CHAPTER 12

C.H. Sisson's *Metamorphoses* and the "New Age of Ovid"

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1 Introduction

In this paper I shall argue that with his "Metamorphoses" C.H. Sisson anticipates important aspects of the most recent receptions of Ovid at the same time that he builds upon the long Ovidian tradition. The past few decades have indeed witnessed the rise of a "New Ovidian Age," especially since many rewritings and reinventions of the *Metamorphoses* have appeared in various and differing art forms: poetry, narrative prose, drama, movies, and the visual arts.[1] For instance, Christoph Ransmayr's novel *The Last World* was published in the late 1980s (original title: *Die letzte Welt*, 1988). While perpetuating a tradition of stories centered on Ovid's exile, it is also a transfigured reworking of the *Metamorphoses* themselves.[2] The real beginning of the "New Ovidian Age," however, is marked by the publication, in 1994, of a volume entitled *After Ovid: New Metamorphoses*, edited by two poets and critics, Michael Hofmann and James Lasdun. It is a collection of poetic versions (translations, reinterpretations, and even complete reinventions) of sixty passages from the *Metamorphoses*, composed by forty-two Anglophone poets.[3] This work has been followed by numer-

1 For a systematic treatment of the phenomenon, with references, see the second chapter (entitled *Le Metamorfosi nell'età dell'incertezza*) of my book on Ovid and European culture (Ursini 2017, 115–256).

2 See Ursini 2017, 278–291.

3 Niklas Holzberg was the first to describe a "New Ovidian Age," but he placed its beginning some ten years earlier: "since the mid-1980s, he [Ovid] has become so popular, not only with classicists and other lovers of Greek and Roman poetry, but also with poets and prose writers, that we may once again speak of an 'Age of Ovid,' at least as far as the literary afterlife of antiquity is concerned" (Holzberg 2002, 1 = Holzberg 1997, 11). By contrast, I prefer to place the original Ovidian "big bang" in 1994, the year in which there appeared both the first explicit, systematic rewriting of the *Metamorphoses* (*After Ovid*) and David R. Slavitt's translation (*The Metamorphoses of Ovid*). Slavitt's translation (Slavitt 1994) proved to be not only very free, but also extremely influential among learned readers: hence, its impact on later rewritings. (Note, for instance, that it is the source of Mary Zimmerman's play, presumably the Ovidian reinvention with the largest audience.)

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ous poetic and prosaic rewritings of the *Metamorphoses*, such as Ted Hughes' *Tales from Ovid* (1997), Alex Shakar's *City in Love: The New York Metamorphoses* (1996), and the collection of short stories entitled *Ovid Metamorphosed*, edited by Philip Terry (2000). Note also dramatic works such as Mary Zimmerman's *Metamorphoses: A Play* (2002) and movies like Christophe Honoré's *Métamorphoses* (2014).

Although these artworks are very different from one another, contemporary reworkings of the *Metamorphoses* tend to share some common features:

1) Rewriting is a fragmentary, heterogeneous operation. Individual authors, such as Hughes and Shakar, seem to select Ovidian excerpts in a "desultory" way, rewriting and rearranging only certain episodes of the *Metamorphoses*. Similarly, collective works such as *After Ovid* and *Ovid Metamorphosed* lack both completeness (since they do not encompass the poem as a whole) and systematicity (since certain episodes, for instance, are narrated multiple times by different authors). Moreover, such collections include various texts of disparate nature, ranging from (more or less faithful) translations to reinventions of Ovidian episodes adapted to a contemporary context, not to mention original narratives that simply take the cue from Ovid for an entirely new reflection.
2) Ovid's stories are "defamiliarized" in more or less evident ways (the term and its definition belong to Stephen Hinds).[4] This is accomplished through various means. On occasion, authors employ modern vocabulary (note, for instance, "the nuclear blast" in Ted Hughes' "Semele")[5] or adopt a point of view that was marginalized in Ovid: for instance, Alice Fulton in her "Give: Daphne and Apollo" emphasizes the perspective of the tree into which Daphnis is turned.[6] Other writers modify the Ovidian plot altogether; see, for example, Naomi Iizuka's play entitled *Polaroid Stories: An Adaptation of Ovid's "Metamorphoses,"*[7] in which Eurydice kills Orpheus with a dagger. Others let the narrator—or a single character—transmit and interpret the story, as Phaethon's analyst does in Mary Zimmerman's play.[8] Finally, certain authors radically choose to transfer the story itself to a contemporary context, as is the case, for instance, with Shakar's *City in Love* and Honoré's movie *Métamorphoses*.

4 Hinds 2005, 69–79. See also Chapter 11 in this volume.
5 Hughes 1997, 91.
6 Hofmann and Lasdun 1995, 28–58.
7 Iizuka 1999, 84.
8 Zimmerman 2002, 62–68.

3) References to Ovid and his historical context are mixed with references to modern sources and events. Stephen Hinds has excellently highlighted the pattern in his analysis of Alex Shakar's short story "Maximum Carnage,"[9] which expects from its readers not only thorough knowledge of Ovid's poetry, but also great familiarity with American comics (especially Violator, a supervillain and the arch-enemy of the eponymous hero in Todd McFarlane's *Spawn* serial, published by Image Comics).[10] Among the numerous examples, note also Mary Zimmerman's choice to combine Ovid's Orpheus and Eurydice with Rainer Maria Rilke's version of the tale.[11] Similarly, Glyn Maxwell assigns a structural function to audiovisual media in his *Phaethon and the Chariot of the Sun: Fragments of an Investigative Documentary Unearthed by Glyn Maxwell*.[12]

Such features can also be detected in an earlier poetic text: "Metamorphoses," written by the British poet, translator, and critic C.H. [Charles Hubert] Sisson. The poem is part of, and shares its title with, an entire collection of poems that Sisson published in 1968.[13] Born in Bristol in 1914 and deceased in Langport in 2003, Sisson is considered a direct heir to Eliot and Pound's Modernism, but also to a different literary tradition spearheaded by Thomas Hardy and Edward Thomas. He is the author of over twenty-five books of poetry, two novels, several translations (Dante, Du Bellay, Racine, La Fontaine, Heine, and Valéry among others), and critical essays.[14] Besides translating a number of Latin poetic texts,[15] Sisson frequently took inspiration from Latin poets in his

9 Shakar 2002, 89–104.

10 Hinds 2005, 78: "Shakar's *Maximum Carnage*, by superimposing the sensibility of a reader of Ovid (as cued by his own book-title), and the sensibility of his ten-year-old narrator, a reader of *Violator*, achieves part of its impact by forcing us to consider the possibility of mutual permeability between high and low-cultural versions of the mythic imagination."

