
We Too Are Part of the World:
The Logic of the Concrete in
Ovid's *Metamorphoses*

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THE LAST TIME I saw Marcel in what had been our garden, nested in the forest of Fontainebleau, we talked about ongoing projects. He was writing about different practices of comparison. I was finishing an essay on Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. I had discovered a pattern in the classification of plants and this, I thought, explained beautifully the crucial importance of Pythagoras's speech at the end of the poem.¹ It also agreed with Marcel's early study "La cuisine de Pythagore" and, more generally, with his life-long commitment to an "anthropology along with the Greeks," namely an approach to ancient societies as such—societies, rather than bookshelves.² Already in the sixties, Marcel had embraced the structural analysis of mythology, applying to Greek and Roman storytelling the same hermeneutical devices that Claude Lévi-Strauss had experimented on American tales. The interrelation of humans, animals, plants, and minerals; the cultural salience of food, especially its symbolic and political meaning in the context of bloody sacrifice: all this shaped a "logic of the concrete." This approach to narrative thinking entailed a fundamental materialism and an ecocritical potential. While I was reading the *Metamorphoses*, these ideas had come back to life, refreshed and more heuristic than ever. I had decided to take the poem itself as an object of anthropological analysis. The poem was a world: a possible

world abiding by its own rules. "I had not thought about that!" Marcel said. I promised that I would show him the article, but we did not have the time.

What follows echoes that conversation.

Nova corpora

THE *METAMORPHOSES* CREATES a possible world. A possible world is a fictional artefact, accessible to the imagination. Its premises may well be incompatible with the reality in which the reader dwells, but the consequences of those principles are logically consistent. Some are required and some are plausible.³ Ovid's poem postulates the possibility of metamorphosis and then follows its conceivable developments. From the first lines, we are told that *nova corpora*, new bodies, come into existence through the modification of pre-existent beings (Ov. *Met.* 1.1–4). How can this happen? What is the starting point of these morphological reworkings? Women and men. There exists an initial difference between humanity and the rest of the cosmos. But the narrative sets taxonomy into motion, and almost all individual metamorphoses begin from us. We may become the targets of divine intervention; we may make mistakes that provoke retribution; or we may even ask the gods to be changed into something else. It is we, human beings, who experience changeability. In its focalization on human life, form, and agency, therefore, the poem is anthropocentric. By telling these very stories, however, the syntagmatic progression of its many subplots blurs those distinctions. Transformation after transformation, human beings undergo disfiguring makeovers. These alterations affect our bodies to the point of

reassigning them to distinct species. Metamorphosis is dehumanizing. But humanity lingers. Narration reworks plastically our fragile uniqueness, to reshape new miscellaneous embodiments. Hybrids proliferate.

Poetic storytelling redistributes life across natural domains. Yet, there is an internal coherence. This relies both on the modal logic of possible worlds and the structural logic of perceptible qualities.⁴ There are, we just said, humans and nonhumans. They look different. Among non-anthropomorphic living beings, there are those that have always looked as they now look, and there are those who, in the course of a metamorphosis, have acquired feathers, fangs, horns, or branches, leaves, sprouts, and petals—but still retain a parcel of human quality and, more specifically, a psychosomatic memory of themselves. Their body is different; but *they* live their new body. They live through their re-embodiment. This is what Philippe Descola calls an animistic ontology, namely a classification of beings in which there may well be disparate forms of physicality, but they are compatible with one shared interiority, usually human.⁵ This is not to say that the Romans were an animistic society, but that the *Metamorphoses* shapes an animistic possible world.

Now, one of the most salient ways we, humans, interact with the ecosphere is by eating other bodies. Normally, we abstain from feeding on our fellow humans because this is abominable. The poem makes a neat distinction between human and nonhuman foodstuff. Pythagoras depicts the daily life of the Cyclopes, the cannibalistic brutes we have known so well since the *Odyssey*. They used to devour human limbs as a matter of course (Ov. *Met.* 15.90–95). Their difference from Greek, Trojan, Roman civilized people is a

matter of good or bad *mores*: flesh-eaters are blameworthy. But the poem itself generates the potential for such an uncouth violence. Metamorphosis—and the very possibility of metamorphosis—creates perceptual uncertainty and, therefore, a risk of alimentary confusion. The *nova corpora* issued from transfiguration are invisibly motley. Whenever we feed on them, we may commit cannibalism. Meat might be flesh. The episode of Lycaon (who dismembers and cooks a Molossian prisoner to trick Zeus) and Procne and Philomela (who serve Itys, a boy converted into a stew, to his father) bear witness to the moral/anthropological judgment made in the narration. Indeed, anthropophagy can be a tragic accident, the outcome of a malignant trick. But the threat of anthropophagy is intrinsic to an ecosphere in which, once metamorphosis has been admitted, any human being can lose anthropomorphic conspicuousness and any nonhuman being might hide a human subjectivity.

In Book 15, Pythagoras will make this judgment crystal clear. We too are part of the world (*nos quoque pars mundi*); since our human “winged souls” (*volucres animae*) “may enter into beastly homes and even be concealed in the bodies of cattle” (*inque ferinas possumus ire domos pecudumque in corpora condi*), we must abstain from ingesting those bodies. “Let us not fill up our bowels with Thyestean feasts” (*neve Thyestis cumulemus viscera mensis*)! Thyestes ate inadvertently the flesh of his sons, when his twin brother, Atreus, served it to him at dinner:

Nos quoque pars mundi (quoniam non corpora solum
verum etiam volucres animae sumus, inque ferinas
possumus ire domos, pecudumque in pectora condi),

corpora quae possunt animas habuisse parentum,
aut fratrum, aut aliquo iunctorum foedere nobis,
aut hominum certe, tuta esse et honesta sinamus;
neve Thyesteis cumulemus viscera mensis.

