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Patricia Eakins, Wendy Walker, Don Webb**



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There is, it seems, an "absolute connection between magic and metamorphosis ... one <being> the essential aim of the other" ¹. Although I first would like to dismiss metaphor in favor of literalism, a minor breach of this rule will precede the enormous one to which my discussion will eventually lead. For I would like to share this feeling of magic before turning to its modalities, to praise the poet, whom René Char described as "the curator of the infinite faces of the living" ², rather than the goet, with his reputation for evil-doing. Enchantment, the marvellous, the fantastic, in their rather recent semantic deviations, reveal our sensitivity to narrative forms exploring transformation. We read to seed our dreams, to recall them or to give them form; and reading Ovid today -from whatever distance epistemological shifts compel us to observe- is to succumb to perennial temptations and to afford ourselves the delight of an orphic interpretation of the world that satisfies the child dwelling still within us. It has been suggested that metamorphosis was a "semi-rational hypothesis for accommodating the remainders of a primitive totemism to the tastes of a nascent anthropomorphism" ³. The taste that we still have for it today, beyond the great fractures of knowledge that

intervened, in a period some call "postmodern" in order to disguise its romanticism, is but a resurgence of the taste for absolute fluidity that Emerson or Goethe exemplified not so long ago. The former centered the essay that he devoted to "The Poet" on incessant metamorphosis, flux, ductility, the volatile, the fissile : "No fixities in nature", "the only sin is limitation", "no covenants but proximities". The world spoke to him of the versatility of evolution; from our own vantage point, his ascendant vision of the metamorphosis of beings answers Kafka's, which rather bespeaks the degraded and the regressive. Goethe, perhaps closer to Thoreau, entertained a fascination for transformation that Valéry recognized : "The love of forms does not confine itself for Goethe to contemplative delight; every living form is an element of transformation, and each part of a form is perhaps a modification of some other one" ⁴. It may be, however, that Valéry overlooked Lucretius, whom Ovid admired, almost alone in his time.

If, far from a metaphoric usage of the term "metamorphosis", I would rather speak first of real metamorphoses, of texts that actually deal with living beings whose forms modify themselves, it is by reason of the tenacious magic that this idea has been exercising over western cultures since Heraclitus, Empedocles and Pythagoras, relayed by Homer, Ovid and Cicero's Tusculanes. It is also, no doubt, by reason of the personal delight I experienced upon

rereading various works in which the fixedness and rigidities of the world give way to the freedom of bodies and the flux of souls, where natural decrees are made flexible by dint of arrangements negotiated with a diplomatic nature all too ready to swap forms and consciousnesses. There is certainly always an element of terror in inconsistency and instability, but a permanent ontological vagrancy often appears more attractive than the prisons of identity. Metamorphosis for metamorphosis, Proteus seems closer to our desires than the most rarefied of transformations, be they catasterisms or changes into birds : apotheosis among the stars, the liberation of the soul taking flight. Our death-envy is weak; our desire to live on knows fluctuations in its intensity. We have trouble tolerating our existential freeze on fixed images of our world and ourselves, and each day we dream of being something else, for a nanosecond or an entire day : the first case corresponds to what we call "daydreaming", the dilettante offspring of desire; the second is a symptom of more or less severe schizophrenia. Not the least of the charms of the Ovidian text is that for the poet of Tomis metamorphosis is rarely definitive, as he wished his own exile would not turn out to be. In his poem, "the scarcity of words like *semper* or *aeternus* as well as the way in which they are occasionally used guarantees <its> transitory character" ⁵. The fact is that, with all our being, we resist the idea of an absolute end and, in transformations that would continue us, we continue to find a charm

capable of counterbalancing death. Or more precisely, we tend to exclude from our anxieties an offensive life/death polarity that denies the hybrid ontological space in which Ovid situates his mutations and in which wishes, imaginations and desires can unfold themselves. "Metamorphosis, the magic act *par excellence*, is a movement towards life, a flight of evasion simultaneous with continued life" ⁶. Ovid himself is fully aware of this fact when, in the tenth book of the Metamorphoses, he has Venus, who is about to change them into bulls, thus threaten the Propoetides :

...Let this impious race pay the penalty by exile or by death, or by some punishment midway betwixt death and exile. And what other can that be than the penalty of a changed form ? ⁷

Later in the same book, Myrrha prays to the gods in these terms :

O gods, if any there be who will listen to my prayer, I do not refuse the dire punishment I have deserved; but lest, surviving, I offend the living, and, dying, I offend the dead, drive me from both realms; change me and refuse me both life and death ! ⁸

If, then, I would not dream of denying that in the last analysis the most "real" metamorphosis metaphorizes something else, at least I will start from examples which, by not metaphORIZING metamorphosis, will perhaps allow us to detect what is of necessity

metaphorical in every metamorphosis. That every metaphor is in its turn a metamorphosis is a proposition that could feed intense debate at an altogether distinct juncture.

