

Metamorphosis - Angles of Approach



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METAMORPHOSIS – ANGLES OF APPROACH

This paper takes as its point of departure the demotion of metamorphosis in a variety of discourses and systems of belief. In Western culture in particular, the notion of ontological fluidity has received hostile treatment, from literary critics to religious thinkers, and the ability of humans or other beings to shift shape (and belief in the possibility thereof) have variously been associated with the devil or the primitive. In the light of this traditional demotion of metamorphosis to the margins of cultural hegemony, this paper surveys current research on the phenomenon of transformation, before proceeding to explore the interface of metamorphosis and Judeo-Christian monotheism. Its main thesis is that there are more points of contact between cultural traditions that endorse or explore the possibility of metamorphosis (such as Greek and Roman mythology) and the world view of the Bible and, more generally, Christian theology than appears to be the case at first sight, especially if one approaches the topic from the perspective of reception: authors and artists in the Western tradition have frequently ‘enriched’ an orthodox Judeo-Christian outlook on the world by drawing on the metamorphic thought of the pagan classics.

Introduction

In a range of discourses and systems of belief, metamorphosis functions as ‘the other.’ Thus for Servius, the late antique commentator of Virgil, myths of transformation are *fabulae*, fictions, and ought to have been kept out of accounts of what actually happened (*historia*) – even those written in epic hexameters. His comments on *Aeneid* 3.46 (Aeneas’ encounter with the transformed Polydorus) and 9.81 (the metamorphosis of Aeneas’ ships into sea-nymphs) are scathing: see Hardie, 1992; Hinds, 1998, on Ovid’s re-reading of the *Aeneid* as a proto-*Metamorphoses*; and Feldherr, 2002, pp. 167–8. For Christianity, mythical metamorphoses, especially those enshrined in Ovid’s eponymous epic, epitomized paganism (Barkan, 1986) – and therefore met with sharp condemnation and dismissal, from the church fathers onwards. Indeed, the equivalent to pagan Proteus, the divine shape-shifter par excellence, is the Devil himself, a creature of transformation, often appearing in the shape of a goat or a black dog. (See e.g. Brunner Ungrecht, 1998, pp. 103–4 for the role of the devil in German fairy tales.)

The ontology that underwrites the possibility of ‘magical’ transformation has often been characterized as ‘childlike’ – or, if one sees fit to transfer, in the tradition of Piaget, the notion of developmental stages from the individual human being to whole cultures, ‘primitive.’ Thus Gottwald (2005, p. 86) confidently states: ‘Die Metamorphose als mythische Denkfigur (nicht als literarisches Motiv) ist somit Ausdruck kognitiv defizitärer Bewußtseinsstufen, im besonderen mythischer Kausalitätsauffassungen.’ (‘Metamorphosis as a mythic figure of thought (not as literary motif) is therefore an articulation of a cognitively deficient stage of consciousness, in particular of mythic conceptions of causality.’) In a similar vein, the relative scarcity of metamorphoses in Homer (eighth century BCE) and the restraint and hedges with which they are told has, in the past, served classicists as fodder for their belief in the inherent superiority of the Western (literary) imagination over and against the bodies of myth from, say, ancient Mesopotamia and Amazonia, which sport, in the words of Griffin an ‘exuberant and grotesque play of fantasy’ (1980, p. 177), in which ‘coherence and rationality are frankly abandoned in favour of shape-changing, incest, friendly animals, and a sequence of events

which appears arbitrary and inconsequential' (p. 176) – though he is, admittedly, reacting to the rather more positive endorsement of the non-Greek material by Kirk (1970) who sees it as more creative and imaginative than what Homer has to offer. The list of metamorphoses to be found in Homer is indeed short, especially in the *Iliad*; with Proteus and Circe, the *Odyssey* features two prominent shape-shifters (of themselves and of others), but it too does not explore the rampant metamorphoses Griffin singles out in Bororo and Sumerian tales and the type of transformations that dominate in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*.