(Ov. *Met.* 15.546–62)

And we ourselves, who are part of the world (for we are not only bodies, but also winged souls, and we can go and dwell in feral homes, or be concealed in the chest of domestic animals), let us allow to be safe and respected those bodies which may have contained the souls of our fathers, of our brothers, of those who are attached to us by some bond, or at least the souls of human beings; let us not fill our entrails with Thyestean feasts.

All animals must be avoided as if any beast, in its physicality, may conceal a consanguineous interiority. To forestall cannibalism, we must be vegetarians. But how about plants? It depends. Plants could be either the result of a metamorphosis (such as poplars, laurel trees, lotus, narcissus, cypress, or crocus) or purely botanical beings that never underwent a transformation from a human body (such as apples, berries, and cabbage). The former are also-human amalgams and, therefore, might be an anthropophagic fare. The latter are uncontaminated by humanity. The former are inedible anyway; the latter are comestible in Roman cuisine.⁶ Once we discern this subtle line of demarcation, as I told to Marcel, we fully understand the distinction between the animal and the vegetal realms. It is an issue of quantifiers. On the one hand, *any* animal might be a theriomorphic man (like Actaeon, the deer, or Lycaon, the wolf), or a woman defaced (like Io, the

cow). *Any* meat, in short, could double as human flesh, and secrete human blood. Any appetizing chunk of steak might be the culinary reincarnation of a tender youth, like Tereus's and Thyestes' sons. On the other hand, *not all* plants carry a human provenance. Some are pure. People are already used to eating them. By weaving this system of differences, the poem itself paves the way to the conclusion that there exists a reasonable, preferable, commendable, and manageable response to the confusing organization of the ecosystem. This response is vegetarianism. We must not eat any meat whatsoever; we may eat a selection of plants, which we do anyway. Vegetarianism is neither a utopia nor a whim, but a realistic, comfortable, and tasty possibility ingrained in a social practice—Roman cuisine—as well as in the fabric of the *Metamorphoses*.

This is the logic of the concrete. To take it seriously we must consider worthy of inquiry at least three facts: how a culture generates its norms; how those norms may be embedded and embodied in all sorts of material things and down-to-earth activities; how an exceptionally insightful individual can rationalize those norms in a normative work of thought, be it a dialogue, a drama, a treatise, or a poem. This is the aspiration of an anthropological approach. No disrespect to the text. No contempt for philology. No simple-minded determinism either. But a humble inquisitiveness: what is the ambition of an awe-inspiring masterpiece like the *Metamorphoses*? How does it relate to the cultural universe in which it came to exist? How can we say something worthy of that ambition and that situation? True, scholars who have endorsed an anthropological method may have discounted the authorial idiosyncrasy of a great book. True, Marcel himself tended to steer his

inquiries towards multiple sources. But no reading of a text could have been more concerned with semantic granularity than his engagement with Plato in *The Invention of Mythology*, or with the *Homeric Hymn to Apollo* in *Apollon, le couteau à la main*.⁷ The “text” has never been a problem for those who understand the benefits of anthropology. My own contribution, as I said, takes a different direction, that of an anthropology of possible worlds. Yes, there are authorial projects. Yes, there are profound works of thought. Yes, there are ontologies and modal ramifications in those textual totalities. We can try to discover them.

Securae gentes

TO MAKE SURE that we understand, Ovid kindly helps us. In Book 15, Pythagoras brings the vegetarian logic of the poem into full light. Let us go into details. Pythagoras prohibits all the kinds of meat to which his addressees were accustomed, while approving of milk and honey. In lieu of any kind of carnivorous diet, he recommends such vegetables as *fruges*, *poma*, *herbae*, *uvae*. All these are mild food, *alimenta mitia* (Ov. Met. 15.75–84). No blood. Now, these greens and fruit are immune from a trans-human history. They are earthy, wholesome, local supplies as common and easy to source as they are delicious. Pythagoras urges his audience to enjoy them. Interestingly, he does not bother to alert us to the danger of eating plants that might contain a quantum of humanity. Why? Because there is no need to forbid a regime of poplar, cypress, or narcissus, just as the risk of gulping down a stone or a star is quite remote. The distinction is self-evident both culturally and narratively. When we finally come to his exhortation, we know

already that among plants some derive from a human being via metamorphosis and, lucky us, they are inedible; some are (and have always been) purely vegetal and, lucky us, they are edible. By reading the previous books of the poem, we have learned this taxonomy and now we discover that, unfailingly, Pythagoras invites us to enjoy plants that are good for us. Meat—in all its variants—is systemically to be avoided, lest we commit cannibalism. We are urged to be vegetarian, but we must be a discriminating one—which is easy. Once again, we already like fruit and vegetables; who would feed on flowers, bark, or stones?

That the poem, despite its unbridled assortment of new bodies, should abide by this deeply seated rule must mean something: not necessarily that Ovid was a vegetarian, not that he adhered to Pythagoreanism, but that Pythagoras's speech, in Book 15 of the *Metamorphoses*, is in line with the poem. Neither a ridiculous nor a mediocre intruder, Pythagoras is here at home. The casting is perfectly adjusted. Everything is in flux. Be careful into what you chose to sink your teeth. The poem, to conclude on this point, develops a poetic, and yet prescriptive discourse on violence, namely a discourse loaded with ethical values and expressing approval and dissuasion, praise and blame. Pythagoras brings this subliminal structure to the fore. Ovid, I am trying to argue, does not need to be moralized, because his poetry already articulates a moral philosophy.

