Ovid, on the birth of love *(Met.* I 452 ff.)[1]

The charm of the Apollo and Daphne myth inspires admiration, particularly in its amatory facet, the aspect which has attracted most attention. But the myth also examines love and pain, alongside the elements of prophecy and virginity, as the true nature of poetry, symbolized by the laurel of Apollo. It also deals with love -and its opposite, the philosophical principles of separation and combination- as primum mobile in a civilizing rewriting of Hesiod and his primary, generative love. Here Ovid fuses the charm of elegy with the cosmogonic hymn, didactic wisdom and the epyllion.

The myth of Daphne and Apollo or the metamorphosis of the laurel, is endowed with beauty, and the fact is that when we marvel at any manifestation of beauty -a handsome youth like Apollo here, Ovid's art itself, any exquisite work of nature- we do not ask the object of our admiration to break into speech, to speak sensibly or to display wisdom. We do not expect serious statements from the fair Helen, and we can be moved to ecstasy by an aria whose meaning is a closed book to us.

The myth sings of useful things in dulcet tones. In such dulcet tones, in fact, -the tone of love elegy, or of love and pain- that the philosophical element virtually passes unnoticed. This is just as it should be in such a work as the *Metamorphoses*, which aims to

[1]Although I refer to the myth in general, it is lines 452-473 in particular that I am commenting on here. I would like to thank the Ministerio de Educación y Ciencia (PS94-0096) for encouragement above all and for economic assistance. I am very grateful to Catriona Zoltowska for help with these pages.

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entertain and delight us with its endless compendium of knowledge, and its sustained lightness of tone.

The myth of Daphne and Apollo, for instance, contrary to appearances, begins most unhappily. It originates in the conflict between two archer gods, Cupid and Apollo. The bow means power, and their duel must be based on the symbol of the powers, at odds with each other. It is on the bow that Apollo concentrates his challenge, and with it the winged youth exacts revenge for the affront of the senseless boy.

At the end of its hundred-odd lines, the myth didactically almost culminates in a contradiction. For shunning the violent love of Apollo, Daphne is finally incarnated as one of his attributes, the laurel. But why laurel? What kind of symbol of Apollo can this be?

The laurel is an evergreen, shining tree, with purifying effects. The perennial sheen of its leafy branches is associated with the radiant brightness of immortality, in eternal youth: emblems of glory and victory. All this, together with the ties with virginity (Daphne) and with prophecy (Apollo), combine to make the laurel a symbol of poetry.

In terms of its subject matter, the fragment is epic. It should also be serious, as befits a struggle between gods. However, the tone dominating the legend as a whole is enchantingly amatory. A wise choice, because together with the incurable emotions Cupid inflicts on his tender prey, we witness the birth in the work -in the universe- of love and his twin and adversary, hatred. From from now on it is love in particular that will have the task of feeding ("sweet poison") our already sharpened interest, not only in this passage, but throughout the poem, as in the Metamorphoses as a whole.

The text is also framed within the peculiar Genesis of Ovid, who now wonders about the consecutive distribution of the Whole from rough and formless Chaos. In this didactic point love and hate must fulfil their corresponding function as well: as principles which are also of separation and union, of concord and discord, the two opposing forces which have helped the wise men of so many periods to conjecture about the road between black holes or big bang and the orderly, intelligent cosmos. For, in fact, the world and its constant mutations are reflected in the fifteen books of the Transformations.

But to go back to love, it is the brilliantly applied amatory tone that gives the episode its charm. Observing its incurable torment, we become sympathetic accomplices, and are entertained. In turn, the obvious charm of the piece, even greater in what lies beneath the

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surface, produces the desired effect, emotion, which is what engraves it deep in our memory rather than our consciousness.

If we fuse what is explicit in the passage with what is strongly suggested, it could be said that Delian Phoebus is the Apollo who represents an age that thirsts for love, the age of the military barracks, youth in all its ardour, its imprudence and its error. Here we see the god exhilarating in hunting, the thrill that is a carbon copy of real soldiering. He feels pride in his recent conquest of the dragon, his saurian from an undefined age, not long after the flood in Ovidian paleontology. Suddenly he encounters Cupid, an all-powerful god for all that he is a boy. Love bends his bow to tauten the string, with no indication of his specific purpose or target, of who the unknown victim might be, a reflection of love permanently lying in wait. Apollo haughtily upbraids the boy for wielding a weapon to which he has exclusive rights, the bow: the key. He argues, boasting of the Python, his recent quarry, and orders Cupid to limit his powers to the use of the torch, whose effects he belittles as a burning sensation, an irritation which is unknown to him and which he therefore scorns. By this time Apollo is already lost, without realizing it, since his stubborn, empty heart is unacquainted with the imminent wound of love, is ignorant of the laws of this war, so much truer and harsher than the war of metal weapons for the elegists, for those who once were poets of rebellious love.