Likewise, the depiction of transformation (or the transformed) in art has run foul of classicizing sensibilities – from Horace (65–8 BCE), who begins his *Ars Poetica* by declaring miraculous human-animal hybrids a laughing matter and, despite conceding the greater vividness of visual representation, advises against the acting out of metamorphosis on stage (together with infanticide and cannibalism), to Johann Joachim Winckelmann (1717–1768), who expressed his displeasure at what he considered the baroque mannerism of Gian Lorenzo Bernini's (1598–1680) *Apollo and Daphne*, a work of art that violated his ideal of noble simplicity and calm grandeur ('edle Einfalt, stille Größe'). Thus in a letter from spring 1764, while identifying *Apollo and Daphne* as Bernini's best work (with the exception of the *Santa Bibiana*), he still, among other things, objects to Daphne's open mouth (which, he feels, generates the impression of a mask), in contrast to the restraint visible in the *Laocoon* group; and he notes that what Daphne lacks in beauty, the artist supplied in form of the miraculous: 'denn an den äußeren Theilen ihres Körpers fängt schon die bekannte Verwandlung an' ('for at the extremities of her body the famous transformation is already starting'): Lichtenstern, 1992, and Barasch, 2000, pp. 99–101.

Finally, alchemy, which counted as a 'science of transformation' for its practitioners, has acquired the status of magic humbug in the age of reason, and in the light of the protocols of scientific rationality, naturalism and realism, myths of transformation would seem to belong to the realm of the surreal, irrational or even grotesque. At the same time, such oppositional schemes as history *versus* fiction, essence *versus* flux, or identity *versus* transformation, cannot help but conjure up the spectre of the supplement. And thus, after a brief survey of the current terms of debate, we would like to embark in this paper on a quest for spaces and traces of the transformative (if not the beast itself), to see whether, or to what extent, it is possible to move metamorphosis (and myths thereof) from the margins to the centre.

Current Research

Over the last two decades or so, engagements with the phenomenon of transformation have taken off, both within academia and other cultural spheres. Examples that readily spring to mind include Leonard Barkan's *The Gods Made Flesh*, a wide-ranging study of 'the history and meaning of metamorphoses' from antiquity to the Renaissance (1986, p. xiii); Marina Warner's 2001 Clarendon Lectures in English at the University of Oxford on *Fantastic metamorphoses, other worlds: ways of telling the self*; or Jan and Aleida Assmann's stimulating conference volume on *Verwandlungen*, in their high-profile series 'Archaeology of literary communication.' Poets and writers – from Christoph Ransmayr to Ted Hughes – have responded to and reworked Ovid's 'bible of change' in a post-modern key. This development has its counterpart in a significant upsurge of scholarship on the *Metamorphoses* (in terms of both quantity and sophistication) since the 1990s, including its reception through the ages: see e.g. Barkan, 1986, with Martindale, 1989; Brown, 1999; Martindale, 1988; and Ziolkowski, 2005. Case studies of the reception of specific myths have become legion. And recently, transformation studies have even received institutional acknowledgement in the form of the

IRCM (Interdisciplinary Research Centre: Metamorphic Changes in the Arts) at the University of Salzburg, directed by Sabine Coelsch-Foisner and Peter Kuon, with its ambitious, six-pronged programme of research, on ‘theory of metamorphosis,’ ‘body transformations,’ ‘reception as metamorphosis,’ ‘production as metamorphosis,’ ‘the concept of a work of art’ and ‘identity and mental transformations.’ See Coelsch-Foisner and Schwarzbauer, 2005; Gottwald and Klein, 2005; Coelsch-Foisner, 2006; Stagl, 2007; and Allesch and Schwarzbauer, 2007. The standard account of metamorphosis in ancient Greek literature remains Forbes Irving, 1990.

