

'METAMORPHOSES' OF PROTEUS IN POUND'S *CANTOS* AND JOYCE'S *ULYSSES*

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Abstract. This article discusses the way in which Pound and Joyce revisit the myth of Proteus (*The Odyssey*, Book 4) and use it in 'Canto II' and *Ulysses* (Episode III), respectively. Starting from the very essence of the myth (the sea god's magic ability to turn into various creatures and nature elements), Pound and Joyce manage to transform the myth itself into a pattern to suit their modernist writing strategies. Thus, the myth becomes the background for metaphorical metamorphoses. Both Pound and Joyce use elements of the myth (the sea shore, the seal image, the daughter of Ocean, the allusion to Helen of Troy and the war, the ship motif, the feeling of imprisonment and insecurity) not only to re-tell the myth from a different cultural perspective, but also to prove that the myth itself may be metamorphosed into strategies of writing. By juxtaposing key-words from Homer's tale, Pound manages to rewrite it from a Cubist perspective, while Joyce creates brilliant correspondences between the sea-god's changing shape and form and Stephen Dedalus's tumultuous changing of thoughts. In this way, both modernist writers reveal the universality of the Greek myth on the one hand, and its inexhaustible resources of novelty on the other.

The concept of 'metamorphosis' (Gr. *meta-*, *morph-*, *-osis*), or 'transformation' (L. *trānsformātio*), expresses the ability of a creature or thing to change its shape or structure either by itself, from the inside, or by imposition, from the outside. 'Myth,' another word of Greek origin (Gr. *mythos*), meaning 'story' or 'word,' probably stemming from *mȳ* ('mouth'), includes in its meaning besides the signified (a series of events expressed through language), the vehicle by means of which the events are conveyed: the mouth. Connecting 'myth' to *mȳ* (which actually encompasses both the connotation of 'mouth' and that of 'mystery'), and 'metamorphosis' would instantly lead one to think of the mythical metamorphoses in Greek mythology from divine or semi-divine creatures to humans, animals, and nature elements or from humans and animals to plant forms.

The present article is concerned with one such Greek myth, Menelaus' narration of his encounter with Proteus in Homer's *Odyssey*, Book IV, which seems to have inspired both Ezra Pound and James Joyce not only to openly allude to it, but also to use it as a strategy of writing. The metamorphosis of Proteus into animals and

plants, before being captured by Menelaus, has undergone its own transformation and has been ‘metamorphosed’ into a writing technique with Pound and Joyce.

Kept on the island of Pharos at the mouth of the Nile with his companions, unable to sail further to reach home, Menelaus, according to Homer, realizes that he has somehow angered the gods. He is helped in discovering the truth by Eidothee, the daughter of mighty Proteus, also named “the Old Man of the Sea.” Eidothee reveals to Menelaus the secret of catching Proteus through his metamorphoses and of forcing him to answer the Greek hero’s questions (IV: 379-480). Thus, she brings four seal skins to Menelaus and three of his companions and advises them to hide underneath and wait for Proteus to come out of the sea at noon. When the god does so, and after he has counted the seals without realizing that four of them were covering humans, he goes to sleep, when

[W]ith a shout, we charged and grabbed hold of him. But the old man’s skill and cunning had not deserted him. He began by turning into *a bearded lion* and then into *a snake*, and after that *a panther* and *a giant bear*. He changed into *running water* too and *a great tree in leaf*. But we set our teeth and clung on grimly. (Homer IV: 454-459 [italics mine])

Caught by Menelaus and his friends, Proteus tries to escape by changing his shape and structure. Thus, he turns, according to Homer, into “a bearded lion and then into a snake”, and after that into “a panther and a giant bear”, and lastly into “running water and a great tree in leaf.” But, Menelaus and his companions manage to grab hold of him in the end and the god accepts to tell them what he knows about the past, the present and the future, also revealing to Menelaus the reasons why he was kept on the island.

