

Versions of Pygmalion

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HARVARD UNIVERSITY PRESS
CAMBRIDGE, MASSACHUSETTS
LONDON, ENGLAND
1990

PROEM

Pygmalion's Prosopopoeia

One of the most artful features of that most artful of poems, Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, is the concatenation between any one story and those that come before and after. The *Metamorphoses* is not just a random series of stories. Each story leads to the next and from the previous one in complex relations that are always part of the meaning of any given story. Each metamorphosis is a change of shape that in its most general form can be defined as the literalization of a metaphor. In this change justice is done, an account paid off, a case closed. But there is always a remnant, some residue of unassuaged guilt or responsibility that leads to the next story, the next metamorphosis literalizing yet another figure, then to the next, and so on.

Though the gods magically cause the transformations, an unsettling human truth is hidden behind these childish stories of boys turned into flowers, girls into trees. This truth is double. On the one hand, in the cruel justice of the gods we see the terrible performative power that figures of speech may have. Tropes tend to materialize in the real world in ways that are ethical, social, and political. The *Metamorphoses* shows what aberrant figurative language can do. The power of the gods to intervene in human history is the allegorization of this linguistic power. Ovid's stories show that you always get some form of what you want, but you get it in ways that reveal what is illicit or grotesque in what you want. On the other hand, the *Metamorphoses* suggests that the account is never fully paid off by any materialization of desire, however apparently decisive or conclusive, however exactly the pun-

ishment fits the crime. The sins of the fathers and mothers are visited on the children from generation to generation. The guilt is always passed on in new desires demanding the compensation of yet another literalizing metamorphosis.

But to say "materialization of desire" or "literalizing metamorphosis" does not quite do justice to what these transformations are. In an adjacent story, the Cerastae, so called because they have horns on their foreheads, have made sacrifice to Jupiter, god of hospitality, by slaying their guests. It is a grotesque perversion of the obligation of a host. "Sacris offensa nefandis . . ." (Sickened by their unspeakable offerings), Venus says, "exsilio poenam potius gens inopia pendat, / vel nece; vel siquid medium est mortisque fugaeque. / idque quid esse potest, nisi versae poena figurae?" (Rather let these wicked people be punished either by exile or by death, or by something intermediary between the two: and what could that be, except to be transformed into something other than they are?).¹ Venus changes the Cerastae into bullocks, in fulfillment of the destiny inscribed on their foreheads. A metamorphosis is not exile from the human community, such as Ovid himself was to suffer, and it is not the ultimate separation of death. It is halfway between the two, neither death nor life. The one who has been transformed remains as a memorial example still present within the human community—in the form of a tree, a fountain, a bullock, a flower. The halfway state of the victim of a metamorphosis is a sign that his or her fault has not been completely punished or expiated. The changed state may be read this way or that way, as life-giving or death-dealing, depending on how you look at it.

The story of Pygmalion in book 10 of the *Metamorphoses*, with its adjacent stories, is a splendid example of all this. The narratives in this book represent only a few of the innumerable stories that could be called "versions of Pygmalion." My discussions do not add up to a total repertory of possibilities, nor do they make in their sequence a coherent narrative, with each chapter leading logically to the next. Each of my chapters begins again each time more or less from scratch, that is, from the incitement to thinking anew about the personifications of a particular text. The reading takes the line that incitement indicates. But in their range my ex-

amples indicate what is at stake when someone becomes infatuated with a statue or a painting or, for that matter, when someone reads or hears a story and thinks of its characters as "real people." This poem is a reading of the prototypical version of Pygmalion.

Ovid's "Pygmalion" differs from most of the stories in the *Metamorphoses*. It is a tale in which something inanimate comes alive, rather than the other way around. The story is flanked by two stories in which the transformation goes the usual way, from human to inanimate. The three stories, as well as others before and after in book 10, are held together by the fact that all involve the pleasure or displeasure of the goddess of love.

In the story just before Pygmalion (10.238–242), Venus punishes the "loathsome Propoetides," who have dared to deny her divinity. The goddess in her wrath makes them the first women to become public prostitutes. The blood hardens in their cheeks as they become shameless, spiritually hard. Venus then punishes them again, in punishment for a punishment she has herself inflicted. She makes them literally stone: "in rigidum parvo silicem discrimine versae" (turned by a slight alteration into stony flints).

