

# METAMORPHOSIS

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*The World Institute for Advanced Phenomenological Research and Learning  
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For sequel volumes see the end of this volume.

# METAMORPHOSIS

*Creative Imagination in Fine Arts Between  
Life-Projects and Human Aesthetic Aspirations*

*Edited by*

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*In Honor of Marlies Kronegger,  
President of the International Society for Phenomenology,  
Aesthetics & The Fine Arts*

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A group at the Harvard Faculty Club. Among others: Tadeusz Czarnik, Jadwiga Smith, Bernadette Prochaska, Victor Gerald Rivas, Mariola Sulkowska, Simone Seym, Stephen J. Goldberg, Max Statkiewicz, Dennis Skocz, Gary Backhaus.

METAMORPHOSIS AS A MAGICAL DEVICE OF  
CREATIVE IMAGINATION

In Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey* the mythical dwelling of the gods, Olympus, is an extrapolation of the real world, but the gods are free from natural constraints and may invent forms of life and objective reality at will. They may either convert the forms of living beings or themselves assume human or animal form to further and fulfil their concrete desires. As a transformative device that performs a radical transition from the empirical reality of life to the mythical realm of the gods as superior beings floating above the iron laws of life and death, metamorphosis has entered human fabulation in oral storytelling and literary and artistic creativity, even providing interpretations of the concrete life processes themselves. In blocking out the forms of the real and introducing other forms not subject to the strict laws of reality, this intrusion of possibilities changes Argus into a peacock<sup>1</sup> and makes the once white raven black.<sup>2</sup> We have recourse to imagination, then, to break down and expand the frames of reality's pedestrian concatenations of occurrences and so give range to the unexpected, to what is unforeseeable applying the common laws of nature.

From its mythological past to the most recent present, metamorphosis has meant a change in the state of a being. This change occurs in a mysterious passage and marks a moment of continuity and discontinuity. Discontinuity consists in the breaking of a hitherto enduring form and the substituting for it of another form. Continuity means the partial persistence of the discarded initial "identity" in such a way that that identity is maintained. Ovid's crow tells the raven that she remembers once being a king's daughter "sought by many princes."<sup>3</sup> Whether originally white or transformed into a black-feathered bird, it is still the "same" raven that remembers the reasons for her punishment. In the same way, Pygmalion's sculpture, whether just a stone statue or come alive and animated before its fashioner, is regardless his artistic vision (*Metamorphosis* X, 243–297). It is this continuity/discontinuity that makes the device of metamorphosis meaningful.

In this continuity within discontinuity – a passage from the old to the new, from the past to the future – there resides the constructive power of metamorphosis to interpret for us the dynamics of the phenomena of nature and of creativity in the arts and literature.

The aesthetic merits of this device when applied in literature has ever since the classic work of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*<sup>4</sup> exercised a powerful attraction and fostered literary and artistic inspiration. It has been the subject of innumerable studies in literary criticism. In view of the use of this device in modern literature from Gogol, to Stevenson (in *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*), to Kafka<sup>5</sup> and in cinematic productions like *Dracula*, *Star Trek*, *ET*, the *Terminator* series, etc., it is not surprising that contemporary criticism abounds with such studies.<sup>6</sup>

This manifests the innermost human desire to break the rigid frames of empirical reality and expand that reality within the imaginary sphere, which would participate in it without being chained by its laws.<sup>7</sup>

This is, of course, an expression of the human yearning for unrestricted freedom. But it also serves the human mind by pinpointing and illustrating numerous puzzling and tantalizing issues concerning continuity/discontinuity, which issues range from those of identity and its perdurance in change<sup>8</sup> to the distance between the animal and the human,<sup>9</sup> the illustration of our vices, reward and punishment,<sup>10</sup> and the religious mysteries that unite the empirical and transcendent realms, ultimately the mysteries of life and death. Pythagoras expounded on metempsychosis as the culmination of Ovid's metamorphic chain. Then there is Leibniz's view of metamorphosis as the conductor of living Nature, there being no death at the conclusion of the process of origin, growth, and decay but only an involution of form issuing in a new beginning.

As with other of his insights, the modern and contemporary sciences of life – morphology, embryology, and evolutionary science – follow Leibniz in discerning metamorphosis to be nature's chief instrument in its workings. The penetrating French thinker Andre Malraux accepted metamorphosis as the "universal law" of life.<sup>11</sup> He drew this sweeping conclusion from his probing studies of the state of affairs in the sciences and developments in human culture, society, and social personality.

We will but allude to his work here. The scope of this present collection is at once vaster and more restricted; vaster, because here we continue previous circuitous studies of the ways in which creative imagination leads to the establishment of the Human Condition; more restrictive, because we attempt to focus on and substantiate a particular metaphysical thesis, namely, that through the device of metamorphosis *Imaginatio Creatrix* "aestheticizes" the vital sense of Nature, which allows the passage from the natural sense of existence to the aesthetic sense of the Human Condition.

