

Modern Metamorphoses:  
Issues of (Im)personality and Tradition in the Poetry of Pound, Eliot and H.D.  
by  
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To Mom and Dad

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## Abstract

Looking back to the past is nothing new for a student; indeed, at times an academic, systematic approach to the canon can lead to a student's despair that nothing new can be said, that it's true that originality is dead. Ezra Pound, T.S. Eliot, and H.D., in their densely allusive and polyglot poetry, attempt to reassemble and reconfigure tradition by creatively recycling and refurbishing the past in ways that do indeed "make it new." Metamorphosis—a seemingly antiquated theme or topos that nevertheless has fresh implications for the ways in which we reread our present interests in stories from the past—becomes a central way for Ezra Pound, T.S. Eliot, and H.D. to creatively make use of the past and to achieve an impersonal voice necessary in the creation of art. In doing so, these poets turn their backwards gaze into the past frontwards as metamorphosis also reflects aspects of a changing world and an emerging concept of identity predicated on multiplicity and flux.

As an introduction, I offer a brief overview of the reception and use of the term metamorphosis as it pertains to the study of myth and to questions of personal identity and tradition in literature. I postulate that metamorphosis is more than a synonym for change of any sort. Instead, metamorphosis becomes a structuring discourse, a way to speak of a dynamic instance of transformation in which something of the old is preserved in the new.

My first chapter focuses on the shorter poems by Ezra Pound, collected in a volume entitled *Personae*. More than any of the other poets discussed, Pound exemplified an Ovidian spirit in his poetic project of casting off different masks, or personae in an attempt to revivify the past. As I will show through a discussion of his poems "The Tree," "A Girl," and "The Return," metamorphosis can be an ecstatic, magical instance of transformation that allows the poet to give the reader new eyes through which to see an old, habitual experience or mindset. I argue that metamorphosis is a key tool with which Pound arrives at this goal, while still pointing to the negative aspects of metamorphosis as they further shatter and scatter a static notion of self. This aspect of metamorphosis is something I'll explore through a close reading of "La Fraisine," and "On His Own Face in a Glass," among others.

My second chapter explores how metamorphosis is likewise a central theme in T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*, a poem that formally enacts metamorphosis while thematically decrying metamorphosis as a model that condemns one to a cycle of repetition. I argue that the poem pivots around two Ovidian characters, Tiresias and Philomela, who observe the desire for yet lack of metamorphosis in the waste land, pointing to how metamorphosis is a complicated, risky model of endurance in modern world.

My third chapter will focus on *Four Quartets* by T.S. Eliot and observe the ways in which metamorphic energies are transposed into a Christian register or key. In doing so, Eliot offers a sacred model of repetition and transfiguration (liturgy and Incarnation) that allows him to transpose and redeem his earlier model of pagan, or earth-bound metamorphosis

By way of concluding this project, I will situate H.D.'s poetry—specifically her poems from *The God* sequence which revise the myths associated with the Ovidian poet character, Orpheus, and her *Trilogy*—within these different figurative and literal uses and depictions of metamorphosis while ultimately commenting on how metamorphosis becomes particularly essential for a woman poet attempting to break into a traditionally patriarchal canon. I use her poetry to reflect back on the project as a whole, since her version of metamorphosis is particularly activating, allowing one to creatively carry strands of tradition, while also spinning those strands into something new.

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## Introduction:

### Renewal From the Past: Teasing Out Modern Metamorphoses

Some one said: “The dead writers are remote from us because we know so much more than they did.” Precisely, and they are that which we know.  
—T.S. Eliot, “Tradition and the Individual Talent”

Sitting here at nearly the end of four years of intensively reading and writing—of indulging in the privilege of being able to speak to and learn from the dead—I can’t help but feel uncomfortable with this paradox that Eliot draws out here: of having the dead bring you to life. It’s an issue that’s all too common for an undergraduate English major to face, at family reunions, holidays, and trips back out of the ivory tower into the world: so *what* exactly are you going to do with a degree in literature? Why does it matter? It’s a question that has haunted me throughout my time here at this university, but no more so than when I studied abroad at Oxford, an institution that is predicated upon reverence for tradition, where the whispers of the dead spoke to me as the yellowed, carefully handled pages scuttled and slid together as I flipped the pages of the volumes that contain lives that remained interred and disturbed by students and researchers in the Bodleian library. I searched frantically in the dust for something that could answer me, could provide guidance as I lost myself in tutorials and quotations and essay crises and too little sleep. *What are they saying? How can I respond in ways that matter?* I launched myself into this literary canon ostensibly because I was interested in the texts that have accrued a sort of reverence in the institutions in which I have made my home these last four years. I wanted to know what *good* literature is; but the deeper I dove into a sea of voices, the less buoyant and more downed out I felt at the formidable task of somehow speaking back to the

dead.<sup>1</sup> What Eliot says is true: these are the dead, I should know more than they, but they are what I know. They have said it all before, and what they haven't said, hundreds of critics have been explicating and complicating. *So what do I do with this circular logic?* or, perhaps more sobering for a young student, *What can I say that is new and original if the dead are what I know?*

T.S. Eliot said in his introduction to Ezra Pound's *Selected Poems*, "When [Pound] deals with antiquities, he extracts the essentially living."<sup>2</sup> Admittedly, I had difficulty with this assertion early on in my study of Pound, whom I first encountered while studying abroad. With his fondness for archaic diction and spellings and obscure allusions, I found Pound's *Personae* like a literary exhibit in a museum, and I always needed to scramble for footnotes, or guides or companions that would explain his sometimes oblique references. It wasn't until I remembered a term and concept that I loved in my Spanish literature class back at Michigan—metamorphosis—that I found a point of access into Pound's poetic philosophy and came to realize that Pound *does* manage to "extract the essentially living" despite his fond use of archaic formulations and phrases in these poems; that Pound is, as Eliot said in "Tradition and the Individual Talent," attempting to use emotions not his own—or, his own and funneled through myth—in order to give these emotions a timelessness that is in itself poetic, rather than creating emotions anew.

Such a formulation opened up Pound's, Eliot's and H.D.'s densely allusive poetry for me in completely revitalizing ways. My thoughts became as organic and associative as Ovid's

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<sup>1</sup> Eliot himself demonstrates this silence one faces when one feels inadequate or unable to speak even to those living in "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" where Prufrock, uncertain whether he should "dare" or "presume," imagines becoming a crab "scuttling across the floors of silent seas" until human voices wake him and "we drown."

<sup>2</sup> A volume that contains Pound's collection of shorter poems called *Personae*, on which the first third of this project is focused.

morphogenesis myths as I came to consider metamorphosis as a framing, structural device that organized my abiding questions about how we can read in fresh ways and connect our reading of past literature to our present interests. It was as though, as Pound said of his mission in *Personae*, I had indeed received new eyes through which to view the themes of impersonality, fragmented identities, and of the troublesome but no less essential aspect of situating oneself within a tradition, where the past is made present. These themes built upon one another in a way that seemed to tie together all of the fumbling, disparate stabs at understanding how I could assert my own voice within a tradition that I had previously and fruitlessly been attempting. It was in a sense magical, this literary metamorphosis, and its structuring force coalesced a seemingly disparate array of thoughts and ideas that I had previously dealt with in a variety of other works, from magical realism to modernism. Metamorphosis is more than simply a synonym for change, as a mere change implies that there is an entirely new version.<sup>3</sup>

Metamorphosis is a particular, polyvalent instance of transformation in which something of the old form is preserved in the new. To use an Ovidian example, when Narcissus turns into a flower after dying because he wasted his life away staring at his own reflection, something of his essence remains in the flower, which is still used in Western culture as a symbol of vanity. Similarly, when H.D. transforms the story of Orpheus and Eurydice, giving voice not to the celebrated poet from the *Metamorphoses*, but to his muted wife, something of the original myth is suspended even as it precipitates an entirely new, feminist version or telling of it. This experience and understanding of metamorphosis changed the way that I read all literature, not just that of Pound, Eliot's or H.D.'s, but it was especially useful in considering these poets, since

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<sup>3</sup> If metamorphosis were simply a synonym for change, this project would be very long indeed as it seeks to catalogue and expand the different models of metamorphosis at work in the poetry of Ezra Pound, T.S. Eliot and H.D.

the whole of their oeuvres are predicated on metamorphosis as both a theme and a method. Indeed, according to Charles Tomlinson, “By the twentieth century, metamorphosis had become a primary component of style itself” (Tomlinson 25). Metamorphosis is at once the framework, organizing structure, practice and subject that allows these poets to balance the old with the new, to allow the dead to speak to them while also speaking back to the dead. In short, metamorphosis allows these poets to incorporate and modify tradition without losing themselves in it.

Another crucial component of this thesis is an issue of impersonality, an issue that is intimately involved with the questions and hesitations I posed earlier about the validity of one solo voice attempting to sing back to the canonical choir. As Pound, Eliot and H.D. are relying on metamorphic energies, they are also deeply committed to attempting to speak from a perspective other than from their own limited, broken, traumatized selves.<sup>4</sup> This means they are each working towards a concept of impersonality, of losing personal idiosyncrasies in order to find ways to use their personal experiences and transform them into art, to speak with an impersonal, universal way. As T.S. Eliot says in “Tradition and Individual Talent,” “Poetry is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion; it is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality. But, of course, only those who have personality and emotions know what it means to want to escape from these things.” The tyranny of the “I” over the reception and reading of poetry, the fear of fading into solipsistic ponderings and being

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<sup>4</sup> See David Perkins’ *A History of Modern Poetry: From the 1890s to the High Modernist Mode* for more biographical information on the trauma and identity crises each poet faced in their lifetime. Pound was eventually institutionalized late in life; Eliot faced a nervous breakdown during the composition of *The Waste Land*, and H.D. suffered many private agonies in the death of some family members in the war, the stillbirth of her child, and the dissolution of her marriage. See *Tribute to Freud* for her personal account of her work with Freud on psychoanalysis, particularly as it pertained to her understandings of identity in her own work.

trapped into purely autobiographical understandings of one's own work, or even just static versions of self, all foster this interest in the impersonal poetic voice. As Sharon Cameron underscores in her introduction to *Impersonality*, "personality" and "impersonality" are not mutually exclusive terms. Indeed, impersonality can better be understood as a putting aside of one's intimate knowledge of oneself, rather than an absence of personality; for, without personal experience or emotion, we would not have the components and materials that need to be combined in order to produce art. The process Eliot describes involves the paradox Cameron sets up and is comparable to the process involved in turning one's work from mere diary to art, where the poet combines and transforms his or her emotion or experience in a way that, in its final form, is unrelated to his personal biography. This process is one Eliot insists is wholly related to an artist's sense of tradition. "The emotion of art is impersonal. And the poet cannot reach this impersonality without surrendering himself wholly to the work to be done. And he is not likely to know what is to be done unless he lives in what is not merely the present, but the present moment of the past, unless he is conscious, not of what is dead, but of what is already living." Eliot sought to establish a sense of tradition in order to validate his own individual voice, to avoid missing certain indestructible truths in the middle of one's personal, specific, idiosyncratic experiences. Despite the ever-changing renderings of such truths, something is continuous and remains. Eliot calls this a historical sense: that which "compels a man to write not merely with his own generation in his bones, but with a feeling that the whole of the literature of Europe from Homer and within it the whole of the literature of his own country has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order." The energy involved in making the past present is one that Eliot himself envisions the same way I envision metamorphosis: of a change that does not abandon the old form in the new form. "He [the artist] must be aware that

the mind of Europe—the mind of his own country—a mind which he learns in time to be much more important than his own private mind—is a mind which changes, and that this change is a development which abandons nothing en route, which does not superannuate either Shakespeare, or Homer, or the rock drawing of the Magdalenian draughtsmen.” Metamorphosis—itsself a change and development that abandons nothing en route— is thus clearly and intricately tied up in this process of making the past present, of recognizing what is already living and thus transmitted to us from the dead. This is a conception, Tomlinson adds, “of the entire history of art as one vast process of metamorphosis” (42).

What Tomlinson and other critics fail to draw out more explicitly, however, is that metamorphosis is one of the central ways in which Pound, Eliot and H.D. practice impersonality in their poetry. There are other ways they do this, such as by simply using quotation or archaisms (as Pound does), but metamorphosis is a centrally important way to achieving the goal of impersonality. At times, these poets speak through Ovidian myth; at other times, they creatively put themselves in an Ovidian scene to force a transformation. Although critics such as Quinn and Tomlinson make note of the influence ideas of impersonality had on the careers of these poets especially in how they conceive and make use of metamorphosis, no one else has drawn together these two strands of modernism so explicitly. I posit that the model of metamorphosis is both a vehicle for impersonality and also has profound implications for it. Impersonality, I will argue, similar to and intricately tied up with Eliot’s and Tomlinson’s conception of a history of art, demands an understanding of the self that is protean, capable of transformation and reconstitution of the personal in another, artistic form made possible through writing and through situating oneself within the context of a literary tradition.

For Pound, as I will discuss in my first chapter, metamorphosis and myths become ways in which to achieve an impersonal poetic voice while they also open up a wide range of possibilities as he metaphorically enacts metamorphosis through his exchange of different masks or personae in order to attempt to use the past in order to reanimate the present. As I will show through a discussion of his poems “The Tree,” “A Girl,” and “The Return,” metamorphosis can be an ecstatic, magical instance of transformation that allows the poet to give the reader new eyes through which to see an old, habitual experience or mindset. The risk, however, of using such a seemingly antiquated and mythical method in the twentieth century –and even from a twenty-first century standpoint—is that metamorphosis can seem artificial, or even downright terrifying in its depiction of a splintering of self. This aspect of metamorphosis is something I’ll explore through a close reading of “La Fraisne,” and “On His Own Face in a Glass.” As I will draw out in my second chapter, for Eliot, metamorphosis becomes an at times costly and troublesome, even broken method for navigating these similar themes in *The Waste Land*. Rather than a model of ecstatic revival, on a thematic level, metamorphosis seems to act as a model that condemns one to repetition. Yet on a structural level, the poem’s use of an interpenetration of voices from both past and present mimics the energy of metamorphosis in a way that reinforces his sense in “Tradition and the Individual Talent” of the importance of impersonally placing oneself in context with the dead. Later, as I look past Ovid in my study of metamorphosis as poetic method, I plan to demonstrate how Eliot in the *Four Quartets* adapts this same metamorphic energy to a Christian discourse. In doing so, he offers a sacred model of repetition and transfiguration (liturgy and Incarnation) that allow Eliot to transpose and redeem his earlier model of pagan, or earth-bound metamorphosis. By way of concluding this project, I will situate H.D.’s poetry—specifically her poems from *The God* sequence which revise the

myths associated with the Ovidian poet character, Orpheus, and her *Trilogy*— within these different figurative and literal uses and depictions of metamorphosis while ultimately commenting on how metamorphosis becomes particularly essential for a woman poet attempting to break into a traditionally patriarchal canon. As I will show, there are several versions and uses of metamorphosis, the levels of which will follow the overall outline of my chapters—one: As a means to combat boredom, to find rejuvenation, and to channel your story impersonally through a mythical funnel that will ensure the story’s timelessness and place in tradition (specifically in Pound’s “The Tree”); two: as an unsuccessful, troubling, sometimes violent, sometimes cheesy response to boredom or trauma in which the metamorphic momentum condemns one to an endless cycle of repetition (as Ovidian characters Tiresias and Philomela observe in Eliot’s *The Waste Land*); three: as a sacred form of transformation or transfiguration, where Incarnation and a liturgical model of repetition take over to offer a spiritual metamorphosis that allows one to break free of Ovidian models of metamorphosis (as in Eliot’s *Four Quartets*); and, in conclusion, a fourth level, where metamorphosis serves as a method through which to creatively insert yourself into, or to completely remake a tradition you had previously thought or been told was closed to you (H.D.’s *Trilogy* and *The God* poems).