Pygmalion's horror at these wicked, stony-hearted women leads him to remain celibate, "sine coniuge caelebs" (10.245). In an attempt to compensate for the Propoetides, Pygmalion fashions "a snowy ivory statue . . . lovelier than any woman born" (231). This compensatory gesture does not quite make sense. To make up for women who have become painted ladies with hearts of stone, Pygmalion fashions another painted lady out of another hard, inanimate substance. The crisscross substitution begins when he falls in love with his own creation, "operisque sui concepit amorem": "The statue had all the appearance of a real girl, so that it seemed to be alive, to want to move, did not modesty forbid. So cleverly did his art conceal its art [ars adeo latet arte sua]. Pygmalion gazed in wonder, and in his heart there rose a passionate love for this image of a human form" [simulati corporis] (10.249–253; 231).

If most of the metamorphoses in the *Metamorphoses* go from human to inhuman, life to death, animate to inanimate, the coming alive of Galatea goes the other way. The name for the figure of speech of which this metamorphosis is the literalizing allegory is

prosopopoeia. This trope ascribes a face, a name, or a voice to the absent, the inanimate, or the dead. But *prosopopoeia* is already the basic operative trope in the more usual transformations in the *Metamorphoses*. The two kinds of metamorphosis meet, the criss-cross lines intersect, because both are forms of *prosopopoeia*.

In most of the metamorphoses, the dead do not completely die. They remain to be memorialized in a work of mourning that may never be completed. The irreducible otherness of my neighbor or of my beloved may be expressed by saying that he or she may die. My relation to the person is always shadowed from the beginning by death. That we are certain, if we live even a minute longer than whatever is taken as "now," to be the survivors of the deaths of others is a determining feature of the human condition. If *prosopopoeia* is a cover-up of death or of absence, a compensation, its power is needed even in my relation to my living companions. My neighbor is always somehow absent even in moments of the most intimate presence. Personification both covers over these blank places in the midst of life and, sooner or later, brings them into the open.

That *prosopopoeia* is the trope of mourning is indicated by the way that the more usual changes in the *Metamorphoses*, though they go from life halfway toward death, are personifications too. They are etiological myths expressing our sense that an obscure human life is diffused throughout nature—in the sighing of branches, in the whispering of water in a fountain, in the dancing of a daffodil. In the story just after Pygmalion, for example, the dripping of the sap of the myrrh tree is the tears of Myrrha: "Though she lost her former feelings when she lost her body, yet she still weeps, and warm drops flow from the tree" (238).

Pygmalion's happy love for a Galatea brought to life by the urgency of *prosopopoeia* is the reversal of these more usual features of metamorphosis. The story of Pygmalion shows *prosopopoeia* functioning not to hide the absolute absence of death but to give life to the inanimate in a dream come true. For Pygmalion, the other is not really other. Pygmalion has himself made Galatea. She is the mirror image of his desire. His relation to her is not love for another, in an attachment always shadowed by the certain death of the other. It is a reciprocity in which the same loves the same. Here

Narcissus' vain desire seems fulfilled: "timidumque ad lumina lumen / attollens pariter cum caelo vidi amantem" (And timidly raising her eyes, [the just-awakened Galatea sees] her lover and the light of day together; 10.293–294; 232). For Galatea, to see at all is to see Pygmalion and to be subject to him. It is as if Narcissus' reflection in the pool had come alive and could return his love.

If anthropomorphisms exceed the ordinary opposition between literal and figurative language, since they posit as given an identification at the level of substance,² even the most traditional rhetorical definition of *prosopopoeia* begins with language. *Prosopopoeia* is the ascription to entities that are not really alive first of a name, then of a face, and finally, in a return to language, of a voice. The entity I have personified is given the power to respond to the name I invoke, to speak in answer to my speech. Another way to put this would be to say that though *prosopopoeia* is a fact of language, a member of the family of tropes, this tends to be hidden because the trope is posited a priori. Many *prosopopoeias* are part of ordinary language and so exist prior to the distinction between figurative and literal speech—many *prosopopoeias* are also catachreses, neither literal nor figurative, like "headland," "eye of a storm," or "face of a mountain."

But a proper name may also be a strange species of catachresis. There is an equivocation in the definition of a *prosopopoeia* as the ascription of a name. The name may be proper or generic, though in either case the process goes from the name to the substance named. Hardy used two lines from *Two Gentleman of Verona* (I.ii. 114–115) as the epigraph for *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*: "Poor wounded name! My bosom, as a bed, / Shall lodge thee." The epigraph defines the act of narration as an extended *prosopopoeia*, invoking Tess and keeping her alive within the covers of a book. In Shakespeare's play Julia says she will hide in her bosom Proteus' name on the fragment of the love letter she has torn to pieces. The paper serves as a personification of the beloved because it bears his name. But that name is both proper and conceptual. The name "Proteus" foreshadows its bearer's faithlessness.

