

Sea-change and Metamorphosis: Useful Images in a Degrowth Approach to the Arts?

Marco De Bernardo, Italy

marco.debernardo@fastwebnet.it

oo

Content and purpose

I shall discuss the literary motif of metamorphosis as a reflection of the ecological position of human societies; in particular, I shall deal with a kind of metamorphosis referred to as “sea-change”: the transformation that occurs underwater, or, more generally, by agency of the sea.

I shall refer to examples of literary metamorphosis across different historical contexts, from works by Homer, Ovid and Shakespeare, that will give us some necessary notion of the main antecedents in the treatment of this motif, to the work of the contemporary anglophone writer Derek Walcott (Saint Lucia, Caribbean), whose poetry will be analysed a little more closely.

Before discussing single works and authors, I shall propose some theoretical and historical background notes on the meaning and the development of the metamorphosis and sea-change motifs: this exercise reveals consonances sometimes unsuspected between literary periods that are very distant temporarily.

I am posing myself two main purposes.

The first purpose is an ambitious one: to advocate for the Degrowth movement to become interested in promoting ecocritical research on the subject of metamorphosis, both in the form of monographic studies on single authors, on single geographic or thematic areas, and with the scope of panoramic studies, that could aim at drawing a comprehensive picture of the development of the motif of metamorphosis, and of the related ideas of the human position in the biosphere.

The second purpose is possibly even more ambitious: contributing, through the analysis of the literary motif of sea-change, to the better understanding of important aspects of the work of Walcott, one of the greatest poets and playwrights of our time.

Calvino and Ovid

In the late 1980ies, the Italian novelist Italo Calvino concluded his *Six Memos for the Next Millennium* proposing the programme of **a literary work able to place itself outside its human self, giving voice to other forms of being**.¹ This was already the task of the Latin poet Ovid in his epic poem *Metamorphoses*, Calvino argues, a task attained through the sense of **continuity of forms** expressed in that poem.

Drawing upon a rich oral and written tradition of mythology, but more directly upon recent Hellenistic literature, Ovid's work tells a never-ending story of the continuous transformation of the world, under a law which Calvino, in another essay, describes as one of “universal contiguity”. The poetry of the *Metamorphoses* is mainly rooted in “indistinct borderlands between diverse worlds”; Calvino significantly adds that to regulate the relations between “gods and goddesses, men and women, fauna, flora and the mineral world” there is no “hierarchical order, but an intricate system of interrelations in which each level can influence the others [...]. Myth, in Ovid, is the field of tension in which these forces clash and balance”.

Calvino here refers to Ovid's stories of transformation of human beings or of deities into animals, plants or things: this is the kind of radical, dramatic change of shape we refer to as *metamorphosis*. Written in around 3-8 A.C., the *Metamorphoses* is paradigmatic for the virtually unique comprehensiveness of its repertoire of some two hundred and fifty transformation stories, that are given rich visual and psychological detail; this motif is, nevertheless, certainly not confined to this single work.

Before and after Ovid, Euro-Mediterranean tradition has made use of metamorphosis images and stories across different epochs, languages, arts. Today, a wider global perspective also reveals interesting analogies with the metamorphosis motif in non-European traditions, which some postcolonial writers have contributed to revitalize, through their engagement with cultures formerly negated by imperialism.

What does metamorphosis mean?

The literary metaphor finds a correspondence in the field of natural sciences (zoology, botany, geology), where the term metamorphosis indicates specific natural processes. But in the field of

¹ (1988)

humanities, what do these images of metamorphosis mean? How to interpret their function within a work of art?

The comparatist Pierre Brunel, author of one of the most comprehensive studies on the subject, emphasizes the complexity, the multi-faceted and paradoxical nature of metamorphosis. The meaning of its literary representation can be described as the result of the union of two couples of opposing categories: identity and alterity, and change and continuity. These, though, are very general, abstract concepts, and have been applied to a wide conceptual area.

Depending on the historical context, metamorphosis has thus been represented in very different ways, and has come to be applied, as said about Ovid, to the relations among the different realms of the universe, but also to growingly complex and unstable human categories such as the identity of the individual, society, or cultural tradition.