Much scholarly work on metamorphosis (from Boethius onwards: see *Consolatio* 4) is fuelled by the desire for definition and classification of what proves to be supremely elusive both as concept and phenomenon. Jacob Burckhardt’s attempt in his *Griechische Kulturgeschichte* represents an early modern effort, which still informs more contemporary remakes (pp. 2, 7–19, 396–400). But the possibilities for typologies are seemingly endless: one can, for instance, explore what kinds of being undergo transformation; what sort of entities constitute the outcome of metamorphosis; which agency is responsible for transformative change and the various motivations that underwrite it (rescue, punishment, revenge etc.); whether or not the newly assumed shape is terminal or temporary; or whether the transformation affects the body or the soul. An interesting challenge is, furthermore, to distinguish ‘actual’ metamorphosis from related phenomena – such as metempsychosis. But as useful as such efforts are in developing a heuristic grid and establishing important distinctions, they ultimately fall short of doing justice to the complexity of the evidence. For example: one of the most ambitious efforts in categorization in the field, Christian Zgoll’s *Phänomenologie der Metamorphose*, attempts to come up with a precise definition of the phenomenon in Augustan poetry (though excluding Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*). He delimits metamorphoses to changes of a human being into another shape found in nature, such as flora, fauna, stones, water or mythical creatures and involving suddenness, supernatural intervention and irreversibility; conversely, he carefully distinguishes such ‘hard-core’ transformations from peripheral metamorphoses (such as sex-change) and a range of related phenomena, such as allophany (a neologism, to refer to the appearance of a god in disguise), magical transformations achieved through witchcraft (e.g. Odysseus’ men turned into swine by Circe), genesis and growth, apotheosis, and catasterism. But one of the problems with this quest for the ‘original’ meaning of metamorphosis and clear-cut distinctions, which a reviewer has likened to the ‘pinning of corpses of swarms of gaily-coloured butterflies in neatly arranged display cabinets’ (Hardie, 2008, p. 176) is that in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* all of these neat distinctions ultimately break down. Despite the fact that Ovid himself, in his exile poetry, places the emphasis of the epic on the transformation of *human* beings, it requires a rather compartmentalized reading of the poem not to relate (say) Jupiter’s ‘allophany’ to Europa in the form of a bull to the title of the epic. In other words, Ovid, both for his poem and Western culture ever after, elevates the term metamorphosis to an overarching category that includes the whole variety of transformative change, ranging from gods to humans and including (not least) his own metamorphosis of the mythic tradition.

Efforts to define metamorphosis in a strict (or stricter) sense thus almost inevitably entail the exclusion of a wide variety of data that are potentially pertinent. One can see the advantages, for instance, of confining the term to denoting ‘non-linear historical, cultural, and aesthetic processes’ (Kuon, 2005, p. 1). But this understanding of metamorphosis excludes one of the more fascinating chapters in the history of the term, i.e. early modern natural history, when the symbolic-theological view of nature as a book of divine creation began to give way to scientific study of natural phenomena, aided, among other things, by the invention of the microscope by the painter Johannes Goedaert (1620–1668). Works from this period, which feature metamorphosis in their title, include Goedaert’s own *Metamorphosis et historia naturalis insectorum*, Maria Sibylla Merian’s (1647–1717) *Metamorphosis insectorum*

Surinamensium (as well as her posthumously published collection *Erucarum ortus alimentum et paradoxa metamorphosis*), and Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's (1749–1832) *Metamorphose der Pflanze*. Heselhaus traces the career of the term 'metamorphosis' in early modern Europe to the renaissance of Ovid (1953, pp. 144–5). As Warner notes, the tension between 'due organic change on the one hand and incongruous and disruptive mutation' on the other are already embodied in Ovid's poem (2002, p. 75). More generally, she has shown how in the early modern period metamorphosis functioned at the interface of the old and the new, the mythic and the scientific, Europe and the newly discovered Americas, as a dynamic principle of creation and as a creative idiom to explore novel insights and experiences. Natural philosophy (or theology) and science go hand in hand in other texts as well – such as the song *Raupenleben* by Luise Hänsel (1798–1876), author of the well-known 'Müde bin ich, geh' zur Ruh'/ Schließe beide Äuglein zu,' in which the transformation of the caterpillar into a butterfly stands in as allegory for the ascent of the human soul to heaven; a metamorphosis in nature thus functions as allegory for the metamorphosis of the soul that Paul mentions in *Corinthians* (for which see below). (Nowadays, metamorphosis has a very precise and distinct meaning in scientific discourses, such as geology and entomology, where it is used to describe specific types of transformation. Entomologists, for instance, distinguish between insects that are hemimetabolous (i.e. undergo incomplete metamorphosis) and holometabolous (who experience full-scale transformation). Interestingly, contemporary versions of evolutionary theory similarly emphasize the unpredictability of mutations.)