11 Zimmerman 2002, 40–48.

12 Hofmann and Lasdun 1995, 65–78.

13 Sisson 1998, 118–127.

14 For a recent bibliography of writings on and by Sisson, see Louth and McGuinness 2014, 491–493 (but cf. also Knottenbelt 1994 and De Luca 2015). Sisson's poem "Metamorphoses," a text generally neglected in scholarship on Ovid's reception (there is no mention of it, for instance, in Miller and Newlands 2014) though represented in anthologies such as Martin 1998 and Miles 1999, is briefly examined in Joshua 2001, 152–153; Brown 2005, 81 and 130–131; Ziolkowski 2005, 169–170; Ursini 2017, 119–121. On the presence of Ovid in modernist poetry see in general Tomlinson 1983 and, further, Tomlinson 2003.

15 Among other texts, Sisson translated the entire Catullan corpus, Horace's *Ars poetica*, Lucretius' *De rerum natura*, and Vergil's *Aeneid*, besides excerpts from Plautus, Martial, and—of course—Ovid (see below). Sisson discusses his rationale for translating poetic texts (and also, albeit indirectly, adapting or rewriting them) in the prefaces to his single translations, as well as in the introduction to his volume *Collected Translations* (Sisson

own literary output. As regards Ovid alone, his translation of the opening of the *Metamorphoses* (1.1–155),[16] albeit unfinished, is particularly important, both because it makes use of the same metrical form (couplets of iambic tetrameters) that Sisson employs in his own Ovidian poem and because it features the myth of the ages, an Ovidian theme that frequently recurs in Sisson's poem.[17] Note also his freely reworked version of the Actaeon episode (*Met.* 3.138–252),[18] which plays a crucial role (along with Pygmalion's story) in Sisson's original poem (although, in this case, the connection between the two texts is somewhat looser, and the metrical form of the translation, iambic pentameters, is different; see further below). Sisson's translations also include a version of *Tristia* 5.10.[19] Among his original poems, note especially "Daphne" and "Ovid in Pontus," both published in a 1974 collection entitled *In the Trojan Ditch*,[20] as

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1996, ix–xi). There, in particular, he asserts that "there never was a poet who was not profoundly affected by poetry, not in the sense merely of having been open to identifiable influences, … but in the sense of finding that he belonged to a far-spreading company which, for all its individual diversity, shares some modes of perception which compel the linkage with words and rhythms which lie close to the heart of every language" (Sisson 1996, ix). In the same text, the very sense of translating is expounded by Sisson as "an irresistible, or at any rate unresisted attempt to get close to the work of foreign poets and to understand what they were saying, in their different times and places, in ways which make sense here and now" (Sisson 1996, x). For a more extensive, technical discussion of issues inextricably tied to poetic translation, see Sisson's 1984 essay "The Poet and the Translator" (reprinted in Louth and McGuinness 2014, 467–479). On issues more specifically tied to the translation of Latin authors, see Sisson's preface to his *Selected Translations*, which appeared in 1974 as part of the volume *In the Trojan Ditch* (now in Louth and McGuinness 2014, 430–433).

16 Sisson 1996, 285–291.

17 Despite Sisson's obvious debt to a common model in both texts, certain lines of his "Metamorphoses" seem to echo his translation of the opening of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (or vice versa): cf., for instance, "The first age was the age of gold" (5, 9) with "The golden age was first, when none …" (112) and "The giants piling up the sky" (9, 15) with "The giants pile the mountains up" (182). I was unable, however, to establish the chronological priority of either text over the other. Sisson's translation appeared in his 1974 volume *In the Trojan Ditch* and Sisson himself, in the preface to his *Selected Translations* (now in Louth and McGuinness 2014, 430–433), dates it between his translation of Catullus and that of Vergil (432). In other words, it was composed roughly at the same time as his poem "Metamorphoses." At any rate, it is reasonable to assume that the translation precedes the original poem (it could even have inspired it), and that the references to the myth of the ages and the Gigantomachy in Sisson's "Metamorphoses" are prompted by Sisson's translation of the opening of Ovid's poem, where the same topics are treated.

18 Sisson 1996, 291–293.

19 Sisson 1996, 294–295.

20 Sisson 1998, 157–158; on "Ovid in Pontus" see Ziolkowski 2005, 129; Simonis 2016, 313–314; Ursini 2017, 312.

well as "Narcissus" (another Ovidian composition), published in 1980 as part of *Exactions*.[21] Later in his career, Sisson published a larger poetic collection entitled *Tristia* and divided into ten parts, adding up to 125 lines; the theme is, once again, the poet's exile in Pontus.[22] Moreover, the volume entitled *Metamorphoses* includes, besides the eponymous text, a poem on "Eurydice" and one on "Orpheus,"[23] to which I shall come back.

In the preface to his *Collected Poems* (published in the volume *In the Trojan Ditch*, now in Louth and McGuinness 2014, 429–430), Sisson compares the practice of poetic translation to the use of myth in his own poetic output, equating both with a form of "distraction" of consciousness:

> The writing of poetry is, in a sense, the opposite of writing what one wants to write, and it is because of the embarrassing growth of the area of consciousness which writing, as indeed the other serious encounters of life, produces that one has recourse to the conscious manipulation of translation, as it were to distract one while the unwanted impulses free themselves under the provocation of another's thought. … There are other enabling distractions—reasoning and analysis, mythology and other narrative, properly used. All these are really modes of the problem of form.[24]

In the preface to his *Collected Translations*, published in the same volume (Louth and McGuinness 2014, 430–433), Sisson asserts that, in fact, he sometimes hesitated between including a text in his "poems" and classifying it as a "translation" (432). As I shall show, a composition inspired by Prop. 1.3 appears in *both* Sisson's *Collected Poems* and in his *Collected Translations*.[25]

The poem "Metamorphoses" is written entirely in couplets of iambic tetrameters and divided into nine sections, ranging in length from a minimum of four lines to a maximum of fifty-four (the total length is 240 lines). The text begins as a series of variations on Ovidian themes (the first two sections are devoted

