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Changed Forms, Migrating Identities:
Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and the Posthuman

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It has been stated that the concept of metamorphosis as it operates in Ovid's poem has never been satisfactorily understood, nor has its significance been fully appreciated. In short, to define metamorphosis as it functions in Ovid's ancient cosmos of "mutatas formas," or "changed forms," has often been considered as an exercise in defining the undefinable. In yet another attempt to define the ever-shifting configurations of the Ovidian universe, Philip Hardie has described the *Metamorphoses* as "a gigantic repertory of aetiologies for phenomena in the natural world, a world that is at once an image of the one in which we live, and also a pointedly artificial and fictive remaking and doubling of that world."[1] Within this general framework, metamorphosis is often perceived as the phenomenal change of material form as expressed in rhetorical embellishment, at once indicating and creating psychological reactions in the poetic subjects, characters, and readers alike. Thus construed, transformation by metamorphosis entails not only temporal and physical change, but also the speaker's psychological reaction to the perception of such change.

While I am essentially in accord with this broad interpretation of metamorphosis, I shall argue that the theoretical constructs of the recent spate of critical works on posthumanism can shed light on how to re-examine the "pointedly artificial and fictive remaking and doubling" of the Ovidian natural world. In the process, posthumanist studies may suggest new readings on the separation of mind from body or, as Hermann Fränkel aptly put it as early as 1945, the alienation of "a self divided in itself or spilling over into another self" within Ovid's artificial

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1   P. Hardie (2002), 7.

and fictive universe.[2] Posthumanist perspectives on issues like artificial intelligence, disembodiment, transferred consciousness, metamorphosis, and the phenonomenology of technologically altered subjectivities, might be brought to bear on a reading of Ovid that could afford some reflections on the differences and affinities between constructions of the "artificial" and of mutated forms and minds in classical and twenty-first century mythologies. These differences and affinities can usefully be approached in the light of the concept of "transembodiment," a concept that sanctions the identification and discussion of productive correspondences between Ovidian and posthumanist perspectives on the "artificial" and the "mutated," and creates space for a rethinking of posthumanism itself while potentially paving the way for a new *aetas Ovidiana.*

Any discussion of transembodiment in both Ovid and posthumanism is intimately connected with the twin concepts of selfhood and boundaries. Elaine Graham writes that new technologies have challenged "the fixity of human nature" by calling into question "the immutability of boundaries between humans, animals and machines, artificial and natural, 'born' and 'made,'" in ways that have radically undermined any notions of "ontological purity."[3] By contesting the boundaries of our existence through the interpenetration of realms once believed to be discrete entities, the debates surrounding emerging biotechnological fields have renegotiated and even replaced binary oppositions used to define the "human" or "humanity", such as the human and the non-human, the "less-than-human" and the "more-than-human," the animal and the supernatural.[4] The challenge to conventional categories, including the classical, dualistic distinction mind-body, has given rise to "a discourse of the body" which, in Eugene Thacker's words, sets forth a series of thorny questions that are both philosophical and technical on what it is that exactly constitutes a body, what it means to be human, and what

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[2]   H. Fränkel (1945), 99.

[3]   E. Graham (2002), 1-2; 5.

[4]   I. Callus and S. Herbrechter (2007), 19.

the impact of the reconfiguration of the human body on our sense of selfhood and identity might be.[5]

An ancient equivalent of the philosophical and technical issues treated by Thacker can be traced back to Ovid's great epic of transformation. Ovidian scholars are increasingly approaching the *Metamorphoses* as a "discourse about the body, the body as the site for constructions of and anxieties about identity, as the *locus* for violence and desire."[6] Lynn Enterline, for example, focuses on the desecrated body as the place where, for Ovid, "aesthetics and violence converge, where the usually separated realms of the rhetorical and the sexual most insistently meet."[7] Another, not dissimilar, approach is Elena Theodorakopoulos's reading of the body in Ovid, in its perfection and in its debasement, in its wholeness and in its disintegration, as a metaphor of the anxieties and tension involved in writing.[8]

The analogy between the human body and the written text involves a consideration of the body as a site of speculation on the malleability of boundaries between the human and the non-human, between the animate and the inanimate, between individual human personality and physical nature. Because of the porous nature of its confines, the constantly mutating space of the Ovidian cosmogony raises a cluster of unsettling issues which have to do primarily with the nexus between consciousness and embodiment, or identity and bodily form. Ovid himself foregrounds the body by introducing the *Metamorphoses* as a narrative about shape-shifting, or shapes changing into new bodies, human and animal, anthropomorphic and artificial:

> *In nova fert animus mutatas dicere formas*
> *corpora; di, coeptis (nam vos mutastis et illas)*
> *adspirate meis primaque ab origine mundi*

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[5]   E. Thacker (2004), 1-2.