At the opposite end of the spectrum stand those scholars who delight in blowing the term open by correlating, or even identifying metamorphosis with something else. The options are legion. Thus Massey (1976, p. 2) notes a propos such statements as Bachelard (1939, p. 65): 'le besoin d'animaliser [...] est à l'origine de l'imagination. La fonction première de l'imagination est de faire des formes animales' that 'Gaston Bachelard [...] makes metamorphosis through identification with animals virtually synonymous with the imagination itself.' For Tomlinson (1983) metamorphosis is identical with translation and for Blumenberg (1979, p. 384) with myth: '*Metamorphosen* ist kein bloßer Sammeltitel für Mythen, sondern das Ausformungsprinzip des Mythos selbst, die Grundform einer noch unzuverlässigen Identität der aus der Formlosigkeit zur Erscheinung herausdrängenden Götter.' ('Metamorphosis is not simply an umbrella label for myths, but the principle that underwrites the articulation of myth itself, the basic form of an as yet unreliable identity of the gods that push out of their formlessness into appearance.') Barkan identifies metamorphosis with classical civilization: '[...] from St. Augustine to the seventeenth century (at least), metamorphosis is an essential metonym for the classical civilization that gave it birth' (1986, p. 18).

The yield of such universalizing formulas lies perhaps more in the aesthetic pleasure to be derived from a neat rhetorical turn and *faux*-profundity than in real insight – the desirability of terminological clarity and theoretical precision in the cultural sciences applies also if one studies a phenomenon such as change and a notion (metamorphosis), the semantics of which are historically rich and fuzzy. Massey's proposal has therefore much to recommend itself: 'what may be somewhat easier than identifying a single principle in metamorphosis is establishing a set of categories under which the problems of metamorphosis can be studied' (1976, p. 3) – though his list of six fields in which the theme of metamorphoses occurs and merits exploration – science, philosophy, anthropology, religion, psychology and aesthetics – again turns out to be far from exhaustive. Perhaps, then, a compromise is called for: if one refrains from trying to turn metamorphosis itself into a technical term but operates with a careful typology of (transformative) change, it ought to be possible to explore all relevant data domains in their full complexity without sacrificing conceptual stringency – including

discussion of where ‘the’ territory of ‘actual’ metamorphosis ends and that of ‘mere’ change begins. (This seems a crucial distinction: see Assmann, 2006.)

In what follows, we want to put the potential of this ‘oblique’ approach to the test in an enquiry centred in a proposition designed to raise eyebrows, if not controversy, namely that metamorphosis plays a key role in Judeo-Christian monotheism, both in the Bible and beyond.