Both Ezra Pound and James Joyce seem to have been fascinated by this particular myth as both allude to it. While Pound refers to it mainly in Canto II, Joyce uses it in Episode III of *Ulysses*. In the opening of Canto II, Pound juxtaposes three references to three distinct artists: Sordello, an obscure medieval poet, whose wealth was his art, So-Shu, a less-known Chinese poet, whose name is probably a corruption of another Chinese name, and Picasso, the artist, famous for the ability of changing the shape and color of the things he painted. It is the reference to Picasso that constitutes the link to Homer’s text and the Greek myth. Thus, after the opening of the canto, we read:

Seal sports in the spray-whited circles of cliff-wash,
 Sleek head, daughter of Lir,
 eyes of Picasso
 Under black fur-hood, lithe daughter of Ocean;
 And the wave runs in the beach-groove:
 “Eleanor, ἑλένας and ἑλέπτολις !”
 And poor old Homer blind, blind, as a bat,
 Ear, ear for the sea-surge, murmur of old men’s voices:

The reference to Picasso is actually more complex. Technically, Pound focuses on “eyes of Picasso” which are separated from the rest of the text and form a single line. Visually, the line looks like two eyes gazing at the reader. Symbolically, the artist’s faculty for changing the shape and structure of things on the canvas is rendered by the allusion to the seal, the sea animal closely related to Proteus. The reference to “the Old Man of the Sea” is supported by the reference to Lir, the Celtic sea god who had a similar ability of metamorphosis, to Lir’s daughter, who is identified with a seal in the Celtic mythology and, possibly, to Menelaus’ narrative, with specific reference to the moment when he hid under the seal skin (“under black fur-hood”). Although the reference to Proteus is not openly revealed in Pound’s text (it is kept ‘mysterious,’ another term that can be related to ‘myth’ and ‘mythology’), it is actually implied by the direct address to Helen, in “ἑλένας and ἑλέπτολις” and to Homer, the teller of the *Odyssey*, in “poor old Homer blind, blind, as a bat”. The multiple references, all grounded on the Greek myth may constitute an example of what Pound calls “the luminous detail” and considers as a possible writing strategy or poetic technique.

In the excerpt under discussion, the image of the seal, symbolical of Proteus as related by Menelaus in his story and also known to be one of Proteus’s own impersonations, is juxtaposed on the image of Lir’s daughter, equally known in the Celtic mythology for her appearances under the form of a seal. Both sea gods (Proteus and Lir’s daughter) bring about the motif of the sea in a different manner from the one in which it is introduced in the previous canto. If in Canto I, the sea is obviously symbolic of the idea of journey (whether mythical, cultural or psychological), in Canto II, the image of the sea, composed by the allusion to the

impersonations have been added: Atalanta and Tyro. The four women are four distinct bodily images of the same energetic node from which the concepts of life and death, love and hatred, construction and destruction radiate.

In Pound's *Cantos*, therefore, metamorphosis may be discussed as a strategy of writing by means of which the poet shifts from one reference to another, from one image to another, quickly changing the topic or the allusion as some of his masks (such as Proteus or Helen) keep changing their shape. Pound's technique has usually been described as 'ideogrammatic,' focusing on the "luminous detail," "node," or "cluster" of images, or more simply, a technique of 'fragmentation,' 'indirection,' and 'juxtaposition.' At a closer look, however, his technique seems to be more strongly related to the concept of metamorphosis as, what Pound does, is a transposition, or translation, or transformation of motifs and myths (i.e. words) from mythology into image, rhetoric, and style.

Thus, in the second part of Canto II, Pound alludes to another two famous mythical transformations. One is Tiresias' who is famous for his having metamorphosed from male into female, to change back into male later, and for having been given, by Zeus, the gift of prophecy. Like Proteus, the sea-god, he became an authority on the meanings of the past, present and future, a person to whom one had to listen carefully ("And you, Pentheus, / Had as well listen to Tiresias, and to Cadmus, / or your luck will go out of you."). The other one is Daphne's, famous for her metamorphosis into a laurel tree to escape the amorous pursuit of Apollo. Daphne (or Dafne) is herself the daughter of a river god (Peneus) who comes to her rescue during the unfortunate event and grants the transformation. To these two names, behind which there lie two well-known stories, Pound adds a third one: *Ileuthyeria*, a corruption of *Eileithyia*, the goddess of childbirth and *Eleutheria*, meaning both "freedom" and a marine organism of the genus of bisexual jelly-fishes (Terrell 1993: 7). Pound, therefore, makes his own language metamorphosis by creating a new word (*Ileuthyeria*) that encompasses the notions of childbirth, freedom and bisexuality. In its turn, *Ileuthyeria* is compared, or identified, with *Dafne*:

the coral face under wave-tinge,
Rose-paleness under water-shift,
Ileuthyeria, fair Dafne of sea-bords,
The swimmer's arms turned to branches,

Who will say in what year,
fleeing what band of tritons,
The smooth brows, seen, and half seen,
now ivory stillness. [italics mine]

Linguistically, *Ileuthyeria* is an umbrella word, but rhetorically, it is an energetic node which allows ramifications and connections to Tiresias, through the shared knowledge of the two sexes, and to Dafne, through the feeling of ‘liberation’ she may have felt when she ‘escaped’ as a tree. Moreover, Pound retorts to his own imaginary metamorphosis in Dafne’s case. As he himself confesses, “in my own myth,” Dafne is “not turned into a laurel but into coral” (Terrell 1993: 7). Hence, the association between Dafne and “the coral face” and “ivory” brows. By metamorphosing Ovid’s Daphne into “Dafne of sea-bords,” Pound connects her both to primal matter (the sea, unisexual micro-organisms) and to the beginning of humanity (childbearing and childbirth).

It is known that Pound did not actually have a real plan when he started composing the cantos. He devised a strategy for writing a text which would ramify into networks of connections and meanings which would encompass all cultures and in which past and present would co-exist. The design of his ‘epic’ would probably look like the photography of the human brain in which a myriad connections could be made, circuits would be drawn and “luminous details” would shift from foregrounding various parts and backgrounding others to creating cultural nodes and ambiguous images. The only stable connection among the “nodes” or “clusters” could probably be the energy (of a cultural kind) flowing through them. Pound himself outlined the importance of cultural energy flowing through the veins of a text in his description and understanding of *virtū*, the consciousness of each historical epoch which has shaped our cultural tradition through the centuries. Yet, history and myth interweave when it comes to the cradle of civilization. Pound makes use of a large number of such historical-cultural-mythological energetic instances. One of them could be Menelaus’s encounter with Proteus, another one could be the archetypal image of Helen in Homer’s text, another, *Ileuthyeria* with its complex meaning. The three instances are culturally and energetically bound to the subsequent ages of mankind by the linguistic, symbolical or metaphorical connotations they tend to attain.

Homer's *Odyssey* may generally be regarded as only one of the threads that weaves the texture of the Cantos, one way out of the Cantos' intricate structure. Intentionally or not, the Cantos are structured as a labyrinth, another reference to the Greek mythology, from which it is almost impossible to come out, if one does not symbolically or metaphorically possess 'Ariadna's thread'. A similar possession is needed when one intends to travel through Joyce's text. That Joyce's Ulysses is based on Homer's *Odyssey* is unquestionable and has made the subject of numerous studies. My intention at this point is to discuss the way in which Joyce makes use of the Proteus myth in his own text.

Episode III of Ulysses, called "Proteus" or "The Strand", is concerned with Stephen Dedalus's walk along Sandymount Strand and with his tumultuous stream of thought which he struggles to control in a manner similar to Menelaus's who also struggled to control Proteus through his transformations. The references to Homer's text are both direct, obvious (the sea, the waves, the ship, the return home of an ordinary seaman, the search for a father) and indirect, hidden, mysterious. The latter reference may be to the changing form of Stephen's thoughts, connected to, and standing for, Proteus's literal changing of form. In his own schemata concerning *Ulysses*, Joyce equates Proteus with "primal matter," while in one of his letters, he explains that in the Proteus chapter "change is the theme. Everything changes--sea, sky, man, animals. The words change, too." Thus, Stephen's flow of consciousness may be interpreted as a metaphorical transformation of primal matter through the very subjective mixture of actual perception and past memories. On the other hand, the flow of words, supporting the change in thought may be seen as a strategy of writing which would stand for the Protean metamorphoses.