Cupid, in turn, possesses two attributes: the torch, of course, but also the bow, and he is not just any lesser god, nor any less skilled with the arrow. To the provocative jibes of Apollo, and his lack of calculation, he accordingly replies epically, hieratically, in a tone which would be out of proportion for any other boy. Homeric, too, is the manner in which he announces his revenge and instantly carries it out. Flying up to the lofty heights of Parnassus, he inflicts on Apollo the wound of love, the piercing golden wound -the gold of divinity, of the transcendental. At the same time he pierces the maiden Daphne with the blunt lead of discord, which she will be unable to bear. In this way the brave daughter of the river god, the mighty Peneus, is to suffer a cruel, unsought blow, for in her irrevocable chastity, her downfall was her beauty. Meanwhile, the dashing conquered god, with his future laurels, symbols of victory, absurdly ends up as the incarnation of the admonitory contradiction and becomes the hunted hunter, the wounded healer.

Parnassus is the most suitable background for this scene, since it is the mountain of the Muses, below which, in Delphi, the god had

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overcome the dragon. And now we understand why Apollo is the god of music and poetry, and of all the arts. It is the work of love, a road to knowledge. For what other profound reason, what other allegorical logic could be found in Ovid?

We have seen how little space is taken up by the stringing together of themes and tones which have always existed, themes which are always new in an artist's hands. It is even more astonishing to see how the first two lines alone are enough to suggest the essence of a whole long story which, as mentioned above, takes up more than a hundred lines. If the real test of an opening lies in the brilliance of its impact, this one takes off with a bang.

> Primus amor Phoebi Daphne Peneia, quem non
> fors ignara dedit, sed saeua Cupidinis ira.

One distich manages to introduce the episode while locating, summarising and condensing it. The story is to be that of a first love (that of the first love), since given its position in the first book, we should be prepared for some aetiology, some ultimate cause. We are to brace ourselves for something highly significant, heralded by the force of this double principle. At the same time, the first two words (*primus amor*) introduce an episode we should expect to be amatory, and in fact it is an elegiac tone, fittingly, that will prevail in the legend. We are also immediately introduced to the characters in the names that follow (*Phoebi Daphne Peneia*). Phoebus comes first, although we may already have guessed at Cupid's presence from the term *primus amor*, and now love is to rule in Apollo's empty heart. Next comes Daphne, object of his desire, who loathes him, in a fateful word order[2]. Following in second place is Peneus, her protector, her loving father, whose voice will later be heard in the retrospection on Daphne and to whom moreover the resolution of the myth will be delegated: to save his daughter, he changes her into a laurel, and although he does not thus free her from Apollo or from Cupid, he does manage to save her

[2]Phoebi-Daphne. The order of the adversaries' names reopens the wound of frustrated love here and in the no less impressive opening of the second Eclogue: formonsum - pastor, Beauty and the Beast; or the rivals in love in Sappho, 31, faivnetaiv moi - kh'no", just as in Catullus 51, Ille-mihi; Puella-senibus, in Martial V 37, the little girl and the old man. The rivals or lovers are joined in a union much more deadly than the distance that unites or separates them: odi et amo. The same rule which is applied to the imminence of Daphne and Apollo can be seen one step before in Primus A/amor-Phoebi: Cupid and Apollo duelling. In addition, the identity which flows easily from the nominal phrase ("The first love of Phoebus: Daphne, daughter of Peneus") is a renewal of grief. Its anthological ambiguity ("The first love: of Phoebus and Daphne daughter of Peneus") is equivalent to the oracular "This is your wife and mother of your children" in Oedipus.

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virginity. What greater tribute could there be to the laurel of art than this fresh, untrodden (*auia*) sanctity? Finally, just at the end of the second line, we once again have a linking mention of Cupid (*amor* - *Cupidinis*), in his star role: the double, the triumphant force. *Fors* and *ira* also struggle in the same short space. They introduce tension to the line, combining with the adjectives: for it was not chance that was ignorant but Apollo's youth[3], opposed to the omnipotent rage which normally characterises the gods and their reflections, the epic heroes. The introductory lines herald the inevitable duel, with a clear victor and a serious ending which only epic (*saeua ira*) softened by the sensuality and pity of elegy, succeeds in lamenting.

All this is indicated or suggested by these two lines, which give some advance warning of the linking of faint allusions, of the subtle use of nominal phrases, of appropriate cadences[4]. All these elements combine to create an exquisite work, one to match the concentrated epigram which opens and sums up the second *Eclogue* of Virgil or the whole turbulence and consciousness of passion lodged in Catullus' desolate *Odi et amo*, also compressed in two lines.