It would have been permissible, I suppose, to choose other contemporary American writers as examples, considering John Barth's fascination for chimeras, that of John Hawkes for the Golden Ass of Apuleus, the inviting "metamorphations" of Harry Mathews, the fact that Guy Davenport professes reverence for the Heraclitean flame and gives form to it in his writings and cultural opinions, or Annie Dillard's attention to metamorphoses of natural surroundings and of the self. Besides, as Don Webb puts it, "America is a land of shifting identities ... a Heisenberg land" ⁹. But since the gods have placed three small recent books, all works of young writers, under my eyes, I think it best not to blaspheme this providence. I shall therefore focus these remarks on a book by Don Webb, Uncle Ovid's Exercise Book, a collection of stories by Patricia Eakins, The Hungry Girls, and a collection of tales by Wendy Walker, The Sea-Rabbit, Or, The Artist of Life, all three of which came out in 1988 ¹⁰.

At first glance, only Uncle Ovid's Exercise Book seems to call for a remark about structure. This group of ninety-seven metamorphoses corresponds loosely to the fifty epyllia that "Uncle Ovid" laid out in the fifteen books of his own Metamorphoses. It is

perhaps the first American echo of the parody that a certain L. Richer published in 1649 in Paris : L'Ovide bouffon ou les Métamorphoses burlesques. The thirteen narratives by Patricia Eakins and the nine neo-fairy tales by Wendy Walker do not at first glance single themselves out by direct reference to the teratological intertext ¹¹. Concerning thematics and the appearance of these works, a few hasty remarks will provide minimal anchorage to my discussion. Don Webb's book explicitly plays at displacing and at shifting about the Ovidian intertext. The instability of all perceptions of reality leads, in each fragment, to a physical metamorphosis : Mr. Gneiss turns himself to stone, and gives over to erosion; a man slowly takes the form of a face in a photo found in a park; a woman, impregnated by an oil-well, gives birth, logically enough, to the famous "tar-baby" of legend; a man named Paul becomes a cicada; kicked out of his home, another character changes himself into a house; Lautréamont is changed into the "octopus with a silken gaze" that appears in Les Chants de Maldoror... For intertextuality reigns supreme over this text : here Ovid 's work appears side by side with the Egyptian Book of the Dead and its Tibetan homologue; William Burroughs keeps company with Paul Bowles; Darwin, master of metamorphoses, is neighbors with Kafka, Swift with Williams and Melville... Dozens of texts and authors appear explicitly or by allusion : the metamorphoses that comprise this text are not necessarily the ones we expect or believe.

Don Webb is originally from Amarillo, Texas, a home of the military nuclear industry. He is a child of the Sixties and incorporates the effects of drugs to his narratives. He lives in a world where biogenetics and atomic holocausts suggest potential or all too real mutations. Accordingly, his work is created under the influence of sources of veritable metamorphoses of reality. Like Patricia Eakins, but also for example, Denis Johnson (Fiskadoro), Steve Erickson (A Day Between Stations), or William Gibson (Neuromancer), he feeds his texts and his poetics with the effects of hallucinogens, which affect perception, of biotechnology, which affects our very being, of computers, which affect models of perception, and of atomic physics which, simultaneously, through nuclear technology and the theoretical fallout of quantum physics, affects genetic inheritance and spatio-temporal models as well as causality. Ovid had Lucretius as his contemporary, but the transformations with which he would have presented us had he inhabited our modern world open dizzying imaginary perspectives. In other words, in lieu of the legendary, of the Aristotelian "impossible probable" upon which Ovid rests his tales (legends which he inherited from a past that had already greatly exploited the idea ¹² and in which he did not always believe too much himself ¹³), Webb substitutes the "improbable possible" and extrapolates Ovidian logics to contemporary abilities to mutate species, flirting with the apocalyptic. His broken, fragmented, jolting

text gives uneven emphasis to metamorphoses that are more or less quick, cruel, or sharp, with little explicitness here and a great deal there. "At the summit the mad one gives agonizing screams. His body turns to brass. It is not a quick metamorphosis -the process requires three to four minutes" ¹⁴; or again : "How <the Dragon> changed into a man I do not know" ¹⁵. The narratives of metamorphosis mingle with scientific information and speculations about the evolution of literary species to which I shall come back. If a number of transformations take place under our eyes without apparent motive, a brief notation suffices to suggest that the fantastic belongs to this world : "If a bar of gold touches a bar of steel even for a moment, some of the gold molecules leap across to join the steel and some of the steel to replace the gold. It's a scientific fact" ¹⁶. Lucretius had already said so in the first book of his De Natura Rerum. Midas, in other words, would have merely suffered a tragic acceleration of natural phenomena, like this narrator who, in a crowd, feels himself

worn away -replaced molecule by molecule like a petrified log.

By the time I reach the gate, 'I' shall be gone entirely. I will be completely replaced. Someone else will arrive to help you. Someone we don't know.¹⁷

Likewise, the flattening out of forms in proportion to the speed of light, in Webb's sixth metamorphosis, indicates that we are

functioning at the limits of reality rather than outside of it. The mutant inhabits our world. Here can it be seen, for the second time, that what is at stake is the metamorphosis of metamorphoses themselves.

Needless to say, Ovid's characters move through these metamorphoses : centaurs, dragons, Dionisos, Icarus, Narcissus, Pygmalion, Arachne, the dogs, the werewolves are here, Ovid's village of exile as well, which lends its name to a "Tomas" strangely close to the spellings of *Tomis* or *Tomes* , while the poet's own name furnishes a number of generative variants, from *oval* to *ovoid* .