Having thus laid out my topic for this project concerning metamorphosis and early high modernist poetry, a familiar question still haunts me and needs to be further addressed: why does it *matter*? The topic of metamorphosis in literature may seem to belong solely to the realm of the classics, fantasy or magical realism. The subject clearly harks back to Ovid’s collection of genesis myths, a collection that arguably has been among the most influential on Western culture. In his *Metamorphoses*, Ovid tells of “bodies changed / To different forms” as he retells his own version of the world’s creation, cataloging and reshaping ancient Greek and Roman gods

and mythologies in such a way that offers up a transformed pantheon of ancient poetry in one volume. Since then authors from Shakespeare to Michael Hofmann have creatively appropriated Ovid's myths, finding their own voices by channeling them through and transforming past models of these now familiar stories.<sup>5</sup> Each time, these Ovidian authors have creatively and figuratively employed a kind of literary metamorphosis in that they shift and reshape "bodies" or myths until these myths become changed, become these authors' own, while still retaining something of the myth's original inspiring core. Nonetheless, even in pointing to the preponderance of this theme in our literary tradition, the question still remains: What kind of relevance can this theme or topic have for us, here in the twenty-first century? To echo Eliot, don't we already, thanks to science and reason, *know* so much more than the antediluvian magic of myth and metamorphosis can teach us?

It is a question that nearly all of the critics who deal explicitly and specifically with metamorphosis and literature seem to feel the pressure to deflect. One of the most recent volumes, *Proteus: The Language of Metamorphosis*, begins with an interview with Darko Suvin, professor emeritus from McGill University, and immediately the question of why metamorphosis still merits study is countered. Suvin argues that "like Mount Everest, it is there; furthermore, it has been there for thousands of years in many cultures. Thus we can learn something about ourselves and possibly even about extra-human 'nature' meditating upon what some of the brightest writers or painters of the past and present have variously conveyed to the 'consumers' of this theme or topos" (13). The theme or topos is itself undying, always reforming across space and time, not just in literature, but also in many different artistic mediums throughout

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<sup>5</sup> See *After Ovid: New Metamorphoses* (1994), a poetry anthology edited by Michael Hofmann.

history.<sup>6</sup> It contains the core knowledge of what the dead thought to preserve in an impersonal form and pass on to future generations. Clearly the topic still matters; and yet, as critics demonstrate, it still seems to need defending, not just in terms of whether or not metamorphosis is still relevant, but if so, *how*? How do stories about the mythical change of one body into different forms tell us anything about our place in a modern, rational world where scientific explanation of phenomena might often prevent us from associating mythical epistemology with our sense of self and being?<sup>7</sup>

In speaking about one of his crucial poems that shows the poetic uses of metamorphosis, Pound offers his own modern defense of metamorphosis:

Commenting on “The Tree” in a footnote to an uncollected poem called “Aube of the West Dawn. Venetian June,” Pound said he thought ‘from such perceptions as this arose .... the myths of metamorphosis’ (A Quinzane for This Yule [1908], p. 12). The theory was elaborated subsequently in the *New Age* [Jan. 7, 1915], 246):

The first myths arose when a man walked sheer into ‘non-sense,’ that is to say, when some very vivid and undeniable adventure

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<sup>6</sup> See Charles Martindale (ed), *Ovid Renewed: Ovidian Influences on Literature and Art from the Middle Ages to the Twentieth Century*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990. Also, Georges Braque, a famous early twentieth-century French painter, said “I am no longer concerned with metaphors but with metamorphoses” (see his *Cahiers D’Art*).

<sup>7</sup> Editors Carla Dente, George Ferzoco, Miriam Gill and Marina Spunta in *Proteus: The Language of Metamorphosis* argue that “The permeation of modern culture by ‘new physics’ establishes a world-view in which the radical transformations of metamorphic change can be related to a soberly scientific understanding of the nature of reality, rather than be consigned to the realms of the supernatural or fantastic” (3).

befell him, and he told someone else who called him a liar.

Thereupon, after bitter experience, perceiving that no one could understand what he meant when he said that he 'turned into a tree,' he made a myth--a work of art that is--an impersonal or objective story woven out of his own emotion, as the nearest equation that he was capable of putting into words. That story, perhaps, then gave rise to a weaker copy of his emotion in others, until there arose a cult, a company of people who could understand each other's nonsense about the gods. (Ruthven 241)

Pound thus elucidates myth-making as a way in which the poet can reconfigure the personal in an impersonal manner. By creating myths of metamorphosis, the self is allowed to project outwards, to inhabit another, impersonal space, thus allowing it the freedom to seek out renewed insight or escape. Regardless, something of the original self is suspended in the story; without that original self or personal emotion, there would be no emotional material upon which to build the impersonal myth. Myth opens up a realm in which it is safe and expected that one will discuss the fantastic, the seemingly irrational. The speaker in the poem "The Tree" wants to talk about a moment of transformation that occurred within himself when he understood "things unseen before," and the language he reaches for to use in order to do this is the language of metamorphosis. Similarly, Eliot's comments in "Ulysses, Order and Myth" celebrate what he calls a mythical method for literature. Speaking of James Joyce's allusive and myth-centered *Ulysses*, Eliot says "In using the myth, in manipulating a continuous parallel between contemporaneity and antiquity, Mr Joyce is pursuing a method which others must pursue after him. . . . Instead of narrative method, we may now use the mythical method. It is, I seriously

believe, a step toward making the modern world possible for art..." (*The Waste Land* 130).

Myth thus establishes an order that accounts for and manipulates a continuity between the past and present. As these notes from Pound and Eliot demonstrate, myth is a method for achieving impersonality and for making the past present in ways that make art still possible. Myth and metamorphosis are forms of understanding that may counteract and go against the grain of modern, rationalist, scientific, and instrumental modes of analyzing and making use of the world. Yet the premise of using myth and metamorphosis in a modern context, such as Pound and Eliot do in their poetry, is that there is something about its primitive energy that is useful and productive—and if we lose it, we lose a whole—and one could even say, an *artistic*— range of experience and way of understanding human identity.

Almost always this change, this instance of physical transfiguration that Ovidian metamorphosis is built upon is further understood as a creative depiction of the mutability of human identity on a more metaphorical level. Recent studies of metamorphosis literature such as D.B.D. Asker's *Aspects of Metamorphosis: Fictional Representations of Becoming Human* (2001) and Marina Warner's *Fantastic Metamorphoses, Other Worlds: Ways of Telling the Self* (2002) are interested in how the concept of identity must lend itself to a constant cycle of death and rebirth in metamorphosis literature. Most literary critics of this classic, Ovidian model of metamorphosis celebrate the language of metamorphosis as they identify the elastic nature of its definition. "It expresses eternal flux, a prevailing law of mutability and change" (Warner 4), and "it is characteristic for metamorphic writing to appear in transitional places and at the confluence of traditions and civilizations" (Warner 18). This elasticity mirrors what we as writers and readers continue to celebrate and develop: the inexhaustible nature of meaning and interpretation. As Warner points out in the introduction of her book, the concept of

metamorphosis as “a literary figure ... embodies the condition of writing itself.” Asker echoes these large-scale statements when he states, “Perhaps there is something in this particular form which resembles the structure of the human mind and has a resonance for the human spirit” (6). It is clear the term’s meaning has been expanded to mean more than the physical change of one body into another and indeed always has included these meanings.

According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the oldest definition of the term “metamorphosis” is “the action or process of changing in form, shape, or substance; esp. transformation by supernatural means. When we speak of metamorphosis stories, on one level, we do mean human-animal metamorphosis stories, such as Kafka’s or the ones in Ovid. However, I posit that the very nature of the word pushes for another kind of definition, one that covers many instances of changes or transformations, especially in the constant breaking and re-making of self or identity in the face of pressure, such as imminent destruction or even simply in the need to stave off a stagnating sense of self that one faces in the bored repetition that stems from a habit-worn outlook towards life. I also argue that the term now has a second-order meaning. When we discuss meta-language, we mean language that has a second-order signification. In the same way, the nature of the prefix ‘meta’ pushes for another kind of definition of metamorphosis, one that covers many instances of changes or transformations. I urge my readers to keep in mind not just literal instances of metamorphosis in literature, but figurative ones as well. When T.S. Eliot writes using Tiresias as the narrator in *The Waste Land*, he not only mimics metamorphosis by shifting the narrative voice into another, more mythical figure who is himself capable of metamorphosis, Eliot also transforms the story, just as Ovid did when he penned his own version of the myth. Myths like this have lent themselves to constant retellings and reshadings, an act that transforms these stories in a dynamic sort of way, rather

than just changing or modifying them slightly. Metamorphosis demands that we hold two things at once; both the history of the old versions and the new one being created out of them. The fact of Daphne's violent transformation into a tree signifies the strange dynamic and magic inherent in the mythical world Ovid imagines, but the added mythic layer of signification is how this transformation speaks to a larger set of issues revolving around the transformative power that intense emotions (such as Daphne's fear of Apollo's sexual advances) have over the self. The astonishing power of a structuralist theory of myth lies in the elastic ability of words and definitions to stretch to new levels of meaning.<sup>8</sup> Anything can lend itself as a catalyst for a new level of signification. Any story can become a myth, can allow myth to accumulate levels and layers of renewed signification—which is what Ovid does when he decides from an etiological perspective to retell the story of Apollo's penchant for laurel leaves, recasting it as a tale of unrequited love that causes his love interest, Daphne, to seek refuge and escape by metamorphosing into a laurel tree. Ezra Pound retells his own version of the Daphne/Apollo story in his shorter poems in *Personae*; in some ways, he trades in third order signification.<sup>9</sup> This is why metamorphosis is still relevant today; inherently, the word embodies a sense of inexhaustibility, where old tales offer themselves as sources for new spins or takes. As with Daphne, whose "body is willing to become a thing, but a thing which retains something of its own nature" (Tomlinson 9), something of the core of the original story remains, but allows for its form to take on new shape and meaning, cloaked by the language of myth and of metamorphosis.

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<sup>8</sup> In viewing myth and metamorphosis in this way, I am indebted to Roland Barthes study of modern myth in "Myth Today," in which he posits myth as a structure, one that includes many orders or levels of signification. Although his discussion of myth has certain political and cultural implications, I only want to focus here on the bare structure he lays out in this study.

<sup>9</sup> Or even fourth, fifth, twentieth, fortieth, etc, considering how many other versions of this story that exist or may have existed but are now lost.

Furthermore, metamorphic energy can show itself even in sacred forms, rather than “pagan” mythical, seemingly archaic forms. Like Pound, H.D. demonstrates a penchant for personae from ancient Greece in her early poetry. However, in her *Trilogy* she uses metamorphosis within the context of esoteric religious transformation that simultaneously places women at the forefront of mythmaking. Using the figure Psyche, who is often associated with the metamorphic figure of the butterfly, H.D. considers metamorphic energy at the center of her religious thinking in terms of the resurrection that comes out of death and destruction and the restructuring of tradition that lies therein. Metamorphosis is thus able to encompass figurative examples of literal narratives of transformation as well. The second definition available in the Oxford English Dictionary clarifies this, citing metamorphosis more generally as “a complete change in the appearance, circumstances, condition, or character of a person, a state of affairs, etc.” It is this less literal, more dynamic definition of metamorphosis that also shapes this project. In light of the staying, mutable power of metamorphosis—as both a term and concept—I would like to see instead how thinking about Ovidianism and metamorphosis as a discourse and as a formal, structuring device for poetry, can open up modern poems in revitalizing ways.

In order to do this, I must first make clear what I mean by Ovidianism. It is useful to ask why Ovid would center his epic, mythological world around metamorphosis, since this question helps unpack what it is about metamorphosis that becomes so central to Pound and Eliot as they use metamorphosis to navigate the same questions of a fragmented identity seeking to understand its position in relation to the past and the present ever-changing world.

For Ovid chose the theme and method of metamorphosis not as a whimsical vehicle for amusement (though there is this in abundance in his stories) but to present the process of transformation as a means of relating

the inner workings of the mind to the workings of nature – reconciling, as it were, the human with the outside-human. The world of nature is seen as points of stasis in a reality which constantly changes, and stories of these sudden and abrupt changes of form reflect the nature of language itself as it reflects the man’s impulse to understand the living world and human identity. (Asker 2)

Drawing on the significance of metamorphosis that Asker points to here, I argue that Ovidianism is the way in which metamorphosis becomes more than a trope; it becomes a way in which to speak or think about transformation. Just as Roland Barthes positions myth as a language, as a structural method for speech and understanding, so I position metamorphosis as a structure, a form of aesthetic and philosophical organization for understanding personal identity and one’s relation to the past. I propose that there is something about the nature of metamorphosis that motivated and continues to motivate artists and poets, especially when exploring questions of identity in a changing world. As a model, it offers a mechanism through which to depict not only the destruction of self in a world constantly under threat of change, but a resilience of self as it reshapes and reforms to adapt to this as well. Walter Pater, in his “Conclusion” to *The Renaissance*, terms his understanding of identity as “that strange, perpetual weaving and unweaving of ourselves.” Likewise, “in a 1924 essay about Freud’s influence on literature, the south poet and critic John Crow Ransom noted that, after Freud, the self is conceived as ‘multiple rather than simple,’ many ‘bound up loosely in one,’ ‘a pack of demons.’” (*Norton* xl-xli). This emerging, modern understanding of identity calls for a continual breaking and re-making of identity, the energy of which is essential to any metamorphic story.

Additionally, this understanding of identity as fundamentally fractured found outlet in early twentieth-century trauma literature and theory, something that also has ties to metamorphosis. Despite its seemingly archaic connotations, metamorphosis is crucially influential on artistic renderings of modern human subjectivity under pressure. As Ziolkowski succinctly summarizes, “the idea of metamorphosis was centrally prevalent in the minds of many high modernists immediately before and after World War I—metamorphosis as a reflection of the rapidly changing world that they saw around them as the social, political, and cultural foundations of the nineteenth century crumbled and the twentieth century began to emerge from the ruins” (Ziolkowski 75). With the “rapid pace of social and technological change....Modernity disrupts the old order, up-ends ethical and social codes, casts into doubt previously stable assumptions about self, community, the world, and the divine” (*Norton* xliii). The energy involved in metamorphosis reveals particular aspects that are essential to a modern concept of identity, in which identity is constantly broken and reformed, weaved and unweaved. As I will later show briefly in my first chapter through a close reading of Pound’s “La Fraise” and “On His Own Face in a Glass” and more comprehensively in my second chapter through examining the Ovidian characters in *The Waste Land*,<sup>10</sup> in these cases, metamorphosis serves as a broken model, one that does not end up helping free its subjects, but instead condemns them to a cycle of repetition, or a terrifying splintering of self. Broken or not, however, this model still allows Pound, Eliot and H.D. a way in which to approach the issues of impersonality and tradition to which both were deeply committed in their poetic projects.

Like one of Ovid’s characters, Ovid’s text itself is metamorphic. The stories it encapsulates have proven themselves as protean as Proteus, as metamorphic as the gods who

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<sup>10</sup> See some essays in *Tense Past*, edited by Paul Antze and Michael Lambek.

instigate its changes. It has lived forever, as Ovid insists it will, precisely because of its foundation on a universe that is consistently in flux. Such fluidity has allowed the stories and themes to be adopted and re-formed throughout our literary history, and popular contemporary anthologies such as *After Ovid* demonstrate the fascination and inspiration the collection of myths still holds for our poets today. What H.D., Eliot and Pound saw in myth was its ability to tell stories that are beyond the self, which are impersonal and thus universal. They both come to the myths they use with deeply personal material, and these myths—and metamorphosis in particular— help them transpose the personal to the impersonal register while also navigating issues of identity from within that context.

