

*Ovid's Metamorphoses in Twentieth-Century  
Italian Literature*

ed. by Alberto Comparini

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## Massimo Bontempelli's Re-Inventions. Magism, Metaphysics, and Modern(ist) Mythology

A significant portion of this book is focused on authors that many textbooks include in the so called 'Italian Surrealism,' a cluster of literary and artistic trends that actually started before the birth of Surrealism, was largely anti-Surrealist, and must be considered from a less Franco-centric perspective.<sup>1</sup> This essay addresses the influence of Ovid on a specific and central niche of that prismatic phenomenon. I will discuss, in particular, Massimo Bontempelli's Magismo, an original thread of a global modern literary poetics: Magic (or Magical) Realism.<sup>2</sup> From the Twenties up to the end of World War II, Bontempelli's inventions and theories developed in parallel and in contrast with the evolution of French Surrealism. They were also nourished by the de Chirico brothers' metaphysical aesthetics, which, along with Futurism, was the most influential Italian contribution to modern Western art. My analysis will therefore also pay special attention to de Chirico's uses of Ovid in the years in which his rapport with Bontempelli was more significant.

I hypothesize that, besides occasional references and direct homages, Ovid is a crucial model for the ambition that informed the Realismo Magico: that of turning literature into a form of magic, and modern stories into new classical myths.<sup>3</sup> I will offer a brief historical account of the cultural genealogy that made Ovid relevant to the Magismo as a master of two specific traits, imagination and irony, and I will discuss the role of this influence in the wider frame of Italy's controversial return to order. A close reading of Bontempelli's late masterpiece *Giro del sole*, written under circumstances that made Ovid a biographical and

<sup>1</sup> For a wider discussion on this phenomenon, see Alessandro Giammei: *Surrealismo italiano*, in: *Il contributo italiano alla storia del pensiero. Letteratura*, ed. by Giulio Ferroni, Rome 2018.

<sup>2</sup> The role of Bontempelli in the international developing of Magical Realism needs to be investigated further. He is part of the picture in Maggie Ann Bowers: *Magic(al) Realism*, New York 2004.

<sup>3</sup> The best way to frame Bontempelli's theory of Realismo Magico is to read his own collection of essays *L'avventura novecentista*. A rich anthology is available in: Massimo Bontempelli: *Opere scelte*, ed. by Luigi Baldacci, Milan 1978, pp. 749-770. For a recent monograph on the matter, see Ugo Piscopo: *Massimo Bontempelli. Per una modernità dalle pareti lisce*, Naples 2001.

spiritual model for the author, will highlight the narrative and stylistic consequences of Bontempelli's original approach to reviving classical mythology in late modernity.

#### 1. Those Who Had "an Ovid" in the Novecento

'I've never had an Ovid,' realizes one of Bontempelli's alter egos in a 1923 short story: "non ho mai posseduto un Ovidio."<sup>4</sup> The protagonist of that story, published in the collection *Donna del sole* and soon translated in America,<sup>5</sup> is a girl who wants to know about those plants, people, animals, and things that were taken from Earth to be turned into constellations. Given such a plot, 'an Ovid' can't be anything but an edition of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, the poem that recounts those sidereal transformations, along with vegetal, mineral, and animal ones. The narrator has never possessed that book, and he sounds like a proud anti-classicist (even a *Strapaese* provincialist) when he explains why. "Nessuna delle persone che conoscevo possedeva un Ovidio," he declares, and then he even admits that he would feel embarrassed to enter a bookshop and ask for "un Ovidio."

When this story was being published, Bontempelli had just returned to Rome from Paris and was about to launch his modernist journal, *900*.<sup>6</sup> It might seem unsurprising that a former futurist poet such as himself, influenced by Cubist simultaneity and the nascent French Surrealism, would simply shrug his shoulders at classical literary mythology. But the irony – an intentional irony, presumably easy to notice for his vast audience at the dawn of the fascist *ventennio* – is rather glaring. Not only does the oneiric tale, titled *L'idillio finito bene*, end up in a perfect Ovidian metamorphosis (with the curious girl, Adelina, herself turned into a pattern of stars in the sky, just as Arcas and Callisto),<sup>7</sup> but Bontempelli's acquaintances in the early Twenties, as well as his intellectual models (and competitors) beyond the Alps, definitely had 'an Ovid.' And they read it, too.

<sup>4</sup> Bontempelli: *L'idillio finito bene (Adelina)*, in: *Racconti e romanzi*, ed. by Paola Masino, Milan 1961, I, p. 837. All the passages from this short story are quoted from this page.