In the writings of Wendy Walker, the connections are more distant. Whatever revival of the adventures of Narcissus and Echo her short story "Arnaud's Nixie" may constitute, the parallel occurs clandestinely as if, justifiably, Walker considered the legendary intertext as obvious. Her narratives fill up with metamorphoses that a thousand intermediary tales have made familiar to us : the beasts -crow, carp or fox- speak; the spectacular metamorphoses of Bernard, the hero of the title story, allow him to win the heart and the hand of Princess Mengarde after having been dissimulated in an egg and in the abdomen of a fish; after which, "he moves manward again", as the text of "The Sea-Rabbit" tells us; the

hedgehog who is the main protagonist of "The Contract with the Beast" knows how to play the bagpipes, rides an enormous rooster and undergoes fantastic mutations; "The Unseen Soldier" enjoys the complicity of a magic cape that makes him invisible; he is thus able to discover the secret of the king's daughters. In "The Cathedral", the statues converse; Queen Ashiepattle, who lends her name to yet another story's title, disappears easily under the eyes of the monarch who courts her, amazed by her extraordinary beauty. The king describes her in terms that are sumptuous metamorphoses in themselves : as cathedral, as countryside, as each of the animals, finally, in whose form Ovid shelters the newly wrought natures of women and men whom desire or violence submits to the whims of the Olympian hierarchy :

Yet he could see her costume in his mind's eye as clearly as though it stood before him: the splendid bark-and-silver-colored fur thrown so carelessly across her shoulders, like a wolf escaping a parting shot; the ragged convolvulus or her enormous ballooning sleeves, iridescent blue, green, and white, like the splayed abstraction of mallards hung on a door; the dark dagging of the long nether sleeves, like the parted crucial feathers of hawks aloft; the overlaid loops of her meticulously tended tresses, neat and copper tessellated as the scales of an upstream salmon. The quilted lappets jutting from the waist of her vest recalled to him many gentle paws of foxes, hares and even lions, slain and arranged in a victorious ring. He helplessly imagined unlacing that superficial bodice, to expose the hirsute white lining that so suddenly put him in mind of the bellies of dead doe, and a cheetah he had vanquished once on an excursion to Barbary. The circular motif in the gown's

brocade, being gathered from looseness at the ground to neat folds at the waist, contracted into an even impression of fanning feathers on a quail's or pheasant's throat. ¹⁸

To be sure, we are closer to Grimm, Perrault and Alice than to Ovid, here, but the Ovidian metamorphosis maintains its functional power, both dramatic and narrative. Metamorphoses of castigation, of appeasement, of flight, of preservation : every variety of metamorphosis found in the texts of the Ancients serves an apparently naive, but perfectly controlled narrativity. Walker does not exploit this solely for the production of the marvellous : into her legendary canvas she slips many a metafictional thread which the eye must follow with attention. Her neighbors, in this regard, are named Pierrette Fleutiaux, Italo Calvino, Vitezslav Nezval or Robert Coover, descendents, all, of the greatest practitioners of the fairy tale and of the allegory for purposes of literary demonstration. As Simone Viarre has noted,

allegory corresponds easily to metamorphosis, to the extent that action and allegory try to rationalize myths and that action constitutes in some way the point of departure for science. But it opposes itself to the Ovidian system with its moralizing element, although Caillois' affirmation on this subject is too peremptory when he says (in Le Mythe et l'Homme), "it is precisely when myth loses its moral power of constraint that it becomes literature and an object of aesthetic enjoyment. It is at such a juncture that Ovid writes the Metamorphoses." ¹⁹

The evolution, in terms of literary history, seems clear : the moral stress no longer falls directly upon the works of these masters of allegory and prosopopoeia, who prefer to highlight a moral of forms to the detriment of any moralizing message. Here, one rediscovers the terms of the debate in which William Gass opposed John Gardner's bid for "moral fiction". Moreover, complicity with the intertext is so strong in the first pages of Wendy Walker's stories that any reader becomes fully aware of the fact that the millenary inclination of story-tellers is necessarily lined with or doubled by a reflection largely informed by the literary debates of the last half-century. However strongly and constantly the naive form of the tales may draw our attention to the intertext, the sophistication of their meditation on what I would be tempted to call "the art of would" cannot escape the careful reader. As the lady says to poor Esperte while teaching her to spin :

Watch how my fingers form this vague body of wool into thread -it is much like the melody you have coaxed from the flute, for it is long, it begins and it ends. But the thread from this labor does not fade with your turning aside from its making, as music does; it does not wander away upon silence, only to linger in the mind. ²⁰

In what better terms could it be said that the strong thread of a reflection about art weaves itself into the canvas of evasion with the tale favors ? It can hardly be doubted that beyond sumptuously

written texts which tempt us to delightful readings, beyond the ancient wonders of rediscovered childhood, what we are invited to witness is the metamorphosis of the fairy tale.