As I near the end of my beginning, I can't help but return to my earlier frustrations with the claim that plundering the past allows one to extract the essentially living. The potential dangers of this modern mythmaking, especially in the context of impersonality, are an over reliance on the past as opposed to one's self. Perhaps it was an American impulse, my distrust of tradition that festered as I studied abroad in the world's oldest university. Catering to this impulse, I turned to Ralph Waldo Emerson's essay "The American Scholar," in which he likewise cautions against this blind reliance on the past, since then "Instantly the book becomes noxious: the guide is a tyrant." As I discovered during my time as a student here, "Books are the best of things, well used; abused, among the worst" (67). Although they should be used for inspiration, it's a little too easy within such a structure and reverence for tradition for an impressible student to lose her voice as she struggles to understand how she can successfully measure herself against a tradition, a canon of literary works while also navigating a philosophy of identity that calls for a fragmentation that is at once liberating and terrifying. Metamorphosis at once confirms and frees us from this fear. As I will demonstrate, Eliot and to some extent

Pound and H.D. were not strangers to such fears and paradoxes, and a better understanding—through the structure of metamorphosis— of how impersonality and tradition work in their poetry will bear this out.

## Chapter One:

A Return to the Origin: Pound's Metamorphic Method in *Personae*

The romance of the precise is not the elision  
 Of the tired romance of imprecision.  
 It is the ever-never-changing same,  
 An appearance of Again, the diva-dame.

--Wallace Stevens, "Adult Epigram"

In order to explain more fully how metamorphosis and myth work within the context of Impersonality, I begin with Ezra Pound. His famous credo is to "make it new," and he did much to advance the poetical careers of T.S. Eliot and H.D., who are also at the center of this project. Paradoxically and even counter-intuitively, however, Pound and many of his fellow modernist poets modernized themselves in part by invoking the past in their poetry. The introduction to the *Norton Anthology to Modern and Contemporary Poetry Vol. 1* explains this paradox, stating that "make it new" is also "ironically, a reaction to an uneasy sense of being 'not new,' of coming late in the long record of human achievement, and thus bearing the enormous weight of the cultural past...It registers the impact of change on the imagination, while answering to the traditions of poetry as an ancient art form" (xli). Joyce's *Ulysses*, Eliot's *The Waste Land*, H.D.'s *The God* sequence<sup>11</sup> all are evidence of modern authors refusing to dis sever themselves from the past and instead mining Greek myth for inspiration and direction. Wyndham Lewis' "A Man in Love with the Past" from *Time and Western Man* criticizes Pound for this, going so far to insist that Pound "has never loved anything living as he has loved the dead," and, disputing Eliot's early claim that this allows Pound to "extract the essentially living," Lewis goes on to say that "If this account of him is true, it is obvious how unfit he is to deal with living material at all"

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<sup>11</sup> The sequence of poems were collected under this title in her *Collected Poems*, and together they deliberately revise Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, and include poems such as "The God," "Adonis," "Pygmalion," "Eurydice," and "Oread."

(69). It's difficult to juggle both Eliot's and Lewis' contradictory opinions of Pound's poetry, but as I will show in this chapter, metamorphosis is a key poetic tool in balancing the possible successes and failures of plundering the past for inspiration and poetic process.

As he demonstrates in his volume of shorter poems, *Personae* (1926), Pound is the most Ovidian of the modern poets; his allusions to Ovid are numerous and even his letters and criticism extol most vigorously the virtues of the *Metamorphoses*. Ezra Pound considered Golding's translation of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* one of the most beautiful in all of the English language and counted the book not only as one of the few safe guides in religion, but also as one of five literary works requisite for culture (see *The ABC of Reading* 45 and 115 and Quinn 17). The theme of metamorphosis unifies the whole of his work before the *Cantos* (though, as S. Mary Bernetta Quinn points out, the *Cantos* are also centered on and around metamorphoses, a point that demonstrates how metamorphosis continued to be important to Pound's poetic philosophy even later on). By taking on different masks of the past, Pound's collection of shorter poems demonstrates a kind of literary metamorphosis, or creative transformation of self, especially in relation to modernist theories of originality and personality. The title speaks to these preoccupations and Pound's method in dealing with them: *personae* comes from the Latin meaning "mask," or "character played by an actor." The different characters Pound is able to play in his poems—whether Ovidian or not—allow him to transform himself, while still retaining something of himself. Pound constantly draws upon metamorphosis—both as a theme and as a vehicle—as a driving force behind creative transformation of old Provencal, ancient Greek and Roman myths. Pound, for his part, insists that he is learning to write the way writers in ancient times learned. We see in his earlier, shorter poems that Pound uses past myths and stories not simply as models that help him, through imitation, hone his poetic craft, but as

inspiration. As he says in *A B C of Reading*, "it is my firm conviction that a man can learn more about poetry by really knowing and examining a few of the best poems than by meandering about among a great many" (43). For Pound, a poet needs to sift through the poetry dating back even to ancient times in order to learn what has come before him, just as scientists need to catalog and review the data and experiments that have shaped present understanding.

In Ovid's mythical realm, knowledge is gained or explained through the act of the human changing form in order to enter into the animal or plant world. In our modern era, we see more evidence of the unknown being breached through re-discoveries of the mythic, ancient world—our literary past. As John Whittier-Ferguson points out, modern epics are made not from the mead hall or the battlefield, but from our libraries. Modern mythmaking works in much the same way, in plundering the past by sifting through books. Pound emphasizes this blurring between the past and present by writing many of his poems in an archaic diction as he explores past myths, while still making them his own. In Ovid, the Daphne and Apollo myth is taken as purely story; that is, a textual location of a popular story from oral traditions. In Pound, however, this story is used as a mask through which Pound can impersonally channel something of himself while schooling himself—through imitation—in prosody and subject matter. Pound sought to learn from the dead, not just by reading older forms of poetry, but by trying his hand at imitating them as well. *Metamorphosis* figuratively acts as a gathering force of imitative and echoing projects in which one uses old material in new ways. This is also evident when we consider Pound's translations of Chinese poetry in his volume called *Cathay*, also included in *Personae*. Despite the fact that his knowledge of Chinese was rudimentary at best, Pound's translations of ancient Chinese poetry managed, as Ming Xie points out, to become English poems in their own right, while still, paradoxically, remaining true to the essentials of Chinese

poetry.<sup>12</sup> As Eliot says in his introduction to Pound's *Selected Poems*, it would be a mistake to consider his translations as separate from his works, since "A good translation like his is not merely translation, for the translator is giving the original through himself, and finding himself through the original." The root meaning of translate is 'to change from one condition to another,' making it analogous to the act of metamorphosis. Translation is thus itself metamorphosis, like the kind that Pound explored through his Ovidian allusions in other poems such as "The Tree" and "A Girl."<sup>13</sup> Clearly, metamorphosis is a way to understand a whole range of Pound's meditative and poetic practices as it helps encapsulate all the various ways in which Pound was a chameleon (or, as Lewis would less flatteringly have it, a "great intellectual parasite" [68]).

Here, it seems appropriate to draw again on Barthes in order to clarify the definition of metamorphosis and myth. I argue that even in the transference of signification from one level to another, something of the original remains; for without that original, the new, transfigured meaning would not exist, would have nothing upon which to build itself. In the same way, moments of intensity— either during war, while witnessing natural phenomena, or even just in reading a particularly moving passage of literature— change our selves, even though something of the same, old self or form is retained. By looking back to the past, Pound propels himself and his poetry forward. "In this respect this most radical paradigm of change contains within itself ideas of continuity" (Dente et al 1). This seemingly paradoxical move was made possible through the advent of metamorphosis: the transformation of the story's shape and narrative details, while still retaining something of the inspiring core.

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<sup>12</sup> See essay "Pound as translator" in *The Cambridge Companion to Ezra Pound*, ed. Ira B. Nadel, 1999.

<sup>13</sup> For more on this topic, see Charles Tomlinson's *Metamorphoses: Poetry and Translation*.

In the process of this kind of allusive poetic project, however, Pound found it difficult to respect or even believe in the originality of an individual poet when it came to recasting certain subjects in poetry that had already been repeated too often to seem “new” anymore. In one of Pound’s letters, he lists these commonplaces that he had found repeated too often to warrant any further visitation in his poetry:

1. Spring is a pleasant season. The flowers, etc. etc. sprout bloom  
etc. etc.
2. Young man’s fancy. Lightly, heavily, gaily etc. etc.
3. Love, a delightsome tickling. Indefinable etc. A) By day, etc.  
etc. etc. B) By night, etc. etc. etc.
- 4 Trees, hills etc. are by a provident nature arranged diversely, in  
diverse places.
- 5 Winds, clouds, rains, etc. flop thru and over ‘em.
6. Men love women . . . .
7. Men fight battles, etc. etc.
8. Men go on voyages (*The Letters of Ezra Pound 1907-1941*, 37-  
38).

It is clear from the bored repetition of those etceteras and the flippancy laced through his simple manner of laying out such complex topics and themes (“Love, a delightsome tickling. Indefinable”) that Pound found absolute originality was impossible. It’s a problem anyone who reads copiously faces: ironically, the more one reads, the more one begins to find his or her own voice being crowded out. As Pound said in “Make It New,” “It is only good manners if you repeat a few other men to at least do it better or more briefly. Utter originality is of course out of

the question.” As a poet who was academically inclined and immersed in poetic projects filled with research and archaisms, Pound sought to return instead to quotation, imitation, and translation of poets who came before him and said it better. As K.K. Ruthven, in his Introduction to his *Guide to Personae* (1969), says: “Allusiveness is a way of acknowledging antecedents, of admitting that others have been here before us; if a poet finds himself compelled to say something that has already been said before, the least he can do is to refer directly to the earlier writer or quote him in whatever language he happens to have written” (Ruthven 3). This concept of the death of originality seems particularly damning; how does one go about writing if he/she has such an acute, academic awareness of how many poems and poets have long since written it all down before? How does one write about love after Shakespeare, or about prayer after Herbert, or about metamorphosis after Ovid? The answer, for Pound, is by evoking metamorphosis: he creatively takes on different personae, temporarily becoming different mythic figures. Through imitation, Pound does not merely transcribe these old stories; as in music, he transposes these stories into his own key. Eliot celebrates this difference between mere imitation and creative transposing, saying, “Immature poets imitate; mature poets steal; bad poets deface what they take, and good poets make it into something better, or at least something different. The good poet welds his theft into a whole of feeling which is unique, utterly different from that from which it was torn” (*Selected Prose of T.S. Eliot* 153).<sup>14</sup> Though they retain the core of their original narrative arc, their form has been transfigured into something of Pound’s own. By inhabiting these antiquities, Pound manages to confer a sense of authenticity; it’s as though the dead speak through Pound, or rather, that Pound finds his voice through them. In writing thusly and by achieving impersonality in this way, Pound demonstrates Eliot’s point in “Tradition and

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<sup>14</sup> From essay “Phillip Massinger.”

the Individual Talent,” which states: “No poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone. His significance, his appreciation is the appreciation of his relation to the dead poets and artists.”<sup>15</sup> This is true of Pound’s poetry, but the reverse is also true. Those dead poems and poets take on their significance from their continued resonance in modern literature that Pound’s reanimation of them allows. As Eliot says, “the difference between the present and the past is that the conscious present is an awareness of the past in a way and to an extent which the past’s awareness of itself cannot show.” Pound doesn’t just draw on the past in his poems. In many ways he seeks to inhabit the past, to revivify it from his position in the present—a project that seems to reflect the kind of work we engage in as readers all the time.

In Pound’s case, originality can be seen as a return to the origin, rather than a completely new excavation of something previously undiscovered. As he says of his own purpose,

I began this search for the real in a book called *Personae*, casting off, as it were, complete masks of the self in each poem. I continued in a long series of translations, which were but more elaborate masks...A Russian correspondent, after having called it a symbolist poem, and having been convinced that it was not symbolism, said slowly, “I see, you wish to give people new eyes, not to make them see some particular new thing.”<sup>16</sup>

Pound connects the action of casting off complete masks and selves in the poem to the act of giving people new eyes; new insight is to be gained by the metamorphic transfiguration of self in poetry. As Quinn explains, “Rejuvenation is achieved by clothing the basic thought in fresh particulars, the vitality of which has not been worn down by familiarity” (28). Thus, Pound rejects his “list” of well-written and well-worn themes, yet he still turns to the past as an attic

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<sup>15</sup> again from “Tradition and the Individual Talent.”

<sup>16</sup> See his essay on “Vorticism,” *Fortnightly Review*, XCVI, 573 (Sept. 1 1914), 463-464.

space through which he can rummage, air out, and transform such basic thoughts and themes with fresh particulars. Vintage (cars, clothing, literature, etc.) if you will, always becomes new again; or if not new, our interest in them becomes renewed. As Pound says in a *Criterion* essay, “nothing is new and all good is renewal.”<sup>17</sup> By inhabiting different personae, Pound attempts to transform the modern world and himself, to reanimate his understanding of both the world and self through the use of the gods and the metamorphic powers that have lain dormant for some time. In his poem “The Return,” Pound describes the pagan gods who, “vigorous in antiquity, have managed to survive only as shadows of their former selves” (Ruthven 204). The ghosts, as it were, are “tentative,” with “trouble in the pace” and “uncertain / Wavering!” They were “the souls of blood,” but now they are “Slow on the leash, / pallid the leash-men!” Though these pagan gods, these metamorphic spirits, exist as shadows of their former might, they always return and we always return to them, even if we don’t always recognize them in the same form they enjoyed in pagan myth. This poem can be understood as a microcosmic example of what Pound attempts in his entire *Personae* project: of resurrecting the dead, seeing them return, and, as Eliot says in his *Four Quartet*, seeing them return “and bring us with them.” In doing so, Pound bridges two worlds: the past and the present, making it clear that a new understanding can come from looking back and finding the universal in experiences and stories from the past.

We can see this renewed understanding in Pound’s “The Tree,” a poem chosen to open the collection and to thus represent or introduce the volume. It deals explicitly with metamorphosis and Ovidian references. Indeed, its placement as the first poem of *Personae* speaks volumes about metamorphosis’ importance to Pound’s overall project. In it, the poetic

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<sup>17</sup> “D’Artagnan Twenty Years After.” *The Criterion*, July 1937. rpt. *Selected Prose, 1909-1965*. Ed. William Cookson. New York: New Directions, 1975.

speaker owns a more personal voice while engaging in diegesis. In using first person, the speaker situates himself within his own story of metamorphosis: “I stood still and was a tree amid the wood.” Through the power of metaphor (by writing and asserting so confidently that “I was a tree”), the speaker becomes something other than himself, while still retaining something of his core self. Instead of speaking simply through or as Daphne, which he does in “A Girl,” the speaker claims that by “becoming” a tree in a metamorphic fashion, he is able to know

the truth of things unseen before;  
Of Daphne and the laurel bow  
And that god-feasting couple old  
That grew elm-oak amid the wold.

By creatively inhabiting this poetic, metaphorical space where it is possible for an individual to “become a tree amid the wood”—and additionally by remembering a literary history of others changing into tree (Daphne, Baucis and Philemon<sup>18</sup>), Pound lays claim to renewed understanding of things that were “rank folly to my head before.” Metamorphosis thus allows the self the elasticity necessary for understanding things “unseen before,” suggesting that the speaker has obtained “new eyes.”

