

CASA ESSAY

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MIMESIS AS POETIC TOOL AND METAPOETIC COMMENT IN OVID

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Ovid orders words in one or more verses to make them imitate an aspect of the event they narrate. Protean syntax, modified to suit the situation, reinforces the protean theme of mutability. Syntax pictures sense.¹

Mimesis is not only a long-established and popular literary tool, but also an ingrained feature of human language. So deep-seated is our desire to reinforce the coding of our language with the characteristics of their denotations that forms of mimesis crop up in our speech and text all the time.² Onomatopoeic words are probably the most obvious example of this mirroring of meaning, where sounds are directly echoed in voice, but the same principle extends to qualities of sound — for example, the sibilance of ‘whisper’ and ‘sibilance’ itself — and even qualities unrelated to sound. In this form of mimesis, words are able to create almost visceral reactions related to the nature of what they describe, above and beyond the reaction engendered simply by the connotation of the words; words like ‘moist’ invoking unpleasant feelings and ‘lullaby’ the opposite even in those unfamiliar with or without attachment to them. In the hands of those authors willing to consciously employ mimesis in all its forms, it becomes all the more impactful both in lending weight to the direct meaning of writing and in commenting on communicative forms and human attitudes. The work of this essay is to examine such usage by Ovid in Book 3 of the *Metamorphoses* and determine its extent and purpose with regard to literary style and the thematic content of the book.

In Ovid, however, somatic mimesis is less our concern than syntactic mimesis: the placement of words and phrases such that they echo aspects of their subject matter. This form of mimesis departs from those mentioned above for two reasons. First, this is a conscious choice by the author and not simply a reflection of a mimetic vocabulary. While anyone may subconsciously adopt mimetic language simply as a result of a limited storehouse of words, mimesis by word choice cannot occur at scale without deliberate effort on the part of the author, and this allows for more complex and potentially effective mimesis. Second, mimesis

¹ Lateiner 1990:204.

² Lateiner 1990:205.

by word order is incredibly rare in English given its strict reliance on word order for meaning, as well as a traditional usage of sound and rhyme above word order in creating metatextual reinforcement or meaning, leading Lateiner to describe it as a ‘resource barely available in English’.³ The laxity of Latin word order, as well as metrical emphasis, creates the ideal environment for syntactic mimesis, and it is this which Ovid exploits. The interest in Ovid, though, rests on the reluctance of previous Latin writers to exploit this selfsame opportunity. Cultural obeisance to the Greeks, who by and large avoided conscious mimetic syntax, meant that many Latin poets similarly limited themselves to more basic forms.⁴ The original Greek phenomenon may be attributed to the difficulty of extemporising mimetic syntax in oral poetry, but it is worth noting that there are instances of such mimesis in Homer, the most obvious being the repetitive slowness and gravitas employed in narrating the punishment of Sisyphus.⁵ This may have catalyzed further experimentation by Ovid, and would fit his tendency toward radical reinvention, particularly within a work that redefines epic poetry and the ways in which poetry may cross genres in order to most effectively make its point.

Should it indeed be the case that Ovid takes on this relatively new stylistic tool to advance his writings, the next question to be answered, if its use is to be understood, is the purpose toward which it is employed. Lateiner sees no need to examine this question beyond attributing it to Ovid’s characteristic flair, seeing only fit to justify such usage against contemporary criticism in that ‘mimetic syntax, like extravagant rhetoric, is one of those alleged faults that Ovid would not forswear’.⁶ Whilst Ovid may have resisted criticism, he cannot fail but to have been influenced by opinions and theories on literature that abounded in his time. In particular, writing in the shadow of the Greek greats, Ovid would have been aware of the association between mimesis and Stoicism, stemming from a suggestion that ‘language, coming into existence “by nature”, involved mimesis of reality’.⁷

The choice to employ mimesis was by no means simply an exercise of poetic flair, but involved a conscious choice of philosophical identification that shows Ovid’s commitment to providing what the Stoics would call a ‘close image of reality’.⁸ This identification is particularly important in bridging the gap between artistic illusion and the participatory literature through which Ovid aimed to involve Roman society. Further, it corresponds to the two forms of mimesis expounded by

³ Lateiner 1990:206.

⁴ Lateiner, 1990:206.

⁵ Homer 2.593-598.

⁶ Lateiner 1990:208.

⁷ Halliwell 2002:265.

⁸ Halliwell 2002:266.