But I promised for the moment to speak only of actual metamorphoses before broaching their own metaphorical transformations. Patricia Eakins's astonishing texts invite me to remain faithful to this project, for the disquieting world of The Hungry Girls constitutes a bestiary unequalled by any other imagination I know. Ovid himself is never far away, however, nor is the mythology of which he became the bard. Medea is at the center of the narrative of "Auravir"; minotaurs spring from the flanks of anonymous, but less inventive as well as less consenting Pasiphaës; dogs, with names as varied as those of Acteon, are omnipresent in a story aptly entitled "The Change"; in "Murumoren", we hear, after dinner,

the old women gathering children near a fire to tell stories of wives who changed into birds to please their husbands, of husbands who changed to snakes to spy on their wives, of naughty children changed to kernels of grain and eaten by their parents' hens, and of jealous gods who stole the rich men's cows. ²¹

In "Onoo", the knife turns itself into a shark, the soul into a sea-gull, fingernails into fish. The young geophages who give their name to the title of the collection, "the hungry girls", will benefit, *in*

fine, from the care of a veterinarian, the osmosis of human and animal kingdoms being thereby underlined : "Dr Couviard had been long enough among animals to have forgotten the ways of people"²². Insatiable bulimiacs, the famished women devour everything : rats, dogs, cats, earth, livestock if possible, as well as any household objects that happen to be nearby; they literally absorb the world and the beings that populate it, giving birth through their stomach to descendants in every way identical; their autopsies reveal that objects have replaced their organs. Their proliferating brood of mutants, wreckers of anarchy, will be locked up before being put to death. Elsewhere, in "Snakeskins", serpents colonize human bodies; "Milady's Ploy" tells of the ingenious subterfuge invented by a Japanese noblewoman in order to preserve a race of deer whose antlers have become too heavy to allow them to copulate. In the balance of amazing stories in this collection, Eakins creates a world of raw mythologies which, under the cover of pseudo-ethnography, pseudo-mythography and pseudo-biology, substitutes a consideration of entropic metamorphoses of endings for the poetic expression of the creative metamorphoses of origins of which Ovid is the most famous narrator. The itinerary no longer goes from the creation of the world and the Titans to the apotheosis of Julius Caesar; either it originates in the most elementary genetics in order to go and vanish into the post-apocalyptic, or it inscribes lazy Meander's winding path through the imprecise swamp of an

archeological or prehistoric past. In this chronologically hazy but graphically shadowless universe, this uncertain world of mutations and animal evolutions, Eakins calls on dream to succour a genetic heritage that keeps fluctuating. The temporal frame is one that precedes all memory, the spatial a place pregnant with immanence and imminence, awesome and threatening : this is the world of Genesis, of mitosis, a world of eggs, of semen and of genes, harboring a life that as yet knows only mystery and uncertain becoming. If thematically, in "Salt" as in "The Change", "Banda" or "Meat Song", the shadow of Uncle Ovid prevails, it is to Uncle Beowulf and Uncle Pound that we owe the Saxon cadences and resonances of a crushed and rocky language that sings out the mineral, the primitive, the cellular, the primordial. From these themes and from this song there springs up a kind of primary eroticism or sensualism in which the reproductive dominates, a surge of the living urge that resembles hunger, instinct, a stubbornness to hold on, to endure, to persevere in being, under whatever form. It is a time of hesitating nominations, devoid of all transcendence, a time of the primal division, of a laborious sexual distinction, of the separation of earth and water, of the egg's white from its yolk, a time of weaning from the mother earth of origins, a time of the sheer will to live. In this half-entropic, half-proliferating universe, the songs of the species can be heard, the evolution of genes and the metamorphoses undergone by the work

of a supreme artist-creator can be observed. One could describe this lyricism of the monstrous life and of the fantastic beauty of the unknowable as some sort of chromosomic oratorio. Robert Coover once remarked that Patricia Eakins's miraculous bestiary is a bestiary exactly inasmuch as Borges' Fictions are a collection of myths and Calvino's Cosmicomics is a scientific treatise. It is clear that, as in Webb's work, atom and biology, concerted mutations and victimized mutants are never far from the mind of the reader. The post-apocalyptic landscapes of Denis Johnson's Fiskadoro bring identical tones to mind.

But for all their staging of quite remarkable metamorphoses that André Pieyre de Mandiargues could easily have included in his "Monumental Incongruities", these three young authors, of course, also do more and better than that.

I wrote earlier that, like the Ovidian model, sustained by many previous collections of metamorphoses and works by predecessors without number, these texts unceasingly refer us back to known models; that they owe part of their charm to a combination of imprecise recognition and the feeling of novation or renovation they induce. If the sources are at times clearly proclaimed (as is the case for Webb and, in generic terms, for the neo-fairy tales of Wendy Walker), they can also be concealed in the

depths of stranger fictions (Eakins) or among the decoys of conspicuous citation. As Guy Davenport insightfully points out : "I would go so far as to say that all modern writing is about some other text, and that this is so much the case that many writers are guardedly furtive about it, while knowing that their only hope of meaning is in our ultimately finding that other text" ²³. And more than our hope of meaning, our hope for irony never is disappointed; should there occur, here or there, a "rosy-fingered memory" ²⁴, we soon realize that no "rosy fingers", even if attached to a clear morning, can any longer be anything but the product of cultural memory. We also understand the absolute necessity for Webb himself to have recourse to metamorphosis when, having also stolen from Homer the eyes of "cow-eyed" Hera, the hindouist cowboy hero of the text, caught between the beautiful wrathful goddess and sacred cows, has some difficulty practicing his trade... The conclusion is not long in coming : "The cow gods and goddesses transformed W.B. Porter into a giant saguaro cactus" ²⁵.