Ovid's *Metamorphoses* already dramatizes this doubleness of *prosopopoetic* naming in its stories of why a certain flower is called a narcissus, a certain tree a myrrh. On the one hand, these are the

generic names for this kind of flower or tree. On the other hand, behind each of these generic names is a proper name, behind each proper name a story that presupposes the anthropomorphizing of the flower or the tree. Hidden within each narcissus is Narcissus and his story, within each myrrh tree, Myrrha and her sad tale.

The story of Pygmalion dramatizes the process by which an anthropomorphism takes place, whereas in most of the stories of the *Metamorphoses* the anthropomorphism is already complete at the beginning. This makes the story of Pygmalion a prosopopoeia of prosopopoeia. Myrrha is already a girl; she becomes a tree. Galatea is an ivory statue that becomes a girl.

Ovid's description of the anthropomorphizing of Galatea strongly emphasizes the autoerotic side of this process. Autoeroticism is a region of human experience in which prosopopoeia appears to be least verbal, most bodily, tactile, and affective. Even here, however, a murmured proper name may invoke the absent, personify the inanimate, or re-personify the dead:

saepe manus operi temptanes admovet, an sit
corpus an illud ebur: nec adhuc ebur esse fatetur.
oscula dat reddique putat loquiturque tenetque
et credit tactis digitos insidere membris
et metuit, pressos veniat ne livor in artus. (10.254–258).

Often he ran his hands over the work, feeling it to see whether it was flesh or ivory, and would not yet admit that ivory was all it was. He kissed the statue, and imagined that it kissed him back, spoke to it and embraced it, and thought he felt his fingers sink into the limbs he touched, so that he was afraid lest a bruise appear where he had pressed the flesh. (231)

Only in this imaginative caressing of the statue does the reversal of the previous story, redressing the imbalance, begin to occur. Ultimately Pygmalion places the statue on a couch and, as Ovid tactfully puts it, "appellat tori sociam" (called it his bedfellow; 10.268; 232). So passionate is Pygmalion's love for the girl he has made with his own hands that, with some help from Venus, Galatea comes alive. His patience is rewarded when he prays submissively to Venus, who hears his prayer. It may be better for her to let him marry a statue brought to life than for him to remain a bachelor, in defiance of her power. So she grants his not quite spoken wish.

The ivory does become flesh, in the magical substantiation of what began as a trope. The passage describing this merits analysis:

When Pygmalion returned home [from praying to Venus], he made straight for the statue of the girl he loved, leaned over the couch, and kissed her. She seemed warm: he laid his lips on hers again, and touched her breast with his hands—at his touch the ivory lost its hardness, and grew soft: his fingers made an imprint on the yielding surface, just as wax of Hymettus melts in the sun and, worked by men's fingers, is fashioned into many different shapes, and made fit for use by being used [ut Hymettia sole / cera remollescit tractataque pollice multas / flectitur in facies ipsoque fit utilis usu]. The lover stood, amazed, afraid of being mistaken, his joy tempered with doubt, and again and again stroked the object of his prayers. It was indeed a human body! (10.280–289; 232)

Though the birth of Galatea takes the help of a goddess, Ovid emphasizes the way it is the result of human work, even of specifically male work. The work is both sexual and at the same time simply one of manufacture, in the literal sense of a making by hand: "at his touch the ivory lost its hardness." This story embodies a male fantasy whereby a woman cannot be the object of sexual desire and cannot desire in return unless she has been made so by male effort. The process is likened to the procedure whereby a passive and formless raw material is given shape by man's productive power.

Is this fantasy exclusively male? Not necessarily, if there is any truth in the many versions of the Pygmalion story in which the woman rather than the man idolizes a statue or a painting. Examples are Kleist's "Der Findling," Hardy's "Barbara of the House of Grebe," or James's "The Last of the Valerii," two of which are discussed in this book. Though these stories are by male writers, they would at least authorize saying that men have ascribed to women as well as to men the error of taking prosopopoeia literally. The word "versions" in my title is meant to suggest not only different tellings of the same story, but also deflections, or one might even say "metamorphoses," of that story. Are the versions of Pygmalion in which the gender of the protagonist is changed so radical a transformation as no longer to be "versions" in the sense of "redactions"? That question must remain open for now and abide the readings that follow.