Furthermore, metamorphosis is an image loved by critics and theorists, as well as by poets and artists: this is also because it applies to the very processes of writing and of creative production of meaning (as such, it is also been described as a “metatrophe”, that is, a trope whose meaning applies to forms of language and of representation).

Image of the interchange among cultural traditions and identities, metamorphosis applies also to the *interplay among literary texts*, to the way in which different texts, from different literary traditions, are *re-membered, assimilated, revised and rewritten into new texts*: metamorphosis is a metaphor of cross-culturalism and of intertextuality.

From an ecocritical perspective it is anyway the first, “Ovidian” literary meaning of metamorphosis, as defined by Calvino, we need to start from: reading metamorphosis as a crossing of the boundaries between the human and the natural world is a good vantage point on the development of the image of the human position in its ecological context.

A little history

With no pretence of exhaustiveness, here are a few very brief notes on some turning points of the development of certain features of the metamorphosis motif across epochs, with an eye on the corresponding mutating views of human society's ecological position; I propose this as a framework for the discussion of single texts, and also to give some idea of the direction that wider research might pursue.²

² An extensive recent review of previous wide-scope studies on the general subject of metamorphosis can be found in

Homer

Ancient literature makes use of metamorphosis stories since Homer, where they are already connected with elements of otherness from the human world, and with the sea. Shape-shifting sea deities make their appearance.

Ovid

It is with Hellenism that this motif becomes very popular. From here Ovid takes most of his material: metamorphosis is a fascinating narrative subject, whose appeal resides also in the imaginary exploration of the meeting with what transcends the limits of human experience. Ovid's and Apuleio's Latin versions of the metamorphosis myths will allow an easier fortune in the following centuries, after the temporary eclipse of Greek language and literature.

Shakespeare

During the Renaissance, it is in English (from Spenser to Shakespeare) more than in Italian literature, that metamorphosis stories are rewritten. "Classic" metamorphosis in comic, pastoral and fairy-tale context (*A Midsummer Night's Dream*). *The Tempest* (1611) has explicit reference to Ovid, and includes the famous "sea-change" song: plausible connection with the context of geographical and scientific discoveries and with the new Atlantic imagery.

Joyce

Contemporary panorama of industrial growth and environmental degradation is a background element for the Modernists' renewed interest in myth, and in the metamorphosis motif. Darwin's evolution theory gives new meaning to the ancient idea, at the root of metamorphosis, of interconnection among all living creatures.

There is now, in Joyce above all, more consonance with Homer's treating of metamorphosis. The "Proteus" episode in *Ulysses* (1922) also alludes to Shakespeare's sea-change.

Walcott

The expression "Black Atlantic" indicates an area characterized by the African diaspora, connected by other shared experiences, notably European imperialism, the slave trade, the legacy of African and European cultures and of the English language, and by a history of exchange now continuing across the Ocean. Within this area, a consonance among writers like Wilson Harris (Guyana), Derek Walcott, Wole Soyinka (Nigeria) can also be observed in their convergent elaboration of Homeric

David Gallagher, *Metamorphosis: Transformation of the Body and the Influence of Ovid's Metamorphoses in Germanic Literature of the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (2009: 35-90).

myth, including the figure of Proteus (with both Homeric and Joycean implications), as well as of the sea-change motif (Soyinka explicitly alluding to *The Tempest's* version).

Metamorphosis and sea-change are indeed a translation of “that movement beyond epistemological, cultural and spatial boundaries to which post-colonial discourses aspire”, as Bill Ashcroft writes in *Post-Colonial Transformation*.³ But these writings are also aware of a global context characterized by the new thought of complexity and by environmental sensibility: Harris's fiction is particularly interesting on this account.

Why the *Odyssey*

My focus is, as can also be seen from my very unequal historical outline, on that particular kind of metamorphosis, referred to as sea-change, made famous by a passage of William Shakespeare's play *The Tempest*. To illustrate the meaning and significance of this particular motif, we should look first at an older text, Homer's *Odyssey*.