However, more discreet than the effects of a programmatic intertextuality, certain manipulations indicate that the thematics of metamorphosis serves a deeper inquiry into literary forms. This inquiry certainly addresses questions of genre, but also questions of syntax, of vocabulary, of semiotic, narrative, and stylistic stakes, pushing some interrogations as far as punctuation and the

alphabetic signs themselves. My description of Ovid's text as a kind of poetic egg applies not only to the fact that narratives and images result from imitation, extension or adaptation, as real as they all might be. It also has to do with the fact that the structure of Ovid's stories proves to be narratively fertile, favorable as it is to digressions, stories within the story, collages and imaginary driftings. Ovid acknowledges this : "And as always happens, a recent event causes a return to stories of past events", or again, when Cephalus tells Phocus (he of the predestined name !) of his love for Procris : "Would you know the story of this second gift ? Hear the wonderful story : you will be moved by the strangeness of the deed" ²⁶. The conspicuous narrative power of the short fictions and the generativity of detail largely depend, on the one hand, on the always fleeting presentation of the radical otherness of desire that René Char defined as "a traveller with a single piece of luggage and many trains" ²⁷, and, on the other, on the need for narrative drifts and inventive extensions dedicated to justifying the improbable by means of constant inflation. Marcel Béalou was well aware of this in L'Araignée d'eau (The Water Spider), a collection in the title story of which a water spider transformed into a young girl will return to being a spider, dragging her lover into death : commenting on "that which was inadmissible in this story of a spider metamorphosized into a human creature", he incorporates the following remark to the story : "When one discovers a truth that

far exceeds the admissible, one must continue to lie in order not to appear to be a liar" ²⁸. Thus does the equivalence between that which links metamorphosis to exile and that which unites a theme to the forms it gives itself resurface and become plain again. For we think then of a remark by André Malraux that established a deep bond between modern art and metamorphosis : "The world of art is the presence in our life of that which should belong to death" ²⁹.

More precisely, the narrativity of these texts relies on a formal metamorphosis that backs up thematic metamorphoses. The iterative mode dominates the narrative of a sustained dread in a Wendy Walker story : "The Cleverness of Elsie". Elsie, by narrating in an ever-changing style her vision of a future that she fears, eventually modifies reality itself. The thirteenth metamorphosis of Don Webb's book develops in a similar manner according to the mutation of an identical story that repeats itself six times over the two fragments of the section. The narrative begins and progresses in terms of its transformations. So much so that, in a more radical example, three words alike only in their first letter ("a polemic, a prediction and a pineapple") program the a priori improbable development of the text of metamorphosis 56, which must work out a reason for them to be together. A variant of the famous "word golf" -in which one passes from one word to another totally different one by changing a letter each time to form an existing

verbal relay -serves as the backbone of metamorphosis 91. The lexical metamorphosis "time, tome, come, comb, bomb" provides the paradigm and momentum for comparable numerical series and even for the declension of simple phrases. The fact that the word "time", which triggered the narrative, should return to conclude it also avers the cyclical character of the metamorphoses and proceeds from a genuine pythagoreanism. The process is so well-established, the program so legible and well-marked, that Webb can go as far as confessing : "I could have created a situation for that rule to show up, but I reckoned you'd want the story just like it happened. Natural like" ³⁰. I mentioned earlier the way in which Wendy Walker used description and image as instruments of metamorphosis ³¹; she insists on the metamorphic powers of the imagination in "The Cleverness of Elsie" :

Elsie believed that she could see a great deal more than other people in commonplace experiences <...> She had been forced back on her own shamefully indulged resources to nourish the marvels upon which she had grown so dependent. It seemed to her that echoes were the audible life of shadows, for when she stood on the first stair and made the lid of the jug go clapperty-clap, the small, delicate resonances made the overlapping scales of the shadows more vivid, so that she understood that every long tube was really a serpent, that serpents had scales inside as well as out, and that there were more snakes living under the earth than most people realized.

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For Patricia Eakins, there is, by the same token, a profound equivalence between metamorphosis and the use of words : "The young of this serpent are hatched from a mother's mouth like so many words" ³³. These quasi-spontaneous generations of signs and beings are moreover referred simultaneously to the domains of metamorphosis and of magic by a remark from Webb :

Succeeding sentences, the second explicitly or implicitly referring to the content of the first (and so on until the text is presumed to be completed), give us the impression of a continuing reality. But they are only sentences, one after the other, each itself and only itself. And grammar ? All prestidigitation employs rules. ³⁴

Particularly attentive to the metamorphic power of forms, he exploits every variety. Opening his forty-seventh metamorphosis with a phrase that states its opposite in common usage, he redresses it : "It's been a bad summer for locusts (or rather a good summer for locusts and a bad summer for everyone else)" ³⁵, before relaying the mutation of this atrophied phrase by means of the paradigm "changing/turning/becoming" which, throughout this metamorphosis, will make sure that the only lexical stability is that of a vocabulary of change. The restoration of atrophied forms to movement is a constant; here, a cabalist permutes the seventy-two letters of God's name; there, Egyptian cartouches are called "cool to the touch" and suggest the carapace of fossilized words.

Playing on words with conviction, Webb elsewhere emphasizes that writing and enchantment both palpitate under the word "spell".