Metamorphosis and Judeo-Christian Monotheism, or: the Legacy of Adam’s Tail

For anyone in search of the ‘transformative’ in modern Western culture, the system of belief that constitutes Judeo-Christian monotheism would seem to pose the toughest challenge. Still, both the phenomenon of transformation and the lexeme *metamorphoo* occur in the Bible, starting with Genesis where God, in the second account of anthropogenesis, fashions Eve out of the rib of Adam. (Genesis 2:21–5; contrast 1:27: ‘So God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them,’ where there is no hint of chronology, dependence, or transformation. All biblical citations are from the *Authorized King James Version*.) The passage underscores what some scholars have identified as an essential component of metamorphosis, i.e. that the new form somehow recalls the old shape out of which it has arisen, establishing a dynamic relation between state₁ and state₂, identity and differentiation. See e.g. Nicklas, 2002, pp. 11–12: ‘Nicht ganz allgemein die Mutabilität ist der Kern des Motives [der Metamorphose], sondern eine Veränderung der Form, die in ihrer neuen Erscheinung wieder zu Ruhe kommt und die Erinnerung an ihre frühere Gestalt in sich trägt. [...] Die neue Gestalt muß an die alte in irgendeiner Weise anknüpfen.’ (‘Not generally mutability is the core of the motif of metamorphosis, but a change in form, which acquires renewed stability in its new articulation and retains within itself the memory of its previous shape. [...] The new shape has to build in some fashion on the old.’) Or as Adam puts it, ‘This is now bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh: she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man.’ The configuration of material origins, aetiology, and relational identity also informs anthropogenesis in other traditions, notably those that occur at the beginning of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* – though in *Genesis* the mythic underpinnings are of course pared down to bare essentials. Still, instances of reception illustrate that the metamorphic subtext of the second account has continued to resonate. Thus an imp from the eighteenth century, who is sometimes identified with David Garrick, works out the underlying logic in his verse satire *Adam’s tail; or, the first metamorphosis* (London, printed for John Bell, fourth edition 1774). It begins as follows:

When Jove, as learned *Rabbins* say,
Had form’d our common Sire of Clay,
Had spun the Nerves, sublim’d the Juices,
And giv’n each Part its various Uses;
To grace the Monarch’s princely Thighs, 5
And guard his royal Side from Flies
That might his tender Flesh assail,
He furnish’d Adam with a *Tail*.

After providing examples from the animal kingdom (the peacock, the steed) in support of his point that ‘from the greatest to the least/ The *Tail’s* the Pride of ev’ry Beast,’ the author notes that the human being is the exception, for: ‘*Woman is the Pride of Man.*’ This rhetorical turn points to an equivalence, or even identity between ‘tail’ and ‘woman,’ and it is precisely this that the rest of the poem sets out to illustrate. As it happens, Adam took rather less care of his tail than he should have, and God, checking up on his creature and its accoutrements,

finds his 'Tail so scrubb'd and ragged/ With filth, that Adam scarce could wag it.' Almost mistaking man for monkey, He bemoans 'the cruel metamorphosis' and begins to fret that the ontological hierarchies of his cosmic order will come tumbling down 'because a King b-----s his *Tail*.' (We capture here an outrageous reworking of the idea that as the devil is to God so monkey to man.) Off comes the tail; but despite its sorry state God is disinclined to let it go to waste:

The Scheme is fix'd, the Nod is given,
That powerful Nod that shakes the Heaven.
The *Tail*, obedient to the Nod
Arose a *Woman* from the Sod.

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The author continues to assert that this is the story told by Moses in the original Hebrew and that the fib with the rib is a mistranslation of the Septuagint; the rest of the poem is then devoted to rendering the aetiology also empirically plausible. Just as *Genesis*, this piece of satire issues a powerful invitation for a detailed feminist critique – as do other myths of transformation that feature 'womufacturing,' most notably the story of Pygmalion.

Likewise, the ambivalent characterization of the human being in *Genesis* as being both part of, and superior to, flora and fauna, precariously poised in between animals and God and somehow less fixed in terms of instinctual orientation than beasts and hence open to the world and culture, has led Renaissance thinkers to define the human as a metamorphic being par excellence or, to quote God's speech to Adam in Pico della Mirandola's (1463–1494) treatise *de Hominis Dignitate* (§5):

Nec certam sedem nec propriam faciem nec munus ullum peculiare tibi dedimus, o Adam, ut, quam sedem, quam faciem, quae munera tute optaveris, ea pro voto, pro tua sententia habeas et possideas. Definita ceteris natura intra praescriptas a nobis leges coerchetur. Tu nullis angustiis coercitus pro tuo arbitrio, in cuius manu te posui, tibi illam praefinies. Medium te mundi posui, ut circumspiceres inde commodius, quicquid est in mundo. Nec te caelestem neque terrenum neque mortalem neque immortalem fecimus, ut tui ipsius quasi arbitrarius honorariusque plastes et fctor, in quam malueris tute formam effingas. Poteris in inferiora, quae sunt bruta, degenerare, poteris in superiora, quae sunt divina, ex tui animi sententia regenerari.