This choice might seem odd, if we consider how Homer's heroic and Olympian world is far from Ovid's fabled “universal contiguity”. Categories of existence remain distinctly separate in Homeric poetry, and we don't have here many descriptions of humans turned into animals or things, as compared to Ovid's poem.

In the case of the *Odyssey*, though, this is only the more superficial aspect of the poem. Transformation is in fact a major theme in this poem, even if metamorphosis works here mainly as a general metaphor, more than as an explicit image; furthermore, what is particularly interesting is that this is associated with the subject-matter of sea-travel. These aspects have also contributed to the fortune of Homer's treatment of the metamorphosis motif among contemporary authors, such as James Joyce and Walcott: while the metaphorical approach to metamorphosis appears more easily “manageable” by modern writers than Ovid's fantastic stories, the sea subject happens to be particularly consonant with aspects of the modern experience, especially in the English-speaking, Atlantic part of the World.

The sea and transformation

The *Odyssey* gives literary representation to a relationship of human society with the sea, that in the Eastern Mediterranean dates back at least to the Third Millennium B.C.; Fernand Braudel's

3 (2001).

historical studies on the Mediterranean are a justly acclaimed reading on the subject. The association between the sea imagery and the idea of change is plausibly an ancient one.

Sea-travel is a powerful means of historical transformation, through economic and cultural exchange, conquest, colonization, war. And before the historical level, there is an ecological one: water and sea are the main agents of transformation in the biosphere, and it is from this that their symbolic value primarily derives. All peoples whose history, economy and culture have been connected with the sea, know its destructive and creative transformative power, as a source of food, or of riches like coral and pearls, and also, at the other end of the life-cycles, as a grave for the many who die in the often dangerous jobs of fisherpeople, or of mariners, or, as we are learning once again in the Mediterranean in the 21st century, of travelers migrating to other countries in search of better life opportunities.

Accelerating processes of bodily decay and of life growth, water constantly turns human history into natural history, and then again, in the form of food and other resources, into an element of human history. This is the never-ending cycle that literary images of sea-change represent.

The sea and alterity

Another aspect of the sea imagery, connected with its metamorphic character, is the sea's character of alterity in the face of the land world of the human species. Actual and archetypal origin of life on the planet, the sea remains uninhabitable for us and for most of the animal and vegetable species that share with us the dry surface of the Earth, while at the same time being placed side by side with our world, functioning as our source of food and support for travel: the sea is for humans simultaneously unreachable and contiguous. This has made the sea, as well as lakes, rivers, streams, ponds, swamps, a kind of mysterious double of the known world, whose environment, under the surface of the water, can only be seen by us in a very limited proportion - and this mainly in very recent historical epochs, with the assistance of technologies of various complexity.

Such conditions have ever found representation in the arts, which have imagined or elaborated the underwater experience in many ways: let me just mention, for two well known contemporary literary examples, the early science fiction by Jules Verne, "Vingt mille lieues sous les mers" (1869), or the visionary poetry of Arthur Rimbaud in his "Le bateau ivre" (1871). Other stories tell of trespassing of the border between the land and the watery world in the opposite direction, from water to earth, by creatures of the depths like mermaids, sirens, undines.

The quality of otherness of the literary images of the submarine world bears destabilizing implications for the land world of the humans. In sea-change, the element of otherness active in metamorphosis, which, as proposed above, is a fundamental category of this trope, is thus embodied by the whole setting of the change story, the sea, and not only by the term of arrival of the term, the new form resulting from the transformation.

The *Odyssey*: Odysseus and Proteus

The *Odyssey* can be read as a transformation of Odysseus wrought by his experience of sea-travel: from his departure from Troy as a war hero, to his shipwreck and his symbolic fusion with the sea, as No-man, on arrival on the shore of the Phaeacians, crusted with salt and seaweed, to his eventual regaining of his humanity (on an advanced stage of humanity, we might say, being “many the men whose cities he saw, whose ways he learned”), and social role. The overall narrative structure of the poem is thus also a metaphorical sea-change.