Let us return to the text with an eye to the logic of the concrete. In Book 1, the poem projects into the past a blissful condition in which nobody ever shed blood to stay alive. This is the Golden Age. Those fortunate people did not have to take animal life for the sake of the gods either. In

that time, there was neither war, nor agriculture, nor carnivorous diet, nor bloody sacrifice. People lived safe and secure (*securae gentes*):

Nondum praecipites cingebant oppida fossae;
 non galeae, non ensis erant : sine militis usu
 mollia securae peragebant otia gentes.
 Ipsa quoque immunis, rastroque intacta, nec ullis
 saucia vomeribus, per se dabat omnia tellus;
 contentique cibis nullo cogente creatis,
 arbuteos fetus montanaque fraga legebant,
 cornaque, et in duris haerentia mora rubetis,
 et quae deciderant patula Iovis arbore glandes.

(Ov. *Met.* 1.101–106)

The steep moats did not yet surround the cities; there were no helmets; not a sword; worry-free people spent their leisure time without the use of soldiers. The land itself was also free of tribute; and untouched by the axe, and not wounded by any ploughshare, provided everything by itself. And men content with the food that came, without any constraint, picked the fruit of the arbutus, and mountain strawberries, and cornel-cherries attached to hard brambles, and the acorns fallen from Jupiter's broad tree.

Safety, security, and *otia* compose a tableau of peace. Nowadays, that eternal spring is lost, but a vast variety of vegetal foodstuff remains available. Still “now,” in the temporality of the poem, Pomona's orchards are full apples, berries, figs, grapes, honey, and plenty of common vegetables (Ov. *Met.* 14.623–97). Baucis and Philemon share with their guests a fare of root/radish (*radix*), cornel-cherries, sweet nuts, dried

figs, dates, plums, apples, grapes, honeycomb, cabbage/lettuce (*holus*), curdled milk, and eggs (Ov. *Met.* 8.646–80). The Roman readers can take the cue from this “catalogue of what you can eat,” and freely help themselves to the same produce. Like their blissful ancestors living in the Golden Age, they too could gather arbutus fruits, wild strawberries, and blackberries; they too could collect “the sweet acorns fallen on the ground from Jupiter’s large tree” (*et quae deciderant patula Iovis arbore glandes*). Since the Silver Age, agriculture provides them with nutritious cereals. Bloodless nourishment is just easy. It would be truly uncomplicated to live without shedding gore. We could be good.

But a gulf separates us from that bygone meekness for, after the Golden Age, came the Age of Bronze, and later the Age of Iron. Exploitative agriculture, extractive mining, competitive trade, greedy wealth, mutual deceit. And to crown this descent into truculence came war, which “shook clashing arms with its bloody hand” (*sanguineaque manu crepitantia concutit arma*, Ov. *Met.* 1.142–43). But humanity could sink even lower. After the attack of the giants on Mount Olympus and their punishment, Jupiter struck them with lightning, and from their remains arose another generation of men: born of blood, this race was cruel, superlatively bloodthirsty, and violent (*saevaeque avidissima caedis et violenta*, Ov. *Met.* 1.161–62). It was a bloody age. Could it get any worse? Since the offspring of Pyrrha and Deucalion are not described in more flattering terms in the final anthropogony of Book 1, we must conclude that humanity never improved. And if we immerse ourselves in the Trojan-Greco-Roman universe of the poem, we realize that bloodshed has become a matter of course. War is ubiquitous. The killing of an ani-

mal and the consumption of flesh take place all the time, in a wide range of situations that can be more or less brutal.

This is especially salient when the gods are involved. To give a sense of this array of possibilities: on the most vicious and blameworthy end of the spectrum, meat-eating may occur in deliberately murderous circumstances, as in Lycaon's cannibalistic kitchen. The ritual slaying of a human being for a divinity can be fully accomplished: think of Polyxena (Ov. *Met.* 13.447–87). Sometimes the slaughtering of a victim (human and nonhuman) may be started but suddenly aborted. Iphigenia is presented as a victim to Diana, but the goddess transforms the young woman into a doe, at the very last minute. The doe is slain instead. “Diana is appeased by this murder” (*lenita est caede Diana*, Ov. *Met.* 12.24–38). Philemon and Baucis's goose is never killed for Jupiter and Mercury. Similarly, in the history of the foundation of Thebes, the sacrifice of a heifer to Jupiter is never carried out (Ov. *Met.* 3.10–26). Finally, at the other end of the spectrum, bloody sacrifices can be performed in a banalized fashion, as if they were just a commonplace feature of daily life.⁸ The king of Delos, Anius, performs a sacrifice:

Ture dato flammis vinoque in tura profuso
Caesorumque boum fibris de more crematis
regia tecta petunt positisque tapetibus altis
munera cum liquido capiunt Cerealia Baccho.

(Ov. *Met.* 13.636–39)

After throwing incense into the flame and pouring wine onto the incense, after burning the interiors of the slaughtered oxen according to custom, in the royal palace and its

high ceilings, reclining on luxurious rugs, they take Ceres' gifts of food with liquid Bacchus.

To Asclepius, brought to Rome in the shape of a huge snake, the descendants of Aeneas gladly sacrifice a bull:

Aeneadae gaudent caesoque in litore tauro
torta coronatae solvunt retinacula navis.

(Ov. *Met.* 15.695–96)⁹

The glad descendants of Aeneas all rejoiced, and they sacrificed a bull beside the harbor, wreathed the ship with flowers, and loosed the twisted hawsers from the shore.