[6]   P. Hardie, A. Barchiesi, S. Hinds (1999), 5.

[7]   L. Enterline (2001), 1.

[8]   E. Theodorakopoulos (1999), 153-154.

"My mind is bent to tell of bodies changed into new forms. Oh gods, for you yourselves have wrought the changes, breathe on these my undertakings, and bring down my song in unbroken strains from the world's very beginning till the present time."

The invocation expressed in the opening lines establishes the theme of metamorphosis as the main connecting thread which will enable Ovid to create an edifice of narrative and thematic unity in the form of what he calls a "*carmen perpetuum*". From the very moment of its inception, Ovid's text, like the shifting bodies it talks about, is the object of a series of transformations willed by the gods, and as the narrative progresses, it will continue to undergo further changes in terms of tone, style, and subject matter.[9] Thus, Ovid begins the *Metamorphoses* by constructing, or better, repeating a chronology of worldly history based on the creation of man, his fall, the flood, and the repopulation of the world: a chronology that runs through the Four Ages and includes, in the mode of competition, the fight between the giants and the gods. Ovid's own age, the last of the four, is the age of hard iron, the worst of ages, and the most foul:

> *protinus inrupit venae peioris in aevum*
> *omne nefas: fugere pudor verumque fidesque;*
> *in quorum subiere locum fraudesque dolusque*
> *insidiaeque et vis et amor sceleratus habendi.*[10]

> "Straightaway all evil burst forth into this age of baser vein: modesty and truth and faith fled the earth, and in their place came tricks and plots and snares, violence and cursed love of gain."

In a confused world in which, as Charles Altieri puts it, notions of order, destiny, and transcendent unity are no longer in force,[11] Ovid strives to create a temporal order by weaving together hundreds of narratives on the transmigration of consciousness from one shape-shifting form to another. Within this disarray, the theme of metamorphosis functions as a way to

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9   A. Feldherr (2002), 164.

10   Ov. Met. 1.128-131.

11   C. Altieri (1995), 257.

create out of fragmentation a sort of plenitude that is both narrative and thematic by linking together individual myths until it expands through fifteen books to encompass the entire cosmos, and finally culminates in the long speech on mutability and flux by Pythagoras, whose philosophy echoes the poem's opening lines:[12]

> *omnia mutantur, nihil interit: errat et illinc*
> *huc venit, hinc illuc, et quoslibet occupat artus*
> *spiritus eque feris humana in corpora transit*
> *inque feras noster, nec tempore deperit ullo,*
> *utque novis facilis signatur cera figuris*
> *nec manet ut fuerat nec formam servat eandem,*
> *sed tamen ipsa eadem est, animam sic semper eandem,*
> *esse, sed in varias doceo migrare figuras.*[13]

"All things are changing; nothing dies. The spirit wanders, goes now here, now there, and inhabits whatever frame it pleases. From beasts it passes into human bodies, and from our bodies into beasts, but never perishes. And, as the pliant wax is stamped into new designs, it does not remain as it was before nor does it preserve the same form, but it is still the selfsame wax, so do I teach that the soul is always the same, though it passes into ever-changing bodies."

Pythagoras' concept of the spirit, as distinct from the body and, therefore, entirely immaterial, enshrines a belief that lies at the heart of Ovid's cosmogony. It is that of the transmigration of consciousness and the defiance of death through reincarnation. But within a cosmogony which seems to be infused with a random life of its own, beyond the reach of human control, and governed by the presence of supernatural agencies capable of transferring selfhood from one realm of being to another, what exactly does transmigration entail? In the moment of metamorphosis, what happens to consciousness as it divorces itself from the material world but, in some mysterious fashion, also persists in

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[12]   M. Warner (2002), 1.