The question of just what Pound understands better after engaging with this creative metamorphosis goes unanswered and allows the reader to fill in her own answer. It also implies that the action of metamorphosis as it relates to seeing the old with new eyes, rather than seeing some new particular thing, is what is important. As Quinn elucidates,

We must be willing to admit that our version of reality needs constant  
revision if it is to remain valid...what served yesterday as an equation for

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<sup>18</sup> Baucis and Philemon are two who were metamorphosed into trees by the gods in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, VIII.

one's personality, or any fragment of it, is no longer satisfactory today.  
 Only the man who keeps voluntary pace with his metamorphoses will  
 succeed as a human being. (26)

The poem is not about a particular epiphany, but rather, it is about the human ability to learn, unlearn, and relearn, to read, reread, question, and revise our opinions of ourselves and our relation to the outside world. The process of metamorphosis is a process of renewed understanding that we need to practice perpetually. Figuratively, we need to remake ourselves and reform our ideas about our own identities if we are to avoid a habit-worn outlook that turns our eyes old, blind to renewal. Pound is deliberate and matter-of-fact when he says "I stood still and was a tree amid the wood, / Knowing the truth of things unseen before." The power and certainty in his words and in his poetic ability to use metaphor, to stand still and be a tree, and in that moment to invoke the mythical figures that have magically completed this kind of tree transformation are in themselves dislocating, shaking us out of a habit of thought that might resist metamorphosis. The assertive style and mode of declaration here dares a reader not to marvel at and participate in the ecstasy—in the magic—of such a transformation.

Similarly, we can see in the poem that Pound does relocate the power of metamorphoses from the realm of the divine to the realm of the human heart and the human will. With just a few words—almost incantations—Pound declares, or wills himself into "treeness." By mentally inhabiting the space of a tree, by feeling of the roots of the literary history of allusion surrounding and grounding his transformation, Pound realizes:

'Twas not until the gods had been  
 Kindly entreated, and been brought within  
 Unto the hearth of their heart's home

That they might do this wonder thing...

The “they” in this part seems to me to belong to the metamorphic figures of Daphne and Baucis and Philemon; Pound thus confers some of the power behind the metamorphosis to them, rather than relegating all agency of the act to the whimsical, outside forces embodied in the gods. The gods do need to be entreated, and, more important, they need to be brought within these human subjects. By internalizing these forces, which symbolically seem to represent the transformative power of nature, Daphne is able to transform herself in order to escape her potentially destructive present. In these particular Ovidian cases of metamorphosis, the transformation is cast as a reward, or a response to a cry for help, rather than a punishment from the gods. Daphne is fleeing from the lecherous Apollo when the force of her terror allows her to escape through metamorphosis; in this case, unlike others in Ovid, metamorphosis is benevolent, if still violent and forceful, as Pound explores when he takes on the voice of Daphne in “A Girl.” Something is lost, even if she is thus preserved in another form, a form whose magic ensures her abiding endurance in the myths and stories we continue to tell and retell. As with most of his other personae poems, however, what is important here is the exercise, the act of metamorphosis itself. The speaker in “The Tree” imaginatively inhabits another space, becoming another entity—and in that imaginative shift in perspective, he’s allowed to stretch the self to find new epiphanies that he might not have originally been able to make from a stagnant, dull, or deadened point of view, or understanding of self. In “becoming,” the self is more elastic, more lively—but it’s also scary, thrown open. Metamorphosis also becomes a way in which to talk about those moments of intense, potentially destructive yet still necessary transformations.

Not all of Pound’s poems demonstrate how metamorphosis can lead to this kind of rejuvenation. On a formal level, at times it seems as though Pound does not push his poems past

pastiche and imitation, and many of his personae poems remain nothing more than poetic exercises. In other words, it's as though Pound tries more transformations than he pulls off. Furthermore, there is a danger in practicing the magic of metamorphosis in the twentieth century, or even from a twenty-first century standpoint, in which metamorphosis doesn't fully work and instead can feel artificial, even cheesy, like really bad special effects, or even just puzzlingly archaic. For example, his "La Fraisne" seems to offer very little in terms of content. In it, Pound takes on the voice of an aged man who "was a gaunt, grave councilor / Being in all things wise, and very old" who has decided to live among his fellow men no more, seeking solace and companionship instead among the trees, "in another fashion that more suiteth me." As we can see, this councilor's diction is archaic, and the title lends itself to the assumption that the story comes from some arcane Provencal myth. The man desires "a bride / That was a dog-wood tree some syne," a strange desire for a man that rings even more strangely and even falsely because the language itself is so odd, the diction and spelling so archaic. As Ruthven points out, the poem needed an explanatory note in which Pound draws "attention to a metaphysical scheme that the reader would scarcely have discerned for himself... which reads

When the soul is exhausted of fire, then doth the spirit return unto its  
 primal nature...becometh it kin to the faun and the dryad, a woodland-  
 dweller amid the rocks and streams. (Ruthven 158)

This is a prime example of an instance in Pound's poetry where his attempts to make it new by using the past seem initially just to confuse readers, especially if it necessitates an explanatory note such as this one. It implies that the reader could not discern anything from the poem on its own. Nevertheless, the more I considered Pound's decision to use such an antediluvian style, the more I realized that Pound is evoking another kind of metamorphosis: that of words as they

accrue different meanings, pronunciations and spellings over time. Pound plays with this here in a way that makes this poem seem both ancient and modern at the same time. In using such antiquated spellings or diction, he reminds of word's own history, how, even though they change over time, they still continue the roots of meanings and spellings from past usages. Using these spellings is clearly an attempt to make the poem inhabit two different ages and registers at once.

To return to the diegetic level of the poem, metamorphosis here is activated from a desire for escape, rather than one of rejuvenation. The man in the poem hides his "face where the oak / Spread his leaves over me," he seeks to "cast aside" the "yoke / Of the old ways of men," and it's clear he is seeking escape from a way of life which no longer invigorates him. Thus, in this case, it's escape from exhaustion that activates the metamorphosis, rather than escape from trauma or threat, as is the case so often in Ovid. As the poem later allows us to understand, the man had an affair once with a woman, but this memory proves traumatic, one that the man refuses to fully articulate:

Once there was a woman...  
 ...but I forget...she was...  
 ...I hope she will not come again.

The fragmentary nature of the verse, the trailing off of the speaker's words into pauses indicates the fragmented, broken nature of his mind. It is clear that that the speaker has suffered. "...I do not like to remember things anymore," he says, and the isolation of that line set apart from the rest of the stanzas mirrors his self-inflicted isolation from the rest of the world, and his emotional isolation from the one who "hurt [him] once." He has come to the woods to escape from his memories, and he seeks to turn this tree into an idealized form of the female: a nymph-like bride,

one that is incapable of hurting him, one that is literally rooted and will not leave.<sup>19</sup> He is a man distressed by the past, a fact that is compounded by the effect of aging on his mind. His desire to transform himself into a kindred of the woodland is fueled by a need to escape, rather than to find renewal in the old. Metamorphosis has the potential to break and unmake the self, especially when used for the purpose of escape. In “A Girl,” Daphne disappears into the form of a tree: “Downward / The branches grow out of me, like arms,” and we cannot avoid the pain, the violence, and the terror that is involved in her transformation and escape from Apollo’s sexual advances. In “La Fraisne,” on the other hand, the man in the poem does not seem afraid of this unmaking of his self, since he seeks to dissolve into a new life amid the trees as softly and understatedly as the poem’s ellipses trail off of the page.

We can see this similar contentment with metamorphosis as demonstration of an old-age wisdom that seeks to return one back to his primitive, animalistic connections to the natural world in one of Pound’s versions/translations of a Chinese poem by Li Po.<sup>20</sup>

So-Shu dreamed,  
 And having dreamed that he was a bird, a bee, a butterfly,  
 He was uncertain why he should try to feel like anything else.

Hence his contentment. (“Ancient Wisdom, Rather Cosmic”)

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<sup>19</sup> In some ways, this poem is reminiscent of the Pygmalion myth in which the sculptor, disillusioned with the examples of femininity he sees around him, creates his own perfect version of a female that metamorphoses into life.

<sup>20</sup> The poem Pound imitates is one by Li Po that H.A. Giles first translated in *A History of Chinese Literature* (1901, p. 63). In Giles’s version, the poem reads “Now I do not know whether I was then a man dreaming I was a butterfly, or whether I am now a butterfly dreaming I am a man” (Ruthven 36).

Because he has performed metamorphosis in the dream realm—for it is in the imagination that magic is safe from skepticism or even ridicule—Sho-Shu is able to relinquish himself to a multiple, mutable understanding of identity. Whether he is a man dreaming he was a butterfly, or, upon waking, is a butterfly dreaming he is a man is besides the point in the poem, which seems to be the contentment with the flight itself. Not all of us, however, are likely to see this kind of transfiguration of self as peaceful, especially if our spirits are not, as is the councilor's in “La Fraisne,” yet “exhausted of fire.”

Although he recognizes metamorphosis as a force that allows him to break into new places and escape exhausting or traumatizing ones, Pound deals explicitly with the terror that arrives in midst of the kind of mask-changing and re-making that takes place throughout his *Personae* project in “On His Own Face in a Glass.” The poem consists of a speaker engaging in a discussion with himself—his selves—in this particular case while in front of a mirror. He finds something unfamiliar in talking to his different personae: his face in the glass is “strange,” full of an array of contradictions evidenced in the pairing of the phrases “ribald company” and “saintly host” in describing his self (selves). It's as though a whole host of people exist in front of him in the mirror, and we can see Pound encounter all his personae, poetic and otherwise, in the phrase

What answer? O ye myriad

That strive and play and pass,

Jest, challenge, counterlie!

The myriad personae amalgamate and balance each other out in their contradictions and challenges of one another, and yet it is because of this jesting, challenging and counter-lying that Pound finds himself without answers—or, perhaps, too many answers—to the question of “I? I? I? / And yet?” Which face in the glass is the “real” Pound? Is there such a thing as an easy,

certain, singular, stable identity? Pound thinks not: “In the search for oneself, in the search for ‘sincere self-expression,’ one gropes, one finds some seeming verity. One says ‘I am’ this, that or the other, and with the words scarcely uttered one ceases to be that thing.”<sup>21</sup> Though the face in the glass doesn’t change anymore than with the brushing effects of time, Pound has lost himself within his poetic project in *Personae* in allusions and has transformed himself into not just into a tree, but into multiple personae from past literary traditions. These faces swarm and stare back at him through the glass, at once crowding him out and scattering his notion of personal identity. The transformative energies involved changing from one persona to another in a figurative, poetic space mirror the transformative energies involved in metamorphosis. Despite the opportunities that this kind of metamorphic project has offered him, the power of metamorphosis thus also comes with the lack of stability, an open-endedness to stories and questions of identity that at once stills, trips, and invigorates the impersonal tongue (and pen).

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<sup>21</sup> Again from his essay “Vorticism,” *Fortnightly Review*, XCVI, 573 (Sept. 1 1914), 463-464.

## Chapter Two:

A Worn-Out Common Song: Malfunctioning Metamorphosis in Eliot's *The Waste Land*

I remain self-possessed  
 Except when a street piano, mechanical and tired  
 Reiterates some worn-out common song  
 --T.S. Eliot, "Portrait of a Lady"

Unlike Pound's desire to bestow his reader with "new" eyes through which to view transformation as invigorating, fighting stagnancy of soul and outlook and infusing the everyday with renewed insight and inspiration, Eliot by distinction seeks to give his readers a vision of frustrated metamorphosis that doesn't lead to fulfilling change, or escape at all. Many of *The Waste Land's* characters feel deadened, trapped in a cycle of routine that seems to imply that human intimacy is impossible. The poem is richly saturated with references to Ovid, but they act as ironic and wistful emblems of transformation that are wished for but that don't happen. The poem is filled with characters who in part desire and in part fear a kind of metamorphosis—who are undergoing the same kind of outward pressure and potential destruction that, in Ovid, *would* trigger a metamorphosis, whether positive or not.

Similar to Pound's use of allusions and archaisms in *Personae*, Eliot's use of allusion, quotation, and an interpenetration of literary sources bring an anthropological study of myth and the many resonances of metamorphosis into the forefront of ways of understanding of the poem. Ovid's *Metamorphoses* is certainly not the central text to which *The Waste Land* makes allusion, and yet Ovid's text is central to the psychology and aesthetic form of the poem. The mythical collection's structural open-endedness, in which the cycle of metamorphosis seems endless, lends itself perfectly to Eliot's project in *The Waste Land* to chronicle a similar fragmentation and violence-driven transformations, or desire for transformations. Although Tomlinson says of Eliot "More impersonally, he does however choose a fragmented art form where psychic

wholeness can yet be hinted at by the use of myth and of metamorphosis” (Tomlinson 23), in fact, it is this fragmented art form that allows Eliot to chart destruction and brokenness, rather than psychic wholeness. On a formal level, as Tomlinson points out, metamorphosis is the literary device that propels the poem: voices, personae fade and blur into the next. There is no one personal narrator; there is no one personal story, simply the fluid motion of narrative strands intertwining and taking over from one another. The consistent shifting of registers and of the blurred use of past voices is metamorphic in structure, and similar to Pound, Ovid gives Eliot a useful model for bringing history back into present. However, only focusing on the metamorphic structure, as Tomlinson does, fails to acknowledge that Ovidian moments or characters may enable poetic progress, but that they ultimately function as a repository of horror.

Before we can focus on particular instances of how metamorphosis works in the poem, we need to understand some of the sources that influenced Eliot’s thinking of metamorphosis in relation to *The Waste Land*. Generally speaking, “the mythical method,” as Eliot called it in his essay “Ulysses, Order and Myth,” is clearly influential as much on his own poem as it is on Joyce’s *Ulysses*. As Eliot says in the essay, “It is simply a way of controlling, of ordering, of giving a shape and a significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history” (*The Waste Land* 130). This mythical method is also intimately tied up in theories of impersonality, which itself gives order to art. Louis Menand calls the abandoning of a conception of subjectivity “the modernist edition of the nineteenth-century historicist argument,” which dictates that the subject is “a nondetachable part of a greater whole, with the capacity to express, by expressing to remake, something ‘more valuable’ than itself” (Menand 81), an argument is similar to Eliot’s understanding of impersonality. As Pound outlined in his note to “The Tree,” myths and metamorphosis become ways in which a person can enact this

“remaking” that allows him or her to transform the personal into something that is likewise more valuable than itself. Metamorphosis necessitates an elastic self, one that can stretch, sometimes break from a static, stationary, singular understanding of identity, before being reconstituted. As such, metamorphosis, as I demonstrate, becomes practice of impersonality, where the personality must be broken into emotional and experiential parts that can be reconstituted by the poetic mind in an impersonal way. Menand connects this argument to Eliot’s understanding of impersonality by visualizing its influence on Eliot’s writing process:

Sitting at his desk, with a blank sheet before him, Eliot must thus have felt that in order to write a poem about the experience of contemporary life, he would have to write a poem that took in everything. And *The Waste Land* is indeed a literary work that seems to regard the present moment—as it is experienced by the individual subject—as a reinscription of the whole of the cultural past, and the cultural past as though it were the autobiography of a single consciousness. (Menand 81)

In order to better understand how *The Waste Land* works as a poem that regards the present as a re-inscription of the whole of the cultural past, it is useful at this point to consider some of the other sources that were influential on Eliot’s formation of the poem

None of Eliot’s sources are as pertinent to my project as Ovid. Even early on, we can trace Ovid’s influence on Eliot’s poetic development. Ovid greatly influenced Eliot’s early classical education before and during college—an influence that I myself argue followed Eliot, in some version, throughout his poetical career. Indeed, during his first year at Harvard, Eliot wrote home to his mother to have her send home a box of books he forgot to bring and wanted, and one of the books was his edition of *Metamorphoses* (Ziolkowski 49-50). Ziolkowski admits that

“Eliot’s sharpened interest in Ovid about the time when he had begun to think seriously about the long poem that was to become *The Waste Land* was due in no small measure to the influence of Ezra Pound” (50). During this time Pound “was Europe’s most energetic advocate for Ovid, whose works he constantly urged his friends to read and whose *Metamorphoses* he was touting, in 1922, as ‘a sacred book’” (Ziolkowski 50). The two met in 1914 and immediately struck up a relationship of influence. Pound was instrumental in the editing of *The Waste Land* down to the version we know today.

