovid is consistently alerted to the place of ars in making the impossible seem possible. The subjective response of any reader of Ovid means that we cannot remain unaware of the complicity of his audience in the apparent ‘actuality’ of representation. Our responsive imaginations make his fantasies become reality to us.

Ovid’s Metamorphoses is famously filmic, vivid and fascinating, clearly aiming to bring before the eyes rather than merely describe, to seem to show while only telling, to re-present. His is, outstandingly, the poetry of the visible through the word. His method relies on the enargeia and even on the vivid and dynamic effect of irrupting energies that break through the stylised, ekphrastic mise en scène. The locus amoenus is carefully arranged, for example, in several instances in Books 3 and 4, as a static, pictorial word painting which is made to heighten, by its stillness and artifice, the illusion of violent action and poignant transformation of character and scene which ensues.

Such is the nature of a work of art that it problematises the distinction between static and dynamic, between subject and object and therefore the stability of reality and its forms. Art is at once reification and idealisation and it is on this rich antinomy that Ovid weaves his text. Ovid’s aesthetics of irony seems to issue from his sensitivity to this doubleness, this pleasure in the mutuality of dialectical relationships. In his sophisticated fusion of a variety of philosophical ideas, intellectual ideas artfully conceal and reveal and contrast with each other in a music of themes, images and devices, (ars adeo latet arte sua, Met. 10.252). Equally, the episodes of the poem are composed to enrich each other through contrast, similarity and elegant variation of theme.

The arrangement of episodes in Books 3 and 4, the Theban sequence, for example, illustrates his taste for this reciprocally animating and heightening effect of proximate contraries. Episodes invert, echo and reflect each other, relying on similar motifs and situations (bad luck, pathetic reversal, failures to recognise, doubleness).

23 Elsner 1996:258 n. 7.
24 See Parry 1964.
It opens with Cadmus, killer of the chthonic monster he chances upon, and it closes (in an internal ring-effect) with the transformation of Cadmus himself into a snake. Cadmus asks his wife if all of the catastrophes that have befallen his house were a result of his stumbling upon and killing the serpent:

> num sacer ille mea trajectus cuspide serpens'  
> Cadmus ait 'fuerat, tum, cum Sidone profectus  
> vipersos sparsi per humum, nova semina, dentes?'

'That serpent I pierced with my spear, at the time when I came from Sidon, and scattered its teeth on the ground to grow into strange new warriors – could it by any chance have been sacred?'  
(Met. 4.571-73)

Like his grandfather Cadmus, Actaeon is out in the Theban countryside: separated from his men, he happens upon Diana, goddess of the natural world, fierce and stirred to wrath by his presence. She transforms him into a stag and he is, ironically, devoured by his own hounds (Actaeon ego sum: dominum cognoscite vestrum, Met. 3.230). Both become, the one voluntarily (Cadmus) the other through no choice of his own, that thing or a thing that belongs to the god or creature which they have offended.

Naïve Semele, ignaram … Cadmeida (Met. 3.287), is deceived by Juno into fatally testing whether Jupiter, so often a deceiver of women, really is Jupiter himself, when for once he is what he says he is. Bacchus, the offspring of that incendiary union, is the god of epiphanies, who arrives in cities and is either recognised or not recognised for a god until he makes himself manifest. He is, certainly since Euripides, a god of contraries: both masculine and feminine, a blessing and a curse, offering both joy and terror. He is the god who insists on recognition. Here in Ovid’s Theban section he is situated amongst human figures who in various fashions fail to recognise him. His birth precedes the amusing account of Tiresias’ transformation, he, who suffers or enjoys the experience of knowing maleness and femaleness, literal blindness and symbolic sight, the fatidicus vates (Met. 3.348), who prophesies in riddles (i.e. speaking at once both literally and figuratively) that Narcissus would live a long life if – like Oedipus – se non novet (Met. 3.348).