[13]   Ov. *Met.* 15.165-172.

belonging to that singular individual who is the subject of the memories, the emotions, and the thoughts that make up his or her human identity?

In a broad sense, one might begin by asking whether *meta-morphosis* is a change of both form and essence, of appearance and content, or only of form. Does a change of form bring a change in essence, that is to say, do changes in appearance entail changes in the truth of contents? More to the point, does a change of form somehow diminish the value of essence, or enhance a prior state by bringing it to the fore? Joseph Solodow asserts that paradoxically metamorphosis is "a change which preserves, an alteration which maintains identity, a change of form by which content becomes represented in form."[14] He then continues by saying that metamorphosis is "clarification. It is a process by which characteristics of a person, essential or incidental, are given physical embodiments and so are rendered visible and manifest."[15] In an analogous vein, Marina Warner writes that in their newly metamorphosed state, "the subjects achieve final personality", and that "from the perspective of creation and life force, the shape into which they shift more fully expresses them and perfects them more than their first form."[16]

Both Solodow's and Warner's attempts at definition are germane throughout Ovid's work. It is also helpful, however, to isolate a few signal instances and to consider case by case the evidence contributing to definition. For example, in one of the early tales of the *Metamorphoses*, that of Lycaon, the subject maintains all his essential traits despite his outward physical transformation: *fit lupus et veteris servat vestigia formae, "*he turns into a wolf, and yet retains some traces of his former self".[17] Although Lycaon changes form, he somehow remains the same, and actually becomes essentially clearer. Ovid calls our attention to this sameness through the repetition of the word *idem* and *eadem* in the description of the subject's "metamorphosed" self: *canities eadem est, eadem violentia vultus, / idem oculi lucent, eadem feritatis imago est*,

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14   J. Solodow (1988), 174.

15   J.Solodow (1988), 174.

16   M. Warner (2002), 4.

17   Ov. *Met.* 1.237.

"There is the same grey hair, the same fierce face, the same gleaming eyes, the same picture of beastly savagery".[18] Lycaon's "new" shape is externalized and made manifest by being given physical form, thereby becoming clearer. This is precisely what Solodow means by "clarification": a process which brings to the surface of an inner trait and sheds light upon it.

On the level of form as opposed to that of essence or content, some prior aspect or shape usually continues in the metamorphosed state, which again creates the effect of continuity between the prior and the subsequently transformed figure. Hence in Ovid, the opposition between form and content is problematized by the manner in which a specific cast of mind, a consistency of outlook, and individual charisma can all endure in the metamorphosed state. Daphne's splendour still remains even after her metamorphosis (*remanet nitor unus in illa*, "her gleaming beauty alone remained")[19], as does Io's beauty in the story of Io, Jove, and Juno in both the transformations she undergoes; after first being metamorphosed into a heifer – *bos quoque formosa est*, "Even in this form she still was beautiful"[20] - Io finally reassumes her human shape (*de bove nil superest formae nisi candor in illa*, "No trace of the heifer is left in her save only the fair whiteness of her body").[21]

It is, however, the survival of consciousness in a mutated form that can be read in a most pointedly posthumanist light, and that opens up the concept of Ovidian metamorphoses to the challenges and complexities of posthumanist discourse. What distinguishes humans from nonhumans is consciousness and, in a technological age, it is also the distinguishing feature that sets apart humans from intelligent machines. As Katherine Hayles observes, "humans have conscious self-awareness, and intelligent machines do not. Along with the capacity to feel emotions, self-

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[18]   Ov. *Met.* 1.238-239.

[19]   Ov. *Met.* 1.552.

[20]   Ov. *Met.* 1.612.