Another important influence on the poem—and on Eliot’s thinking on myth and metamorphosis in general— was Sir James Frazer’s *Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion* (1890), a wide-ranging comparative study of mythology and religion. This anthropological study receives its own mention in Eliot’s notes to the poem. Indeed, in his essay “Ulysses, Order and Myth,” Eliot credits *The Golden Bough*<sup>22</sup> for making the mythical method possible. More specifically, Frazer allowed Eliot an understanding of how metamorphosis becomes a way in which to consider transformation—that is, transformation in the sense that the old lives on in the new— an important theme in all art. In a review Eliot wrote in 1921 of the performance of *Le sacre du printemps* by Stravinsky:

It was interesting to any one who had read *The Golden Bough* and similar works, but hardly more than interesting. In art there should be interpenetration and metamorphosis. Even *The Golden Bough* can be read in two ways: as a collection of entertaining myths, or as a revelation of that vanished mind of which our mind is a continuation.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Along with “Psychology” and “ethnology.”

<sup>23</sup> “London Letter,” *Dial* 71 (October 1921): 453.

This interpenetration of sources that Eliot demonstrates in *The Waste Land* echoes the work Pound did in his *Personae* (and later, in his *Cantos*). Ovid is a crucial source for both myths and for poetic structure: the myth about Philomela's transformation into a nightingale is a central hinge on which the poem pivots and to which the poem returns, and in his notes, Eliot proclaims Tiresias, though not a character or even a persona, is "the most important personage in the poem, uniting all the rest" (Eliot 23). And yet, whereas in Pound's poetry, metamorphosis is seen as enabling, reviving, in Eliot's *The Waste Land*, metamorphosis is a cycle of transformation that condemns one to repetitious cycle of ennui. Although he depicts metamorphosis in different ways, for Eliot it is useful model with which to depict the fragmentation, despair, and unfulfillment of the waste land.

Although the poem's version of metamorphosis reflects a sense of the inevitability of change, the human spirit does not find resurrection or revivification in this. As I have defined early on in this project, metamorphosis is the transformation of the old that manages to suspend the old in the new. A potential danger in such a model of change is that nothing ever really changes, an attitude that is at once intensely terrifying and boring.

For the terrible thing about metamorphosis in Eliot's earlier poetry is that, although nothing connects with nothing, everything seems to be changing into everything else, that all these things are identical, that metamorphosis is not variety and fecundity, but the phantasmagoria of a divided self, of a mind that contains and unifies and yet, in need of spiritual metamorphosis itself, depletes and dries up. (Tomlinson 33)

On a thematic level, metamorphosis as a troubling and violent response to trauma and brokenness that occasionally condemns one to a cycle of boredom or pain.

I'm reminded here of a poem by Louise Gluck, "March," in which she describes a woman who experiencing one of the first thaws of spring and tries to wrest from April the title of "the cruelest month." In her poem, "Everything's still very bare—nevertheless, something's different today from yesterday" as the sun melts the snow on the tops of the mountain and the woman's dog sniffs at dead flowers. "The season of discoveries is beginning" the narrator tells us monotonously, "Always the same discoveries, but to the dog / intoxicating and new, not duplicitous." In the end, the woman wishes she lived near the sea, because "The sea doesn't change as the earth changes; / it doesn't lie." It is a similar tone of frustrated, deadened hope that begins *The Waste Land*: Spring is cruel because it stirs the earth from a warm, "forgetful snow." Such stirring should indicate complete change, but Spring is but one of four cyclical seasons: their repetition is nothing new. Similarly, the mixing of memory and desire that the breeding of Lilacs brings about is cruel because it drags up human desires for intimacy that such a world cannot sustain or even offer.

One of the most central and prime examples of this human desire for an intimacy that doesn't seem to exist and that is instead doomed to a cycle of disappointment is that of the typist scene, which remarkably is narrated by the Ovidian, metamorphic figure of Tiresias. As Eliot famously and puzzlingly indicates in his notes, "What Tiresias *sees*, in fact, is the substance of the poem." Ostensibly, it seems that all Tiresias sees is a base and unfulfilling sexual encounter between a typist and her co-worker, a "young man carbuncular." Eliot, however, does not want us to discount this encounter, and he instead draws even more attention to it by assigning a great deal of importance to the literary history of Tiresias, citing in full the story of Tiresias' metamorphosis, and calling attention to the Ovidian myth as one "of great anthropological interest" (Eliot 23). In Ovid's version, Tiresias is turned into a woman after he unwittingly parts

two copulating snakes. Eventually he is able to reverse his metamorphosis, but his experience as both a man and a woman makes him the prime witness Juno and Jupiter call forth to settle their dispute about who derives greater satisfaction from intercourse. When Tiresias admits that women do, Juno is furious and blinds Tiresias as punishment, while Jupiter, vindicated in his views, rewards Tiresias with the gift of prophecy. Eliot's decision to use the figure of Tiresias as the narrator adds a curious weight to this sexual encounter, where it seems instead that the woman is "bored and tired" during the act, glad when it is over. Tiresias' very overlooking presence in seeing what no one can possibly be blind to—that in this experience, no one seems to enjoy the loveless coupling—makes the scene even more seedy and unbearably common. Unlike his position in Ovid, where he exists in the poem *either* as a man *or* as a woman, Tiresias in *The Waste Land* lives *at once* as both man and woman: "I Tiresias, though blind, throbbing between two lives, / Old man with wrinkled female breasts." It is this ability to "throb," to oscillate between two lives that gives Tiresias the power "to perceive[] the scene, and fore[tell] the rest." Tiresias knows *from experience* that this kind of episode happens all the time. He remains, especially in Eliot's version of him, a strangely condemned and punished character: doomed to the repetition of both gender roles and experiential knowledge at once. Because of that, he is able to foretell all the rest without hope of rejuvenation. He doesn't escape the typist's fate: "I too awaited the expected guest," he says, and "have foresuffered all / Enacted on this same divan or bed." Because Tiresias has seen it all before, the repugnant typist scene is made all the more horrific and repugnant because of his narration of it. He is stuck; his status as a metamorphic figure keeps him from a satisfying path to liberation. Metamorphosis doesn't renovate but seems to condemn to repetition instead.

The typist on her own serves as a figure of repetition. As Rainey points out,

The typist, after all, is repetition personified, her task to repeat someone else's words whether dictated aloud or transcribed in longhand; while the young man carbuncular is a paradigm of the stranger or intruder whose arrival sets in motion the mechanics of event and plot, sparks narrated activity. Their story is a narrative of repetition, in the sense that their loveless coupling is inferred to be but one in a protracted series of similar encounters. (Rainey 62)

Indeed, she has an “automatic hand” and her thoughts are “half-formed” as she, “hardly aware of her departed lover,” paces about the room alone while looking in the mirror and playing the gramophone: the scene, and especially her dulled, habitual reaction to it, stands as an emblem of the kind of sordid office affair that seems, in this depiction of it, almost cliché. And yet, because Tiresias—a mythic, dynamic prophet from a well-ensconced literary tradition who here invokes a metamorphosis that seems anything *but* magical—accents and reiterates this repetition, this cycle of boredom and unfulfilled (unfulfilling?) desire seems even *worse*. It would be as though Hamlet magically appeared to an indecisive, loquacious, ordinary student and said, “And *I* thought I had it bad.” Tiresias seem to yawn in the typist's face, himself repeating “I Tiresias” three times and “At the violet hour..At the violet, the evening hour” in such a way that echoes the typist's own boredom and exhaustion. Although Tiresias has suffered similar scenes in the past, has in a sense seen it all before, the particular experience of the typist is still told with an insight and attention to detail that, though it accurately portrays the listless boredom of the typist, manages to make the scene vivid, though ordinary. It is an example of how Eliot uses a figure from the past in order to make the present moment of the poem felt more deeply. In doing so, he performs what he outlines in “Tradition,” placing the present sensibilities within the tradition of

past, canonical writings on similar subjects or emotions. One of the achievements of the poem is the way it reanimates texts from past and the way its metamorphic energy creates a plurality of voices and an interpenetration of sources—even if the metamorphosis in action fails to give those involved “new eyes,” as Pound would have it. Although the poem offers a model of metamorphosis that seems to condemn, rather than revive, it does sustain the energy derived from continually returning to metamorphic scenes, where the poet takes material from past and uses it to animate the present scene. Furthermore, it is reminiscent of the idea of the eternal return that Nietzsche outlines in §285 and §341 of *The Gay Science*, and later *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. We can imagine Nietzsche’s words being asked of the typist: “What, if some day or night a demon were to steal after you into your loneliest loneliness and say to you: ‘This life as you now live it and have lived it, you will have to live once more and innumerable times more’ ... Would you not throw yourself down and gnash your teeth and curse the demon who spoke thus?” (*The Gay Science* §341). Ovid as a mythologist poet gives us another version of that eternal return idea, and Eliot in using metamorphosis and Ovidian characters as models of endless repetition likewise offers a version of this eternal return.<sup>24</sup> We can imagine the typist cursing Tiresias as the demon whose very presence seems to condemn her to living out such horrific and debased sexual encounters over and over again.

A question still remains: if what Tiresias sees is in fact the substance of the poem, what exactly is the substance of the poem? A seedy, horrifically complacent and sordid affair that marries repetition with narrative in a loveless coupling? A scene where characters both desire and fear the kind of metamorphic change that might revive them, but that Tiresias’ position suggests would simply further condemn them to repetition, to living out a modern present that

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<sup>24</sup> I urge my readers to remember too Pound’s poem “The Return,” which I discussed in Chapter One.

contains within it all the horrible moments of the past? Rainey suggests that there is more to typist scene than that. He notes that the scene is particularly horrible because no one in the modern day has the agency or voice with which to articulate his or her discontent. The typist takes down other people's words without generating her own, and in the aftermath of her loveless, indifferent coupling, she can only muster "one half-formed thought to pass" before she, "with automatic hand... puts a record on the gramophone" so music can drown out her silence. The young man carbuncular, although his presence marks the impetus of a small narrative scene in an otherwise largely impressionistic poem, does not speak. As readers, we are but an audience to this silent scene in which the actors act out their scene of tawdry horror without speaking of it. Their silence provokes

...that sense of immense commiseration, at once a profound pity at the lacerating horrors of modernity and an unspeakable sorrow that there is no language, whether in narrative or lyric (epitomized by repetition), adequate to the terror which the poem wishes to account for. Fictively situated beside the heart of modernity which is the financial district of London, the poem offers only speechless weeping, a wild pathos at once unutterable and irredeemable, over the conditions that have governed its production.

Perhaps that truly is "the substance of the poem." (76)

Only Tiresias, because he is a metamorphic character from a mythic past, oscillating and throbbing between two lives at once—in a constant state of unmaking and remaking, of living and reliving similar scenes—is allowed a voice. Only he can speak, can attempt to turn this modern-day seedy scene into poetry. Metamorphosis and the interpenetration of myth become

ways in which to speak of an inability to break out of repetition, to make poetry out of a world and a scene that seem to discount or discourage the making of it.

No figure exemplifies this more than Philomela, another key Ovidian figure in *The Waste Land*. After being brutally raped and mutilated—after being devoiced in the most violent of ways (having her tongue cut out)—Philomela transforms into a nightingale and is able to transpose her suffering into birdsong. As Eliot says, her physical desecration and violation allows her to fill “all the desert with inviolable voice,” something that should seem comforting, a gift of sorts, in the same way that Tiresias is gifted with the power of foresight and prophecy as a way to offset his own physical mutilation. However, though Philomela does end up with the ability to sing, her song is unintelligible, a point that Eliot mimics in his poem by having the poem broken up by arcane, onomatopoeic imitations of bird song in Part III. The Fire Sermon “twit twit twit / jug jug jug jug jug jug” and in the last part of the poem “What the Thunder Said”: “co co rico co co rico.” Just before the typist scene, this birdsong wafts in again:

Twit twit twit

Jug jug jug jug jug jug

So rudely forc'd.

Tereu

As a note to this stanza explains, Tereu “is the vocative form of the name of Tereus, indicating that he is being addressed. The spelling and formulation of the bird cry possibly comes from an Elizabethan source, *Alexander and Campaspe* (attributed to John Lyly), in which Philomela accuses Tereus in her song: “Jug, jug, jug, jug, tereu!” (*The Waste Land* 12). Her in mutilated, human state, she is unable to voice her indictment of Tereus, but in her metamorphosed state, she is able to turn her suffering into song—into poetry. The nightingale has long been considered as

a symbol for the poet. Like Tiresias, Philomela appears in the poem as an author, one who is able to sing her story and to interweave her mythic story with the other, modern-day episodes, vignettes, and impressions—but hers is also a song of repetition, made even more horrible because it is unintelligible. Although being broken does allow Philomela to remake herself and to find her voice, metamorphosis is a costly and bizarre response to trauma. Hers is a deeply troubling model for finding one's voice, and we can't help but question the purpose of poetry if it comes at such a horrific cost. Is there really anything healing in Philomel's—or indeed any poet's—ability to transform suffering into song? And—to bring this question to bear on how Eliot uses Philomela and other mythic allusions in *The Waste Land*—is there actually anything redeeming about relying on past phrases?

Bush picks up on this underlying doubt in the poem over the validity and comfort of using an interpenetration of sources:

When the speaker reassumes the linguistic personae of the past in the *glissando* of the next three lines, therefore, it strikes us as a gesture taken *faute de mieux*. That is, we sense by this point that Eliot's speaker already has some awareness that the great phrases of the past are as unreal as they are beautiful...even the cherished texts of the past cannot charm away the bleak realities of life. To pretend that they can is a fraud. (Bush 62)

One cannot be too careful with this overdependence on reading lest this lead one to attach too much importance to words and thus lapse instead into a kind of mawkish pandering to English majors and book sellers. As Bush theorizes, Eliot, too, was self-conscious of his reliance on past literary sources, and “one of the terrors of the speaker of *The Waste Land* is that he has forfeited life to books, and is trapped in ways of thinking and feeling acquired through convention. To

use Eliot's bitter phrases, his emotional life is a terminal victim of 'the pathology of rhetoric' and the 'pastness of the past'" (Bush 59). Nonetheless, in spite of this self-consciousness, Eliot, in following the tenets of impersonality, *wants* to use other texts to help guarantee that it's not just him speaking himself. He's so mistrustful of his own, personal voice that he would rather have it sanctioned by someone else, which gives his voice authenticity because someone else has had that experience. So at the same time Eliot *is* self-conscious about using the past, he also clings to it as the only foreseeable answer to his concern about the validity of his own voice. By invoking Philomela as a poet figure, as he does with Tiresias, Eliot attempts to interweave past phrases and figures within a modern poem that seeks to catalog the bleak realities of life. And yet, as we saw with Tiresias, the mythic, magical figure of the past cannot charm away these bleak realities. They can only serve to accentuate them, to reinforce a reader with the sense that human suffering always has existed and will continue to exist.

Tomlinson sees something consoling in the way Eliot is able to manipulate his sources in an interpenetrating, impersonal way so as to speak to a universality that is greater than the personal because comprised of many voices:

In realizing the accuracy of Eliot's use of his sources, one learns something of the continuity of men's attempt to know their situation, and one grasps anew the way 'the individual talent' comes into possession of an exact knowledge of its own situation—becomes capable of uttering it, stating it – by opening itself to the great past instances, losing and finding identity through the encounter in a metamorphosis of self. What the individual talent loses is the unnerving, unnerved sense of naked homelessness and lonely complaint. What is found is that human woes,

though specific to oneself in the uniqueness of one's situation, are no longer homeless or condemned to formless outcry. (Tomlinson 42)

Tomlinson is right that metamorphosis is a helpful way to understand of transposition of one moment to the next, but the use of metamorphic figures has a very different valence. Rather than a metamorphosis of self that allows one to lose and then find identity, we find in the poem metamorphosis works as a broken model that seems to condemn one either to repetition or to a sometimes unintelligible articulation of one's suffering. It's as though Tomlinson has nicely named tools Eliot used to create the poem but hasn't explained what Eliot's made.