<sup>5</sup> Bontempelli: *Sweet Adeline*, in: *The Living Age* 19 (April 1928), pp. 720-722.

<sup>6</sup> The bilingual journal, with the subtitle *Cahiers d'Italie et d'Europe*, marked the most internationalist editorial experience of fascist Italy. Max Jacob and James Joyce were part of its editorial committee, and the first Italian translations of Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway* – along with texts by Chekhov, Cendrars, Tolstoy, and Joyce himself – appeared on its pages. See *Antologia della rivista "900"*, ed. by Enrico Falqui, Rome 1958.

<sup>7</sup> The adherence of Adelina's metamorphosis to the canonical phenomenology of Ovid's transformations is underlined by commentators: see Simona Micali: *Massimo Bontempelli*, in: *Il mito nella letteratura italiana*, ed. by Pietro Gibellini and Marinella Cantelmo, Brescia 2007, IV, p. 159.

The term ‘surrealist,’ used in 1924 by Breton in his first *Manifesto*, was minted seven years before for the re-writing of an episode from the *Metamorphoses*: Apollinaire’s *Les mamelles de Tirésias*. Both Curzio Malaparte and Corrado Alvaro intertwined the most visionary threads of their literary careers with Ovid’s myths after joining the editorial board of Bontempelli’s short-lived new journal, founded in 1926 as an emblem of *Stracittà* cosmopolitanism.<sup>8</sup> And Bontempelli’s nearest and most influential comrades at the time, the de Chirico brothers, were almost transfixed by the ancient collection of Greek legends sung in Latin. There is no need to dwell on the younger brother, Alberto Savinio, since an entire chapter of this book is devoted to him. It will suffice to remember that his literary debut, *Hermaphrodito* (1918), is titled after a myth from Book IV of the *Metamorphoses*, and that many of his writings and paintings from the Twenties are inspired by Ovidian myths: from the wooden Andromeda, the ugly Narcissus, and the transgender Apollo of *Tragedia dell’infanzia*, to the zoomorphic Niobe painted in Paris, and the Perseus of his early ballet recalled by Bontempelli himself in *La vita operosa*.<sup>9</sup> As for the older brother, Giorgio de Chirico, a special connection with Ovid (among the many classical influences that informed his art) is already evident in the pre-war Parisian years of his career, during which a visual and philosophical fixation on Ariadne’s sleep led to a famous series of repetitive, almost compulsive, Metaphysical paintings.<sup>10</sup> Ovidian themes are to appear in almost every phase of de Chirico’s artistic life, at times revealing a deep knowledge of the original literary source. In 1923 for instance, in the prime of the so called ‘ritorno all’ordine,’ he produced an inked pencil study on paper for a never-realized painting about Numa and the Nymph Egeria, one of the lesser known iconographies from the *Metamorphoses*.<sup>11</sup> And later, during the

<sup>8</sup> On Malaparte’s Ovidian irony, see Cristina Bragaglia: *Il piacere del racconto*, Florence 1993, pp. 287-290. As for Alvaro, intertextual and conceptual links with Ovid’s poetics (and with specific myths from the *Metamorphoses*) have been established. See for instance Marinella Lizza Venuti: *Ovidio modello di ‘Lunga notte di Medea’ di Corrado Alvaro*, in: *Carte Italiane* 2 2-3 (2007), pp. 59-70.

<sup>9</sup> “S’erano accese discussioni parziali, più o meno animate a seconda dei caratteri, soffocate tutte dal tumultuare ariostesco del pianoforte su cui Savinio aveva attaccato il primo atto del *Perseo*. D’un tratto, quando di sotto alle sue innumeri dita scaturì il tema magniloquente di Poseidon, Kri-kri, agitandosi come se si scrollasse ancora d’addosso l’acqua della vasca napoletana, si mise ad abbaiare furiosamente contro la musica” (Bontempelli: *La vita intensa*, in: *Racconti e Romanzi*, I, p. 234).

<sup>10</sup> On the obsessive return of Ariadne in de Chirico’s painting, see the introduction of Theodore Ziolkowski: *Ovid and the Moderns*, Ithaca and London 2005, pp. 3-9. See also Michael Taylor: *Giorgio de Chirico and the Myth of Ariadne*, Philadelphia 2002.