The nymph Echo detains Juno with long chats (illa deam longo prudens sermone tenebat, Met. 3.364) to cover up Jupiter’s incorrigible deceitfulness. When Juno recognises Echo’s deception of her, she reverses Echo’s
outstanding character trait: *qua sum delius, potestas | parva tibi dabitur vocisque brevissimus usus* (Met. 3.366-67). A narrative mirror image of this is Narcissus' tale, in which his unavailability to others becomes also his unavailability to himself. The Narcissus episode, which in itself is rich in so many ways for a discussion of the complexities of seeing and objectification and representation and subjectivity, is also perfectly placed in the Theban suite in which its *motifs* recur in nuanced permutations.

'Realistic' Pentheus, *contemptor superum* (Met. 3.514), and the sceptical Minyseides are set off by the preceding accounts of the naïve and gullible. But Pentheus, another figure who is doomed by what he sees (the Bacchic rites), and very like Actaeon, is violently torn apart by his own who cannot recognise him: *Autonoes moveant animos Actaeonis umbrae!* (Met. 3.720). The stories are linked by the figure of Tiresias, whose warning to Pentheus is pregnant with prognostication and all the more richly textured by the close proximity of the previous story of Narcissus, blind and too seeing: *quam felix esses, si tu quoque luminis huius | orbus, ait, fieres* (Met. 3.517-18).

The tale of Pyramus and Thisbe is the story of two innocents told by a sceptical daughter of Minyas to her equally unbelieving sisters. The Babylonian couple long for physical union but are thwarted by Pyramus' tragic misrecognition of signs and misattribution to himself of causes (again like Narcissus in misreading himself, and his role in the situation):

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Serius egressus vestigia vidit in alto
pulvere certa ferae totaque expalluit ore
Pyramus: ut vero vestem quoque sanguine tinctam
repperit, 'una duos' inquit 'nox perdit amantes.
E qui subs illa fuit longa dignissima vita,
os nostra nocens anima est: ego te, miseranda, preemi,
in loca plena metus qui tibi nocte venires,
non prior hic veni.
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Pyramus stole out later and came on the scene to observe the unmistakable tracks of a wild beast, there in the deep dust. At once he grew deadly pale; but when he had also discovered the blood-drenched cloak, he exclaimed: 'One night shall ruin two lovers! Thisbe deserved far better to live to a ripe old age. Mine is the guilty soul. Poor girl, it is I who've destroyed you by making you find your way at night to this frightening place, without being there to meet you.'

(Met. 4.105-12)
Leucothoe, also beloved by the sun and wrongfully found guilty for a crime not hers, contrasts with the jealous Clytie who loves the sun and is ignored. These tales repeat the structure of the Narcissus and Echo narrative and also recall Semele’s encounter with Jupiter: nec longius ille moratus | in veram rediit speciem solitumque nitorem (Met. 4.230-31). The following Salmacis and Hermaphroditus episode is another variation on the theme of loving/beloved and union/disunion, with obvious resonance with the Tiresias figure and the equivocal gendering of Bacchus. Hermaphroditus is clearly signalled as a version of Narcissus (both are compared to apples and ivory, Met. 3.421-22, 483-84, 4.330-32) and Salmacis, like the rejected suitors of the frigid Narcissus, prays and is heard by the gods: vota suos habuerre deos (Met. 4.373). The feature of the pool and the contrasting reaction of Narcissus and Hermaphroditus to the water offer another outstanding clue to the reciprocal relationship of the stories, and yet the story plays on similarity and difference. Both figures are like works of art in the water, Narcissus, significantly, as viewed from above:

... visae correptus imagine formae
[spem sine corpore amat: corpus putat esse, quod unda est]
adstatet ipse sibi, vultuque inmotus eodem
haeret, ut e Pario formatum marmore signum.