Metamorphosis enables the poetic form of the poem, but it also establishes a critique of intimacy and trauma in ways both ancient and modern. Nonetheless, Tomlinson's attempt to redeem *The Waste Land's* use of metamorphosis demonstrates our individual need to articulate our own understanding of how suffering repeats itself throughout time, despite knowing how and what others have written to prove this true.

Eliot exemplifies this in "Baudelaire" in an essay with his reflections on the similarities he finds between Baudelaire and Baudelaire's spiritual ancestor, Dante:

Indeed, in much romantic poetry the sadness is due to the exploitation of the fact that no human relations are adequate to human desires, but also to the disbelief in any further object for human desires than that which, being human, fails to satisfy them. One of the unhappy necessities of human existence is that we have to 'find things out for ourselves.' If it were not so, the statement of Dante would have, at least for poets, have done once for all. (*Selected Essays* 379)

The interpenetration of the past into one's present does not overwhelm or condemn present attempts to negotiate similar themes and insights. Rather, this interpenetration serves the present task of "finding things out for ourselves."<sup>25</sup>

And so we come to the end of this chapter with a paradox, one that champions the usefulness of past literary sources in how they can add significance, support and company to one's present situation, thought, and work, and at the same time one that admonishes us against a potentially insincere over-dependence on outside sources as a way of making sense of one's present. This paradox is similar to the one implicit in theories of impersonality: a personality is imperative as a starting point to write. At the same time, an ability to transcend the particularized details in order to speak about such shared experiences in a universal way is likewise imperative. In short, we need the past, and yet we cannot depend too heavily upon it; we need a personality, and yet we cannot rely on our unadulterated personal experiences if we hope to create art. Eliot's uses of metamorphosis help him to navigate these seemingly impossible paradoxes. The choice to employ Tiresias as the narrator in the typist scene is an emblem of how modernist authors use a figure from our literary past to make the present more deeply felt. Metamorphosis is both a way of understanding the brokenness of human life, human personality, and it's also a mythic representation of the kind of ancient-to-modern pattern of transformation that happens as we read and write, as we incorporate and quote and reconfigure older texts and motifs into newly fresh form. It is central to putting together the pieces that make up the poem, but another aspect of metamorphosis is ironic because it is also negative, in a way that isn't emphasized in Pound's

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<sup>25</sup> I can't help but think of the scene in *The History Boys*, a film version of the play by Alan Bennett, in which Hector speaks about powerful moments in reading: "The best moments in reading are when you come across something - a thought, a feeling, a way of looking at things - that you'd thought special, particular to you. And here it is, set down by someone else, a person you've never met, maybe even someone long dead. And it's as if a hand has come out, and taken yours."

poetry. Thus metamorphosis works in two ways: 1. as an aesthetic formal enabling device, and 2. as thematic employment of character and motif that shows a spiritual emptiness that should prompt metamorphosis but instead involves a ceaseless transformation of particulars that just gives us more of the same. On a larger scope, the action of metamorphosis itself is mimicked in Eliot's use of past quotation and allusion in the poem, creating a cacophony of sounds all working to sing of themes all able to be housed in one poem. The arc of the poem's journey through many ancient texts and quotations, even when these quotations are interrupted by the urgency and decay of his present, likewise mimics a metamorphosis that allows him an impersonal voice, one that is consistently lost, and then found in its weaving in and out of allusions and quotations. It is the inconclusive nature of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* that allows one to reuse its myths so perfectly. Eliot's purpose in presenting such a despairing, waste land, and Eliot's interaction with this ancient text serves as a perfect microcosmic example of why we continue to read and revere ancient texts, even as we continue to struggle through the same eternally returning human fears and desires, navigating them with ever-transforming selves and doubts about the utility of poetry in the face of despair or destruction. Eliot still continued to strive for an impersonal universality by relying on a similar interpenetration of literary sources in his poetry even after he converted to Christianity and abandoned his interest in the pagan mythologies that so fascinated him in his study of Frazer and in his writing of *The Waste Land*.

## Chapter Three:

“For Us, There Is Only the Trying”: Spiritual Metamorphosis in Eliot’s *Four Quartets*

I invent nothing. I rediscover.

--Auguste Rodin (French sculptor 1840–1917)

During the time when he was conceiving of and writing *Four Quartets*, Eliot was no longer interested Frazer’s anthropological study of myth. Instead he was theologically and doctrinally centered in Christianity, even though, as in *The Waste Land*, he still allows himself the use of various sources, including childhood memories and quotations from *suttas* and other religious texts from Eastern traditions in order to build a cycling narrative across the four poems that make up *Four Quartets*. As different as *The Waste Land* is from *Four Quartets*, Eliot relies on exactly the same reassembly and amalgamation of past myths and vocabularies from across centuries. At this point in his career, Eliot is explicitly and doctrinally using Christian “myths” (as it were) and is no longer interested in explicitly drawing upon Ovidian myth. However, as Theodore Ziolkowski points out, Eliot “came to recognize in Ovid a pagan analogy to the metamorphosis that he had already learned to see in the Christian idea of resurrection” (51). Pagan myths are seen as precursors to Christian myth. I argue that Eliot finds similar energy in both Ovidian metamorphoses and the Christian resurrection, even if at times he seems to outright reject an Ovidian concept of poetry that is about natural beauty, terror, and transfiguration. Metamorphosis, then, in *Four Quartets* is not only way of engaging the past or of measuring how difficult it is to maintain vitality in the face of repetition (which is how *The Waste Land* viewed metamorphosis). By distinction, Eliot, who has in the interim between the writing of *The Waste Land* and the *Four Quartets* become a Christian and has embraced new rationale for impersonality, now celebrates a liturgical model of repetition. What I show is that is that metamorphosis is transposed from a pagan to a Christian register, or key. It becomes way for

Eliot to understand transformation following the destruction of the war, to understand voices speaking to him from the past in a Pentecostal fire, and to understanding the birth of Christ as the transfiguration of the natural into something supernatural. This is clearly different from an Ovidian concept of metamorphosis, but on the other hand it remains an idea of something new breaking out of—or into— something old.

To demonstrate this transposition of a pagan understanding of metamorphosis to a Christian understanding, I invite my readers to look at a metamorphosis moment in Eliot's poem, in which humans are invited to celebrate and remember the moment when God became flesh and then God again. This moment, this sacrament of communion, is consistently repeated and remembered in the Church and during services that commemorate God's sacrifice by enacting the last supper. Eliot makes use of this in Part IV of "East Coker," where metamorphosis is reconfigured as moment of communion, a crossing point where something physical becomes something metaphysical. Celebrating the poetry and shocking quality of this description, Eliot wants to emphasize the body that is a transfigured body:

The dripping blood our only drink,  
 The bloody flesh our only food:  
 In spite of which we like to think  
 That we are sound, substantial flesh and blood—  
 Again, in spite of that, we call this Friday good.

Eliot relishes the violence of this metamorphosis, of eating body and drinking blood. It's as nauseating as the story of Philomela, but it's not about *animal* sacrifice: it's about the sacred transformation of bread and wine into body and blood that symbolizes the ultimate sacrifice God made for humans. It is a transformation in which God (the old) is present in Jesus (the new).

Incarnation is thus metamorphosis, but a Final Metamorphosis, one that trumps all other forms of metamorphosis and cannot become merely habitual.

In *Four Quartets*, metamorphosis becomes a way in which we can understand the mechanics of the religious issues of resurrection and transformation of self. Unlike in Ovid, where another story of transformation is always added, and the cycle of change on earth never ceases, Eliot's philosophy during his later life and the writing of *Four Quartets* is an orthodox Christian philosophy that awaits the Final Metamorphosis, of body to spirit that can transcend the earth-bound cycles of "dung and death" we see presented in *The Waste Land*. The Christian belief that there is an end point, that the cycle of transformation is not pointlessly sequential is crucially important in the *Four Quartets*, especially when we consider the historical context from within the historical context it was written. Eliot wrote them before and during World War II, and a theological belief in an afterlife—or even simply resurrection out of destruction—becomes one of the few things that could survive such a devastating, annihilating force. The background of the war served as a literalizing force of destruction, trauma, and pressures—the same kinds of pressures that in an Ovidian world trigger metamorphosis of the body. In the poem, I argue that Eliot draws upon the same mechanics of transformation that he had used all his life, but in such a way that triggers metamorphosis of the spirit. Resurrection thus becomes a metonymic substitution or revision of the same ideas inherent in the metamorphosis at work in *The Waste Land*. Some of the original remains, though there is a definite change in form or presentation.

A less obvious manifestation of metamorphic energy involves the presence of the past, which in *Four Quartets* is fueled by the same metamorphic momentum we see in *The Waste Land*. All the quartets in some ways echo and anticipate one another: the garden at the end of

“Burnt Norton” is echoed at the end of “Little Gidding,” the poem returns again and again to images of tombstones, of the rose and fire as religious symbols, of birdsong and intonations, and to themes of return. Eliot’s repeated motifs has many moments where something is taken and transposed into a new key (as in musical compositions, something Eliot was clearly thinking of in titling his poems “quartets”). It’s more than just repetition: images of children in the garden in “Burnt Norton” are transposed to an image of the Christ child; voices in tree in the garden become voices from past and poetry speaking to him in “Little Gidding.” In “East Coker,” the issue of the dead returning in “Little Gidding” (which I will discuss later) is prefigured in a dance scene, in which the speaker hears the music, and sees the ghosts of the past returning in modern day. It’s a particularly Christian point: we, like all things, have our time and will end in “dung and death.” Ovidian metamorphosis doesn’t let you escape from that. Eliot mimics Ecclesiastes in his diction as he describes the dancers, who are

Keeping time,  
 Keeping the rhythm in their dancing  
 As in their living in the living seasons  
 The time of the seasons and the constellations  
 The time of milking and the time of harvest  
 The time of the coupling of man and woman  
 And that of beasts. Feet rising and falling.  
 Eating and drinking. Dung and death.

The rising and falling of the rhythm matches the rhythm of life and death, of forms changing and transfiguring from ashes to ashes, dust to dust, life out and away from dung and death. Inherent in this depiction of the never-ending-ever-returning cycle of life is a criticism of non-sacred

forms of metamorphosis. If “There is no end, but addition: the trailing / Consequences of further days and hours,” then the cycle of change, as we saw in the case of Tiresias in *The Waste Land*, seems nothing more a cycle of repetition that is in itself damning.

For Eliot, at this stage in his life, the way out of this cycle of repetition comes in the same sacred form of metamorphosis we saw in the communion reference in Part IV of “East Coker”: that of Incarnation. All things come and go and transform, but there’s one form of this equation for change that is not merely Ovidian physical transfiguration. The energy of metamorphosis can be similar to the energy involved in simply wanting change, but in this case, it is redefined in essence, sanctified. As he says in “Burnt Norton,” in such a cycle of repetition, of living, eating, breathing, working, dying,

For most of us, there is only the unattended  
 Moment, the moment in and out of time,  
 The distraction fit, lost in a shaft of sunlight,  
 The wild thyme unseen, or the winter lightning  
 Or the waterfall, or music heard so deeply  
 That it is not heard at all, but you are the music  
 While the music lasts. *These are only hints and guesses,  
 Hints followed by guesses; and the rest  
 Is prayer, observance, discipline, thought and action.*

*The hint half guessed, the gift half understood, is Incarnation.* (emphasis mine)

To rephrase, it is easy to grow bored, listless, and even despairing as we grow older and the cycle of seasons stops delighting, stops seeming new, and we settle into the patterns of life, which the

knowledge from experience imposes.<sup>26</sup> In getting caught up in this cycle of repetition, our minds are in danger of falling into habits of thought which prevent us from believing that any metamorphic energy could do anything other than reaffirm our belief in the inevitability of change that seems anything but new or renovating. There are, however, moments that allow us some distraction, or rather, realization of something holy in the everyday: in a sublime vista from atop a waterfall, in the stirring chords of a sonata that seems so rich and powerful so as to momentarily take you over, or in the passages of a poem that seems as though a dead author is speaking to you, about you. All of these things are fine and fleeting—are, from the stance of the Christian philosophy that directed much of this poem in ways that are notably different than *The Waste Land*, an instance of the divine made present, made flesh. The motion of this Incarnation is metamorphic but to a degree that breaks the cycle of repetition in a way that Eliot's Tiresias could not, or at least in a way that speaks to a greater realm or power into which we can transcend.

In order to demonstrate how this works, I'm going to look in particular at "Little Gidding." As it is perhaps the most dramatic and the last of the quartets, I consider it a fitting place for me to conclude my chapter on Eliot. The opening of "Little Gidding" demonstrates another moment of Incarnation in which a divine presence manifests itself in a way that breaks a cycle of seemingly endless and pointless sequences of cycles or repetition. In its imagery, this opening is meant to evoke the opening of *The Waste Land* as it navigates the tricky balance between both the stasis and the metamorphic change inherent in nature:

Midwinter spring is its own season

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<sup>26</sup> See "East Coker" II: "There is, it seems to us, / At best, only a limited value / In the knowledge derived from experience. / The knowledge imposes a pattern, and falsifies, / For the pattern is new in every moment / And every moment is a new and shocking / Valuation of all we have been"

Sempiternal though sodden towards sundown,  
Suspended in time, between pole and tropic.

It is worth noting, however, how different this opening actually is from *The Waste Land*, even it is clear it is supposed to remind us of it. Instead of a warm spring day that “mix[es] memory and desire,” stirring up unpleasant memories and realizations the way it stirs the Earth from its death-like hibernation, the opening of *Four Quartets* focuses on the remoteness and silence of a magically, surreal warm day in winter. Eliot describes a frosted existence seemingly outside of place or time that is nonetheless still moving, though still.<sup>27</sup> In religious terms, this idea is often considered a “breaking in,” a moment of Incarnation where God makes his presence known to the human eye through a “windless cold” that nonetheless manages to “stir[] the dumb spirit.” Eliot wants us to think of seasons and cycles (as he does in “Journey of the Magi”), but this moment is not just one of expected cyclical return, though it starts off that way. Initially, the speaker here knows spring and summer are coming, and that the repetition of this cycle of change is in itself sempiternal; anyone, no matter what path they took and no matter who they are—“broken king” or directionless student—would find “the same at the end of the journey”: “the hedges / White again, in May.” The speaker maintains his impersonal voice and experience by concluding Part I by speaking in the second person, reiterating this impersonal claim that

If you came this way  
Taking any route, starting from anywhere,  
At any time or at any season,  
It would always be the same.

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<sup>27</sup> It’s as if it were Coleridge’s stilly silence, in which the added suffix gives the word movement (see “Frost at Midnight”).

However, this moment, this mid-winter spring is a moment that breaks out of that cycle of repetition. Instead of being expected and thus habitual, this moment is a bizarre anomaly that is unsettling because it is a moment outside of time and expected seasonal change. The fundamental difference in this passage from the opening of *The Waste Land* is that this moment is not the start of a new season; it's about an anomalous singularity, in which the speaker is pulled out of the physical changes that repeat over and over the way the sea churns over and over. It is in this singular moment outside of time and space—this “breaking in” of divine presence—that the speaker finds a “pentecostal fire” that makes “the soul’s sap quiver[.]” The metamorphic energy takes place not only in the physical but also in the spiritual realm. We’re here looking at a moment that in Ovid would be a moment of another sequential physical change, but that is instead emblematic for Eliot not as physical transformation, but metaphorical, spiritual transfiguration, not of metamorphosis, but of incarnation. The answer in *Four Quartets* to a very human fear of stagnation is that “we must be still and *still moving* / Into another intensity” (emphasis mine)—not transforming into another animal form, but into something divine, something, as Eliot would have it, Christian. This allows us to break free of an Ovidian cycle of endless repetition.