Halliwell, either in the first instance ‘depicting and illuminating a world’⁹ outside its own boundaries, and in the second as a ‘creator of an independent artistic heterocosm, a world of its own’,¹⁰ which contains some form of inner truth. A society both highly literary and self-aware makes it difficult for an author to cultivate both appreciation of his work and literary content compelling enough to enrapture the reader and capture their imagination. Particularly in Book 3, Ovid focuses on precisely this conundrum, expressed eloquently by Hérica Valladares:

To be considered lifelike, a work of art ought to give the viewer the impression of witnessing and even participating in the depicted event. Yet the degree of verisimilitude and the artistic skill required to produce such an effect can only be gauged if the representation allows for a break in the illusion — a break that calls the viewer to his or her senses, causing an appreciative recognition of the artist’s deception.¹¹

Given that ultimately ‘Roman artists and viewers became intensely interested in the strange story of a youth who fell for his reflection’,¹² it is clear that at least on a literary level, Ovid was successful, having ‘fused this concept of mimesis with the push-pull dynamics of erotic seduction, a potent combination that turned Narcissus into a symbol of pictorial illusion’.¹³ Beyond simple flair then, Ovid used societal awareness of the role and structure of mimesis both to emphasise the dynamic within his work and heighten the role of mimesis within Latin poetry.

This, however, still deals squarely with Ovid’s literary aims. It is possible, even likely, that Ovid’s artistic choices also give insight into his philosophical views, and were made with this in mind. Unlike other epics in the Greco-Latin canon, the *Metamorphoses* is not a single story but a collection centred around a single topic: metamorphosis itself — Norwood considers its ‘outstanding characteristic’¹⁴ to be diversity. On its own, this is an indication that the aim of the work is not to tell an individual, particularly good, story, but rather to explore a concept, for after all ‘[i]t must seem wantonly perverse to claim that there exists any unity in *Metamorphoses*, *except in subject* and in some chronological order’.¹⁵ There is therefore a thematic concern behind the writing, and it stands to reason that literary choices carefully made would happen in consideration of the purpose of the entire work. While the bulk of these connections must be made according to

⁹ Halliwell 2002:5.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ Valladares 2001:378.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ Norwood 1964:170.

¹⁵ *Ibid.* (emphasis mine).

specific incidents of mimesis, it is also true that the concept of mimesis in itself speaks to a core concern of mutability: the ability of things to shift, mutate and be echoed by different things while still carrying a fundamental essence, just as language mutates that which it denotes whilst still carrying a reflection of its reality. Perhaps most pertinently, the core feature of syntactic mimesis is the altering of meaning and emphasis by altering placement and context.

In the *Metamorphoses*, Ovid is doing precisely this: exploring occurrences of changes of context and state. Tiresias, for example, remains Tiresias throughout his life, but lives as both genders, and it is this which creates his value to Jupiter and Juno; that his ability to embrace multiple paradigms and experiences by alterations of circumstance and positioning, leading to his description as *doctus*.¹⁶ There is thus a two-step mimetic and communicative process: writing, or more broadly, communication, must seek to emulate and embody reality, and in so doing must further embrace the multiple positions that reality or meaning may take. Through consciously exploring the positionality of language, Ovid suggests that all language, which must necessarily occur in cultural, temporal and syntactic context, is at least in part subjective and positioned toward a particular end.

To examine the ways in which these literary and thematic aims are reached, it is of course necessary to catalogue relevant instances of mimesis, and this will be done within the literary/thematic structure. Syntactic mimesis, because it does not have self-contained meaning (as might sonic mimesis), generally acts to emphasise meaning within words or phrases. Certain words that deal directly with positionality are therefore the simplest instance of syntactic mimesis as emphasising movement, position or direction. Words denoting commencement are often found at the beginning of lines: *iam* or *iamque* (19, 85, 124, 237, 469, 508, 678, 717, 718, 730), *prima* (107, 138, 232, 341, 711, 712) as well as other words with a *pro-* or *prae-* prefix (234, 394, 414, 604, 642, 692, 694, 696), along with rarer instances of words like *coeperat* (86) and *addidit* (191). The word *circumdatus* (666) appears surrounded by the words it describes: *racemiferis frontem circumdatus uvis*, similarly to *mixtum* (423) and *partier* (426) while *profecti* (35) completes its line and *recondita* (273) and *fusus* (438) are literally concealed within their lines. For the most part, these are simple instances of literary prowess where syntax is in line with the meaning of the words, creating a more natural and realistic literary landscape. But, as established above, flair is not the only achievement of this literary excellence. Goethe provides a useful excursus of the value of mimesis in literature by way of a dialogue between two art critics.¹⁷ Through discussing the relative value of realist painting and opera, the two (not

¹⁶ Coleman 1990:573.