The fact that a ritual can be executed “as is customary” (*de more*) does not contradict the line of thought that runs through the poem, and the tone of praise/blame. Indeed, the peoples involved in the *Metamorphoses* offer animal victims to the gods, supposing that the gods may welcome them; indeed, they eat meat. They do so, but the poem itself makes it clear from the beginning that there exists a touchstone of what would be best; this is the vegetarian and peaceful regime of the Golden Age. In synthesis: from a Golden Age to a Greco-Trojan-Roman history infected with meat-eating/flesh-eating, the poem’s periodization of human life runs for fourteen books in the wake of a loss. Peacefulness is gone. But the banalization of violence is also a precursor to Pythagoras’s own account of the progression of the world. Such a development is worse than deterioration: it is tragedy.

Pacis artes

PYTHAGORAS HIMSELF DEPICTS a tableau of the Golden Age:

At vetus illa aetas, cui fecimus Aurea nomen,
 fetibus arboreis, et, quas humus educat, herbis
 fortunata fuit, nec polluit ora cruore.
 Tunc et aves tutae movere per aera pennas,
 et lepus impavidus mediis erravit in arvis.
 Nec sua credulitas piscem suspenderat hamo.
 Cuncta sine insidiis, nullamque timentia fraudem,
 Plenaque pacis erant. (Ov. *Met.* 15.96–103)

But that antique age, which we have called golden, was fortunate to enjoy the fruits of the trees and the plants nourished by the earth, and did not contaminate mouths with blood. Birds flew safe in the air; the hare roamed fearless in the countryside. Credulity did not hang the fish to the hook. All things were without snares, fearing no deceit—and all was full of peace.

Again, as in the tableau sketched in Book 1, the Golden Age was a time of safety, security, trust, concord at the scale of the ecosphere—“all was full of peace” (*cuncta* [. . .] *plenaque pacis erant*). Not a drop of blood in people’s mouths. All this has vanished, yet it is retrievable. Right now, we could easily recover that lifestyle, that sociability, that *pax*. We ought to do so. Since nutrition is the key, a straightforward way to recapture (although partially) our original goodness would be to stop practicing animal sacrifice and consuming meat. Vegetarianism is, for Pythagoras, an ethical/anthropological imperative:

Parcite, mortales, dapibus temerare nefandis
 corpora! Sunt fruges, sunt deducunt ramos
 pondere poma suo, tumidaeque in vitibus uvae;
 sunt herbae dulces, sunt quae mitescere flamma
 mollisque queant; nec vobis lacteus humor
 eripitur, nec mella thymi redolentia flore.
 Prodigia divitias alimentaue mitia tellus
 suggerit, atque epulas sine caede et sanguine praebet.
 Carne ferae sedant ieiunia; nec tamen omnes.

(Ov. *Met.* 15.75–83)

Refrain, mortals, from defiling your bodies with abomi-
 nable foods! There are harvests, there are fruits that bend
 the branches under their weight and, on the vines, grapes
 swollen with juice. There are pleasant-tasting herbs; you
 have others that the fire makes mellow and more tender.
 Neither milk nor honey scented with thyme is taken away
 from you. The earth in its prodigality provides you with
 sweet foodstuff and it offers you dishes without murder or
 blood. The beasts satisfy their hunger with flesh, and yet
 not all of them do so.

This is also an anthropocentric imperative because the
 risk inherent in meat-eating, namely anthropophagy,
 threatens us as civilized human beings. In a crucial pas-
 sage worthy of being quoted again, Pythagoras explains
 why vegetarianism is the only prudent response to the mi-
 gration of souls into new bodies: since everything changes,
 and since we too are exposed to the possibility of change—
 more precisely since our “winged souls” may enter beastly
 homes and even be concealed in the bodies of cattle, we
 should abstain from chewing and ingesting those bodies.

They may contain the souls of people just like us, even the souls of our own parents, brothers, children. “Let us not fill up our bowels with Thyestean feasts!” (*neve Thyestis cumulemus viscera mensis*, Ov. *Met.* 15.459–62).

The allusion to Thyestes with no further explanation must have been eloquent for a Roman reader of the poem. In the Greek and Roman tradition of tragedy, Thyestes was the grandson of Tantalus and the brother of Atreus, the king of Mycenae. He had committed adultery with Atreus’s wife, Aerope. In an act of revenge for that sexual relation, Atreus slaughtered Thyestes’ two sons and cooked a selection of their body parts, which he served to him for dinner. Unbeknownst to himself, Thyestes ingurgitated the flesh of his own flesh. In the *Metamorphoses*, the vicissitudes of this famous family are only mentioned.¹⁰ But years earlier, at least two tragedies had brought these characters to the stage. Accius (170–c. 86 BCE) had written *Atreus*, the fragments of which reveal a focus on the cannibalistic meal: “The parent himself is the tomb for the children, it would appear disgraceful, because tradition tells us that they were righteous” (*Natis sepulchro ipse est parens, indecorum videretur, quod eos fuisse iustos accepimus*).¹¹ In 29 BCE, a *Thyestes* by Varius Rufus had been performed during the celebrations of Octavian’s victory over the forces of Antony and Cleopatra.¹² Later, after Ovid’s poem, Seneca would reenact this horror in his own *Thyestes*.¹³ A stoic philosopher, a playwright, Seneca was also a theorist of vegetarianism.

By conjuring up the memory of Thyestes, Ovid’s Pythagoras makes his own ethical exhortation ominously dark. To feed on one’s sons can happen precisely because cuisine is metamorphosis; once carved, prepared, and

converted into a roast or a *bollito misto*, the most familiar person becomes undetectable. This is indeed a spectacular *scelus*. But Pythagoras's choice of Thyestes as the exemplary villain reinforces the deep logic of his vegetarianism. Because all things are in flux, any meat might be flesh and, therefore, we might entomb the limbs of a fellow human into our human stomachs. Because the wrongdoing to be avoided concerns intraspecies kinship, its culmination is the incorporation of one's closest kin. The consumption of one's children is the worst case of cannibalistic intimacy.