21 Sisson 1998, 265.
22 Sisson 1998, 488–492.
23 Sisson 1998, 91–92 and 117.
24 Louth and McGuinness 2014, 429.
25 On the faint boundary line between free translation and poetic reinvention, see also Sisson's 1984 essay on "The Poet and the Translator" (in Louth and McGuinness 2014, 467–479): "When we say a translation is free we should consider the ways in which it could be bound. What is usually meant is being tied up with what one might call the fiction of literal meanings, according to which there are words corresponding with other words. The real situation is much more complex. … There is a sense in which almost any line of poetry is nearer to Catullus than the complete prose version of Cornish is" (474).

to Actaeon, the third to Pygmalion, and the fourth to Leda and Europa). Then, however, Classical myths are placed side by side with Biblical episodes (such as those of Ruth and Susanna in the seventh section), gradually mixing the two sources together until the emergence of what Sisson calls the "metamorphosis of all": i.e. Christ's coming.[26] Sisson's poem includes, at least in embryonic form, all three of the main features common to more recent Ovidian rewritings:

1) Sisson's poem "Metamorphoses" has a fragmented, heterogeneous relationship with its model. The author, in fact, chooses (a few) specific episodes, rearranges them according to his needs, and treats some of them multiple times (particularly the story of Diana and Actaeon, narrated in the first two sections and evoked again in the sixth). This may not surprise the reader, since the poem is Sisson's original composition, merely echoing Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. Note, however, that the text (initially) reads, in effect, like a miniature rewriting of Ovid's poem (just as Sisson's *Tristia* is a rewriting of Ovid's). This is what the first half of Sisson's poem is, although its second half is partly different. We can, therefore, legitimately associate this text with actual reinventions composed by later authors (who may well have used Sisson's "Metamorphoses" as a blueprint).
2) Sisson "defamiliarizes" Ovid's tales, particularly through a deliberate, systematic inversion of perspectives and/or radical change of ending (in both cases, Sisson's technique is essentially the same). Thus, for instance, Sisson surmises in the second half of his poem that Actaeon was not a man transformed into a stag, but a stag transformed into a man. Similarly, the Pygmalion episode is concluded by the protagonist's wish that the woman may be turned back into a statue.
3) Sisson combines Ovid's Classical legacy with another cultural strand: the Bible and, in general, Judeo-Christian religion. (In fact, Sisson uses two intertexts simultaneously: Ovid's poem and the Scriptures. Through his use of both texts, however, Sisson incorporates the respective cultures into one poem, which thus has a twofold reference point.) To be sure, the poem's structure seems to display a linear trajectory from Classical

26 That religion plays a fundamental role in the whole collection is confirmed by the two epigraphs, respectively by Fulke Greville ("Though fleshe cannot believe, yet God is true") and René Crevel ("Et ici, sans nous perdre dans des subtilités, constatons que le monde n'est devenu une telle cochonnerie que parce qu'il a été si bien, si totalement, empli de Dieu"), which Sisson places at the outset of his 1968 volume (although there is no trace of them in *Collected Poems*). See Louth and McGuinness 2014, 482–483.

> myth (in the first four sections) to the Old Testament (in the sixth, seventh, and eighth sections), featuring a "bridge" in the fifth section and the climax (i.e. Christ's coming) in the ninth. However, in the entire second half of the poem, both cultural strands almost constantly overlap (note, for instance, "The naked figure in the grove / Diana's or the risen Christ's?" in the sixth section). This is confirmed by Sisson's final reference to the Gigantomachy in the ninth section (which is about the birth of Christ). In sum: two cultural reference points coexist in the whole text.[27]

Thus, the poem is worthy of closer scrutiny; in what follows, I shall focus on the way in which Sisson rewrites the episodes of Actaeon and Pygmalion, the only tales to which (as noted) he dedicates one or more entire sections.[28]

2 Actaeon

In European and Western culture, the episode of Diana and Actaeon (which Ovid narrates in *Met.* 3.138–255) is famously a symbol of the relationship between error, guilt, and punishment. Ovid himself introduces the story with a moral exoneration of its protagonist (*at bene si quaeras, Fortunae crimen in illo, / non scelus invenies; quod enim scelus error habebat?* "But in him, if you look closely, you will see Fortune's wrongdoing, / not a crime: for what crime is there in a mistake?" *Met.* 3.141–142) and concludes it by making room for two opposite evaluations of Diana's behavior, without taking sides with either (*rumor in ambiguo est: aliis violentior aequo / visa dea est, alii laudant dignamque severa / virginitate vocant; pars invenit utraque causas* "People's comments are disparate: some think that the goddess was less merciful / than would have been fair, others praise her and consider her worthy / of her rigorous chastity;

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27 For this crucial feature, cf. Sisson's "Daphne," in which the wood of the tree into which the girl is transformed is paired with that of the Cross. For a discussion of the role of religion in postwar British and Irish poetry more generally (including that of Sisson himself), see Huk 2009.

28 Referring to his collection a few years after its publication, Sisson described it as "rather confusingly entitled *Metamorphoses* on account of some allusions to Ovid in the title poem" (in the preface to his *Selected Translations*, published in the volume *In the Trojan Ditch*: Louth and McGuinness 2014, 432). The statement is clearly a form of self-mocking humor. And yet, even if taken literally (implying, in other words, that Ovid is but a spur to Sisson's original poetry), it would fall short of disproving that Sisson's own poem "Metamorphoses" is *also* a rewriting of Ovid's—indeed, an open and explicit reinvention, at least in the first half of the text (the poem then transforms itself into something different; after all, metamorphosis is its fundamental theme and principle).

each side has good arguments to adduce," *Met.* 3.253–255). Analogously, in medieval, modern, and contemporary culture, readers have wondered what exactly is the crime of the seemingly innocent Actaeon, suspecting that some further details of the story were omitted by Ovid (or by the mythical tradition itself) and, more generally, meditating on the theme of identity, which is evoked by the transformation tale and its reversal of roles between hunter and prey. Another important object of debate is Ovid's insistence on the fact that Actaeon retains human consciousness even after the metamorphosis (see especially *Met.* 3.200–205).[29]