¹⁷ Goethe 1985-1998:4.2:89-95.

altogether convincingly) decide that it is not so much the direct imitation of reality that results in artistic value, and particularly in the involvement and buy-in of the viewer, but rather the *'innere Wahrheit'* or inner truth of the work. The suggestion here is that by embodying the 'truth of the reality it describes, literature is more effectively able to enrapture and convince its audience of its value and outer truth. Little wonder then that Ovid's mimetic writing can be said to have 'turn[ed] this obscure tale [of Narcissus] into a psychologically complex and compelling narrative'.¹⁸

Beyond this literary feat, however, Ovid uses Narcissus to question his own audience, and it is here that his mimetic syntax becomes more complex than simple denotative imitation. The whole passage carries a sense of climax and gradual entrapment, beginning, or foreshadowed, by instances of repetition. The use of *Echo* (358, 380, 387) to end a line is not only used to create a sense of resonance, but to introduce a sense of claustrophobia and closeness, made more real by the subsequent reiteration of the same repetition with far closer frequency after the entrapment of Narcissus (493, 501, 507). This section contains increased instances of immediate repetition in general, with *posset* (361, 362), *nec* (492, 493) and *dumque* (415, 416) repeated in the same position in subsequent lines. Also building the sense of involvement, urgency and intensity is the placement of verbs: Valladares points to 'Narcissus's emotional involvement with his reflection [which] is, then, indicated through a crescendo in the verbs of seeing: from *adstupet* ('he is astonished') and *haeret* ('he is transfixed'), we move to *spectat* ('he gazes,' *Met.* 3.419) and then to the more charged *miratur* ('he admires,' *Met.* 3.424), culminating in *se cupit*, ('he desires himself' *Met.* 3.425)' (379). Most crucial are intra-line repetitions, echoes and chiasmic phrases which create the climactic points of Narcissus losing all perspective, caught up in what he views: *et placet et video, sed, quod videoque placetque/non tamen invenio, tantus tenet error amantem* (446-447) and *quid faciam? roger, anne rogem? quid deinde rogabo?/quod cupio mecum est: inopem me copia fecit* (465-467) both use mimetic syntax to indicate the complete confusion and entrapment of Narcissus in his own reflection. The adherence to Goethe's suggestion is clear here: just as Narcissus is caught up in his reflection, the writing itself is occupied with reflecting itself. But, moreover, Ovid subtly invites the reader to partake of this same phenomenon. Just as Zeuxis is taken in by the work of Parrhasius,¹⁹ so is the reader enjoined to be swept along by the story. The conclusion of the story of Narcissus takes up a clear position on this phenomenon, and therefore reveals at least a question posed by Ovid against the nature of communication and reception. Mimesis itself reflects the

¹⁸ Valladares 2001:378.

¹⁹ Pliny 35:36.

concern of Narcissus: the mirroring of reality, whether such mirroring is fundamentally real, and whether it is desirable.

These again must be examined against the actual content of the book, but also in the light of the context from which they arise — questions posed by Plato in his theory of forms, among other. In conjunction, the suggestion seems to be that inasmuch as art may be instructive and beautiful, as much as it may contain an element of truth, it is important to remember that it is not itself the truth. As Plato contends that all things on earth are less beautiful than the mind which conceives of their true form,²⁰ so is literature only a representation. By mastering the art of mimesis, Ovid demonstrates its power, and in so doing appears to support the Stoic championing of the mimetic arts, but then demonstrates its destructive potential over both Narcissus and his readers and offers a coded warning. There is thus a line to be drawn; a reminder of the disjunct that exists between art and its viewer — and it is perhaps here that Ovid's 'flair' actually carries practical usage in reminding, through excess and satire, that writing is not reality. Apart from this philosophical distance, 'the degree of verisimilitude and the artistic skill required to produce such an effect can only be gauged if the representation allows for a break in the illusion'.²¹ Mimesis thus acts to bring the illusory and real closer together, with subsequent disruption performed with strong contrasts, such as the 'clash of tones ... very much present in the closing simile'²² of the Pentheus story. The interweaving of literary and thematic concern once more takes shape, as the dual concern of showing the necessity of distance and demonstrating artistic skill are carried out in this manner.

Ovid's use of mimetic syntax is thus a master class in artistic performance, allowing the reader to admire pure authorial skill as well as to be enthralled by the inner truth conveyed by the work, lending it emphasis and believability. More importantly, however, he creates this enthrallment in part to demonstrate the importance of his own story, shattering its assumed virtue in the destruction of Narcissus and asserting his own philosophical views by playing on existing literary and philosophical schools of thought through the very same techniques of mimesis. Ultimately, he tries to show both the beauty and consequent problems with illusory reality through multiple layers of mimesis — but judging by the popularity and endurance of his work, the success of the former aim is far greater.

²⁰ Plato *Symposium*.

²¹ Valladares 2001:378.

²² Segal 1998:35.

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