In addition, the fourth book of the *Odyssey* presents an episode where transformation and sea meet in a way that reverberates on the whole poem, and also offers a legacy that will be richly exploited by writers of later ages: the encounter of Menelaus with the Old Man of the Sea, the god Proteus, on the shore of the island of Pharos, off the coast of Egypt.

Proteus, who has the “smell of the deep”, has also the power to change himself at will into all possible animate or inanimate forms: “First he turned to a bearded lion, then a snake, and a leopard; then a giant boar; then he became rushing water, then a vast leafy tree”. He belongs to the group of the shape-shifters: characters of mythology as well as of folk-tale, who possess the ability to perform a whole series of metamorphoses.

P.M.C. Forbes Irving, whose study on the subject I am indebted to for this paper, interestingly observes that, in Greek mythology, Proteus and all other shape-shifters, including Nereus, Thetis, and even partly Dionysos, share a connection with the sea. Such connection, Forbes Irving suggests, is not based as much on the metamorphic quality of the sea, as it is in its being a space other to the land world: “the sea may be seen as a place of secret knowledge and skills, and also as an alternative, older, and sometimes subversive world that is contrasted with the world of the Olympians and of men in the same way as the world under the earth is.” (1990: 178).

Proteus, and Circe, the protagonist of another, relatively more “regular” metamorphosis episode in the *Odyssey*, do indeed belong to remote and mysterious places; they are like those animals or plants

termed “living fossils”, for their belonging to zoological or botanic families extinct in past geological ages.⁴ Nevertheless, the “dark side” of the Homeric world is an important structural element in this poem: both the Circe and the Proteus episodes are structurally and thematically linked to the journey to Hades, that is, to the adventure that is central to the whole meaning of the voyages of Odysseus.

The Tempest

The sea returns with its subversive potential in Shakespeare’s play *The Tempest*, set in a fabled island between Tunisia and Italy; there as well obvious allusions to the contemporary context of sea travel in America and of rising imperialism.

Sea-change is epitomised by the famous song performed by the spirit Ariel, in lines that are considered the very origin of the expression “sea-change”. Wishing to console prince Ferdinand about the fate of his father whom he believes drowned, Ariel offers also a synthesis for the whole moral and political change staged in the play; a change that has its start from a shipwreck:

Full fathom five thy father lies;
Of his bones are coral made;
Those are pearls that were his eyes;
Nothing of him that does fade,
But doth suffer a sea-change
Into something rich and strange.

(I, 2, 397-402)

Walcott

Having established some basic coordinates, we have now enough elements to turn to Walcott's poetry.

For its reference to the New World context of early imperialism, Shakespeare's *Tempest* was bound to be the object of important revisionary readings in the Caribbean. The imagery of submarine landscapes and of sea-change, with its implications with the history/nature link, are another strong

⁴ Incidentally: in zoology, the character of “living fossil”, isolated in underground waters in Slovenia and neighbouring regions, has gained a rare amphibian the name of Proteus (*Proteus anguinus* Laurenti).

element of consonance of that text with the New World experience. In addition, an inevitable correlation is that between the “new” Caribbean sea, and the “old” Mediterranean of the Homeric poetry.

Omeros is Walcott’s long epic poem whose heroes bear Homeric names, but are ordinary people of his native island in the South-eastern Caribbean (Saint Lucia); two lines from this work are a useful starting point, for the way they express the topic of the connection between culture and nature, and between culture and place:

“Men take their colours / as the trees do from the native soil of their birth”

(*Omeros*, 5.XLI, ii)

Walcott is certainly an author whose work depends on the place he comes from, and on its landscape. Although, the quite rigid association of identity with soil, doesn’t seem to find correspondence in the more complex vision we have in *Omeros* as a whole, or in the other works by Walcott.

In postcolonial writing, in fact, this connection nature-culture is not unproblematic, considering that both culture and nature have been subjected to radical transformations under the pressure of imperialist aggression. One thing we can note is that where culture and history of the oppressed haven’t just been changed, but *tout cours* negated by the hegemonic power as in Africa and in the Americas, nature becomes a primary correlative for reconstructing the negated identity.