[I have not given you a specific location or particular appearance or any talent that is yours alone, Adam, so that you can have and own whatever location, appearance, and talent you yourself desire, according to your will and judgement. The fixed nature of all other living beings is confined within parameters prescribed by myself. You are confined by no limitations and, according to your own free will, in whose power I have put you, you shall define your nature for yourself. I have put you in the middle of the universe, so that from there you can inspect more easily whatever there is in the universe. I have created you neither as a creature of heaven nor a creature of the earth, neither mortal nor immortal, so that you – like a free and honorary moulder and shaper of yourself – fashion yourself securely in the form that you prefer. You will be able to degenerate towards the lower levels of the animals, you will be able to recreate yourself through your own will-power into the higher levels of the divine.]

In his commentary on God's utterance, Pico waxes lyrical about 'the chameleon' that the human being is and corroborates the philosophical anthropology of the Lord, in which the human features as 'the metamorphic animal' par excellence, with reference to bodies of thought and doctrine from various cultural traditions that include transformation of one kind or another, such as Greek mystery religion (Empedocles, Pythagoras), Judaism (the transformation of Enoch into an angel), and Islam.

In the Old Testament (and beyond), magical metamorphoses further indicate divine omnipotence. Thus as Lot and his family are fleeing from Sodom and Gomorrah, his wife violates the injunction of the angels, who had set them on their path, not to look behind and is promptly turned into a pillar of salt (*Genesis* 19:15–26) – a miraculous sign from God and a form of punishment, of the same order as Zeus’ transformation of a snake into a stone as a portent of the fall of Troy at *Iliad* 2.319 or Poseidon’s petrification of the Phaeacian ship that returned Odysseus to Ithaca (*Odyssey* 13.163–4). More intriguingly, the ability to transform one type of being into another also demonstrates the superior ‘magic’ power that resides in the Lord, nowhere more so than in the ‘stick-into-snake’ competition between Aaron and Moses on the one hand and the wise men and sorcerers of Egypt on the other: while both parties succeed in turning their sticks into serpents, the God-backed stick of Aaron and Moses swallows up all the others. (*Exodus* 7:1–12. See also *Numbers* 20:1–13, which recounts the creation of a well from a rock, struck by Moses with his rod at the behest of God.) In the narrative of the Bible, the fact that God engages in ‘magic’ and causes miraculous transformations does not seem to be cause for concern. (See, though, the prelude at *Exodus* 4:1–4, where the Lord ‘inducts’ Moses, who is initially scared at the sight of a rod turning into a serpent, into the realm of magical transformations.) On the contrary, the fact that Moses’ rivals also possess magical abilities suggests a universe in which more than one supernatural power is at work.

For Augustine, the problem of magic in a monotheistic universe turned into a dilemma: on the one hand, divine omnipotence entails that metamorphosis of every kind must be a distinct *logical* possibility and Judeo-Christian religion indeed knows of transformative interventions into the natural order that defy protocols of empiricism and rationality, i.e. miracles; on the other hand, God does not normally act on this potential; in fact instances of metamorphosis as recounted in pagan authors represent rival systems of beliefs and, as in the story from *Exodus*, suggest the existence of alternative supernatural powers in the universe. Augustine remains committed to the principle of omnipotence, but he tries to defuse the unpalatable implications by attributing metamorphosis to the works of demons (*de Civitate Dei* 18). Ironically, Ovid, too, in the centre of his *Metamorphoses*, thematizes the relation of metamorphosis and divine potency and casts the denial of divine power to effect changes in shape as an act of blasphemous hubris (*Met.* 8.612–5):

[...] inridet credentes, utque deorum
 spretor erat mentisque ferox, Ixione natus
 ‘ficta refers nimiumque putas, Acheloe, potentes
 esse deos’ dixit ‘si dant adimuntque figuras.’

[Ixion’s son ridiculed those who believed (sc. in a just recounted story of transformation) and, being contemptuous of the gods and savage in disposition, declared: ‘You are relating fairy tales, Achelous, and ascribe too much power to the gods if you have them give and take away shapes.’]