Thyestes gives us the sense of how dramatic the most mundane activity in our daily life can be. But tragedy is not a fatality. Pythagoras is not an apocalyptic philosopher. He is a master of truth and the theorist of a practicable lifestyle. Cannibalism is possible, but a different diet is also possible. Vegetarianism might have changed and, still now, might change the course of history. In Book 1 and Book 15, the two depictions of the Golden Age frame the stories of how the peoples involved in the poem used to shed blood as a matter of course. Decline into violence seems inevitable. But counterfactually, the Romans could have taken an alternative path. Pythagoras attributes to King Numa the institution of "sacrificial rituals" (*sacrificos docuit ritus*) that were part, literally, of the "arts of peace" (*pacis artes*). He did so for a purpose: to pacify a people used to war:

Coniuge qui felix nympa ducibusque Camenis
sacrificos docuit ritus gentemque feroci
adsuetam bello pacis traduxit ad artes.

(Ov. *Met.* 15.482–83)

Happy with a nymph as a wife, and with the Muses as guides, he taught the rites of sacrifice and led towards the arts of peace a people that was used to ferocious war.

What kind of sacrificial rites? Pythagoras does not say. But once again the deep logic of his speech, as well as the emphasis on the arts of peace, leads us to reckon that such a taming king could hardly instruct his people to indulge in blood-shedding. Pythagoras seems to imply that king Numa had initiated the Romans to worship their deities without having to declare war against nonhuman animals—there are no “nonhuman” animals. Later, a learned observer of Greek and Roman practices, Plutarch, offered a commentary to this effect. The novelty of Numa’s rites was that they were bloodless. Offerings to the gods must involve flour, wine, and simple gifts with no effusion of blood (Plut. *Numa* 8.8). Now, did the Romans learn that foundational lesson? Hardly so. The Romans slaughtered animals to the gods, as the *Metamorphoses* recounts. They were especially keen on celebrating solemnly those moments of cruelty, as we learn from the *Fasti*.

To conclude on the deep logic of vegetarianism. There are not “purely” nonhuman animals in the ecosphere of the *Metamorphoses*; there are only altered, adulterated, contaminated, interrelated, consanguineous hybrids. The poem teaches us that, in its possible world, metamorphosis is always a possibility. At the end, Pythagoras reveals that such possibility concerns the ordinary world: every single day, every single one of *us* may commit cannibalism for the very simple reason that we are mortal. We all need food, just to survive. And then we all die, we experience the relocation of our soul in other animal bodies—at

risk of being eaten in turn. Each of us could fill our bowels with morsels of an invisibly-also-human body and, later, each of us could be hosted in a new corporeal “home,” in danger of being wolfed by some other carnivorous person. This danger is imminent (cannibalism could occur in any meal), permanent (it is intrinsic in the changeability of the world), and universal (it concerns all of humanity). But for the same reason, each of us can humbly contribute to the arts of peace, at breakfast, lunch, and dinner. Metempsychosis is the democratization of metamorphosis. Nobody is immune. Io has become a cow; I can become a cow. Please, eat something else!

Verse after verse and in Pythagoras’s lesson, Ovid’s is ambition to teach a theory about the nature of things and about their relations. All things are in flux (*cuncta fluunt*) and, because of their fluidity, all things are interconnected in a network of kinship. This ontology underpins a theory of nonaggression. Vegetarianism is peacefulness.

Pax augusta

TO REINFORCE THIS argument, I would like to engage briefly with scholars who underestimate the importance of killing animals within this wider horizon, namely the poem’s ethics of nonviolence. I will compare two poems: *Metamorphoses* and *Fasti*.

Hélène Vial has authored an important essay that deserves attention:

Si les Métamorphoses comportent quelques “beaux sacrifices,” ceux-ci n’aboutissent donc pas toujours au résultat escompté, et surtout [. . .] ils ne prennent leur pleine signi-

fication dans le poème que parce qu'ils en côtoient d'autres qui, eux, sont détournés, volontairement ou involontairement. Mais ce jeu qui s'instaure entre les uns et les autres ne suffit pas à définir la poétique du sacrifice dans les *Métamorphoses*; car cette poétique—qui est aussi une cuisine, nous le verrons—, est en fait, celle, recommencée encore et encore, d'un autre sacrifice, que Rosalba Galvagno appelle le “sacrifice du corps,” et qui est la métamorphose, sujet du poème.¹⁴

If the *Metamorphoses* contains some “beautiful sacrifices,” these do not always lead to the expected result, and above all [. . .] they only take on their full meaning in the poem because they are juxtaposed with others which are diverted, voluntarily or involuntarily. But this game between different kinds of rituals does not suffice to define the poetics of sacrifice in the *Metamorphoses*; for this poetics—which is also a cuisine, we shall see—is, in fact, that of another sacrifice, restarted again and again, which Rosalba Galvagno calls the “sacrifice of the body,” and which is the metamorphosis, namely the subject of the poem.

Indeed, in the *Metamorphoses* the numerous scenes of immolation of victims to a god span a range of potential outcomes, from success to failure. We have briefly discussed these various possibilities. But I cannot follow Hélène Vial, when she conflates all the metamorphoses of the poem under the umbrella of “sacrifice,” from Pyrrha and Deucalion throwing stones, to Baucis and Philemon preparing a quasi-vegetarian meal for their divine guests. We cannot do so lest we lose sight of a crucial distinctive trait of what we mean by “sacrifice” as a ritual, namely blood-shedding violence inflicted on animals. Ovid calls

this ritual a *sacrum*. And, beyond the lexicon, to be killed for a deity is a very particular way of losing one's body. The focus on shedding blood, and on handling meat/flesh as foodstuff makes this ritual into something very different from a metamorphosis. Life ends, rather than continuing in a new body. A human being is annihilated in the stomach of a fellow human, rather than surviving in a novel morphology. This interpretation dilutes violence.