Two texts have recently attempted to answer the questions raised by the narrative: Ted Hughes' poetic version of the myth[30] and Joyce Carol Oates' short story "The Sons of Angus MacElster." In Ted Hughes' account, the scene in which the two protagonists meet is significantly replete with verbs of "seeing" and "looking" (referring, of course, to Actaeon), whereas Ovid's narrative focused, by contrast, on Diana and the nymphs' reaction to the intruder's arrival: "So he came to the clearing. And *saw* ripples / Flocking across the pool out of the cavern. / He edged into the cavern, under ferns // That dripped with spray. He *peered* / Into the gloom to see the waterfall—/ But what he *saw* were nymphs, their wild faces // Screaming at him in a commotion of water. / And as his eyes adjusted, he *saw* they were naked, / Beating their breasts as they screamed at him. // And he *saw* they were crowding together / To hide something from him. He *stared* harder. / Those nymphs could not conceal Diana's whiteness, // The tallest barely reached her navel. Actaeon / *Stared* at the goddess, who stared at him" (my emphasis).[31] Thus, Hughes suggests the intentionality of Actaeon's gesture, thereby implying Actaeon's guilt.[32] In

29 For the various ancient versions of the myth, cf. Schlam 1984 and Heath 1992; on the modern European reception of the tale, see Casanova-Robin 2003; Brown 2005, 67–83; Schmitzer 2008; Moog-Grünewald 2010, 19–25 and Lafont 2013. See, finally, Ursini 2017, 183–190, and Schiesaro 2018 for contemporary rewritings.

30 Hughes 1997, 97–103 ("Actaeon").

31 Hughes 1997, 99.

32 The intentionality of Actaeon's gaze, established as a commonplace since Petrarch (*RVF* 23, 152–153: *Io, perché d'altra vista non m'appago, / stetti a mirarla: ond'ella ebbe vergogna*, "And I, who am satisfied by no other sight, / kept staring at her: hence, she felt ashamed"), had been made explicit as early as Nonnus of Panopolis: *Dionys.* 5.287–369 (by contrast, as noted, Ovid treats Actaeon's encounter with Diana as a result of mere chance; the same is true of Ovid's direct source, namely Callimachus' *Hymn* 5 *On the Bath of Pallas* 107–118). Note that, some twenty years before publishing his *Tales from Ovid*, Hughes had devoted an original poem to Actaeon's story (also entitled "Actaeon"), which had appeared in the 1979 collection *Moortown Diary*. In this case, the new text is a complete reinvention of the episode, transferred to a modern psychological context and endowed with a more specific

her short story "The Sons of Angus MacElster,"[33] Joyce Carol Oates reinvents the Ovidian tale and sets it in Nova Scotia in 1923. In this narrative, Angus MacElster's six sons murder their father in order to avenge the outrage suffered by their mother, whom Angus had undressed in the street following a heated argument. As Philip Terry writes in the introduction to the volume *Ovid Metamorphosed* (which includes the story), Oates makes explicit the violence that, from a female point of view, is implicit in the male gaze.[34]

The several possible readings of the episode traditionally associated with Ovid's narrative seem to be conflated in the two texts that Sisson devotes to Actaeon's story, both placed at the outset of his "Metamorphoses" but offering two different—and diametrically opposite—interpretations of the events. In the first rewriting (twenty-two lines), "Actaeon was a foolish hind / to run from what he had not seen" (1.1–2), and the narrative continues in the wake of Ovid, albeit suggesting that Diana deliberately ensnared her future prey (1.6–9: "Diana knew the man he was / but took her kirtle from her waist. / She gave her arrows to her maids / then dropped her short and flimsy dress"). In the second rewriting (only four lines), Sisson hypothesizes that events actually followed exactly the opposite course: "—Or else he was a rutting stag / turned to a man because he saw / Diana bathing at the pool" (2.1–3). Sisson's systematic use of his inversion technique appears evident here (note, in the final line of the section, his choice of an image simultaneously explicit and allusive: "—As you might turn a foreskin back," 2.4). While the opening of Sisson's poem features an inversion of Ovid's tale (note the *incipit*: "what he had not seen") and a portrayal of Diana as responsible for the entire incident ("I think she knew the hunt was up / but set the hounds upon the man / to show her bitter virgin spite," 1.11–13), Sisson rewrites his own version in the second section by reversing the sense of Actaeon's metamorphosis: no longer from man to stag, but vice versa.

Such choices, however, are not merely dictated by a taste for paradox, since the changes made by Sisson to Ovid's narrative are heir to a long tradition of creative reinventions and reinterpretations of the episode. The reverse metamorphosis, for instance, previously appeared in Giovanni Boccaccio's short poem "La caccia di Diana," at the end of which the narrator reveals his past as a stag. He asserts that he and other prey were turned into young men by Venus,

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meaning (see Scigaj 1986, 274). On the poem included in *Tales from Ovid* see Ingleheart 2009 and most recently Schiesaro 2018, 518–523.

33 Terry 2000, 72–77.

34 Terry 2000, 14–15: "classicists have often been puzzled by the disproportion between the crime and the punishment; Oates's reworking, which let us see the violence of the male gaze from the woman's point of view, provides an incisive answer."

whom Diana's companions had invoked after the hunt, asking her to fulfil their sexual desires (*E poi, verso del foco rivoltata, / non so che disse: se non che di fuori / ciascuna fiera che v'era infiammata, / mutata in forma d'uom, di quelli ardori / usciva giovinetto gaio e bello, / tutti correndo sopra 'l verde e' fiori; / e tutti entravan dentro al fiumicello, / e, quindi uscendo ciascun, d'un vermiglio / e nobil drappo si facean mantello*, "Then, turning herself towards the fire, / she said I know not what. But every animal / trapped inside the fire came out / transformed into a man, emerging from those flames / as a fair, cheerful youth. / All of them ran around the flowery meadows, / and all sprang into the stream. / Coming out of it, each of them put on / a crimson cloth as his noble cloak," 17.37–45; *Quasi ripien di nuova ammirazione, / mi ritrovai di quel mantel coperto, / che gli altri usciti dello ardente agone; / e vidimi alla bella Donna offerto, / e di cervio mutato in creatura / umana e razionale esser per certo*, "As though filled with renewed admiration, / I found myself covered in the same cloak / that the others had, as they came out of the fire; / then, I was offered to the fair Mistress / and, turned from stag into man, / I was sure of being a rational human creature," 18.7–12). In Boccaccio, Actaeon's metamorphosis obviously plays a different role compared to what occurs in Sisson's poem. Both authors, however, testify to the possibility of further developing ambiguities inherent to Ovid's narrative as well as to the mythical tradition. In this case, they both complicate and destabilize our perception of the hunter's transformation into prey. As a result, Boccaccio opts for a man-prey (who is happy about his fate), whereas Sisson refers to the animal as a hunter ("a rutting stag").