His being was suddenly overwhelmed by a vision of beauty. He fell in love with an empty hope, a shadow mistaken for a substance. He gazed at himself in amazement, limbs and expression as still as a statue of Parian marble:
(Met. 3.416-19)

and Hermaphroditus, in one of Ovid’s loveliest images, in the water:

Visque moram patitur, vix iam sua gaudia differt,
iam cupit amplecti, iam se male continet amens.
Ille cavis velox adplauso corpore palmis
desilit in latices, alternaque bracchia ducens
in liquidis translucet aquis, ut eburnea siquis
signa tegat claro vel candida lilia vitro.

Any delay or postponement of joy was almost impossible. Out of control in her frenzy, she had to embrace him now. The young man, cupping his palms and slapping his torso, swiftly jumped down into the pool. As his arms flashed out in alternate strokes, his body gleamed in the glassy water, like ivory statues or pure white lilies encased in transparent crystal.
(Met. 4.350-55)

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Once again, this fate is an inversion of its partner in the scheme of the episodes: the impossibility of union in the former, and complete, literal union in the latter, that takes the figurative language of typical fictional lovers to its ultimate, literal realisation.

Athamas and Ino, actually driven mad by the snakes of the Fury set upon them by jealous Juno (who is, as often, a useful narrative instrument), suffer the same fate as Pentheus whose mother and aunts in the Bacchic trance tore him apart. Athamas in his delirium calls to his companions to hunt a beast, which is not a beast, but his wife and children: \textit{io, comites, his reixa tendite silvis! \[hic modo cum gemina visa est mihi prole leana \]} (Met. 4.513-14). He sees what is not there. In this way Ovid fuses important motifs in the story of Athamas and Ino with others from the Actaeon, Narcissus and Pentheus episodes. Each scene is like a chord striking notes that have been played in others.

The Bacchic theme of the Theban sequence perfectly explains a set of tales about failure to recognise reality. Dionysus is the most paradoxical of the gods\footnote{See Burkert 1985:161-67.} and the one who significantly presides over both the tragic and the comic art of masks. The motif of denial of divinity complements that of denial of reality. Failure to recognise Dionysus is set against failure to recognise Jupiter and enriches the theme of ignorance, innocence and scepticism from which so much pathetic irony is derived. One may say that Dionysiac madness/insight is also the basis of mimetic art, enabling his adherents to see that which is not there and to be affected by or to refuse to suspend disbelief at the peril of losing themselves entirely to reality.

The pathos of distance

From above, I will see ... (Met. 15.147).

\begin{quote}
Suave, mari magno turbantibus aequora ventis,
E terra magnum alterius spectare laborem;
\end{quote}

What joy it is when out at sea the stormwinds are lashing the waters, to gaze from the shore at the heavy stress some other man is enduring!

(Lucer. 2.1-2)
In Ovid, language and vision retain all their power for both deception and illustration. If one were to elaborate an evident Ovidian philosophy of language it would necessarily be premised on Ovid’s double sense of both the efficacy of and ambiguous ontological status of representation, language and image, which together form the material and objective of his poetry: he wishes to make us see with words. If words and the images they ‘body forth’ have the power to teach us the truth of our situation, they are also notoriously constituent of our truths and available to the arts of the rhetorician and master of illusion.

Frederic Schroeder has discussed one particular relation between philosophy and literature that argues for the adoption in Vergil’s stoic epic of avocatio, which in Philodemus and Lucretius is the therapeutic technique for establishing proper moral perspective through distance and thus suitable deliverance from the illusoriness of passion and achievement of the moral freedom of apatheia. Schroeder characterises the permutation that this technique takes in Vergil as the ‘pathos of distance’. Envisioning – τίθεναι πρὸ ὀμμάτων or ἐν ὄψει – in Philodemus, in Lucretius avocatio – relies on vision, on the act of seeing itself as establishing or being a means towards establishing the true nature of and a right relation with reality.