In order for us to understand more fully how Eliot transposes ideas of metamorphosis, we need to look especially at the curious figure Eliot called “the compound ghost,” who appears to the speaker in the last quartet. The appearance in “Little Gidding” of the compound ghost figure is a reiteration of how Eliot is both haunted and blessed by texts and myths outside the self and from the past that continue to return. The compound ghost is a metamorphic figure with his “face still forming,” whom the speaker meets after describing the ash and dust in the air on a deserted, recently bombed street. The ghost manifests in a ruined landscape—a wasteland of its

kind. The compound ghost is first described as having “the sudden look of some dead master” the speaker “had known, forgotten, half recalled.” The ghost has been read by many prominent scholars, Bush and Cameron among them, as a compound literary figure, the dead masters from whom Eliot learned and honed his craft. Like all readers, the speaker here has studied and learned from the poets who have gone before him, only to forget and half-recall them, though the impression they have upon him served to propel him forward in ways that are ineffaceable.

The compound ghost is thus a symbol of the past made present come to narrate the present struggle to make sense of things. What the ghost embodies, we might say, is the essence of the poem, and like Tiresias, he too is embodied in a way that metamorphic. As Cameron says, “the ghost’s forming and fading illustrate that the right way to understand the proximity of the two states’ near inclusion in one another is in terms of a passage, not an entity, something that is always only emerging or declining...for the ghost, insofar as he is anything at all, is best expressed as a pure changing” (Cameron 165). This pure changing, which I argue is at the heart of any metamorphosis story, is dependent on an amalgamation of literary authors and other dead masters forming and fading in our memories of texts that have been and continue to be important to us. Cameron argues that unlike Tiresias,

who occupies a similarly privileged position, but who is autonomously fixed above a scene he can lament but not engage in, the ghost becomes who he is in relation first to the speaker, then to the figures [literary figures, such as “Dante,” “Brunetto Latini,” and “Virgil”, and Yeats] even as he is constituted through reiterated dissolutions. Thus he is a model for a person’s unmaking. (Cameron 154)

I, on the other hand, hark back to Eliot's words on how a relationship with such dead masters through the reading of their works allows a momentary coalescing of the self, rather than for a person's unmaking, which Eliot himself calls a metamorphosis: "This relation is a feeling of profound kinship, or rather of a peculiar personal intimacy, with another, probably a dead author. It may overcome us suddenly, on or after long acquaintance; it is certainly a crisis; and when a young writer is seized with his first passion of the sort he may be changed, metamorphosed almost ... from a bundle of second-hand sentiments into a person."<sup>28</sup> The ghost's forming and fading, this overall emerging and declining of the dead, at once frees the speaker and makes him momentarily whole. As Bush says "Here truly one of the dead returns and brings Eliot with him" (Bush 236). The compound ghost's presence reminds us as readers of our own personal tutelary spirits, of how the dead can, paradoxically, bring us to life.

Despite this affirmation of how the dead can bring us to life, the important part about the meeting between the speaker and this compound literary ghost figure is the speaker's ability ultimately to move beyond this now dead master. The speaker asks the ghost to offer him advice or wisdom, even though the speaker cannot promise, because of his human, corruptible memory, that he will comprehend or remember this wisdom. At the heart of this insecurity is also a fear that runs through all of the quartets: How can one refine words so they adequately express one's emotions, theories and thoughts if "one has only learnt to get the better of words / For the thing one no longer has to say, or the way in which / One is no longer disposed to say it?" (East Coker, Part V), or if

what there is to conquer

By strength and submission, has already been discovered

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<sup>28</sup> T.S. Eliot, "Reflections on Contemporary Poetry IV," *Egoist* VI.3 (July 1919), 39.

Once or twice, or several times, by men whom one cannot hope  
 To emulate [?]

The speaker here again echoes the question I myself keep returning to: how does one write about love after Shakespeare, about metamorphosis after Ovid, or even after Pound? If, as Pound seemed to fear, it's all been said before, and in ways that have exhausted any further innovation or creativity, how do we continue to go on and write? For Eliot, simply trying is in itself sanctified, even over creativity and innovation. The poem itself is an act of prayer in trying to write. From a theological standpoint, Eliot knows he's not going "to get it right." Since he is merely human, his word not The Word. Such a realization is entirely different from the way Pound or the younger Eliot measured themselves against their literary predecessors. The attempt of trying to somehow "measure up" does not apply here. Instead, one tries to write or articulate such feelings because he or she knows God will valorize that attempt to get it right.

In keeping with this change in perspective, the ghost teaches humility. He tells the speaker in the poem that his own words and attempts "have served their purpose: let them be. / So with your own and pray they be forgiven." The only word that is beyond reproach is The Word, which, handed down to man, can only be imperfectly imitated, metamorphosed, throughout history. Furthermore, with the dead masters, such as the ghost himself,

...there is no competition—

There is only the fight to recover what has been lost

And found and lost again and again: and now, under conditions

That seem unpropitious. But perhaps neither gain nor loss.

For us, there is only the trying. ... (East Coker V)

and every new attempt to write poetry “is a new beginning, a raid on the inarticulate.” Although a dependence on a literary tradition is helpful—indeed, as Pound would say, imitating the dead masters is exactly how one should learn how to form a poetic style of one’s own, and as Eliot would say, placing his words within the context of those words that have been set down before him bestows upon his own a sort of sacredness that attempts to defy a very human inability to articulate— there will always be room for one’s own voice. As the ghost insists,

...Last season’s fruit is eaten

And the fullfed beast shall kick the empty pail.

For last year’s words belong to last year’s language

And next year’s words await another voice. (Little Gidding II)

In order to provide his year’s voice, the speaker must leave the compound ghost behind and find his own answers and formulations of these answers. The ghost suggests that words and entire poetic projects are nothing on their own. The ghost basically tells the speaker “Just forget my words”; since, where the ghost now is, these words, these earth-bound attempts at poetry no longer matter. Earlier, in *The Waste Land*, we see moments where Eliot seems to feel as though he’s getting it right, that he is altering tradition, using the past yet reconstituting it so it is newly made and vivid. The conversation with ghost, on the other hand, says we can only take a choice to be “consumed by either fire or fire.” In other words, we can only think of our end, since we are mortal. It’s as though the ghost tells Eliot to give up the poetry. As we have already seen, metamorphosis alone is not the answer to destruction, to life’s trauma and violence, because the cycle of repetition it enacts is still of this earth. As we saw with the mid-winter spring moment of Incarnation, however, it is clear the rules have suddenly changed, that a new order has been declared. Christianity breaks the dizzying repetition of Ovidian metamorphosis. The appearance

and message of the metamorphic figure of the ghost announces that Christian order of transformation involves giving up that earth-bound, poetic-bound, voice-bound cycle of mythic transformation.

Despite the ghost's message that one should, in a sense, give up all earth-bound attempts to articulate, ultimately the poem concludes that, before one can do this, he or she still feels compelled to try to articulate such realizations for themselves. This echoes what Eliot wrote in his essay "Baudelaire," in which Eliot say "One of the unhappy necessities of human existence is that we have to 'find things out for ourselves.' If it were not so, the statement of Dante would have, at least for poets, have done once for all" (*Selected Essays* 379). Curiously, the presence of the compound ghost is predicated on a moment in Dante's *Inferno*. According to Bush, who looked at early drafts of the poem,<sup>29</sup> "When Eliot wrote the compound ghost passage, he wanted it to mirror, in form and content, a canto of the *Inferno* or the *Purgatorio*" (Bush 229), specifically that of the *Inferno* XV, where Dante encounters Brunetto Latini, a beloved master but one whose teachings Dante has outgrown. In the passage, the focus is on the liberation of the will; the freedom in leaving master behind. This is reflected in *Little Gidding* III, in which the speaker discovers that

History may be freedom. See, now they vanish,  
The faces and places, with the self which, as it could, loved them,  
To become renewed, transfigured, in another pattern.

The poems then produced allow for all of our compound ghosts "to become renewed, transfigured in another pattern." Indeed, the more drafts Eliot's compound ghost underwent, the more the ghost acquired even more ancestral presences. According to Bush, Yeats is the primary

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<sup>29</sup> Bush here draws upon Helen Gardner's *The Composition of the Four Quartets*, to which I am also indebted in understanding Eliot's composition of the ghost.

presence behind the compound ghost (232), mostly because in his later life, Eliot became more impressed with the continual development Yeats undertook in his poetry even late in his life. Yeats' ability to constantly re-cast his self-image—to infuse his identity with the same kind of mutability that we could call metamorphic—allowed him “the ... impersonality ... of the poet who, out of intense and personal experience, is able to express a general truth; retaining all the particularity of his experience, to make of it a general symbol.”<sup>30</sup>

Though the faces and places the speaker discovered by reading the works left behind by dead masters vanish, as does the ghost, the impact they left on the self that loved them manages to propel the self forward in its own “raids on the inarticulate” that will eventually lead us to our own realizations that the ghost offers, but that we cannot wholly take as ours until we explore them for ourselves—through our own writings and readings. As the speaker affirms in the final section of “Little Gidding,” “We shall not cease from exploration / And the end of all our exploring / Will be to arrive where we started / And know that place for the first time.” As readers and writers, we examine these themes of return in a variety of complicated ways in different forms through literature, and this communication with the dead is central to this quartet. Part of what engrosses Eliot throughout the quartets is a conception of a phoenix poetry rises up out of destruction, of the past being present in the ashes that smolder and float above the fire.

And what the dead have no speech for,  
 when living, they can tell you, being dead:  
 the communication of the dead is tongued  
 with fire beyond the language of the living.

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<sup>30</sup> See his lecture for the first annual Yeats lecture to the Friends of the Irish Academy at the Abbey Theatre in June 1940, reprinted in *On Poetry and Poets*. 1957; rpt. New York: Noonday-Farrar, 1969, p 299.

Using Pentecostal imagery, Eliot echoes his essay “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” which insists that as readers, we are made of the dead; they are what we know and continually give voice to as our reading and writing gives us contact with them. Sitting here, I feel a soft hush flutter over me as I write these words, imaging Eliot’s spirit brushing my head and rushing through my ears with my fingers typing away, giving voice to him, and Pound, and Ovid, just as Eliot sat once and gave voice to the poets he revered: Dante, Swift, Yeats, Virgil, Ovid. There is fire and benediction in that. Fleetingly, I sit here and metamorphose into him, and, just for a moment, before a sound or distraction shakes the connection and snuffs the flame, the past becomes my present. This is a moment of metempsychosis that Pound wrote about in an uncollected poem called “Histrion”:

No man hath dared to write this thing as yet,  
 And yet I know, how that the souls of all men great  
 At times pass through us,  
 And we are melted into them, and are not  
 Save reflexions of their souls.  
 Thus am I Dante for a space ...  
 Or am such holy ones I may not write  
 Lest blasphemy be writ against my name;  
 This for an instant and the flame is gone.

Like Eliot, like Dante, however, I take this moment as something fine and fleeting, humbly ready to move past these masters and allow my own voice to carry forth onward to its own discoveries, while recognizing that my voice is bolstered and shouldered by those who lived and died before

me and are now someplace else. It is in this recognition that, as Pound says, “these, the Masters of the Soul, live on.”

Conclusion:

Carriers of the Old, Spinners of the New: H.D.'s Version of Metamorphosis

One must be an inventor to read well... There is then creative reading as well as creative writing. When the mind is braced by labor and invention, the page of whatever book we read becomes luminous with manifold allusion. Every sentence is doubly significant, and the sense of our author is as broad as the world...

—Emerson, “The American Scholar”

As I finish this project, I find myself, as a woman, wondering how the questions inherently tied up in how I have outlined metamorphosis, impersonality, and tradition might work differently for a woman writer. I think of H.D.'s position at the turn of the last century—once Pound's fiancé, only to be dropped by him when she followed him to England, she transformed herself into one of the prominent poets of the modernist movement.<sup>31</sup> How, I wonder, thinking about these contexts, did a woman writer—writing in the earliest decades of the twentieth century—navigate issues of tradition and of inserting oneself within the context of a literary past?<sup>32</sup> How, to place this question within the frame of my project, might the paradigm of metamorphosis have helped her in this navigation? In creatively imaging herself with the creative ability to shed her personality and in doing so transform and insert herself into a tradition that had up until recently been reserved only for men?

In her early poetry, her use of metamorphosis and myth is much like that of Ezra Pound, with whom she worked closely during the early stages of her poetic development. Like Pound, she shares a love for antiquities, for a Grecian past, and she too sought to discover and create a voice, a persona, a mask while using an imagist style of writing that focused on the hardened

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<sup>31</sup> Many critics used to say this was mostly due to Pound's tutelage, but in the last few decades new traditionalists have reclaimed H.D.'s position as a prominent modernist poet in her own right.

<sup>32</sup> For more on how women writers were contemplating their place in literary tradition during this time period, see Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* (1929).

sharpness of images. This metamorphic method allowed her to cultivate an impersonal voice. As Susan Friedman notes, “The mythological personae that appear in many of her poems did not represent an escapist attempt to return to ancient Greece, but rather served as personal metaphors or masks that allowed her to distance intense emotion sufficiently for artistic expression” (Friedman 2). Her war *Trilogy*, like Eliot’s *Quartets*, also conceives of metamorphosis from within a doctrinally Christian framework as she too concentrates on themes of emergence out of destruction and the transformative energies necessary for that kind of survival, especially within the context of London literally falling down around her during World War II. She, like both these poets, struggles to use the masks of the past, of personae, to channel the personal in a way that is universal, impersonal. Conversely, H.D. uses metamorphosis in a different way, in a way that addresses the patriarchal power structures at root in twentieth-century concepts of literary tradition. One of the most important components of H.D.’s oeuvre is her desire to place women at the center of modern mythmaking, to creatively reshape and reform a tradition that, because of her gender, was more threateningly devoicing for her than it was for her male counterparts in poetry. “Her lifelong revolt against a traditional feminine destiny . . . set her apart from the literary mainstream and led her ultimately to a woman-centered mythmaking and radical revision of the patriarchal foundations of western culture” (Friedman ix). Indeed, some new traditionalist contemporary critics cite H.D. as a foremother for the kind of work still going on today. A volume of critical essays entitled *H.D. And Poets After* calls “H.D.’s dramatization of a transformed and transformative spirituality in *Trilogy* . . . an invitation to pursue a new feminist poetics.” All of these poets showcased in the volume “extend [H.D.’s] feminist critique of culture to their handling of form, deliberately challenging established reading patterns and habits of consciousness” (xviii). Metamorphosis is at the center of such a project.

In a similar concluding gesture, I think about Ovid's next work after the *Metamorphoses*, the *Heroides*, or Heroines, comprising fourteen letters written by legendary women to their husbands or lovers. In it, Ovid allows historically voiceless, mistreated, or overlooked women to speak, to tell their own stories, and it is in this same spirit that H.D. enters into her own modern mythmaking. We have not yet explored the ways in which metamorphosis can be a powerful model of power structures, but it is a dimension of the topic that has already been undertaken in other critical works. "Metamorphosis is also about agency and thus essentially about power, whether social and political or the creative power of an author . . . While metamorphic change may initially seem a paradigm of liberation and subversion, it can also be arbitrary and oppressive and ultimately limiting" (Dente et al 1). In her poetry, H.D. tackles the patriarchal power structure, especially within the context of literary and artistic tradition, and revisions it, recognizing metamorphosis' oppressive characteristics while also at in the same moment reclaiming it as a liberating and at times equalizing force.