I have already mentioned some of the tones harmoniously combined in the text. The *Metamorphoses* belong to the newborn genre of insolent epic, as it could well be named, the living portrait of the accursed radical rebel poet who conceived it, an appropriate response to the abuse of power which was the seed of the *Aeneid*. In this episode the eternal epic takes the attractive form of a graceful elegy which is also a cosmogonic hymn and which writes over the lines of every genesis, of every theogony, over Hesiod, over every book of wisdom, rewriting the birth of love (or of Love, cause and effect) with infinite charm, and inscrutable seriousness. And at the same time it is intertwined with the story of the birth of anger (of hate), perhaps concurrent with a third or fourth genre, a new miniaturised epic to do with Homer and the whole story[5] of humanity which it echoes.

[3]I believe that ignara, reflecting youth, is applied to Apollo, just as saeua undoubtedly refers to Cupid. Apollo's innocence (primus amor) is stressed by the adjective lasciue which Apollo associates with Cupid, so that the narrator, by calling him saeuus without moderating his words, at the same time defines what is crucial in the two gods.

[4]PRiMus aMoR PHoebi DaPHNE PeNEia, queM NoN / foRs igNaRa DeDit, Sed SaeuA CupIdInIs IrA, is only the perceptible part of the music I refer to. The eccentric place occupied by non, falling harshly at the end of the line, perhaps emphasises all these elements, and gives its echo such power.

[5]The epic is the poetic history of human conflict and by this I mean that it is deeply and truly assumed. For all science, all knowledge is transformed by poetry into a spiritual option or a spiritual subject. This is the case of Hesiod and Lucretius and of the various Scriptures, and is usefully and lucidly evoked in Goethe's Faust.

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With reference to the different forms of knowledge, the epic among them, there seems to be a whole series or infinite unity of gods whose many replicas are to be found among men -among heroes- and this feeling is common to all humanity. But, between this human world and the divine world, what is the shadow and what the idea? Let us try to find out.

> Sing, oh Muse, of the wrath of Achilles, son of Peleus, that ill-fated wrath, which was a source of uncountable ills, which cast into Hades the generous souls of many heroes, and left their bodies as food for the dogs and the birds (thus the will of Zeus was carried out), from the day when, for the first time, a quarrel divided the son of Atreus, king of men, and divine Achilles.
>
> And who then, among inmortals, was the one who provoked such violent disputes? The son of Latona and Zeus. In his wrath against Agamemnon, Apollo made a terrible affliction fall upon the army, and the peoples perished, because the son of Atreus had offended his priest Chryses.

Let us reread this in a vain attempt to find out whether the wrath of Achilles or that of Apollo or the offence of Agamemnon, son of Atreus, was or were the first cause of the war. Our only certainty is that rages and primordial struggles begin the story and that the *Iliad* exalts the first and greatest conflict of new-born humanity. But when trying to decipher the deepest origins of this evil, we hesitate; lost in a maze of mirrors, who is projecting this anger and who is reflecting it, so that we do not know where to look for the image or idea.

Returning to Ovid and his version of the origin of love, and its opposite, we see that in the text the wrath of a particular Homeric hero, Achilles, is invoked as, by implication, the wrath of all the violent characters (men, heroes or gods) who people the epics. Ovid alludes to the wrath of the invincible one, of the god of health and illness, the wrath of Apollo, whose cult was neglected by these first ancestors of ours. Apollo, who drove men to war -or viceversa-, is the perfect candidate for this new assignment. To him falls the contradictory honour of changing from the powerful dispenser of wrath to victim. It should again be repeated that this befalls him at the hands of a child, though no common child. A strange and pathetic role: a new warning.

And should not Cupid drawing his bow also recall that great sage, one of the few who had ever seen Hell, Ulysses, returning from his *nóstos* at the end of the *Odyssey*? Should we doubt to which glorious archer the hero commends himself at that very moment when, as the only one capable of bending the bow, he changes from a beggar into an invincible administrator of justice?