Still, overall Old Testament ontology leaves only a marginal space for metamorphoses, and the passages discussed above are nothing more than traces, which scholars routinely ascribe to the presence of older (read: more primitive) layers still noticeable in the text. The whole thrust of the opening book of the Bible in the state in which it has been transmitted is towards ontological fixity and identity. The theology of the Old Testament does not allow for the ‘horizontal’ ontological porosity within the realm of creation that underwrites stories of transformations in other cultural traditions; and it categorically denies ‘vertical’ ontological porosity: the chasm between *factor* and *factura*, creator and creation is absolute and unbridgeable. The kind of ontological traffic between the human and divine sphere that we capture in Greek and Roman literature and culture in various forms at various moments in time (apotheosis, hero-cult, the

worship of a living ruler as god, the so-called *Gottmenschentum*, posthumous deification of benefactors) has no place in the Old Testament.

It has a place in Christianity, however, and a central one at that, grounded in the paradox at the core of Christian religion, i.e. that, as Walter of Châtillon (twelfth century) put it, ‘the Creator became creature’ (*factor factus est factura*). The paradox has proven a good trope to capture the peculiar ontological status of Christ and the various ‘crossings’ (or metamorphosis?) from divine to human (and back again) he underwent in the course of time. See, for example, the following excerpt from the Athanasian Creed (*Quicumque vult*):

Est ergo fides recta ut credamus et confiteamur, quia Dominus noster Iesus Christus, Dei Filius, Deus et homo est. Deus est ex substantia Patris ante saecula genitus: et homo est ex substantia matris in saeculo natus. Perfectus Deus, perfectus homo: ex anima rationali et humana carne subsistens. Aequalis Patri secundum divinitatem: minor Patre secundum humanitatem. Qui licet Deus sit et homo, non duo tamen, sed unus est Christus. Unus autem non conversione divinitatis in carnem, sed assumptione humanitatis in Deum. Unus omnino, non confusione substantiae, sed unitate personae. Nam sicut anima rationalis et caro unus est homo: ita Deus et homo unus est Christus. [...]

[For the right Faith is, that we believe and confess, that our Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, is God and Man; God, of the Substance of the Father, begotten before the worlds; and Man, of the Substance of his Mother, born in the world; Perfect God and perfect Man, of a reasonable soul and human flesh subsisting; Equal to the Father, as touching his Godhead; and inferior to the Father, as touching his Manhood. Who although he be God and Man, yet he is not two, but one Christ; One, not by conversion of the Godhead into flesh, but by taking of the Manhood into God; One altogether, not by confusion of Substance, but by unity of Person. For as the reasonable soul and flesh is one man, so God and Man is one Christ; (...).]

Christ, in other words, occupies a special ontological niche, an intermediary place between the human and the divine and his career on earth is shaped by two metamorphoses, which are in turn prerequisites for the promise of salvation and redemption: the transformation of word into flesh; and the transubstantiation, which occurs shortly before Jesus’ death and prefigures the resurrection and ascension. Nicklas (2002, pp. 16–7) outlines the central place of transformation in Christian religion and notes its continuing presence in Catholic liturgy: ‘In der Wandlung, die in der katholischen Liturgie eine wirkliche Transsubstantiation ist und nicht nur symbolische Verwandlung von Brot und Wein in Leib und Blut, wiederholt sich dieses Mysterium immer wieder von Neuem.’ (‘In the change, which in catholic liturgy is a genuine transubstantiation and not only the symbolic transformation of bread and wine into body and blood, this mystery repeats itself always anew.’) It is with reference to the transubstantiation that Mark and Matthew also employ the verb *metamorphoo*, the only two occurrences of the term in the gospels:

And after six days Jesus taketh *with him* Peter, and James, and John, and leadeth them up into an high mountain apart by themselves: and he was transfigured before them (*kai metamorphoother emprosthen autoon*). And his raiment became shining, exceeding white as snow; so as no fuller on earth can white them (Mark 9:2–3).