Stephen's stream of consciousness opens with his musing over the distinction, made by Schopenhauer, between *nebeneinander* (beside each other) and *nacheinander* (after each other). The former concept expresses the visual perception of reality, when things are seen in space in a line, one by the other; the latter describes the perception of reality through hearing, when things succeed each other in time. In Homer's episode, when Menelaus captures the sea god, things are perceived equally in space (Proteus's transformations are visible, they are beside each other), and in time (they succeed each other). However, possibly having Homer's narrative in mind, Joyce questions, through Stephen's stream of thoughts, the possibility of drawing a borderline between the two kinds of perception, of

distinguishing them as primary and secondary, and of establishing which of them may render reality more truthfully or more adequately. "Shut your eyes and see" (3:9), says Stephen in his attempt to internalize both space and time.

Stephen closed his eyes to hear the boots crackling wrack and shells. You are walking through it howsomever. I am, a stride at a time. A very short space of time through my short times of space. Five, six: the *Nacheinander*. Exactly: and that is the ineluctable modality of the audible. Open your eyes. No. Jesus! If I fell over a cliff that beetles o'er his base, fell the *Nebneinander* ineluctably! I am getting on nicely in the dark. My ash sward hangs at my side. Tap with it: they do. My two feet in his boots are at the ends of his legs, *nebeneinander*. Sounds solid: made by the mallet of *Los demiurgos*. I am walking into eternity along Sandymount strand? Crush, crack, crick, crick. (3:10-19)

Musing about various ways of perceiving reality, Stephen shifts from visual to auditory, from tactile to olfactory and palatable perception in an attempt to render through the senses various processes and media, all subjective and incomplete, of reflecting reality. Thus, he constantly composes and decomposes synesthesia into its component parts: 'sight' ("Snotgreen, bluesilver, rust: colored signs" 3:3-4), 'sounds' (Stephen hears his boots "crush crackling wrack and shells" 3:10; "Crush, crack, crick, crack" 3:19; "His tune whistle sounds again, finely shaded, with rushes of the air, his fists bigdrumming on his padded knees" 3:102-3), 'taste' ("Damn your lithia water. It lowers. Whusky!" 3:90), 'touch' ("Touch me. Soft eyes. Soft soft soft hand. I am lonely he. O, touch me soon, now" 3:434-35), and 'smell' ("A shefiend's whiteness under her rancid rags. Fumbally's lane that night: the tanyard smells" 3:378-80). In this particular way, the senses mediate images, which turn into one another in the endeavor of metamorphosing nature as primal matter into the physical, surrounding world.

The musing about the co-existence of space and time also shapes Stephen's next thought concerning the appearance of two midwives, a complex symbol of the continuity and disruption of life in the spatial-temporal dimensions of our present world. The job of a midwife is to cause the presence or absence of a human being in the space and time of this world. A midwife is therefore the tool between atemporality and temporality, between the infinite and the finite. In Homer's text, space and time seem to be suspended on the Pharos island while Menelaus and his comrades are obstructed to leave. In Joyce's text, Stephen's stream of thought

reaches a suspended time and space when it reveals the archetypal image of “naked Eve,” who “had no navel” (3: 41-42), no *omphalos* to gaze in, no umbilical cord. Before her Edenic fall, Eve was herself shaped from “primal matter” to subsequently become ‘primal matter’ for the whole mankind that gradually found shape from her.