Andrew Feldherr has fully acknowledged the significance of Pythagoras's advocacy of nonviolent reform. As he rightly writes:

Pythagoras's speech has been treated (and dismissed) primarily as an exhortation to vegetarianism, but almost from the beginning of his tirade, the argument against eating animals becomes a condemnation of sacrifice.¹⁵

Such disapproval links the speech and the poem. Pythagoras's depiction of a heifer, sadly contemplating the reflection of the knife that is going to slay her, resonates with the tableau sketched in Book 3: a placid, intact cow is ready to be sacrificed at the hands of Cadmos. The foundation of Thebes requires sacrificial violence (Ov. *Met.* 3.10–26). More generally, Andrew Feldherr goes on to argue that Pythagoras's liquid ontology—*cuncta fluit*—intimates at the finitude of the Roman Empire, thus jeopardizing the extravagant panegyric of Augustus that closes the poem. The crucial point of Pythagoras's speech in the *Metamorphoses*, Feldherr argues, is the significance of bloody sacrifice in the context of Roman culture, but also Ovid's problematic distance from Augustan ideology. Hence his question:

Does Ovid, like his character Pythagoras or his predecessor Lucretius, generate sympathy for the victim in order to indict the practice of sacrifice itself, and by implication the visions of society and the cosmos that sacrificial ritual constructs?¹⁶

This is indeed a decisive question, but Feldherr's reply is too charitable. Ovid insists on "the victim's perspective," he argues, both when Pythagoras lingers on anthropomorphic, heartbreaking descriptions of the victims of animal sacrifice, and when the poem itself depicts scenes of immolation from the standpoint of the dying animal, a sentient being aware of her/his mortality. According to Feldherr, this focalization on the victim's gaze does not necessarily imply a systematic criticism of the rite. On the contrary, in his view, this "can be understood as an effort not so much to undermine sacrificial practice as to appropriate it."¹⁷

I disagree. Indeed, the poem "undermines" meat-eating in all circumstances, including "sacrificial practice." The neat distinction of plants (some edible/some inedible) *versus* animals (all inedible) contributes to a recurring and, I would add, principled blame of carnivorousness. This narrative blame runs deep through the *Metamorphoses* in the homicidal connotations of cuisine, whenever patently human tissues might be converted into a stew, a brochette, or soup (Lycaon, Philomela and Procne, Medea) as well as in Pythagoras's vegetarian imperative uttered with tragic overtones. "Let us not fill our bowels with Thyestean feasts!" Conversely, the praise of alimentary nonviolence surfaces in the pacific greenery of the Golden Age (both in Book 1 and in Pythagoras's speech), in Pomona's idealized

vegetarianism, and in the generous, quasi-vegetarianism of Baucis and Philemon. The abstention from blood-splattered foodstuff is good. Its consumption is bad. There is no doubt about the normative tenor of the narration, and about the mood conveyed in the language.

An anthropological approach to the poem leads to care for its ethical meaning. But there is more. Political compliance is also at stake. As Marcel had argued in his studies on Pythagoras's teachings, we are confronted with the subversive significance of objecting to animal sacrifice.¹⁸ In an Ovidian poem, this raises the notorious dilemma of the poet's acquiescence or dissidence vis-à-vis Augustan leadership. Pythagoras's discourse about/against blood-shedding is followed by a praise of Augustus. Such a celebratory dénouement has received a great deal of scholarly attention. To quote again Andrew Feldherr, there is a problematic antithesis between Pythagoras's attack on sacrifice as a paradigm of violence and the "account of Rome's imperial expansion"; between the instability of *cuncta fluunt* and the exceptional success of Roman history.¹⁹ Indeed, an ontology of change is at odds with the certainty that the prince must be forever powerful and praiseworthy. But let us approach this conundrum within the constraints of the poem. In the last lines of the *Metamorphoses*, it is Jupiter who announces Augustus's military victories. The prince is a conqueror. But this is only the first aspect of his grandness. Jupiter predicts that Augustus will establish peace all over the earth. *Pax*: this is the climax of his accomplishments:

Pace data terris, animum ad civilia vertet
iura suum, legesque feret iustissimus auctor,
exemploque suo mores reget (Ov. *Met.* 15.832–34)

Once peace will have been given to the lands, he then will turn his mind to civil rights and will make laws as a superlatively just legislator. And he will regulate the customs by his own example.

Jupiter makes the military commander into a conveyor of peace. It is a metamorphosis. Augustus becomes attuned (*vertet*) with the arts of peace. This is the *pax augusta*. But, unlike the complete *pax* of the Golden Age, the *pax augusta* is compatible with sacrificial violence. This is true in Rome itself. On the Field of Mars, anybody could contemplate the *Ara Pacis Augustae*, the Altar of Augustan Peace, consecrated on January 30, 9 BCE to celebrate Augustus's victorious campaigns in Hispania and Gaul.²⁰ This is a well-known edifice, covered in bas-reliefs. The images sculpted on its marmoreal walls include a visual encomium of Augustus and his family, *and* a representation of pacific life *and* solemn animal sacrifices. All these tableaux are framed by intricate plants. The altar advertises the imminent butchery of various victims in an unabashed, proud, and triumphal fashion. The *pax augusta*, therefore, is this assemblage of military ceasefire and ritual bloodshed. Victories and victims. Ovid acknowledges such a montage in *Fasti*. The poet comes precisely to the *ara pacis* and addresses the glorious *Pax* brought about by the prince:

Ipsum nos carmen deduxit Pacis ad aram.
 Haec erit a mensis fine secunda dies.
 frondibus Actiacis comptos redimita capillos,
 Pax, ades et toto mitis in orbe mane.
 dum desint hostes, desit quoque causa triumph:

tu ducibus bello gloria maior eris.
 sola gerat miles, quibus arma coerceat, arma,
 canteturque fera nil nisi pompa tuba.
 horreat Aeneadas et primus et ultimus orbis:
 si qua parum Romam terra timebat, amet.
 tura, sacerdotes, pacalibus addite flammis,
 albaque perfusa victima fronte cadat,
 utque domus, quae praestat eam,
 cum pace perennet ad pia propensos vota rogate deos.
 (Ov. *Fast.* 1.709–22)

The song itself has led us to the altar of Peace. The day will be the second from the end of the month. Come, Peace, your dainty tresses wreathed with Actian laurels, and remain meek in the entire world. As long as there are no enemies there is also no cause for a triumph, you (Peace) will be for the commanders a glory greater than war. May the soldier bear arms only to check the armed aggressor and may the fierce trumpet blare for naught but solemn pomp! May the world near and far dread the sons of Aeneas, and if there be any land that feared not Rome, may it love Rome instead! Add incense, priests, to the flames that burn on the altar of Peace, let a white victim fall with wine-anointed brow, and ask of the gods, who lend a favoring ear to pious prayers, that the house, which is the warranty of peace, with peace may last forever.

This invocation to *Pax* conveys a theory of just war. Peace can be established once war is over. Peace, therefore, does not abolish war. War will occur, justified by the purpose of repelling an armed attack. It must be defensive. It must be just. It must be successful. This reasoning

matches the argument, also made in *Fasti*, about sacrifice: slaughtering a living being is unjust, except when we punish an aggressive animal.

Fasti describes the traditional and official rituals of the Roman world, which is not a possible world. A long aetiological account of the first sacrifices introduces this description. Several animals allegedly “deserved” to be punished for attacking a divinity, hence their slaughter.²¹ The swine who offended Ceres and the goat who sank his teeth into Bacchus’s plant, the vine, merit their immolation to those deities. They acted as enemies to those generous purveyors of nutritious stuff. The poem engages unsympathetically with these justifications and calls their logic into question: what harm did a mild sheep ever commit? What could a friendly ox possibly do wrong? “What remains safe, when even the wool-bearing sheep and ploughing oxen lay down their soul upon the altars?” (*quid tuti superest, animam cum ponat in aris lanigerumque pecus ruricolaeque boves?* Ov. *Fast.* 1.383–84). Some of the beasts customarily slain for the gods did nothing at all to incur a deadly retaliation. Their killing is unconscionable. The authorial voice explains that ritualized violence must be thought as a war. “The *victim* (*victima*) is so called because it falls under a *victorious* right hand; the sacrificial victim takes its name from conquered foes” (*victima, quae dextra cecidit victrice, vocatur; hostibus a domitis hostia nomen habet*, Ov. *Fast.* 1.335–36). A captured loser falls to its knees, not by itself, but under the heavy hand of a winner: this is the truth of bloody sacrifice. It is a war that lies at the core of the ritual. It can be justified or not. By thematizing the semantic affinity of *hostis* and *hostia*, *victus* and *victima*, Ovid interprets ritual immolations as a permanent state

of belligerence between humans (always victorious) and animals (always victimized, always losers). This deeply meaningful connection explains the poet's probing questions in the *Fasti*. How just, how rightfully defensive, can a combat between a man holding a knife and a trembling lamb ever be? But here nobody imparts a vegetarian lesson and in front of the *ara pacis*, the poet's appeal to *Pax* ends with an exhortation to perform a solemn immolation. Let a white *victima* fall to the ground for the gods! Then the *domus augusta* will be able to protect the particular kind of *pax* celebrated here—a peace that consists of just wars, legitimate victories, and proper victims. Rather than a *pax ovidiana*, as it has been labelled, it is a full-fledged *pax augusta*, namely the same welcome empire sculpted on the altar.²²

How do we compare the two poems? Ovid stages multiple voices in a variety of enunciative contexts. In the Roman universe of *Fasti*, the poet sets off to sing *Caesaris arae* rather than *Caesaris arma*, the altars of the prince rather than his weapons. But the altars host another kind of hostility. Not unlike the *ara pacis*, the poem attempts to come to terms with defensive bloodshed. In contrast, in the possible world of the *Metamorphoses*, Jupiter, a god who loves sacrifice, praises Augustus precisely for his transition from triumphant conquests to peace. But Pythagoras has a radically different view, holistic and truly nonconformist—he urges people to embrace peace on the scale of the ecosphere. Bloodshed must be forbidden against all living beings, whether human or (apparently) nonhuman. No victim is to be tolerated; no war is ever to be condoned. Augustan peace is not enough for Pythagoras, whose appeal to non-violence undermines the

entire system of values. Once upon a time, King Numa had given the Romans a chance to choose the right direction, but, unfortunately, they opted for iron and blood. Now they could at least change their diet. Whatever we think of Ovid's politics, Pythagoras's fundamentalism challenges what Rome has become.

NOTES

1. I have made a detailed demonstration with bibliographical discussions in "Apples and Poplars, Nuts and Bulls. The Poetic Biosphere of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*." In *Antiquities Beyond Humanism*, ed. Emanuela Bianchi, Sara Brill, & Brooke Holmes, 159–85. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019; and "Cuncta fluunt. The Fluidity of Life in Ovid's *Metamorphic World*." In *Ovid and the Environmental Imagination*, ed. Francesca Martelli & Giulia Sissa, 35–54. London: Bloomsbury, 2023.