[21]   Ov. *Met.* 1.743.

awareness remains a distinctively biological characteristic."[22] In several Ovidian myths, what survives after mutation is precisely "conscious self-awareness" or, to use Ovid's definition, *mens antiqua*, or *mens pristina*,[23] which is to say, thought as it existed in its original and pristine shape. Drawing on Ivan Callus's description of "terminal cases of posthumanism," it might be argued that the survival of *mens antiqua* in a mutated form gives rise to a condition "which no longer pertains to the human physically, but retains the memory, the psychology and desire of the human."[24] In this type of condition, as Callus goes on to say, "what dominates is not the prospect of the apocalyptic occurring through the irruption of humanoid technology upon the human or as a result of the sinister designs of the virtual," but "rather the knowledge and consequent anguish of having been metamorphosed or transported to a post-human state while retaining… the consciousness of the human."[25] Such is the anguish of Callisto, whose body is transmuted into that of a bear, but who retains human emotions as she wanders in the woods or in front of her former home, groaning with deep anguish and hiding from other wild beasts, forgetting that she herself is now also a wild beast (*mens antiqua tamen facta quoque mansit in ursa*, "Still her human feelings remained, though she was now a bear");[26] or that of Io who, in her new shape of a snow-white heifer, licks and kisses her father's hands while weeping, but cannot cry out for help or reveal her name (*conatoque queri mugitus edidit ore / pertimuitque sonos propriaque exterrita voce est*, "and when she attempted to voice her complaints, she only mooed. She would start with fear at the sound, and was filled with terror at her own voice");[27] and that of Actaeon, whose consciousness is transferred from its human body

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[22]   K. Hayles (1999), 140.

[23]   Ov. *Met.* 2.485; 3.203.

[24]   Personal communication from I. Callus in 2005. Further explorations of this idea will appear in a work by S. Herbrechter and I. Callus on 'critical posthumanism', forthcoming with Brill.

[25]   Personal communication from I. Callus in 2005.

[26]   Ov. *Met.* 2.484-485.

[27]   Ov. *Met.* 1.637-638.

to that of a stag when the desiring subject falls into the punitive grip of Diana, and whose desperate but silent plea, (*Actaeon ego sum: dominum cognoscite vestrum!*, "I am Actaeon: recognize your own master!") will remain unheard, and unuttered, except in his own consciousness.[28]

The transmigration of consciousness to the body of an animal is a matter with profound implications for ethical thought, one which desacralizes any notion of ontological purity and introduces an intriguing permutation in the definition of man. Rather than ceasing to exist, the essence of the human is expressed through the nonhuman, or the "human animal." In the painful moment of recognition, the victims look at their own selves and realize that mind and body have been violently separated from each other, and that their consciousness has survived in a bodily form that does not belong to them. This dramatic act of self-reflexivity brings with it a tragic awareness: the mutation of their outside shape has made them unrecognizable to all those who know them, and their new *forma* or *corpus* is deprived of its human voice. Drawing on Donald Winnicott's psychoanalytic work on the self and the body, Theodorakopoulos describes the fully conscious self which is now entrapped in a new shell as a "hidden presence... silent and 'secretive,' not expressive or creative, but not destroyed."[29]

What makes this type of metamorphosis all the more tragic and terrifying is not only the transformation in and of itself, but the pace with which such a change takes place. The key query in this regard is whether the onset of metamorphosis is gradual and subtle, or abrupt and radical and, very importantly, whether the phenomenon of surface characteristics to indicate inner essence is permanent and irreversible, or temporary and, therefore, not fixed in time. Generally speaking, metamorphosis in Ovid is a sudden process which ends all other metamorphoses, one that is therefore different from the sort of mere change and mutability, described in the concluding book of the *Metamorphoses*, in which Pythagoras explains worldly change as constant yet essentially directionless.

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[28]   Ov. *Met.* 3.230.

[29]   E. Theodorakopoulos (1999), 154.

Having said that irreversibility is the dominant order in the *Metamorphoses*, I must modify that assertion and say that there are some significant exceptions to this rule, as in the story of Io who undergoes two transformations, and thus resumes her human shape after having been transformed into a heifer. There are also exceptions to the rule of fixity, as in the myth of Callisto, who is first changed into a bear by Juno, and then transformed into a constellation by Jupiter, or in the tale of Erysichthon's daughter, Mestra, whose metamorphoses do not last, but instead lead to several other mutations in form, and ultimately to her father's unhappy self-consumption through cannibalism . However, despite these and other analogous exceptions, along with irreversibility and fixity, metamorphosis usually involves a downward process into a lower form of life leading from the human to the nonhuman, or from the animate to the inanimate. This is not to say that there are no exceptions even to such a rule, as in the tale of Deucalion and Pyrrha, the only survivors of the flood, who repopulate the earth with a new race of man by tossing rocks behind them which are then turned into human beings, or the metamorphosis of Aeneas' ships whose wood is gradually softened as they are changed into the body of sea nymphs, and the story of Pygmalion's transformation of a piece of ivory into a living body.