Stephen’s thoughts shift from Eve to Jesus, the Holy Child, whom he describes as “consubstantial” with the Father (3: 49-50), with whom he shares one cosmic and spiritual substance. Unlike Jesus, Christians can reach communion with Father and Son only through trans-substantiality, that is through the holy objects (the bread and the wine) which contain, through the process of metamorphosis, God’s substance. In this way, man becomes pregnant with God. There are interesting readings of the many instances of pregnancy by gods in Greek mythology. One example to this effect is the birth of Helen, the cause of all the troubles in the *Odyssey*, who is, nevertheless, consubstantial with Zeus. Moreover, due to his marriage to Helen, Menelaus is addressed in the Homeric text as “favorite of Zeus” (IV: 391,562) and is promised a special place in the Elysian Fields because he is “son-in-law to Zeus” (IV: 569) in the eyes of the gods and, therefore, consubstantial with him. Interestingly, in Homer’s world in which the divine and the human planes intermingle, people are closer to divinity, consubstantial with it whereas in Joyce’s Christian world, the access to divinity is only trans-substantial mediated through holy cult objects.

The common characteristic of both Homer’s and Joyce’s texts under scrutiny is metamorphosis. While Homer describes it as a concrete fact (Proteus changed his shape several times until he succumbed to Menelaus’s grip), and as a necessary force that refuels the mechanism of the world and allows it to move on, Joyce makes use of metamorphosis as a metaphor and as a technique of writing. Stephen’s thoughts take different shapes: they travel from philosophy to religion, to individualism, personal problems, remorse, Irish history, Parisian memories, and subjective representations of the world. Moments of history, instances of culture, philosophy, and religion become metaphors of the shaping of nature and spirit, substance from “primal matter” into humans, animals, and things.

Yet, there is a difference between Stephen and Menelaus in molding the primal matter. To Menelaus, the primal matter is the substance of which the god is made, to Stephen, it is the substance of language. Therefore, while Menelaus takes a strong grip of the god but also allows him to change shape in his hands, Stephen

does not seem to take a strong grip on his own thoughts and, consequently, relaxes his grasp on language. Menelaus forces the god to tell him what he wants to know; thus, he controls both the god's speech and his own narration. Stephen cannot control his thoughts and, therefore, feels compelled to free them, to let them flow at will. By liberating them, he also liberates language from the strong hold of logic and voluntary censorship. There are no stable relations between words and things in Joyce's text. Objects become symbols or are named in metaphors, which constantly change the image of what is named. An example to this effect is the description of the cocklepickers' dog, who turns up on the beach along with his two masters and catches Stephen's attention for a while. The dog is usually read as one of the Protean metamorphoses of nature, as Stephen understands it, similar to the seal interpreted as one of Proteus' impersonations in the Homeric text.

Their dog ambled about a bank of dwindling sand, trotting, sniffing on all sides. Looking for something lost in a past life. Suddenly he made off like a bounding hare, ears flung back, chasing the shadow of a lowskimming gull. The man's shrieked whistle struck his limp ears. He turned, bounded back, came nearer, trotted on twinkling shanks. On a field tenney a buck, trippant, porper, unattired. At the lacefringe of the tide he halted with stiff forehoofs, seawardpointed ears. His snout lifted barked at the wavenoise, herds of seamorse. They serpented towards his feet, curling, unfurling, many crests, every ninth, breaking, plashing, from far, from farther out, waves and waves. (3: 332-341)

Following Stephen's perception of it, the cocklepickers' dog seems to alter its shape while going "through a virtual bestiary of fabulous comparisons" (Sherry 1994: 33). Thus, it "made off like a bounding *hare*...trotted on twinkling shanks....halted with stiff *forehoofs*...reared up at them with mute *bearish fawning*...loped off at a *calf's gallop*" (3: 333-48, italics mine) . The dog's trot on "twinkling shanks" makes Stephen see "a buck, trippant, proper, unattired", most probably a hidden reference to Buck Mulligan, one of his companions with whom he shares the Martello Tower, but also an animal into which the dog seems to transform. The waves themselves seem to have turned into "herds of seamorse" which "serpented towards his feet." The metamorphosis of the dog into hare, mare, calf, and buck is paralleled by the metamorphosis of the waves into serpentine seamorse.

Metaphorically, the dog represents the power of the metamorphosis of reality into art and beauty as well as the mirroring of reality by art. The dog, who appears to take different shapes and gives the impression of turning into a hare, a mare and a calf, meets the carcass of a dead dog which he starts sniffing, and from which he is immediately chased away by the two people he accompanies.