Beyond such uses of "literal" metamorphoses, Webb has recourse to lexical metamorphoses that prove narratively fecund. Ovid, in Book VII of his poem, was not innocent of this formal stratagem. As my reader will remember, someone overhears Cephalus address the breeze in amorous terms : "Thou art my greatest joy; thou dost refresh and comfort me; thou makest me love the woods and solitary places. It is ever my joy to feel thy breath upon my face" ³⁶. The indiscrete person reports to Procris, who is jealous and cannot help but take these words as proof of her lover's betrayal, thus bringing about the tragedy of his murder. The exploitation of ambiguity and polysemy, the radically literal interpretations of such expressions as "pouring money like cement" ³⁷ are at the origin of narrative revivals or boosts where reality and language mutually shoulder their own mutations. Making reference to Ovid's Ars Amatoria, Webb will use "the Ars" at a juncture that allows him to swing discussion over to "the first book on the flush toilet", entitled The Metamorphosis of Ajax, a pun on 'jakes', a latrine or privy..." ³⁸ Elsewhere, lexical mutations give birth to a cross between the Emperor and the Devil : the "Empevil". Lexical substitution can follow the rule of the famous Oulipian formula "S + or - n", or generate new images, of which I will give but three

examples. Metamorphosis 84 starts with the words "I had a carving dream last knife", while a more libidinal dream in the first metamorphosis engenders the following statement : "I'm hot. My dick's beginning to lubricate itself. Ants crawl over my head and spine. Formication." ³⁹ By the last page of the book, the metamorphosis of elementary forms has become so common that we are no longer surprised to read :

the back lot scattering broken changing flowing images through the weeds and hunks of rusting metal each reflecting a metamorphosis... it is not too late to dream of other worlds... each shard a different image... flesh returning to Silly Putty... tadpole iterations of Bosch... can no longer hold the images together... changes outside of our focus... inside our focus... the mirror pieces shoot away faster than the speed of light. ⁴⁰

Bound up with lexical effects, syntax is for Webb the place of the most common metamorphoses :

Everyone knows this trick. You are using it yourself right now. What you don't realize is that the words of Uncle Ovid's aren't normal words. I bought them from an adept in the Andes. After they slip through Broca's area of your brain they pass into the bloodstream. They echo down long arterial corridors. They nudge messenger RNA. Even now they are triggering your metamorphosis -that mutation you've been trying to avoid. Darwin and Stephen Jay Gould don't know about this kind of evolution.

Or perhaps I'm lying. Perhaps there are regular words.

As Wittgenstein well knew, any sentence can radically change its meaning even up to the last word that forms it. Accordingly, Webb can in turn invite us to read a page "quivering with incoördination" or force us to see a metamorphosis in fine : "With the new ending, everything had changed -the framing and focus were different" ⁴². Even stylistic effects are described as consequences of metamorphoses or as metamorphoses in themselves; as in Ovid's work, color dominates line in the descriptions, the chromatic nuances are easier to locate than the ever-changing forms; punctuation, proliferous and viral -as William Burroughs would have us believe language is as a whole- comes, a veritable meteor shower, hailing down on the body of Mike Trampier and reduces him to a minuscule point in metamorphosis ⁴⁵. It is under the effect of amphetamines, on the other hand, that a page starts to explode graphically : "By 8:30, they came on and Rod's language awareness began to increase to painful levels, creating vast Shandy-like discourses on the root of meaning" ⁴³.

Structural metamorphoses no doubt carry the greatest responsibility in establishing the bonds that unite metamorphosis as theme and metamorphosis as form. Webb wrote his book *en marguerite* , starting from the middle in such a way that metamorphosis ⁴⁸ can be considered the heart of the work. It is there that we find direct reference to the life and work of the Latin

poet; there also that the sentences are exceptionally topical, as if governed by some zero degree of literary metamorphosis. Around this center, texts arrange themselves, more and more deformed, more and more sensitive to what surrounds them, and susceptible to sudden mutations : "Immediately Uncle Ovid's Exercise Book began to change into Miss Brandon's diary. Such a metamorphosis is not unusual. Stories run together. Merge. Change like a cloud. Cancel themselves as they go along" ⁴⁴. Hence the possibility of the modular series of eleven possible endings offered -reader's choice- at the end of metamorphosis 77. Hence, in the following one, this scene in which the literary" bricoleur" piles up layers of the yellow pads on which he writes until he sees them begin the sedimentary process and one day, in accordance with the geological laws governing "metamorphic" rock, the pile turns into a little yellow man, somewhat like Ionesco's Amédée, of which the narrative must then find a way "to rid itself" ⁴⁵. The best place to trace the relationships established between theme and writing is doubtless the twenty-ninth metamorphosis, first based on the manipulations of DNA :

What is not generally known is that the process of incorporating living entities into cells will have a macrosystems counterpart <...> Soon entire organisms will be incorporated. Mrs. Nicholl's poodles will merge with her body -their tiny yapping heads taking the place of her breasts. Slum dwellers will develop carapaces as a result of a new intimate cockroach

symbiosis. Minotaurs will fight one another in Spanish bullrings.

We then hear, logically enough, a discussion of Darwin and his tautologies, complete with supporting references. Finally we come to this :

I see no reason why evolution shouldn't be a tautology. In a vast system, which is regarded as being without entelechy (i.e. no one is driving the bus), any description would have to contain tautological elements. It happened, it happened this way.

On the other hand, fictional systems can be presumed to have entelechy. There is an inner purpose -if we concede that the authors are part of a fictional system.

Unfortunately, the strong internal rules of Uncle Ovid's Exercise Book have mutated the bus driver into an amoeba whose pseudopods cannot reach the steering wheel.