And after six days Jesus taketh Peter, James, and John his brother, and bringeth them up into a high mountain apart, And was transfigured before them (*kai metamorphoother emprosthen autoon*): and his face did shine as the sun, and his raiment was white as the light (Matthew 17:1-2).

The tradition of exegesis of these particular passages features interesting and telling parallels to critical reactions to pagan myths of metamorphosis. Faced with the miraculous, an event that is unaccountable in terms of everyday experience, rationalization kicks in, with a familiar bag of ploys that transform the literal into the mistaken or the figural: error of understanding, allegory, metaphor and hyperbole. The Venerable Bede, for instance, in his commentary on Mark 9:3, feels it necessary to reassure his readers:

transfiguratus saluator non substantiam uerae carnis amisit sed gloriam futurae uel suae nostrae resurrectionis ostendit qui qualis tunc apostolis apparuit talis post iudicium cunctis apparebit electis.

[The transfigured saviour did not lose the substance of his actual body but showed forth the glory of his own future and our resurrection by appearing to the apostles then how he shall appear to all the elect after the Judgement.]

Those of a more pragmatic bent have mooted the possibility of an optical illusion caused either by Jesus himself or some opportune lightning; others have mused that the evangelists here recount a subjective experience of Jesus. Another reason why the passage causes discomfort in theological circles is the lexical coincidence between the metamorphosis of Jesus and the metamorphoses that one finds in Greek and Roman literature. Up comes the *cordon sanitaire*: 'The transformation of Jesus is to be kept apart from the Greek idea of metamorphosis—despite the same word' (Gnilka, 1988, p. 94). If Greek stories of transformation veer off into fiction, Christian stories of transformation veer off into faith.

A similar act of containment dominates discussion of the other two places in the New Testament, in which metamorphosis plays a key role. Paul uses the term twice to refer to the transformation of the human being through belief in Christ:

And be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed (*metamorphousthe*) by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God (*Romans 12:2*).

But we all, with open face beholding as in a glass the glory of the Lord, are changed (*metamorphoumetha*) into the same image from glory to glory, even as by the Spirit of the Lord (*2 Corinthians 3:18*).

These passages have obvious affinities with Hellenistic mystery religions and specific texts that thematize ecstatic religious experience, proximity to the divine, or salvation in terms of metamorphosis, such as Apuleius' *Golden Ass* or the *Corpus Hermeticum*. (See Furnish, 1984, pp. 240–1.) This does not mean that Paul here draws on the idiom of pagan mystery cults as some scholars have suspected; rather, he seems to stand in the tradition of apocalyptic Judaism: see Back, 2002, who offers an exhaustive discussion of the cited passages and parallel texts. Paul's use of *metamorphousthai* captures the 'before' and 'after' of experiencing divine revelation, coinciding with an assimilation of the believer to Christ. As Mark and Matthew with reference to the transfiguration, Paul uses the notion of metamorphosis as a dynamic principle at work in the universal and personal history of salvation.

Conclusion

Christian doctrine tends to get short shrift in discussions of metamorphosis. But, as the above survey suggests, it ought to be part of the conversation, not least since transformative change in a Christian context tends to have positive connotations. The role of metamorphosis in Christianity thus counterbalances the ‘morbidity of metamorphosis’ that scholars working on the pagan material routinely emphasize – as pointing towards something pathological, something not quite right, as something that defies reason and order. (See e.g. Massey, 1976.) But in the cultural imaginary of the West, metamorphosis captures movement in both directions: ascent to the divine and descent into Hell, spiritual assimilation to God and downward mutation into a beast. Each option puts our humanity at stake (or risk), not unlike the diametrically opposed fates of Medea and Hecuba in Euripides’ eponymous plays: both engage in inhuman acts of vengeance, but whereas the former ascends to godhood at the end of the play, the latter faces ultimate transformation into a dog; and both options are very much in play simultaneously in the foundational writers of the Western literary tradition, in particular Dante, Shakespeare and Milton, whose works unfold – as it were – both against a biblical and an Ovidian horizon of metamorphosis.



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