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We could go on to dwell on more details latent in the text. Mention could be made, for example, of the reference to the myth of the ages in the gold and the lead in Cupid's arrows, since a civilising allegory of this type would reinforce diplomatic concord against unstable and destructive war. Or we could consider the correction of Hesiod, whose advent of love is postponed in Ovid, converting it from a strictly necessary generative and engendering force into a sensual, magnetic and narcotic fury. This sublimation is also civilising and its mystic path has been trodden so often that it must surely be true. Or perhaps one could see in the *umbrosa* citadel of Parnassus a reverent reference to the "shades", to the immortal souls of dead literary masters. We could even feel a little more pity for Apollo as we perceive the pathetic triangle which he forms, in yet another paradox, with his own sister as rival. It is to Phoebe, that other maid, that Daphne gives herself up. Daphne, Phoebe and Phoebus at a distance[6]. For as the amatory speleologists warn -and not only the rogues like Horace but also the more serious authors- Venus likes to join with an uneven wounding bronze yoke everything that is different. For in what other mirror would she let us look at ourselves, what other reflection could she offer us -or vice-versa, could we mortals offer her- the beautiful goddess of love, the wife of the deformed smith? We may well be astonished at how Ovid rewrites himself, since I believe that this text represents the literary maturity, verbal and specifically allusive, of his irreverent manifesto against the shameful adulatory art demanded by Augustus. I am referring in particular to the first elegy of his *Amores* (but also to the rest), a work which at the height of the dictatorship could boast of a liberal spirit and a firmness that only he could maintain, unlike those who were at one time poets of daring love and political rebels. Only Ovid stood fast and paid a heavy price[7]: the pain of exile, the macabre double death in life meted out by Augustus to his worst enemies, to his daughter Julia, to the man who might have been his successor, Agrippa Postumus, and also to Ovid, for (and by way of) example.

However, I do not feel it necessary to insist much further on what seems to be a delightful fruit of Ovid's astounding art, and of his misunderstood, and at times scorned, intellectual vigour. I do not see

[6]Graphically seen in lines 463 and 467, so distant.

[7]This is a topic for discussion elsewhere, but I agree with those who maintain that Ovid in his exile, far from being a flatterer, was in fact an implacable opponent of Augustus' regime, and comparable in irreverence to Lucan, who branded Nero as fat and squinting, or Persius, for whom the emperor had ass's ears.

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that ignorance or obviousness, coarseness or baseness, have even the slightest part to play in the work of this great poet, although it certainly is important to recognise, as in the results of any artist, the protagonism of the brilliant use of the fortuitous, of felicitous discovery, of the subconscious.

It should be added that for some readers of Ovid, loyal and competent, this episode may merely be seen as frivolously elegiac, seemingly -in fact, quite legitimately- disjointed. We all have our own way of reading or interpreting this master of seduction, just as we all have our own way of becoming victims of Augustus' censorship. Or even of falling under the spell of love, equally blinding, illusory, and deceptive.

Appendix (*Metamorphoses* I, 452-73)

Primus amor Phoebi Daphne Peneia, quem non
fors ignara dedit sed saeua Cupidinis ira.
Delius hunc nuper uicto serpente superbus
uiderat adducto flectentem cornua neruo
'quid'que 'tibi, lasciue puer, cum fortibus armis?'
dixerat, 'ista decent umeros gestamina nostros,
qui dare certa ferae, dare uulnera possumus hosti,
qui modo pestifero tot iugera uentre prementem
strauimus innumeris tumidum Pythona sagittis.
Tu face nescio quos esto contentus amores
inritare tua nec laudes adsere nostras.'
Filius huic Veneris 'figat tuus omnia, Phoebe,
te meus arcus' ait 'quantoque animalia cedunt
cuncta deo tanto minor est tua gloria nostra.'
Dixit et eliso percussis aere pennis
inpiger umbrosa Parnasi constitit arce
eque sagittifera prompsit duo tela pharetra
diuersorum operum: fugat hoc, facit illud amorem;
quod facit auratum est et cuspide fulget acuta,
quod fugat obtusum est et habet sub harundine plumbum;
hoc deus in nympha Peneide fixit at illo
laesit Apollineas traiecta per ossa medullas

The first love of Phoebus was Daphne, daughter of Peneus, and not through ignorant chance but through the cruel wrath of Cupid.

The Delian, vaunting his recent conquest of the dragon had seen him bending his taut bow, and had said "What do you have to do, you

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playful child, with arms of valour? These burdens are suited to my shoulders since I know how to wound with certainty the foe, the monster, and with countless arrows have just laid low the swollen Python, who before covered whole acres with his plague-bearing form. Content yourself with provoking some love or other with your torch and do not lay claim to my honours."

And to him the son of Venus answered "Your bow may pierce everything, Phoebus, but my bow will pierce you, and just as much as all animals are lower than gods, so is your glory lesser than mine. He spoke, and beating the air with his wings, quickly rested on the shady heights of Parnassus, where he drew from his full quiver two darts with opposite effects: one to drive away, the other to inspire love. The one that inspires is of gold, with a sharp gleaming tip. The one that drives away is blunt, and its shaft filled with lead. This is the one that the god used to shoot the nymph of Peneus, while with the other he wounded Apollo, shooting it into the marrow of his bones.

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