This means that in this collection of essays we approach metamorphosis neither as a device that nature employs in the evolutionary processes of life, nor solely as a literary and artistic device *per se*. Reaching deeper into its ontopoietic function, we will instead focus on metamorphosis as the device by which with *Imaginatio Creatrix* the Human Condition emerges as the specifically human sphere of existence.<sup>12</sup>

It is our major contention, and the essays presented will substantiate this from numerous perspectives, that the creative imagination through its major gift to man, the aesthetic sense, by an aesthetic metamorphosis lifts the rudimentary vital axis that spaces and times living existence into the human sphere of life. Secondly, we will show how it is through applying the device of metamorphosis that imagination acquires the pluripotency to creatively expand that sphere.

The first point needs some clarification. We have already seen how a “neutral” space on earth becomes a field, a garden – expressions of the innermost human existential passion for a place of *one’s own* here on earth.<sup>13</sup> Here to begin with is brought into focus the *aesthetic* metamorphosis of a place, of a shelter serving the end of survival, into a human dwelling. Here “spacing” occurs in tandem with “timing” for in the transformation the shelter acquires the meaningful shape of a congeries of human significances, of a history that is assimilated to the present dwelling.

Indeed, from the very start of their new evolution in existence, human beings are not satisfied with the bare efficaciousness of a crude shelter. They will enliven the cavern with an aesthetic touch by drawing on a wall. They will carve a shape into a utensil. Advancing in the development of their faculties, they will seek “adornment” in their clothing, will season foods, adorn and style their hair, faces, bodies. Creative Imagination is set to work to lift the rudimentary round of vital significance toward a wider horizon of human significance. Thus is woven the new fabric of the human world and its various horizons.

Here is brought to the sensing that would ordinarily be directed toward a response serving the survival of the living being a special orientation that reaches beyond the pragmatic to *the pleasing*. Informed by the aesthetic gift of *Imaginatio Creatrix*, sensing assumes a superadded role, namely, to be the prototypical conveyor of beauty, harmony, grace. A meadow is then no longer “seen” only as a place where the sheep, cows, horses may graze. The trees are no longer just possible sources of firewood, or of shade from the sun simply, but as offering a pleasing place of repose, of reverie even, and as part of an aesthetically pleasing landscape.

This crucial aestheticizing aspect of the basic establishment of the Human Condition amid the dynamics of Nature begins with an essential transformation of vital (animal) sensing into human experience. This is at work already in sensing's two primogenital functions: perception and memory.

Actually, primary perception as currently lived is far from being restricted to the ideal/universal skeleton of the Husserlian eidetic model. We never become aware of and perceive anything as an object in the bare 'naked' form that Husserl's framework of intentional structuring posits. While we may assume that that intentional structuring is always directing the singular empirical perceptual process, the process is embedded in an *affective* pulp. Already in the primary incipient stage of its genesis (as it is being developed in and by an infant), perception is always subject to and informed by the peculiarities of the vital surroundings and the vital responses they elicit (e.g., an infant's need for feeding or for bonding). These solicitations do inform the affective pulp. As a matter of fact, it is my contention that empirical perception is always clad in a halo of vital preoccupations and that in this way we share in the animal life concerns of all living beings, each in accord with the grade of their complexity. Yet in the Human Condition, the perception that at the outset is linked to our supporting survival net simultaneously weaves into the fabric of that net aesthetic threads lent by imagination. And so, as said, we see in a meadow or woods not just pasture or cool shade, but a pleasant sight, one that may well stir remembrances of happy play long ago, or stir intimations of further glories.

These aesthetic threads will come to stand out the more when the meadow or woods is viewed with the eyes of a painter as a "landscape." And so the affective pulp is progressively aesthetically informed. Reaching the level of aesthetic metamorphosis we see the world "as a painter does," "as a musician does," in short, as a creative artist who enhances color, shape, sound, form, aroma, etc. so that they manifest harmony, beauty, grace.

In this metamorphosis, crude vital significance assumes the truly human significance of life.

We have now to turn to the second major interest of our collective studies, namely, to the role of metamorphosis in artistic creativity. We have discussed the nature of this creative process and have shown that while having its roots in the vital significance that reality has for us, it consists in a passage from reality's actual state to a state that the artist aspires to project. This passage comprises multiple transformations and discontinuities but involves the basic device of metamorphosis variously

and copiously applied. This is not the place to reprise an analysis already performed.<sup>13</sup> What merits our attention is the role of the creative metaphoric proceeding.