In Walcott's poem “The Sea is History” (*The Star-Apple Kingdom*: 1980), this is stated explicitly:

Where are your monuments, your battles, martyrs?

Where is your tribal memory? Sirs,

in that gray vault. The sea. The sea

has locked them up. The sea is History.

A topic image here is that of death by water, through which issues of memory and of history are dealt with; natural and human elements merge in the submarine landscape:

Exodus.

Bone soldered by coral to bone,

mosaics

mantled by the benediction of the shark's shadow

(...)

Then came from the plucked wires

of sunlight on the sea floor

the plangent harp of the Babylonian bondage,

as the white cowries clustered like manacles

on the drowned women

(...)

The combination of mythical imagery from the Bible with the macabre realism of the action of sea animals on human bodies, emphasizes the violence of the Middle Passage trauma. The poem suggests that violence is the reason why today the Black people's history, their monuments, are inscribed in nature instead that in the signs of power:

Sir, it is locked in them sea sands

out there past the reef's moiling shelf,

where the men-o'-war floated down;

strop on these goggles, I'll guide you there myself.

It's all subtle and submarine,

through colonnades of coral,

past the gothic windows of sea fans

to where the crusty grouper, onyx-eyed,

blinks, weighted by its jewels, like a bald queen;

and these groined caves with barnacle

pitted like stone
are our cathedrals

(...)

Nature, the realm of change and of continuity, is epitomised by the submarine world, as the element representing the origin and the end of life, and, at the same time, otherness from the human realm of history. Significantly, it is in this space other from a history described in terms of power and of suffering, a history that European writers like Joyce and Eliot, and like Shakespeare, had already defined as a nightmare, that the postcolonial subject places the foundations of its own new identity, of its own new history and its own new creative imagination.

Against a linear vision of progress, daughter to European modernity, and of progressive separation between nature and society, transformation and a new future implies restoring the cut links with nature and with the past. And if nature is history in the postcolonial condition, poetry, (and) literature are history too, taking upon themselves the task of bringing back what has been lost, of giving voice to those who have had it stolen.

In another passage of *Omeros*, the image of the merging of bodies and landscape is pushed forward, to that of an extraordinary metamorphosis:

The shreds of the ocean's floor passed him from corpses
that had perished in the crossing, their hair like weeds
their bones were long coral fingers, bubbles of eyes
watched him, a brain-coral gurgled their words,
and every bubble englobed a biography (...)

(*Omeros*, 1.VIII.ii)

Where, in Walcott's passage, "every bubble englobed a biography", the process is eventually completed of a dissolution of human history into a purely biological existence. But the change could not, after all, be one of humans into nature, but the other way round, in a kind of illusory metamorphosis of sea creatures looking like the human rests of a shipwreck in the mind of Achilles, the poem's hero, eager to plunder a legendary treasure from the abyss. This way of using a trope

taken by literary tradition, while at the same time introducing an ironic distance, is characteristic of postcolonial writing.

A space of continuity and interplay of history and art, of past and present, nature and culture, metamorphosis is finally an image of the creative imagination itself. Walcott's poetry is metamorphic primarily in the dynamics of its imagery, where the natural and the human worlds continuously touch and merge into surrealistic similes of a striking vitality; as in lines like "sea-horses curling like questions" (*Omeros*), or as in the conclusion of the poem "Map of the New World: Archipelagoes": "The drizzle tightens like the strings of a harp".

In a circular vision of time, that poem introduces Walcott's parallelism between the Mediterranean epic and that of the New World; nature, poetry become once again the matter of a new poetry:

At the end of this sentence, rain will begin.
At the rain's edge, a sail.
Slowly the sail will lose sight of the islands;
into a mist will go the belief in harbors
of an entire race.

The ten-years war is finished. Helen's hair a gray cloud.
Troy, a white ashpit
by the drizzling sea.
The drizzle tightens like the strings of a harp.
A man with clouded eyes picks up the rain
and plucks the first line of the Odyssey.

(*Collected Poems 1948–1984*: 1986)