Clearly, the reader himself could be at risk; whence the final saving metamorphosis in that section : "The reader of these glyphs is but a future shadow, a dream of the entombed" ⁴⁶.

I would be incomplete, my own metamorphosis unaccomplished, if I did not add that all three of these books have pronounced metafictional dimensions that contribute in an essential way to the metamorphosis of borrowed forms. A simple wink, here or there, when Patricia Eakins has a novel with a lavender cover eaten by her famished geophages ⁴⁷, when Wendy Walker has the

statues lining the nave of a cathedral discuss an invisible structure of the edifice, or when Webb has us read a book within his book, this one called A Magical Life : a work in regress, which, he tells us, uses "the narrative techniques of a complex timeline of delight" and contains "numerous accounts of numinous ceremonies, foul perversions, and day-to-day life in the last three centuries" ⁴⁸. But no doubt more seriously when Wendy Walker concludes her Sea-Rabbit -whose subtitle, as we recall, is The Artist of Life- with a variation that brings to mind the windows of Henry James's "house of fiction". Princess Mengarde's castle has twelve windows that allow her access to what is ordinarily not visible. Having lost her bet, she smashes them all at the end of the tale. A child picks up a shard to look at the world; it is a fragment of the ninth window, the one that, in the story, "reveals refuges that induce grave self-scrutiny"; thus the invitation to a self-reflexive reading is a powerful one when we reach the end of a tale where all those who complied with ordinary rules of the world to attain satisfaction of their desires have been decapitated. Catching sight of the child, grandfather Borrel mutters :

I send the boy off to play, and he scrounges in the rubbish.<...> His father was no better." The child's eyes frowned gravely at the injustice of this remark, but he did not protest it. He took a step backward, and slowly raised the piece of the ninth window he was holding level to his eye. He stared at his grandfather steadily through the glass, and said slowly, "You sent me off to play, and I found something wonderful to play

with. But you did not want me to play; ever since I could walk, you have wanted me to be as still as those heads that are waiting to be put in the ground. ⁴⁹

Overserious readers of fictions that would rather deal with pure enchantment, away with you...

At the same time, it seems, at the close of these readings, that a fundamental question finds in them but a set of rather sobering answers. In literature as in life, it may well be that metamorphosis is no solution at all. The sea-rabbit thus hesitates at the point when he must resume his original shape :

... the deaths of the motherly raven and the grateful fish returned to him as he drifted, considering, through the cool deeps; and he gradually realized that though they had been able to fly high and swim deep, their forms had bound them as straitly as that of any two-legged creature. It seemed to him then that there was no escape in this life, and that he might just as well be a man. ⁵⁰

In this, I read a filigreed metafictional remark that raises the question of the status of metamorphosis of literary forms, beyond the fictional liberties that can temporarily or provisionally result. Should we see here a real advance, a point in a cycle, or a kind of comfortable return to a proven narrative whose problems are more or less the same as those from which we want to move away ? In other words, is it necessary to have recourse to a thematics and a literary practice of metamorphosis in order to attain one's ends ? In

L'Aiguille et le Cadran ("Hand and Dial"), Edmond Jabès, in his own marvelous fashion, asked the very same question :

At night, the sun gathers stars around, in the morning, the feathery creatures we remember. When we read page after page of the sparkling stars of sleep, of the beating wings and flights of birds, do we not admit that writing too has that supreme power we grant above all to death, the power to transform the world, to justify the image of the universe in its many unknowable changes ? ⁵¹

In fact, poetry and literature at their keenest and most alive appear to be a permanent metamorphosis of the forms they borrow, and always seem to be writing some panegyric of the non-generic. Such may be the lesson that could be drawn from the study of contemporary texts that would adopt the framework of the metamorphosis of forms and of living things for being that "play against tragic ruin" in which a German philologist, speaking of actual metamorphoses, read a kind of unavowed defensive move transcending defense itself ⁵². The will to change, the desire to escape constraints not freely espoused, might then be at the origin of the contemporary taste for generic hybrids in which I hear more than the mere phonetic echo answering the genetic mutations with which Webb and Eakins concern themselves. That would be another subject, to deal with which would certainly entail a more general discussion of whether the very notion of metamorphosis could be separated from that of all literary activity; one would then also

probably have to turn to Merleau-Ponty, for whom vision and thought themselves have some connection to metamorphosis.

Actually, thus faced with metamorphoses and texts that feed each other, I cannot help wonder about the stroke of genius that, on a Hollywood shooting lot, gave some technician or bureaucrat the extraordinary idea of setting fire to King Kong's cage in order to produce the burning of Atlanta in Gone with the Wind. Could modern literature similarly have turned into a pyromaniac and a vandal in order to respond to the ardors of Heraclitean fire, to take advantage of Pythagoras's metempsychosis and avail itself of the liberties of the metamorphic imagination which Ovid used so beautifully ?

"January 12, 1983", a notebook tells me, I went to listen to Jorge Luis Borges, who was passing through Paris, at the Collège de France. At the invitation of Yves Bonnefoy, he answered questions and expatiated on an idea that for me remains magical and that is close to our preoccupations here : the memory of prose as a form of poetry. He finished speaking and a young man, disarming in the direct simplicity of his intelligence, stood up and asked Borges the following question : "Do you see a resemblance between poetic creation and that which takes place in nature ?" Borges sat his chin

and cheeks astride the handle of the cane that his old man's hands held between his knees. Raising his empty, merry gaze, he responded, as if resigned : "Unfortunately, none."