Sisson, moreover, hints at Actaeon's ambivalent gender identity by calling the protagonist a "hind," then a "stag" (note also his remark on Diana's muscular body, "There was some muscle on the girl," 1.10). In fact, gender ambivalence seems to be a constant element of rewritings and reinventions of the Ovidian tale.[35] For instance, at the outset of Christopher Marlowe's *Edward II*, Gaveston muses over various literary and musical pleasures that he might offer to his new king (and lover)—among them, a staging of the story of Diana and Actaeon, in which both roles would be played by boys: "Sometime a lovely boy in Dian's shape, / with hair that gilds the water as it glides, / crownets of pearl about his naked arms, / and in his sportful hands an olive tree, / to hide those parts which men delight to see, / shall bathe him in a spring; and there hard by, / one like Actæon peeping through the grove / shall by the angry goddess

35 Brown 2005, 81: "Although the dynamic of the legend, in so far as it is sexual at all, seems heterosexual, it is amenable to queering of different kinds. In particular, the strong sense of transgression or boundary-crossing inherent in the myth may figure same-sex desire even though it is concealed behind a male/female encounter."

be transform'd, / and running in the likeness of an hart / by yelping hounds pull'd down, and seem to die" (1.1.61–70). A similar, yet more significant reinvention is found in the movie *Métamorphoses* by Christophe Honoré, who not only places the Actaeon episode at the outset of his work, but also stages a transgender Diana.[36] This confirms that the motifs of mutable identity and role reversal, along with those of taboo and transgression, can always be associated with the theme of gender identity (as observed by Sarah Annes Brown). Without a doubt, the "muscles" of Sisson's Diana can retrospectively acquire new overtones in light of Honoré's movie (and perhaps also of Marlowe's choice to put the Actaeon episode—one of the many possible stories—in Gaveston's mouth). The similarities between all these versions may suggest that, besides the portrayal of the hunter as a "hind," a more radical role reversal has taken place.[37]

Sisson also evokes the episode of Diana and Actaeon in two other poems: "The Deer-Park," published in his 1961 collection *The London Zoo*,[38] and "The Withdrawal," published in the volume *Metamorphoses* (along with the eponymous poem).[39] In "The Deer-Park," however, the myth functions as an antithetical emblem of a "vanquished world" (15) no longer experiencing "individual sorrow / or even identified pain" (26–27): "And the horn sounding at the death / of the torn Actaeon / echoes for similar deaths / in identical forests / for in this machine world / no one can die lonely" (19–24). Note also that the poem's ending features "the bell / of the emerging church-tower," which "marks / a point in the gathering mists" (34–36): an important detail in relation to the cultural and religious syncretism that characterizes the finale of Sisson's "Metamorphoses" (see below). By contrast, in the seven-line poem "The Withdrawal," Sisson's allusion to the mythical tale translates a world of love and introspection into a world of symbolic imagery, following a pattern typical of lyric poetry. Finally, Sisson's version of the episode in iambic pentameters ("Actaeon")[40] is of crucial importance to our understanding of the contemporary reception of Ovid's poem and the Actaeon myth. In this text, situated midway between translation and rewriting, Sisson adapts the Ovidian narrative to a modern context

36 Ursini 2017, 189–190 (see also 159–163 on the movie in general).

37 It is possible, on the other hand, to detect various allusions to a "reversed" sexual violence in the hunting scene: "There was some blood but not her own" (1.14, following the mention of Diana's "virgin spite"); "the forest rang but not with tears" (1.16); "which they were sure he would enjoy" (1.19, referring to Actaeon, who is about to be killed by "his favourite whippet"); "Diana by the fountain still / shuddered like the water on her flesh" (1.20–21).

38 Sisson 1998, 35–36.

39 Sisson 1998, 100.

40 Sisson 1996, 291–293.

(for instance, Diana mistakes Actaeon for a reporter, 39). In so doing, Sisson seems to foreshadow certain features of some of the most memorable poems published in *After Ovid*; but note also the choice to let the translator-narrator occasionally take the floor—a technique common to both Sisson's version and David R. Slavitt's translation (e.g., "For killing deer was then accepted practice," 13; "In those days / That was the only way to have a shower," 25–26). It is particularly significant that here, too, Sisson alludes to the uncertain and ambivalent nature of the story: "The cameramen had not arrived in time, / Unfortunately, for a front-page picture, / And so the tale was left to literature" (9–11).[41]

We can, therefore, affirm that the Actaeon episode is the Ovidian tale that most attracted Sisson's interest. No wonder that the story also appears in the opening of Sisson's poem "Metamorphoses."[42] This fact, however, can also be explained on a different basis. Some medieval writers and commentators famously regarded Actaeon as a Christ-figure: this is the case, for instance, with the 14th-century poem *Ovide Moralisé* (3.604–669), in which the hunter's metamorphosis is read as an allegory of Christ's incarnation, while Diana is equated with the Sacred Trinity (seen by Actaeon-Christ in its naked purity) and the hounds tearing Actaeon to pieces are identified with the Jews who put Christ to death. Cf. also *Ovidius Moralizatus* (3.5–6) by Pierre Bersuire (c. 1290–1362) and *Épître d'Othéa* (69) by Christine de Pizan (c. 1364–c. 1429). This raises the question: is it purely accidental (or merely a result of Sisson's idiosyncrasies) that a poem in which Classical myth and Biblical episodes constantly mingle

41 Once again, I was unable to date Sisson's "Actaeon" with precision. Consider, however, that Sisson was translating the opening of the *Metamorphoses* towards the mid-1960s, all the while composing an Ovidian poem prominently featuring the Actaeon episode (along with Pygmalion). Moreover, in 1967, Sisson published an essay entitled "Call No Man Happy Until he is Dead" (now in Louth and McGuinness 2014, 318–322), in which he quoted the proverbial dictum (attributed to Solon) which Ovid had echoed at the outset of his Actaeon narrative (*dici … beatus / ante obitum nemo supremaque funera debet*, "Nobody … ought to be / called happy before the day of his death and his funerary ceremonies," 3.136–137). Based on this evidence, we can conclude that, in all likelihood, Sisson's "Actaeon" was also composed around that time. Note that, in his theoretical writings, Sisson highlights the difficulty of drawing a clear-cut line between free translation and reinvention of a poetic model: see above, n. 25.