The role of memory too is not to be forgotten. In these brief remarks about how *Imaginatio Creatrix* works the aesthetic metamorphosis of the brute elementary data serving survival needs into sensuous perception of extended duration, we have been treading ground that memory lays down, memory, a fruit ripened by imagination as it sets up the human mind. This is not the place for me to resume an analysis of memory undertaken elsewhere (in my *Logos and Life*, Book 1, Part 1). It is sufficient here to mark that not only is memory the essential faculty employed by the mind in setting up and unfolding its metamorphosis of the flow of experience but it is also, and this is of direct significance for our task here, the main support and engine of the aestheticization of human life, culture, world.

Employing in tandem these two fundamental operations of the mind, perception and memory, the creative imagination comes ultimately to metamorphose the forms of human experience in exemplary works of art and literature. Here it reaches its peak. Among the essays gathered here we will see the innumerable ways in which this unique mirror that is ours rends, mutates, conjoins, doubles human experience in innumerable ways bringing together remembered past, present influences, psychological attitudes, moods, tendencies, and talents to transform reality. Innovations in the use of the artistic media then concur with the mutating advance sought by the artist or writer.

In the inspired transformations that we call exemplary works of art the sounds, colors, moods of pedestrian reality vibrantly expand and resonate in us with a power unforeseen.

The profound human aspiration for fulfilment in beauty lifts the meaning of life above the givens of survival and comfort to a self-created realm of higher humanhood, to an "other world" that is the theater of the creative works of art, poetry, literature. The fulfilment of this aspiration bountifully illustrates the secondary proposition advanced in this collection, namely, that it is through applying the device of metamorphosis that imagination acquires the pluripotency to creatively expand the human sphere of life.

Let the reader judge whether the applications of creative imagination do not qualify metamorphosis to be esteemed as one of the basic *ontopoietic* devices constructing the human reality.

*Anna-Teresa Tymieniecka*

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, I, 720–23.
- <sup>2</sup> For Apollo's punishing metamorphosis of the raven, see Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, II, 534–41 and 632; and *Fasti* II, 243–66.
- <sup>3</sup> Corone, daughter of Coroneis, was transformed by Minerva into a loquacious crow; *Metamorphosis* II, 562–64, 589–90.
- <sup>4</sup> Ovid, *Metamorphoses – P. Ovidii Nasonis Metamorphoses, Recensuit, varietate lectionis notisque instruxit Gottlieb Erdmann Gierig*, Editio tertia emendata et aucta cura Joannis Christiani Jahn (Lipsiae [Leipzig]: Sumtu E. B. Schwickerti, 1821–1823).
- <sup>5</sup> Nancy Gray Diaz, *The Radical Self Metamorphosis to Animal Farm in Modern Latin American Narrative* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1988); A. M. Keith, *The Play of Fictions: Studies in Ovid's Metamorphoses* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1992) – on Book II of *Metamorphoses*.
- <sup>6</sup> Irving Massey, *The Gaping Pig: Literature and Metamorphosis* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1976).
- <sup>7</sup> Kathleen Anne Perry, *Another Reality: Metamorphosis and the Imagination in the Poetry of Ovid* (New York: Peter Lang, 1990).
- <sup>8</sup> Julia M. Walker, *Medusa's Mirrors: Spenser, Shakespeare, Milton, and the Metamorphosis of the Female Self* (Cranbury, N.J.; London; Mississauga: Associated University Presses, 1998).
- <sup>9</sup> Massey, *op. cit.*
- <sup>10</sup> Marina Warner, *Fantastic Metamorphoses, Other Worlds: Ways of Telling the Self* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).
- <sup>11</sup> Claude Tannery, *Malraux, the Absolute Agnostic, or, Metamorphosis as Universal Law*, trans. Teresa Lavender Fagan (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1991), Part V, pp. 215–312.
- <sup>12</sup> The terms 'Human Condition' and '*Imaginatio Creatrix*' situate our present thought within the context of our phenomenology/ontopoiesis of life as we have unfolded it in numerous volumes of the *Analecta Husserliana* book series. See in particular Anna-Teresa Tymieniecka, *Logos and Life*, Book 1: *Creative Experience and the Critique of Reason*, *Analecta Husserliana* XXIV (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1988); and Anna-Teresa Tymieniecka (ed.), *Imaginatio Creatrix, the Pivotal Forces of the Genesis/Ontopoiesis of Human Life and Reality*, *Analecta Husserliana* LXXXIII (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2004).
- <sup>13</sup> See Anna-Teresa Tymieniecka (ed.), *The Elemental Passion for Place in the Ontopoiesis of Life*, Book 1, *Analecta Husserliana* XLIV (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1995) and *Passion for Place*, Book 2: *Between the Vital Spacing and the Creative Horizons of Fulfilment*, *Analecta Husserliana* LI (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1997).
- <sup>14</sup> Freidmann Harzer, *Erzählte Verwandlung: eine Poetik epischer Metamorphosen (Ovid – Kafka – Ransmayr)*, (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 2000).