Whether the enfleshed subject is born out of an artificial body made of ivory, as in the case of Pygmalion's creation, or out of wood or rocks, as in the transformation of Aeneas's ships, or the metamorphosis of the stones tossed by Deucalion and Pyrrha, the onset of anthropomorphism invariably involves a double or bidirectional movement in which the human meets the non- or transhuman, and the boundaries between the natural and the artificial simply collapse:

> *saxa (quis hoc credat, nisi sit pro teste vetustas?)*
> *ponere duritiem coepere suumque rigorem*
> *mollirique morea mollitaque ducere formam.*[30]

"And the stones – who would believe it unless ancient tradition vouched for it? – began to lose their hardness and stiffness, to grow soft slowly, and softened to take on form."

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[30]   Ov. *Met.* 1.400-403.

robore mollito lignoque in corpora verso
in capitum faciem puppes mutantur aduncae,
in digitos abeunt et crura natantia remi.[31]

"Straightaway the wood softened and turned to flesh, the ships' curved prows changed to heads, the oars to toes and swimming legs."

temptatum mollescit ebur positoque rigore
subsidit digitis ceditque, ut Hymettia sole
cera remollescit tractataque police multas
flectitur in facies ipsoque fit utilis usu.[32]

"The ivory grew soft to his touch and, its hardness vanishing, gave and yielded beneath his fingers, as Hymettian wax grows soft under the sun and, moulded by the thumb, is easily shaped to many forms and becomes usable through use itself."

Thus, although in most of Ovid's tales, the metamorphosis goes from the inanimate to the animate, the natural to the artificial, or the living to the dead, the usual metamorphic flow from the human to the nonhuman is instead reversed in the coming to life of Galatea, of Aenaes' ships, and of the stones tossed by Deucalion and Pyrrha. Joseph Hillis Miller reads such a reversal in the key of prosopopoeia, a trope which, as he writes, "ascribes a face, a name, or a voice to the absent, the inanimate, or the dead."[33] Prospopoeia, Hillis Miller goes on to say, is actually the basic operative trope underlying the metamorphic flow not only from death halfway toward life, but also from life halfway through death.[34] Through this flow, the dead reach a state in which they do not die completely, and their essence is memorialized in the new shape into which they have been metamorphosed.[35] As a sign of their eternalization, human life seeps into nature, while nature expresses human emotions and reactions. In the

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[31]   Ov. *Met.* 14.549-551.

[32]   Ov. *Met.* 10.283-286.

[33]   J. Hillis Miller (1990), 3-4.

[34]   J. Hillis Miller (1990), 4.

[35]   J. Hillis Miller (1990), 4.

tale of Orpheus, for example, Orpheus speaks to an audience of beasts and birds, and following his dismemberment, nature manifests its grief in ways that can be defined as neither human nor inhuman:

> *Te maestae volucres, Orpheu, te turba ferarum,*
> *te rigidi silices, te carmina saepe secutae*
> *fleverunt silvae, positis te frondibus arbor*
> *tonsa comas luxit; lacrimis quoque flumina dicunt*
> *increvisse suis, obstrusaque carbasa pullo*
> *naides et dryades passosque habuere capillos.*[36]

"The mourning birds wept for you, Orpheus, the throng of beasts, the flinty rocks, and the trees which had so often gathered to your songs; yes, the trees shed their leaves as if they are tearing their hair in grief for you. They say that the rivers also were swollen with their own tears, and that naiads and dryads alike mourned with disheveled hair and wore clothes of somber hue."