42 Note also that T.S. Eliot alludes to the story of Actaeon in *The Waste Land*, which Sisson obviously uses as a blueprint for his own religious "syncretism" in "Metamorphoses." In *The Waste Land* 196–201, Sweeney's visit to Mrs. Porter is sketched through echoes of John Day's *The Parliament of Bees*, which features the myth of Diana and Actaeon. Ezra Pound, another of Sisson's poetic models, had composed a short poem entitled "The Coming of War: Actaeon" in 1915.

and overlap, opens with Actaeon's death and concludes with the death of Christ ("A death in spring-time is the best," 9.20)?

3 Pygmalion

In Europe and the West, especially since the 18th century, Ovid's version of the myth of Pygmalion (*Met.* 10.243–297) has been perhaps the best known symbol of the life-giving power of art, as well as of the relationship between art itself, love, and ideals.[43] Note, for instance, Jean-Jacques Rousseau's one-scene lyric drama *Pygmalion* (1762–1770), in which the metamorphosis is not due to divine intervention, but rather to the power of the sculptor's art—to the point that the woman/statue identifies herself explicitly with the artist as soon as she utters her first words, touching herself and her surroundings ("Moi …. C'est moi …. Ce n'est plus moi"). Finally, she touches Pygmalion and sighs: "Ah! encore moi." This tradition can be placed alongside a parallel yet opposite one, which reinvents Ovid's tale (or simply refers to it) by highlighting its disturbing aspects. One such facet of the story is the idea of an inanimate, anthropomorphic object suddenly coming to life (cf., for instance, Washington Allston's 1809 ballad "The Paint-King," in which it is Pygmalion's portrait that comes to life and kills the woman who has fallen in love with him).[44] Alternatively, other authors emphasize the inherently misogynistic assumptions implicit in a man's desire to create the "perfect woman" (cf., for example, George Bernard Shaw's 1913 comedy *Pygmalion*).[45]

Among the many recent rewritings of the episode, Alex Shakar's short story "A Million Years from Now" (published in the collection *City in Love*)[46] belongs to the first category, in that it thematizes the contrast between the real and the ideal, bringing it to its peak. The protagonist is, in fact, a once-famous artist who

43 Unlike other ancient versions of the Pygmalion myth, Ovid's narrative portrays the protagonist as an artist (elsewhere, he is either a king or a common man).

44 On this aspect see Sharrock in chapter 10 of this volume.

45 See Rosati 1983, 51–93 (= Rosati 2016, 53–93) for a comparison between Ovid's version and other ancient sources, as well as for the significance of the story in the context of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. See further Dörrie 1974; Dinter 1979; Schmitz-Emans 1993; Mayer and Neumann 1997; Brown 1999, 133–139, 155–167 and 181–200; Joshua 2001; Brown 2005, 123–142; and Martin 2010, 578–584 on the modern reception of the myth in European culture; Ursini 2017, 233–241 on its contemporary rewritings; Keen 2017, 315–316 on its use in science fiction literature; James 2011 on movie adaptations; Stoichita 2006 on the "Pygmalion effect" in general.

46 Shakar 2002, 55–65.

is now disparagingly called "the Junk Man." Surrounded and ridiculed by prostitutes, he manufactures a woman using waste material found in the street and aspiring to attain ideal perfection—in other words, to create "a woman I could love," who maybe existed "a million years ago" or could perhaps exist "a million years from now" (hence the title).[47] Other works belong to the opposite category, including Michael Longley's short poem "Ivory and Water," in which the reader is prompted to imagine what happens "If as a lonely bachelor who disapproves of women / You carve the perfect specimen out of snow-white ivory." In such a case, "your dream may come true / And she warms and softens and you are kissing actual lips." At the end of the dream, however, events take a wholly unexpected turn as the woman melts and is transformed into water, "until / There is nothing left of her for anyone to hug or hold."[48] Ted Hughes, in his version of Ovid's tale,[49] ascribes the artistic creation process not to the sculptor but (again, as in a dream) to a "spectre" striving to come to life: "He dreamed / Unbrokenly awake as asleep / The perfect body of a perfect woman—/ Though this dream / Was not so much the dream of a perfect woman / As a spectre, sick of unbeing, / That had taken possession of his body / To find herself a life."[50]

As for Sisson, he devotes the third section of his "Metamorphoses" (thirty-two lines) to Pygmalion. While his treatment of the Actaeon episode is immediately introduced as an explicit inversion of Ovid's narrative pattern (and, thus, as a radical disappointment of the reader's expectations), Sisson's Pygmalion is initially presented in a wholly conventional fashion, as if the story were consistent with its Ovidian counterpart: "Pygmalion was an artful man; / Sculpsit and pinxit were his trade" (3.1–2). In fact, Sisson at first follows in Ovid's footsteps, albeit condensing the narrative into a much shorter text and adopting a laconic tone (which he uses throughout the first half of the poem, but especially here): note, for instance, "But it was marble, rather hard" (3.8) and "However, it did not respond" (3.12).

Nevertheless, Sisson's Pygmalion, too, undergoes an inversion process. This time, however, the process takes place at the end of the narrative, although its consequences retrospectively affect the story's premises as well (note, especially, "The ones he knew were troublesome," 5, referring to women in general. The statement obviously acquires new overtones in light of Pygmalion's misogyny, which the narrator explicitly endorses towards the end). At the moment of the metamorphosis and the two lovers' union, the statue's transition from the

47 Shakar 2002, 58.
48 Hofmann and Lasdun 1995, 240.
49 Hughes 1997, 133–139 ("Pygmalion").
50 Hughes 1997, 135.

ideal to the real (or, more specifically, from the artist's dream of an imaginary woman to Pygmalion's coexistence with one of flesh and blood) is foreshadowed by Sisson's use of the verb "to slobber," which has a shocking effect on the reader: "To his surprise the girl grew warm; / He slobbered and she slobbered back" (3.23–24). The following couplet, featuring a stark contrast between two juxtaposed sentences, makes the point even more explicitly: "—This is that famous mutual flame. / The worst of all was yet to come" (3.25–26). The finale of Sisson's narrative reverses the conclusion of Ovid's tale: "Although he often wished her back / In silent marble, good and cold / The bitch retained her human heat, / The conquest of a stone by art. / May Venus keep me from all hope / And let me turn my love to stone" (3.27–32).