"I walked back up the Rue Monge, in some distress. As I came up to St. Médard's, a cold gust of air made it seem to me that his old, doglike face had been transfigured : he had become a Labrador. No doubt the weather had affected me, or perhaps I could not accept an answer which everything, naturally, told me was a lie. I therefore deprived him of a voice that could have abolished the subject of this essay."

My account could have begun this way. This is the way it will end. As for you, reader, whose patience is admirable, you have every right to address to me the sentences with which an exasperated Pentheus punctuated the speech of Tyrrhenian Acoetes, at the end of the third book of the Metamorphoses : "We have lent ear to this long, rambling tale, that by such delay our anger might lose its might. Ye, slaves, now hurry him away, rack his body with fearsome tortures, and so send him down to Stygian night" ⁵³. After all, I will not be in bad company there; catabasis has its advantages and I suspect that, given time, Orpheus might one day confide to me what really happened to him.

Ecole Normale Supérieure

NOTES

- 1 Simone Viarre, *L'image et la pensée dans les Métamorphoses d'Ovide*, p. 149
- 2 René Char, "Feuillets d'Hypnos", *Oeuvres Complètes* (Pléiade), p. 93)
- 3 S. Reinbach, cited in Viarre, p. 145
- 4 Paul Valéry, *Variétés IV*, Gallimard, p. 112. Valéry adds : "Goethe attaches himself passionately to the idea of metamorphosis that he glimpses in the plant and in the skeleton of vertebrates. He researches the forces beneath the forms, he discloses the morphological modulations; the continuity of causes appears to him under the discontinuity of effects... He is one of the founders of transformism."
- 5 Viarre, p. 295.
- 6 Id. p. 298. She adds : "That is what A. Castiglioni says so well of magic in general : magic comes from the objectification of the desire for life and the evasion that is its leit-motif."
- 7 Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, Book X, lines 232-4. English translation from the LOEB edition, Frank Justus Miller, Trans. (Cambridge : Harvard University Press, 1916).
- 8 Id. lines 483-7.
- 9 Don Webb, *Uncle Ovid's Exercise Book*, eightieth metamorphosis.
- 10 Don Webb, *Uncle Ovid's Exercise Book* (Normal : Illinois State University Press, Fiction Collective); Patricia Eakins, *The Hungry Girls* (San Francisco : Cadmus Editions); Wendy Walker, *The Sea-Rabbit. Or. The Artist of Life* (Sun & Moon).
- 11 A notion that could help us deal with that of literary "monster", linked to that of its repression in Foucauldian terms.
- 12 On the subject of the intertext on which Ovid feeds, see Viarre, pp. 132-8 as well as the preface to the GF. Flammarion edition of the *Metamorphoses* (pp. 426, 445 and 453 in particular).
- 13 Ovid writes, for example : " Her features are that of a maiden, and, if poets have not bequeathed us mere fictions, she was, in her time, a maiden ... " or again, "Unless one refuses all credence to poets..."
- 14 Webb, p.. 62
- 15 Id. , p. 143
- 16 Id. , p. 63.
- 17 Id., p. 64.

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- 18 Walker, p. 67.
 - 19 Viarre, p. 304.
 - 20 Walker, "Arnaud's Nixie", p. 254.
 - 21 Eakins, p. 102.
 - 22 Id., p. 14.
 - 23 Guy Davenport, Every Force Evolves a Form, North Point Press, p. 105.
 - 24 Webb, p. 31.
 - 25 Id., p. 23.
 - 26 Ovid, Book VII, lines 757-8, op.cit. p. 395.
 - 27 "Peu à peu, puis un vin siliceux", in La Nuit Talismanique.
 - 28 Marcel Béalu, *L'Araignée d'Eau*, Belfond, 1969, p. 25 (my emphasis).
 - 29 André Malraux, in La Métamorphose des Dieux, Gallimard, 1957, p. 31.
 - 30 Webb, p. 17.
 - 31 Walker, "Ashieattle", pp. 67, 71-2, 75.
 - 32 Walker, pp. 83-4.
 - 33 Eakins, "Snakeskins", p. 25.
 - 34 Webb, p. 26.
 - 35 Id., p. 77.
 - 36 Ovid, Book VII, lines 817-20, p. 399.
 - 37 Webb, p. 17.
 - 38 Id., p. 79.
 - 39 Id. p., 10. The pun may well have been borrowed from Beckett's "Ah les beaux jours" where it is produced at the sight of an ant.
 - 40 Id. , p. 153.
 - 41 Id., pp. 26-7.
 - 42 Id., pp. 27, 42.
 - 43 Id., p. 134.
 - 44 Id. . 103.
 - 45 I am referring here to Ionesco's play : "Amédée, ou Comment s'en débarrasser".
 - 46 Webb, p. 46.
 - 47 Eakins, p. 20.
 - 48 Webb, p. 42.
 - 49 Walker, p. 57.
 - 50 Id., p. 53.
 - 51 Edmond Jabès, The Book of Questions : III, Return to the Book, Rosmarie Waldrop, trans. (Middletown : Wesleyan University Press, 1973), p. 173.
 - 52 W. Friedrich, quoted in Viarre, p. 300.
 - 53 Ovid, Book III, lines 692-95, p. 173.

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