2. Marcel Detienne, "La Cuisine de Pythagore," *Archives de Sociologie Des Religions* 15, no. 29 (1970): 141–62; and *La cuisine du sacrifice en pays grec* (Paris: Gallimard, 1978).

3. Umberto Eco, *Lector in fabula* (Milano: Bompiani, 1979).

4. The guiding principle of Claude Lévi-Strauss's ethnographic works can be synthesized in a few interconnected ideas. Societies think through narratives; notwithstanding their apparent incoherence, these narratives, also called "myths," abide by an elementary logic based on (mostly binary) oppositions and transformations; such a logic is embodied and embedded in organized perceptions of space, time, material things, technological artefacts, and all kind of living beings—what we call flora, fauna, the mineral realm, and cosmology. This line of thought is especially explicit in a seminal essay, "La geste d'Asdiwal," *Annales de l'École pratique des hautes études* 66 (1957): 3–43, and in the four volumes of *Mythologiques* (Paris: Plon, 1964–1971). Emmanuel Terray offers an instructive account of Lévi-Strauss's language. He refers to people's reasoning through perceptible properties, as "logique du concret," "logique du sensible," "logique des qualités sensibles" ("La vision du monde de Claude Lévi-Strauss," *L'Homme* 193 (2010).

5. After Claude Lévi-Strauss's theorisation of the logic of the concrete, one of his successors both at the Collège de France and at the direction of the Laboratoire d'Anthropologie Sociale, Philippe Descola, has redirected structural analysis to the fundamental differences of how societies understand the ecosphere. In his major book, *Par-delà la nature et la culture* (Paris: Gallimard, 2005), Descola argues that there are four ontologies according to the articulation of a basic opposition, that of interiority and physicality. These ontologies are naturalism, animism, analogism, and totemism. To understand properly the proximity between the two anthropologists, see Philippe Descola, "Transformation transformed," *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 6 no. 3 (2016): 33–44.

6. I have made the argument in the essays cited in note 1.

7. Marcel Detienne, *L'invention de la mythologie* (Paris: Gallimard, 1981); *Apollon, le couteau à la main* (Paris: Gallimard, 1998).

8. *Ov. Met.* 13.636–39; 15.695; 15.729–35; 15.794–98.

9. See also *Ov. Met.* 15.731–35: "Wherever the swift ship steered through the tide, they built up many altars in a line, so that perfuming frankincense with smoke crackled along the banks on either hand, and victims made the keen knives hot with blood" (*quaque per adversas navis cita ducitur undas, / tura super ripas aris ex ordine factis / parte ab utraque sonant et odorant aera fumis, / ictaque coniectos incalfacit hostia cultros*).

10. *Ov. Met.* 6.403–11: Tantalus and Pelops; 15.459–62: Atreus and Thyestes' children.

11. Accius, 190. *Remains of Old Latin, Volume II: Livius Andronicus. Naevius. Pacuvius. Accius.* Translated by E. H. Warmington. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1936.

12. Matthew Leigh, "Varius Rufus, Thyestes, and the Appetites of Antony," *Proceedings of the Cambridge Philological Society* 42 (1996): 171–97.

13. Sen. *Thyestes*, especially 755–88. On the synergy of sex, anger, revenge, and cannibalism in the play, see Alessandro Schiesaro, *The Passions in Play: Thyestes and the Dynamics of Senecan Drama* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

14. Hélène Vial, "Les mythes sacrificiels dans les Métamorphoses d'Ovide," *Journée Académique des Langues Anciennes*, Clermont-Ferrand, France (2017): 2. See also page 12; see further J.-P. Néraudau, *Ovide ou les dissidences du poète. Métamorphoses, Livre 15* (Paris: Hys-trix-Les Interuniversitaires, 1989): 181. David Larmour, "Tragic 'Con-

taminatio' in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*: Procne and Medea; Philomela and Iphigeneia (6.424–674); Scylla and Phaedra (8. 19–151)," *Illinois Classical Studies* 15 no. 1 (Spring 1990): 131–41.

15. Andrew Feldherr, "Metamorphosis and Sacrifice in Ovid's Theban Narrative," *Materiali e discussioni per l'analisi dei testi classici* 38 (1997): 51.

16. Andrew Feldherr, "Metamorphosis and Sacrifice in Ovid's Theban Narrative," 53.

17. Ibid.

18. See especially Marcel Detienne, "La cuisine de Pythagore," *Archives de Sociologie Des Religions* 15, no. 29 (1970): 141–62; and "Pratiques culinaires et esprit de sacrifice." In *La Cuisine du sacrifice en pays grec*, ed. Marcel Detienne & Jean-Pierre Vernant (Paris: Gallimard, 1978), 7–35.

19. Andrew Feldherr, "Metamorphosis and Sacrifice in Ovid's Theban Narrative," 51: "Again in the last book of the *Metamorphoses*, views of sacrifice are linked explicitly to a philosophy of nature and history that forms an antithesis to the concluding account of Rome's imperial expansion"; 52: "the view of history Pythagoras presents suggests that Rome herself is destined eventually to fall as every preceding empire has done."

20. Darja Šterbenc Erker, *Ambiguity and Religion in Ovid's Fasti: Religious Innovation and the Imperial Family*. (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2023).

21. Ov. *Fast.* 1.317–457. On Roman sacrifice, see Francesca Prescendi, *Décrire et comprendre le sacrifice. Les réflexions des Romains sur leur propre religion à partir de la littérature antiquaire* (Stuttgart : Franz Steiner Verlag, 2007).

22. Darja Šterbenc Erker, *Ambiguity and Religion in Ovid's Fasti*, 57–84.