Here, too, as in the case of his Actaeon narrative, Sisson does not merely aim at surprising the reader (although the *aprosdoketon* effect is certainly deliberate) or desecrating the Classical model. Rather, Sisson's version is replete with echoes of previous rewritings and reinventions of the myth. Consider, for instance, the idea that the statue may be preferable to the flesh-and-blood woman, which also appears in Charles Cotton's 1689 poem "The Picture" ("Perhaps you fear m' idolatry / Would make the image prove / A woman fit for love; / Or give it such a soul as shone / Through fond Pygmalion's living bone, / That so I may abandon thee," 13–18) and, most notably, in an epigram by James Robertson ("To please *Pygmalion*, Heav'n inspir'd with Life / A Tongueless Stone, of which he made a Wife; / Wou'd Heav'n, all-gracious, hear *Asino*'s moan, / His Wife—her Tongue at least—*wou'd soon be Stone*"),[51] originally published anonymously in 1770 (as part of *Poems, consisting of Tales, Fables, Epigrams, & c. & c. by Nobody*, London, 184) and later signed by the author in 1780 (as part of the second edition of the same volume: *Poems, consisting of Tales, Fables, Elegiacs and Miscellaneous Pieces, Prologues, Epilogues, & c. & c. by J. Robertson*, London, 270). The final line of Sisson's narrative ("And let me turn my love to stone," 3.32) indirectly evokes the idea of reverse metamorphosis, which was widespread well before Sisson himself. Note, for example, W.S. Gilbert's 1871 comedy *Pygmalion and Galatea*, in which the protagonist is a happily married man and the girl decides to turn herself back into stone in order not to destroy his marriage. In Georg Kaiser's play *Pygmalion* (written in 1944, but first published and staged in 1948 as part of a trilogy also including *Twice Amphitryon*

51 The three texts discussed here (Cotton, Robertson, and Sisson) have been compared to one another by Brown 2005, 129–131. Note also that Cotton's poem includes a turn of phrase very similar to the ending of Sisson's Pygmalion narrative: "Where feather-footed Time / May turn my hopes into despair, / My downy youth to bristled hair" (9–11, immediately preceding the passage quoted above).

and *Bellerophon*), the girl symbolizes an artwork that can only be truly understood by its creator; correspondingly, Athena turns her back into a statue so as to save her from the charge of prostitution, pressed against her by the sculptor's client.[52]

In Sisson's text, both the idea of an artwork (actually or seemingly) preferable to reality and the reverse metamorphosis are expressions of the protagonist's misogyny, which is key to the interpretation of the whole episode. Thus, in Sisson's version, the ultimate significance of the tale is the very opposite of what Ovid suggests. In fact, Ovid's Pygmalion succeeds in overcoming his contempt for women precisely through his creation of an ideal woman and his love for her (*Quas quia Pygmalion aevum per crimen agentes / viderat, offensus vitiis quae plurima menti / femineae natura dedit*, "Having seen them [the Propoetides] and their debauched / life, Pygmalion was disgusted by the vices with which nature had / abundantly endowed the female mind," *Met.* 10.243–245). In Sisson's narrative, by contrast, the "birth" of Pygmalion's ideal woman and the protagonist's union with her unveil the "true" nature of desire ("He slobbered and she slobbered back," 3.24),[53] besides laying bare the intrinsically misogynistic assumptions that govern the sculptor's action from the very beginning. In Ovid's tale, the objectified woman replaces an ideal love which the artist deems unattainable, and which is eventually actualized through the object's metamorphosis. By contrast, Sisson's Pygmalion comes to realize that the object is precisely what best embodies his ideal woman. Sisson's rewriting thereby reverses the Ovidian model and ends on a cynical, realistic note.[54]

4 The Pagan-Christian syncretism

In the remainder of Sisson's poem, none of the single sections is entirely devoted to a specific Ovidian myth. In the fourth section, the poet evokes

52 For a similar case, cf. Michel de Cubières-Palmézeaux's 1777 comedy *Galathée*. On the theme of reverse transformation, cf. notably Martin 2004.

53 Cf. also "An Essay on God and Man" (a poem of the same collection, in which the notion of individual personality is called into question), 17–20: "Love? This monster is supposed to be kinked with the person, / But again, I do not know. / It is a fine trick to tie love to the penis / Like the cracked fakirs who put a skewer through it" (Sisson 1998, 129).

54 The motif of Pygmalion's disappointment with Galatea and the reverse metamorphosis (for which the artist himself is responsible) are ironically combined in two 19th-century operatic texts: the libretto written by Jules Barbier and Michel Carré for Victor Massé's *opéra comique* entitled *Galathée* (1852), and Leonhard Kohl von Kohlenegg's libretto for Franz von Suppé's operetta *Die Schöne Galathee* (1865).

Jupiter's encounters with Leda and Europa.[55] Then, in the context of his Biblical rewriting, Sisson refers to Danae in the fifth and central section, which marks a transition between the "pagan" first half of the poem and the "Christian" second half. Phaethon is mentioned in the sixth part, in which Diana reappears; Eurydice in the seventh and eighth sections; the Gigantomachy is narrated in the ninth; and the myth of the ages occurs in the fifth and ninth sections (the only part in which no Classical references are featured is the seventh, which contains two Old Testament episodes, first Ruth and Boaz, then Susanna and the Elders).