If logos in the form of dialogue, instruction and other kinds of discursive propagation and exploration of philosophical truth had long served for essential instrument, we find by the 1st century BC, according to Schroeder, a reinvocation of imago in its marriage with logos as appropriate to techniques of philosophising: ‘We should notice the powerful use of visual imagery in Philodemus’ spiritual counseling. His act of envisioning something is (pace Nussbaum 1986) an original contribution to Epicurean therapy. Since Plato’s attack on the plastic arts in the Republic, philosophy had been ruled by logos. I would suggest that the act of envisioning in later Epicureanism restores the importance of the visual imagination in the marriage of reason and rhetoric that is effected by its pastoral concern …’

Verbal visual representation as the offspring of the marriage of imagination and rhetoric is by this reasoning well restored

26 Schroeder 2004:141; see also Hadot 2002:206-07 for a fuller description of the pedigree of the recurring theme in ancient philosophy of taking ‘the view from above’, from Plato through Cicero, Ovid’s ‘neopythagorean source’. Lucretius, Seneca and Lucian’s cynic Menippus: ‘The view from above changes our value judgements on things … One might say that this exercise has been, since Plato, the very essence of philosophy.’
27 Schroeder 2004:140.
28 Schroeder 2004:141.
by Ovid’s generation, indebted as it was to the precedents of Lucretius, Horace and Vergil, and it is a conclusion hard to refute when one regards the poetic progeny conceived and delivered by Ovid. Not only does the term *imago* recur as a *Leitmotiv* of the *Metamorphoses* but Ovid’s descriptions are carefully developed and detailed *imagines* filled out and enlarged with a surfeit of touches dispensable to the strict narrative but that obviously, in their consistent recurrence, serve a function in Ovid’s poetics of imagining. 29

Ovid does not simply want to represent in a persuasive and affecting way, he plays with mimēsis itself, its operations and implications about the status of reality and appearance. In his work and its treatment of story and image, in its duplicities and in his language he dramatises precisely the techniques of detachment prescribed by doctrinaire Epicureanism. The phrase *ante oculos* – *τίθεναι πρὸ ὀμμάτων* – is used 36 times30 in Ovid’s *corpus* and his desired effect is always to bring into presence before our eyes. This is the degree to which Ovid is intertextual: he does not simply rework the creations and versions of his predecessors, but plays with the conventional mechanisms of narrative and poetic creation itself to go to the primary nature of *poiesis*.

That Ovid’s work is universalist in range and diverse in matter suggests not that Ovid is adopting a philosophical attitude premised on a sense of the real significance of passions and experience in universal terms, but that myth, stories and our relation to stories are his main theme rather than any one story or view of the world. What the status of the work of art is for Ovid and its relation to the world of nature and unmade reality is a question that recurs continually in a work that thematises illusion, appearance against reality, and the figure of the artist, or the figure who has power to transform things.31

29 Cf. Wright 1921:168-69: ‘The habit which the Roman poets have of working up a long passage from a few lines in some Greek original by the addition of a mass of realistic details deserves more study than it has yet received. Ovid, who, in the period of the *Amores* and the *Ars Amatoria*, was even more influenced by Philodemus than is Horace, would supply several examples. The fifth poem in the first book of the *Amores* may record an actual experience, but in its literary form it is modeled on the epigram of Philodemus A.P. V 132; and the seventh piece in the third book is merely a long expansion of A.P. XI 30.’