"Fit utilis usu" (made fit for use by being used)—the phrase, in

Latin or English, vibrates with various meanings of the noun or verb, "usus," "utor," "use," including its negative forms, since "use" is a double antithetical word: "use value" as against "exchange value," "use" of a word or phrase as against its "mention," the mistreatment of one person by another—as in Miss Havisham's question to Pip about Estella in *Great Expectations*, "How does she use you?"—or the notion of exhaustion in the phrase "all used up," with its overtones of usury as wearing away or "usura." But Ovid's usage also vibrates with the meaning of the word when it is given negative prefixes, as in "abutor" (to make full use of, to waste, or to use a word wrongly) or, in English, "misuse," "abuse," and even, as I have suggested, "self-abuse." What the word "usu" literally names here is all that caressing and stroking by Pygmalion of the ivory statue.

Perhaps most obscurely and profoundly, Ovid's phrase "fit utilis usu" expresses the paradox in all inaugural acts of creation—artistic, sexual, ethical, or political. The shapeless wax is not yet fit for use, but it must be used in order to become useful. It must be at the beginning both usable and not usable. The initial using, the shaping manipulation by man, both makes something not yet useful fit for use and at the same time does this by using it, by using the unusable. To put this in terms of speech-act theory, such acts of shaping are, against reason, both constative and performative at once. They identify a usefulness that is already there, as in the old notion that the sculptor does no more than remove the excess stone from around a statue that is hidden in the shapeless material. On the other hand, such shapings bring something absolutely new into existence by a performative gesture that makes the useless useful, gives the shapeless shape.

"Made fit for use by being used" echoes the similar self-reflexive phrase in a passage already cited: "ars adeo latet arte sua" (so cleverly did his art conceal its art). That phrase succinctly expresses what is self-deceitful and idolatrous about prosopopoeia. A prosopopoeia is a human creation, a product of the capacity within language for tropological substitution. We can, for example, shift the name of a part of the human body to a feature of the landscape and speak of the face of a mountain. This operation is concealed when the anthropomorphism then becomes part of ordinary lan-

guage. We forget that we ourselves have artfully personified the mountain and are fooled into taking our own creation literally. It comes to seem that there is a real personality in the mountain, so that, like Wordsworth, we talk of the "speaking face" of nature within which is diffused "a soul divine which we participate" (1805 *Prelude*, 5.12, 15, 16). Pygmalion is so skillful an artist, skilled even in concealing his art from himself, that he is taken in by his own fabrication: it seems to him that Galatea must be a real girl.

The image of the wax of Hymettus melting in the sun so that it may be fashioned by men's fingers into many different shapes, made fit for use by being used, indicates what is equivocal and even ominous in Pygmalion's artful metamorphosis of a chunk of ivory into a living maiden. The transformation requires the cooperation of the gods. But what Pygmalion does is a usurpation of divine power as manifested in the sun god's sovereignty over shapeless matter. In another story told in the *Metamorphoses* Icarus flies too close to the sun, and the wax binding his wings melts. This is a punishment for Daedalus' temerity. In the phrase Joyce cites in part as the epigraph for *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, "ignotas animum dimittit in artes / naturamque novat" (He set his mind to sciences never explored before, and altered the laws of nature; 8.188–189; 184). Yeats's "Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen" picks up on what is ominous about this traditional figure of the melting wax as a trope for man's shaping power. The fragility of "Phidias' famous ivories" is analogous to the fragility of "habits that made old wrong / Melt down, as it were wax in the sun's rays." But if old wrong can melt in this way, new right is equally destructible, as "the Platonic Year / Whirls out new right and wrong, / Whirls in the old instead" (lines 7, 11–12, 54–56). Ultimately the sovereign sun, seeming natural symbol of a transcendent power, conquers all man's attempts to achieve stability in art or politics, and with open mouths and blinded eyes, like Yeats's wise old men, we "but gape at the sun" (102).

Pygmalion seems to have escaped scot-free from all this. Rather than concluding with the terse announcement of a metamorphosis as punishment, his story ends with the birth of Paphos. Paphos is the child conceived, apparently, just after Galatea is born and sees her lover and the light of day together: "when the moon's horns

had nine times been rounded into a full circle, Pygmalion's bride bore a child, Paphos, from whom the island takes its name." Who could blame Pygmalion for his wistful affection for the beautiful statue he has made? And who could blame Venus for granting a wish that so benignly acknowledges her sovereignty?

Ovid's judgment of Pygmalion, however, is not so simple or so positive as this happy ending suggests. For Ovid the appropriate punishment always comes, though in this case it is deferred. The payment for Pygmalion's happiness is made not by his daughter Paphos, but by his grandson Cinyras and, especially, by his great-granddaughter Myrrha.