In "Metamorphoses," Sisson pays great attention to the story of Orpheus and Eurydice, which he reworks on a syncretistic basis. In fact, the myth features a descent to the Underworld, which Sisson associates with Christ's: "And when you visited the shades / Did you see my Eurydice, / Christ, on that terrifying day?" (6.9–11). References to Eden provide (albeit indirectly) further grounds for syncretism: "Within this forest everything / Begins. Although I may not say / Eurydice walks with her tears / It is the grove where they began" (8.7–10). This "forest," which the author goes on to describe as the Garden of Eden, is "the forest of the uterus" (8.4), from which an aborted fetus is pulled out. Significantly, the story of Orpheus and Eurydice is explicitly treated in two other poems belonging to the same collection. The first is "Eurydice,"[56] an Ovidian rewriting somewhat similar to that found in "Metamorphoses" (note especially the final inversion, "Orpheus goes back to Thrace, / In those hard mountains / Learns to hate all women. / For her, it might be said / But that is false," 37–41, alluding to Ovid, *Met.* 10.78–85). The second is "Orpheus,"[57] in which the myth is used as an allegory of the mind ("A group of naked figures with Orpheus playing / But succeeding in attracting only the animals / I take to be a representation of the mind," 12–14). Another reinvention of the Orpheus myth appears in the poem "In Allusion to Propertius, I, iii," placed right after "Eurydice" in the final edition of the collection.[58] Here, Sisson freely rewrites Prop. 1.3, intermingling

55 Ovid does not offer an extensive account of the myth of Leda in the *Metamorphoses*, and merely refers to it as one of the episodes depicted on Arachne's tapestry (6.109) alongside the rape of Europa (103–107)—which, however, is also narrated in full elsewhere in the poem (2.836–875). It is likely that Sisson used *Met.* 6 as a direct source (note also the eagle, mentioned by Ovid at 6.108 and by Sisson at "Metamorphoses" 4.5 in the context of the myth of Asteria).

56 Sisson 1998, 91–92.

57 Sisson 1998, 117.

58 Sisson 1998, 92–93. In the final edition of Sisson's *Collected Poems*, the collection *Metamorphoses* includes some texts which did not appear in the 1968 volume (see Louth and

it with a role-reversed version of Propertius 4.7, and alludes to the Orpheus tale in the finale of the poem. Note the role reversal: "Why had I not come to her bed before? / I explained that I lived in the underworld / Among shadows. She had been in that forest. / Had we not met, she said, in that place? / Hand in hand we wandered among the tree-trunks / And came into the light at the edge of the forest" ("In allusion to Propertius, I, iii," 19–24).

The pagan-Christian syncretism, which Sisson dates back to Dante in a theoretical essay,[59] culminates in the ninth and final section of "Metamorphoses" (twenty lines). Here, Christ's coming is equated with the beginning of a new Golden Age (as in the late-antique and medieval interpretation of Vergil's fourth eclogue): "The golden age began anew; / What had been first became the last. / Declension to the age of iron / Was unimportant after all" (9.10–13). However, the elevated, optimistic tone of this section is deflated first through Sisson's use of colloquial style ("Funny how he became a Mass," 5), then through similes ("Building an ark for the whole world / As you might nail a coffin up," 8–9). In the finale, the poet prompts further questioning: "And yet there must remain a doubt. / The giants piling up the sky, / Pelion on Ossa, also rose / And what will rise must also fall. / We know it by experience" (14–18).

In Sisson's poetry and poetics, parallel references to both pagan mythology and Christian religion play a central role, as Sisson himself explains in an important theoretical text, "Poetry and Myth" (1977).[60] The essay begins with a polemical attack on Philip Larkin's idea that "every poem must be its own sole freshly-created universe,"[61] preceded by a general observation that "a poem can have meaning only in terms of words other people use, and which we have from our ancestors."[62] Then, Sisson examines in greater detail the role of mythology, not only in works of literature, but in human experience itself:

> The question is, are our feelings about things some sort of absolute? Or can they be checked against some wider reference? And if so, how? It is

McGuinness 2014, 483). "In allusion to Propertius, I, iii" is also (significantly) featured in *Collected Translations* (Sisson 1996, 293–294).

59 "Poetry and Myth," on which see below. For Sisson's reference to Dante (*Purg.* VI, 118–119), see Louth and McGuinness 2014, 453.

60 Originally published in "Agenda" 15 (2–3), 1977, the essay later became part of two collections of Sisson's literary-critical writings (*The Avoidance of Literature: Collected Essays*, 1978; *In Two Minds: Guesses at other Writers*, 1990), and has now been reprinted in Louth and McGuinness 2014, 452–458.

61 See Larkin 1983, 79.

62 Louth and McGuinness 2014, 453.

> certainly essential to the possibility of any sort of civilization that the answers to these latter questions should not be entirely negative. It is essential to any communication, to human life itself which, whatever it may be, is certainly not that of any individual floating in space. Mythology is one of the vehicles by which the human being can escape from his solipsism. Through it, one stands for all, as in the Christian religion, or for some of all, or for part of all, as in the pagan mythologies. The old gods were put to flight, but not altogether chased off the scene, by Christ, and if he could be erased from men's apprehension it would not be in favour of a vacuum.[63]

This passage, whose conclusion indirectly illustrates the significance of the finale of Sisson's "Metamorphoses," can be read as a sort of programmatic statement of the entire poem. In fact, it offers a potential key to the interpretation of any modern rewriting of ancient mythical narratives. In this paper, at any rate, I have aimed at highlighting the way in which Sisson's poem simultaneously evokes a long tradition of Ovidian reinventions (Boccaccio and medieval moralizing literature; Christopher Marlowe and 17th-century English poetry; but also 20th-century drama) and anticipates with surprising accuracy many features of contemporary Ovidian rewritings (by no means limited to poetry). These features include systematic "defamiliarization" (in Sisson's case, through explicit inversion) and contamination of Classical sources with other cultural frames of reference (in Sisson's case, through explicit pagan-Christian syncretism). As a result, Ovid is deeply and radically transfigured—in other words, "complicated by the words and rhythms of a different language, a different age and a different tradition," as Sisson writes in his discussion of John Dryden's translation of the *Aeneid*:

> Even a translator of genius—say Dryden—cannot give you his author's line. The most he can do is to offer you a *related* line, a related poem. That is something. It omits matter you could find in such as Cornish, and it is complicated by the words and rhythms of a different language, a different age and a different tradition. That takes us far from the original, it may be said. But we *are* far from our classic originals.[64]

63 Louth and McGuinness 2014, 454.

64 Louth and McGuinness 2014, 474 (from *The Poet and the Translator*; emphasis in the original). "Cornish" is, of course, Francis Warre Cornish, author of a well-known prose version of Catullus' poems (1904).

"Far from the original": Sisson acknowledges the irreducible distance between Ovid's world and ours, concluding therefrom that this very distance can generate a surplus of meaning, crucial to our understanding of both worlds. This idea is perhaps the most distinctive and significant aspect of the multifarious artworks (literature, drama, and movies) which, a quarter-century after C.H. Sisson's "Metamorphoses," would collectively give birth to a "New Ovidian Age."

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