As Hillis Miller observes, following transembodiment, Ovid's metamorphosed subjects find themselves in a "half-way state" which is neither human nor nonhuman. Hillis Miller writes:

> A metamorphosis is not exile from the human community, such as Ovid himself was to suffer, and it is not the ultimate separation of death. It is halfway between the two, neither death nor life. The one who has been transformed remains a memorial example still present within the human community – in the form of a tree, a fountain, a bullock, a flower. The halfway state of the victim of a metamorphosis is a sign that his or her fault has not been completely punished or expiated. The changed state may be read this way or that way, as life-giving or death-dealing, depending on how you look at it.[37]

Whether metamorphosis is regarded as "life-giving" or "death-dealing," the mercurial transference of selfhood from one realm of being to another entails a certain "two-ness," as Caroline Walker Bynum puts it:

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[36]   Ov. *Met.* 11.44-49.

[37]   J. Hillis Miller (1990), 2.

> There is, to be sure, a certain two-ness in metamorphosis; the transformation goes from one being to another, and the relative weight or presence of the two entities suggests where there is no trace of the otherness from which and to which the process is going, there is no metamorphosis; there is metamorphosis only in *between*.[38]*39*

The unsettling undertones of an "in-between" state which allows humans to partake of human qualities in a nonhuman form raises several posthumanistically marked questions. Can *mens antiqua*, or *mens pristina*, live on once it is severed from its human form? In other words, can consciousness survive when it is distanced from its bodily source? Does desire thrive in a disembodied state? To draw on the words used by Hayles, can mind be separated from body, and does consciousness remain unchanged once it is transposed to a bodily entity belonging to a different species?[39] Does the erasure of embodiment bring with it an erasure of human identity? Once it loses its human voice, can the mind still manifest its inner feelings, or is speech its only form of human expression? If a "half-way" state is considered to be an attempt to renegotiate the limits of human life, does metamorphosis generate a different definition of death? And, finally, in representing human subjectivity in terms of transembodiment, to what extent does Ovid prefigure the agenda for the new millennium as posited by Rosi Braidotti, an agenda driven not so much by the desire to know "who we are, but rather what, at last, we want to become," a desire which expresses itself *via* representations of "mutations, changes, and transformations, rather than Being in its classical modes."[40]

These, and many other interrelated questions, remain mostly unsettled. Make no mistake – I am certainly under no illusions about this – they are large questions which can only be raised here and treated elsewhere. For the purposes of this paper, what is undeniable is the infinite capacity of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* to cue a number of

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[38] C. Walker Bynum (2001/2005), 30.

[39] K. Hayles (1999), 1.

[40] R. Braidotti (2002), 2.

productive correspondences between posthumanist outlooks and the Ovidian cosmogony, and for reflections through a reading in Ovid of such posthumanistically marked motifs and notions in the treatment of consciousness and subjectivity as metamorphosis, transembodiment, the transhuman, and the extrahuman. It is in fact difficult to read the *Metamorphoses*'s underlying interpretation of the human in transhuman terms without projecting upon Ovid a certain prescience with regard to the survival of human consciousness in a mutated form, which is a theme that lies at the very heart of a vast array of cinematic films. This is the case of the 1957 short story *The Fly* by George Langelaan and the five filmic versions it inspired, including David Cronenberg's 1986 remake, which represents human subjectivity in terms of transembodiment. Taking as a cue Bruce Clarke's notion that "the metamorphosis of human characters is always already posthuman, that the posthuman is non-modern […], and that stories of metamorphosis […] are commonly precipitated by key mistakes […] for which the metamorphic condition is punishment or poetic justice,"[41] the fate that awaits Seth Brundle in Cronenberg's film as he is metamorphosed into a fly recalls that of his Ovidian predecessors. Like the conscious self of Actaeon who is entrapped in the body of a voiceless stage and is dismembered by his own hounds, or of Io who is imprisoned within the silent shape of a heifer and is unable to express the human emotions that engulf her, and of Callisto who yearns for her human shape as she cries in anguish in the transfigured body of a bear, Seth's fully conscious self is encased in a new shell, making him tragically aware, in the poignant moment of anagnorisis, that he is neither human nor beastly, but *both* human and beastly. Though the transfigurative powers once ascribed to the unpredictable power of supernatural forces are triggered in Seth's world by the advances of technology he himself has devised, metamorphosis in both Ovid and Cronenberg can be construed as the attempt on the part of human consciousness to transcend physicality and the material world. But more about this in a future paper…

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41   B. Clarke (2008), 133.

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