30 Deferrari, Barry & McGuire 1939 s.v.

31 See Hardie 2002:6: ‘To put it another way, while much recent criticism has concerned with the epistemological moment of Ovidian poetics, this book focuses more on the ontological moment … ’; note especially also his chapter ‘Death, desire and monuments’ (62-105).
In Philodemus and in Lucretius we are counselled to derive *consolatio* from the fact that we will not be conscious in death, we will have no sensation of the corruption of our corpses, we will not suffer, because we will no longer be conscious.\(^{32}\) We are adjured to *hold before our minds the images* of death and futile passion so that the emotions of Fear and Anger be suitably dismissed. Ovid's transformed humans, held before our minds' eyes, do precisely have consciousness of their transformations, they undergo the slow, exquisite tortures of loss of self, they witness their own disintegration, stupid with fear and amazement.\(^{33}\) In those scenes we are in turn witnessing both a satire of and kind of extrapolation of Epicurean ideas and furthermore a parody of the tragic *hamartia* (failure to recognise – in Actaeon's case, seeing too much and in Narcissus' both seeing too much and failing to recognise simultaneously) and *anagnorisis.*\(^{34}\) Why Ovid should parody such tragic moments of discovery is because the humour with which his work is invested relies precisely on the exposing of the mechanics of dramatic tension and pathetic irony: playing on that tension between 'those in the know' and those haplessly not.

The 'pathos of distance' is a rich idea for thinking through Ovid's poetics. In Ovid, I would suggest that the 'point' or 'lesson' is not the futility of passions, nor is his a demonstration of the therapeutic value of perspective. Ovid's concern is not pastoral or didactic. What it is, perhaps, is a secularised and satirising adaptation of that technique 'intended to render the doctrine of Epicurus more emotionally relevant.'\(^{35}\) The dynamics of deception and recognition are as central to Ovid's *Metamorphoses* as knowing and ignorance are to the dramatic ironies of Aristotelian tragedy and comedy.

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32 Schroeder 2004:142 on the *De morte* of Philodemus; cf. Lucr. 3.830ff.
33 E.g., Daphne, Actaeon, Cadmus, Pythagoras' slaughtered victim.
34 Being deceived and failure to recognise or acknowledge reality are the recurrent errors of characters in the *Metamorphoses.* Actaeon (he sees too much and in turn is unrecognised by his own dogs), Narcissus, Pentheus, the Lydian sailors and the daughters of Minyas (who all fail to recognise Bacchus, that twice-born god of ambiguities, of nature's terror and blessings and art's illusions and ecstasies), Pyramus and Thisbe (those misreaders). On Ovid's Narcissus episode and its relation to the Oedipus myth, conspicuously absent from his Theban episodes, see Gildenhard & Zissos 2000.
35 Schroeder 2004:142.
Conclusion: the distance of pathos

Just as Ovid takes the formulations of Lucretius to ironically advance contrary or divergent doctrines in the speech of Pythagoras, so too does he employ the Epicurean technique of envisioning and contemplation of violence and death to achieve a work at odds with Epicurean doctrine in its apparently amoral pleasure in beholding, stirring and estranging sympathy rather than testifying to the virtues of a more deeply moral philosophical detachment.

With its philosophical language and techniques that are purged of pastoral intent, Ovid’s poetry can read as a work of sophistic philologia that adapts the topoi and even the techniques of philosophia even as it repudiates its ethical claims. Its primary interest for the history of ideas is in the poet’s Weltanschaung and its evidence as a document in the cultural moment of Augustan Rome. Its perspective is universal and privileged, focalising a relation to time and space that is imperial in its reach. Its recourse to the topics and imagery of philosophy seems intended to lend it a universal framework. Its moral lesson lies in its scope and the power implied by the universalist extension of its omniscient gaze.

Ovid’s compendium of myth, science, philosophy and history has served as such a rich and variously interpreted source for later readers and artists from Antiquity, through the Renaissance and up to modern times because it is the fruit of a radical irony which lends it an apparent interpretive openness. This openness, a precious achievement, can, however, be something of a trap, for if we seek to express the formative poetics that guide Ovid’s composition we cannot deny that belief is problematised in his work. Artists and spectators are both transformed by and transform what they apprehend and there is no simple relation between them. What we seek in Ovid we may very well find. Perhaps an important lesson we should take from him is that we may take what we seek but remain wary of calling reflections of ourselves and our willingness to believe in those reflections, ‘the truth’.

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