We can see this in her poetic sequence *The God* (1913-1917), especially in two poems "Adonis" and "Pygmalion." In this sequence, H.D. reorders and retells the Ovidian myths associated with the figure of Orpheus, the poet, who, like Philomela, is able to sing because of the suffering he endures when his wife, Eurydice, is taken from him to the underworld. From a feminist perspective, H.D. centers her retelling, not on Orpheus, but on Eurydice, often seen as the passive, forgotten female figure who, because she is voiceless and powerless, enables Orpheus to sing. Most of the stories associated with the Orpheus myth have been read within the feminist tradition as being associated with the theory of the male gaze pinioning the passive,

eroticized female object, transforming her at will.<sup>33</sup> In H.D.'s version, however, the important metamorphosis is not that cajoled by the artist as he transforms his passive eroticized object—instead, the important metamorphosis takes place within the artist himself. In understanding the poem this way, I am indebted to Margaret Bruzelius' article "H.D. and Eurydice," which states, "Unlike the artists in Ovid, who perform their aesthetic miracles themselves unscathed... the artist in H.D. must abandon the illusion of autonomy, identify with the desired object as itself an independent subject, and, in that move, become part of a transformed work of art" (449-450). In "Adonis," H.D. shifts the focus from Venus, the artificer, to the art object, the statue or moment of Adonis that Venus creates in order to mourn the untimely death of Adonis at the hands of a fierce wild boar.

Not the gold on the temple-front  
 where you stand,  
 is as gold as this,  
 not the gold that fasten your sandal  
 ...  
 is as golden as this:  
 Each of us like you  
 has died once,  
 each of us like you  
 stands apart, like you  
 fit to be worshipped.

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<sup>33</sup> For more on this kind of feminist theory in relation to these poems, see "H.D. and Eurydice" by Margaret Bruzelius, in *Twentieth Century Literature*, Vol. 44, No. 4 (Winter, 1998), pp. 447-463.

The “each of us like you” is repeated 19 times, as Bruzelius points out, and its repetition speaks to the fact that all objects are also subjects. In “Pygmalion,” we see further evidence of how an artist is transformed by his or her own work of art:

Now am I the power  
 that has made this fire  
 as of old I made the gods  
 start from the rocks?  
 am I the god?  
 or does this fire carve me  
 for its use?

In this poem, the boundary between artist (Pygmalion) and his artwork (the statute that is metamorphosed by the gods into Gaitea) is blurred; we don’t even see evidence of the metamorphosis of Gaitea. The focus is on the artist’s identification with the art object, which becomes in itself a subject, thus breaking and remaking the artist’s identity. In true metamorphic fashion, H.D. fundamentally transforms the power structures so that it is the object that can become a subject, and the artwork that can transform the artist.

Similarly, in her *Trilogy*, H.D. “wove together these fragments of myth and imagery to create her own ‘legend’ of metamorphosis, as she called it (*T.F.* [Tribute to Freud], p. vii). The First World War and its subsequent personal and cultural consequences had constituted a kind of death for H.D., a descent to the underworld from which she had to emerge in a process of spiritual rebirth that was decades in the making” (Friedman 9). Obviously as the trilogy is a poem of epic size and depth that would demand its own project, I will not be able to give the sequence of poems the kind of depth of attention they deserve; nonetheless, its visions of

metamorphosis seem a fitting place to end this project. The figure I want to focus on is the one H.D. chose to identify herself with “to stimulate the unfolding reflections of memory and myth” (9): that of Psyche.<sup>34</sup> The poetic voice driving most of *The Walls Do Not Fall*, the first in the trilogy, is identified as a worm about to embark on the metamorphic process of spinning a shroud and transforming from this cocoon into a butterfly. Reminiscent of Lewis’ attack on Pound, where he calls Pound a kind of literary parasite who relies upon tradition the way a parasite feeds off of a host, H.D.’s poet-worm is decried as a “parasite” who “profit[s] / by every calamity” and “eat[s] [her] way out of it” (516). Unlike Pound’s use of antiquities, however, “The rebirth of Psyche depends first upon a recognition of the androcentric roots of negative definition and then secondly upon a subversive transformation of existing traditions that ultimately destroys their patriarchal base” (Friedman 271). Throughout the poem H.D. invokes and transforms a wide array of cultural archetypes and influential mythical figures that are normally associated with patriarchy—from Ovid to Christianity—transforming them into her own. She even calls forth to other poets, old and new, collectively inviting them to participate with her silkworm narrator in its metamorphic processes, calling them “the keepers of the secret, / the carriers, the spinners / of that rare intangible thread / that binds all humanity // to ancient wisdom, / to antiquity.”<sup>35</sup> The *Trilogy* is thus a collection of poems that works to transform much of the Western (and Eastern) traditions, working in an Ovidian mode of rereading and recasting the past—and the poet-silkworm is a figure for that transformative energy.

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<sup>34</sup> “The name ‘Psyche’ comes from the Greek work for ‘soul,’ often portrayed in Greek art as a butterfly that leaves the body at death. Psyche is the spirit that survives physical decay to be reunited with the divine” (Friedman 9).

<sup>35</sup> Similar criticism have been leveled at H.D. as have been at Pound: for example, “Her real achievement in the trilogy is not that she wrote well about the present but that she wrote incomparably well about the past” (Swann 173).

From within the context of World War II, H.D. tackles the very questions I posed at the beginning of this project from within a much more desperate and urgent context:

But we fight for life,  
We fight, they say, for breath,

so what good are your scribblings?

“This—” H.D. answers:

we take them with us  
beyond death: Mercury, Hermes, Thoth  
invented the script, letters, palette;

the indicated flute or lyre-notes  
on papyrus or parchment

are magic, indelibly stamped  
on the atmosphere somewhere (518-519).

Words are thus the ultimate metamorphic figures, undying and capable of a polyvalent transformations. As Eliot does in *Four Quartets*, H.D. reminds us in a Christian context that words are but metamorphosed versions of the Word, which was in the beginning. She also, like Eliot, re-imagines the same metamorphic energies that I explored in Pound and even in her early renditions of Ovidian myth using a Christian template: according to her, the Holy Ghost is “that way of inspiration” that acts as “go-between, interpreter” to explain “symbols of the past / in today’s imagery” and “merges the distant future / with most distant antiquity” (526).

Like all modern mythmakers, like Pound and Eliot, she must ‘plunder’ the past, “or evoking the dead, / ...bring[] life to the living” (512). This is an idea that catapults the second poem in her trilogy, *Tribute to the Angels*, into its beginning:

steal then, O orator,

plunder, O poet,

take what the old-church

found in Mithra’s thomb,

candle and script and bell,

take what the new-church spat upon

and broke and shattered;

collect the fragments of the splintered glass

and of your fire and breath,

melt down and integrate,

re-invoke, re-create

opal, onyx, obsidian

now scattered in the shards

men tread upon.

This action fuels the whole of her *Trilogy* and indeed fuels the whole of my project, of what Pound and Eliot tried to do within their poetry. It is a kind of alchemy that allows the mythmaking process to melt down and integrate ancient fragments into a new whole. In order to complete this metamorphosis, the poet needs an intimate knowledge of tradition, of the antiquities and words that have gone before him or her. The fundamental difference between H.D. and Eliot and Pound, however, lies in how H.D. reconfigured mythmaking as a subversive act.

As a modern mythmaker, H.D. was deeply rooted in tradition and committed to its preservation. But as one of the ‘keepers of the secret, / the carriers, the spinners,’ she did not conceive of the poet as a passive receptacle for the images and symbols of tradition as Eliot had suggested in his ‘Tradition and the Individual Talent.’ Instead, the poet engages in an active, dialectical process of weaving traditional and personal revelations into new patterns of vision...The poet is simultaneously ‘carrier’ of the old and ‘spinner’ of the new. (226)

Now, to say that H.D.’s version of mythmaking and of tradition is active whereas Eliot’s is passive neglects the many ways in which Eliot himself reconfigures and, in a sense, metamorphoses canonical figures in his poetry (such as Tiresias and his compound literary ghost). That said, H.D.’s mythmaking was much more revolutionary and it is Friedman’s interpretation of H.D.’s use of metamorphosis that I would like to leave my readers with, one where modern myth making “involves the creation of a tapestry of words that ‘weaves’ a new pattern with the ‘threads’ of tradition” (227-8). Out of the cocoon of the old “husk of self,” a more brightly colored butterfly emerges, but it is not the flight itself I want to laud here. Instead,

the worm's ability to spin, to create, to precipitate the transformation that allows for flight is what is ultimately celebrated, and it is the poet's ability to spin a new mythos "that contains both continuity and metamorphosis" (272) that this project ultimately celebrates.

Like Pound, and like all aspiring writers and students of literature, I have felt the pressure involved in discovering the multitude of canonical writers who have written down words that seem to so perfectly encapsulate a thought or feeling I had previously thought to be unique to me. There is a moment after a few years of making our way through literary history when we have to wonder: has it all just been said before? What can I add that says anything *new*, that offers anything other than a mere quotation, imitation, or translation of what the dead already said so well that they are able to live on in our own time? In what ways is creative transformation of old stories, or using metamorphosis in literature simply an example of the pessimistic notion that originality is dead, that nothing new can be said? Such thinking can be potentially damning, stopping the flow of our inspiration and can spread to our general outlook on life: all of it is the same routine of eating, sleeping, working, loving, losing, breeding, dying, (and to echo Pound's bored sarcasm) etc. etc. etc.

In remembering Pound's own understanding of his work in *Personae*, I am again reminded of Pater's "Conclusion." Pater's point is that if we shock ourselves out of a sense of routine complacency—especially in our constructions and understandings of the self—we can look at these routines with new eyes. We can dislocate ourselves, and in that dislocation or break from complacency or routine we open ourselves to a "becoming" that allows us a habitless outlook on things our routine-worn eyes might have more easily dismissed.

To burn always with this hard, gemlike flame, to maintain  
this ecstasy, is success in life. In a sense it might even be

said that our failure is to form habits: for, after all, habit is relative to a stereotyped world, and meantime it is only the roughness of the eye that makes any two persons, things, situations, seem alike. While all melts under our feet, we may well grasp at any exquisite passion, or any contribution to knowledge that seems by a lifted horizon to set the spirit free for a moment, or any stirring of the senses, strange dyes, strange colours, and curious odours, or work of the artist's hands, or the face of one's friend.

To have success in a Paterian sense, we must slow down, pause over each daily act and allow ourselves some recognition of its significance, rather than letting it wash over us so much that we go through life—or through literature—like passive zombies. Obviously we can't always be aware of each moment; that's too exhausting to think about. But poetry slows us down, forces us to read and reread, to mediate on each word's precise usage and placement, to untangle the syntax, the flow, and rhythm of the words, so that we recall and remember epiphanies or stumble across new realizations about how we want to feel and live. As Pound demonstrates in *Personae*, metamorphosis, in the sense of letting the past interpenetrate the present in such a way that at once reformulates and reanimates the habit-worn outlook or thought, is a method for obtaining these new eyes.

I believe that Pound and Eliot and H.D. were right to turn to metamorphosis, both as a theme and as a method in their poetry to attempt to creatively recycle literary allusions, and from that process to offer some refiguring of poetic expression unique to themselves. Even if these attempts at this kind of literary metamorphosis are not always successful,

Through such conflations of myth and history, [Pound] reifies his conviction, as he stated in the preface to *The Spirit of Romance*, that “all ages are contemporaneous”—that, especially in literature, ‘real time is independent of the apparent,’ ... All of the tales exemplify, furthermore, the profound belief in metamorphosis—Philomela and Procne into birds, Actaeon into a stag, Jupiter into a shower of gold—that underlies Pound’s thought and poetry: his well-nigh religious belief in the endurance of the permanent within the transient and in the transmission and preservation of knowledge through the different cultures of the world. (Ziolkowski 40)

Rather than letting the past condemn present efforts, Pound—and indeed both Eliot and H.D. as well— demonstrate the “contemporaneity” of all times; they draw upon a chosen tradition, and though these sources are allowed them to retain their own identity, they also in turn allow these poets to create something entirely new and different. Even though thoughts and emotion are destroyed and reborn in us as we die and are reborn on a collective level, something of the original core is left and allows for this cycle of metamorphosis on a metaphorical level that encourages continual writing that seeks to place ourselves within the context of the past—and to place the past within the context of ourselves. In this way, metamorphosis is a model of regeneration that rejuvenates writers and is the impetus of literary production itself.

Metamorphosis includes both evolution and devolution, the weaving and unweaving of ourselves, the learning and unlearning and relearning that goes on as we read, write, and struggle through with those tools on our quest to figure out who we are in any given moment of circumstance, time, or place. The term also includes the sense of coalescing, of making pieces momentarily whole, and of spurring them onto development and flight, even if later that whole

will be broken again and then remade again in an entirely different form. Just as the seasons continue to change and the waves continue to form and break at the shore, there is something continuous and metamorphic in the way we continue to read and write. We study and learn from the poets who have gone before us, finding lines and moments that seem set down so perfectly, so exactly, that they seem to speak for us, to us. Such moments have the power to link passages and people together across time and space. Even if these moments are fleeting, even if we only forget or but half-recall these passages later, the impression they have upon us serve to propel us forward in ways that are ineffaceable. This is a thought Eliot himself once configured in terms of metamorphosis:

There is a close analogy between the sort of experience which develops a man and the sort of experience which develops a writer . . . . This relation is a feeling of profound kinship, or rather of a peculiar personal intimacy, with another, probably a dead author. It may overcome us suddenly, on or after long acquaintance; it is certainly a crisis; and when a young writer is seized with his first passion of the sort he may be changed, metamorphosed almost . . . from a bundle of second-hand sentiments into a person. Like personal intimacies in life, it may and probably will pass, but it will be ineffaceable.<sup>36</sup>

The inclusion of past literary references allows this metamorphosis, because these writers have left behind their impersonal testaments to the same themes and thoughts we grapple with even after they are gone. Even if for a moment, we can feel that our struggles are not formless, and reading a passage that seems to reach out a hand specifically to you can be a validation of

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<sup>36</sup> “Reflections on Contemporary Poery IV” from *Egoist* VI.3 July 1919, 39

existence. There are moments when I read something particularly dense, something that still manages to coalesce a seemingly disparate array of thoughts and ideas that I had previously dealt with in a variety of other works. In those moments of reading, it's as if the author is "metamorphosing the fragments to a whole" (Tomlinson 25).

Although in the Ovidian sense metamorphosis can connote moments of intense violence or fear that instigate transformation, I revel in those moments of metamorphosis, those moments where the same old story takes on a new form, the same old idea, thought or tired conception of self takes on a rejuvenation of feeling and makes me feel again that my life is my own, the myths are made for re-spinning and re-shading. Audre Lorde demonstrates a profoundly modern notion about originality and change when she says:

For there are no new ideas. There are only new ways of making them felt -  
- of examining what those ideas feel like being lived on Sunday morning  
at 7 A.M., after brunch, during wild love, making war, giving birth,  
mourning our dead—while we suffer the old longings, battle the old  
warnings and fears of being silent and impotent and alone, while we taste  
new possibilities and strengths.

The different uses and manifestations of metamorphic myth demonstrate the phenomenon's continuing vitality, especially as it relates to the search for (im)personal identity and the continuous, indestructible pleasure of reading and writing our own stories within the context of a literary canon. At the core, the stories may be the same, but it is our uncanny ability to transfigure them into our own patterns that mimics the power inherent in metamorphosis.

It is a testament to the protean, fluid nature of writing that we can take Lorde up on this challenge of making the same old ideas felt in new, triumphant ways, and it is a testament to the activating spirit of metamorphosis that we can, as H.D. would have it, be simultaneously carriers of the old and spinners of the new.

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