The carcass lay on his path. He stopped, sniffed, stalked round it, brother, nosing closer, went round it, sniffing rapidly like a dog all over the dead dog's bedraggled fell. Dogskull, dogsniff, eyes on the ground, moves to one great goal. (3: 348-351)

Bare, sordid reality (the carcass of the dead dog) is thus metamorphosed into, and contrasted by, artistic representation (the compound image of the dog as hare, mare, and calf).

Both Joyce and Pound seem to largely use metamorphosis to metaphorically suggest a world in constant change and to prove that there is always room and need for new strategies of writing. Pound's metamorphosed images are luminous details marking the energetic nodes of our civilization. Joyce's streams of consciousness are intended to stress the impossibility of holding a strong grasp on language and, by extension, on reality. Pound's use of metamorphosis is meant to cause disenchantment in our godless world, because it allows ugliness to come to the surface and manifest itself. As Daniel Albright has suggested, Pound's hope for the Cantos may have been "to hasten the evolution of a new human race, a race with sprouted horns, whiskers, antennae sensitive to divine tremblings in the ether." In other words, Pound's image of the human race is already a metamorphosed one. Joyce, on the other hand, keeps reminding us that language cannot be grasped or fully controlled by our consciousness and, therefore, becomes evasive and unreliable. To hold it still and make it reveal its secrets is almost impossible. To Joyce, Menelaus does not exist. His hero is Proteus, who represents the perpetual weaving of narcissistic projection and sympathetic imagination as does the individual self. However, to both Pound and Joyce the creative act, whether poetic or fictional, involves a constant struggle to seize upon the self as other and upon the other as self in a metamorphic process mediated, as illusory as it may seem, by language.

Notes

- ¹. Homer. *The Odyssey*. London: Penguin, 1991, 55-58. All further references to *The Odyssey* will be to this edition.
- ². Ezra Pound, *The Cantos of Ezra Pound*. New York: A New Directions Book, 1998, 6:6-133
- ³. See Caroll F. Terrell, *A Companion to the 'Cantos' of Ezra Pound* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1993), 5, in which the author discusses the complex image of Helen as *helenaus and heleptolis*, a play upon Helen of Troy and the effect she had upon the Greeks as “ship destroying” and “city destroying.”
- ⁴. Ezra Pound, “I Gather the Limbs of Ossiris,” in William Cookson, ed., *Ezra Pound: Selected Prose (1909-1965)* (New York: A New Directions Book, 1975), 24 in which he describes “the luminous detail” as “certain facts or points” that “governed knowledge as the switchboard the electric circuit.”
- ⁵. See Ezra Pound, “Vorticism,” *Fortnightly Review*, Sept. 1914. 461-71, in which the terms “node” and “cluster” are used to describe a Vorticist image which, according to the poet, radiates energy.
- ⁶. Eleanor of Aquitaine is described as first having been the wife of Louis VII of France who divorced her for infidelity, then the wife of Henry II of England. As he held her captive she turned her sons against him and was the cause of the Hundred Years War between England and France. Like Helen of Troy she was the agent of both love and destruction.
- ⁷. Pound’s fascination with “ideogrammic images” comes from his interest in Chinese poetry and in the description of the ideogram by Ernest Fenollosa in Ezra Pound, ed., *The Chinese Written Character as a Medium for Poetry*. San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1968. 26.
- ⁸. For a more extensive analysis of Pound’s technique in the *Cantos*, see Adina Ciugureanu, *High Modernist Poetic Discourse*. Constanta: Ex Ponto, 1997, and *Modernism and the Idea of Modernity*. Constanta: Ex Ponto, 2004. 39-68.
- ⁹. Vincent Sherry, *Joyce: Ulysses*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994. 114.
- ¹⁰. Quoted by Robert Spoo, *James Joyce and the Language of History: Dedalus's Nightmare*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994. 107.
- ¹¹. James Joyce, *Ulysses*. New York: Vintage Books, 1993. 3:10-18. All further references are from this edition.
- ¹². Daniel Albright, “Early Cantos I-XLI,” in Ira B. Nadel, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Ezra Pound*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001. 72.

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