The narrative of Myrrha's incestuous love for her father is a retrospective reading of the story of Pygmalion. Myrrha's story has great power. It is longer than most of the stories in the *Metamorphoses*, and it is prefaced with a stern warning: "The story I am going to tell is a horrible one [Dira canam—this is a good example of how Ovid's laconic Latin inevitably becomes somewhat verbose in translation]: I beg that daughters and fathers should hold themselves aloof, while I sing, or if they find my songs enchanting, let them refuse to believe this part of my tale, and suppose that it never happened: or else, if they believe that it did happen, they must believe also in the punishment that followed" (10.300–303; 233). Father-daughter incest, like the Oedipal incest of mother and son, is so shocking that it cannot be looked at directly by civilized men and women. Parental guidance will not avail in this case. The taboo against confronting such incest was still strong in the late nineteenth century, when Freud changed the relation in one of the case histories in *Studies in Hysteria* from father-daughter incest to uncle-niece incest, and then added a footnote years later castigating himself for having hidden the truth.

In Ovid, Myrrha's irresistible passion leads her, with her nurse's help, to trick her father into sleeping with her, night after night, not knowing it is his daughter. The story is a good example of that cunning method of enchainment whereby one story in the *Metamorphoses* functions as a commentary on previous ones. Pygmalion too, Myrrha's story implies, is guilty not only of Narcissism and of a strange kind of onanism but also of incest. Pygmalion is Galatea's fathering maker as well as her husband. To sleep with her is

to sleep with his own daughter. Pygmalion avoided the painful encounter with the otherness of other persons in ordinary human relations. But a relation in which there is no otherness, in which the same mates with the same, is, precisely, incest. Poor Myrrha pays for the sins of her great-grandfather by repeating his crime in her violent infatuation with her father. Her punishment is to be turned into a perpetually weeping myrrh tree.

The sequence of stories comes full circle back to its initiator, Venus, in a final story, the last in book 10. This story shows that even a goddess is not exempt from punishment meted out by the strict justice of the *Metamorphoses*. The child born out of the trunk of the myrrh tree is Adonis, "offspring of his sister and his grandfather," fruit of the horrible union of Cinyras and Myrrha. This leads Ovid to tell the tale of Venus' doomed love for the mortal Adonis. If Venus punished the Propoetides for denying her divinity and allowed Pygmalion to get away with falling in love with a statue he made, she pays for this by experiencing human loss. At least to that degree she loses her divinity. She falls in love with a mortal and then, when Adonis dies, suffers the human pain of being the survivor of the death of the beloved. As Ovid puts it, Adonis "now became the darling of Venus, and avenged the passion which had assailed his mother."

I have spoken of guilt and its punishment as governing the narratives in the *Metamorphoses*. The most general definition of this guilt would label it the error of taking a figure of speech literally. Such a mistake, like all such illusions, aberrations, or misreadings, can cause great social, historical, and personal grief. To treat something dead as if it were alive is an error in reading. It is also an ethical error that can be exposed by another act of reading. Whether this knowledge can be gained without repeating the error that the knowledge warns against remains to be seen.

My book will explore the ethics of narrative in its connection with the trope of prosopopoeia. But we have already learned something a little unsettling. Though none of us, of course, would take a statue as a real person, in order to "read" the *Metamorphoses* it is necessary to yield to its basic narrative personifications, by a certain willing suspension of disbelief. We must think of Pygmalion, Galatea, Cinyras, Myrrha, and even Venus to some degree as

if they were real persons, not just black marks on the page. This does not bode well for the hope that the reader of these stories can be exempt from the error the tales describe. In order to understand the "crime," it may be necessary to commit it again. Whether this is really the case must remain an open question, to be tested by the readings that follow.

CHAPTER I

The Ethics of Narration

In *The Ethics of Reading* (1987) I investigated in a preliminary way the question posed by that title. I propose here to exemplify further the claim that the rhetorical study of literature is indispensable to exploration of the so-called extrinsic relations of literature: the relations of literature to history, politics, and society, to personal and institutional relations. *The Ethics of Reading* ends with a promise, the promise to read some actual narratives rather than passages where authors write about what they have written.

This book is the attempt to fulfill my promise. It presents readings of a series of stories that exemplify the relation between ethics and narrative. I do this with special attention to prosopopoeia as the fundamental generative linguistic act making a given story possible. If there is no ethics without story and no story without prosopopoeia, then understanding that figure of speech is essential to an understanding of ethics and especially of the ethics of reading.

My inaugural or constitutive questions remain what they were at the beginning of *The Ethics of Reading*. This new book has been undertaken in the hope that a careful reading of some actual stories may take me closer to answers. Is there an ethical dimension to the act of reading as such (as opposed to the expression of ethical themes in the text read)? Does some moral good come to me out of the solitary act of reading? How would one measure that good accurately, and what kind of good, exactly, would it be? Reinforcement and creation of my values, my further incorporation into the values of my society?