<sup>11</sup> On this minor work, see *Giorgio de Chirico. Opere dal 1917 agli anni cinquanta: Disegni, acquerelli, tempere, progetti per illustrazioni e per incisioni, scene e figurini teatrali*, ed. by Maurizio Fagiolo dell’Arco, Reggio Emilia 1996, pp. 46-47.

war, he played with the Renaissance and romantic afterlives of Ovid's myths, composing ironic visual stratigraphies which I have discussed at length elsewhere.<sup>12</sup>

Bontempelli and De Chirico are among the most original and consequential cultural protagonists of Italy's reaction to modernism in the interwar period, both drawing on their avant-garde successes of the previous decade and their direct connections with edgy circles in France. At the same time, they both openly advocated for a return to the power of ancient, classical models for a true renovation of art. From the end of World War I to the collapse of the fascist regime, the writer's Realismo Magico and the painter's Metafisica faced a crucial challenge that is specific to Italy's modernity in the wider frame of early 20th century Europe. While fascism was mobilizing classical antiquity for imperial purposes, progressively isolating Italian literature and art from the rest of Western culture and appropriating the most relevant native contributions to international vanguardism (futurism in particular, but also other trends and movements such as rational architecture), Bontempelli and de Chirico were trying to directly engage the same overwhelming heritage without renouncing their part in a non-provincial modernism. Ovid – the Ovid of the *Metamorphoses* in particular – was a key resource for such an endeavor. For the most advanced expressions of Italy's return to order, the crucial aspect of Ovid's narrative poetry was a quality that Giacomo Leopardi did not recognize in any other classical poet: imagination, the power of condensing legends into fables, the ability to originate everlasting archetypes.<sup>13</sup> To use a Greek word: mythopoeia. Acquiring this classical skill by reviving Ovid's inventions rather than rewriting his verses (by making Ovid's miracles happen again on the page while pretending to have “never had an Ovid”) was a way to evade the dichotomy between tradition and modernity without directly opposing the blatant passéism of neoclassical fascist art.

Ovid was not the only available ancient master of everyday miracles and nonchalant magic for modern metaphysicians and magical realists. Apuleius, for instance, also served as a literary reservoir of stories and figures: Bontempelli

<sup>12</sup> Giammei: *Stratigraphy of Andromeda. Giorgio de Chirico, Alberto Savinio, Origins, and Originality*, in: *Modernism/modernity* 25 1 (January 2018).

<sup>13</sup> According to Leopardi, imagination is creative force typical of children and, at the same time, of the ancients (*Zibaldone* 57, 727). Such a quality undergoes a “cangiamento” during classical antiquity, and is replaced by “affetto:” “cangiamento necessario, e derivante per sé stesso dal cangiamento dell'uomo. Così accadde proporzionalmente anche ai latini, eccetto Ovidio” (*Zibaldone* 726). Ovid is the only Latin poet that maintains “immaginazione” as the primary “nervo, e il forte, e il principale della poesia.” I am citing from the *Zibaldone* using the page numbers of the original manuscript, as in the common use. My reference text is the one edited by Rolando Damiani in its more recent edition (Milan 2014).

translated *The Golden Ass* in 1928,<sup>14</sup> and Savinio re-wrote the tale of Eros and Psyche more than once, from *Angelica o la notte di maggio* to *La nostra anima*. Early modern works inspired by mythology – in particular the serene, only slightly supernatural visions of Quattrocento paintings – were also a relevant source of influence,<sup>15</sup> and Ariosto's fantasy was enormously important for Metaphysical Art and Realismo Magico.<sup>16</sup> However, Ovid remains a unique model in terms of originality and untimeliness, qualities that connect the two seemingly polar extremes that Italy's peculiar modernism tried to reconcile: newness and the past, invention and awareness of origins.<sup>17</sup> A wider ocean of archaic mythology, as we now know, nourished the *Metamorphoses* in the first place, but it is Ovid's selection (and his narrative of course) that endured, actively influencing later art and literature and dictating archetypes.<sup>18</sup>

The ubiquity of Ovid's mythologems in the history of European iconography and in the plots of countless narrations makes the *Metamorphoses* an absolute precedent, a fountainhead. For a modern Italian artist, the poem offered an example to be challenged rather than simply homaged, an inspiration for further, new inventions animated by that same irony and imagination that made Ovid successful throughout the history of Western art and literature. It is not by chance that Bontempelli, after refusing Attilio Momigliano's chair at the University of Florence and condemning the alliance with Nazi Germany in 1938, chose the myth of Europa from the *Metamorphoses* for the re-forging of his proudly Western poetics, theorized and practiced for years and finally completely de-

<sup>14</sup> Apuleius: *Le metamorfosi, o L'asino d'oro*, ed. by Bontempelli, Milan 1928.

<sup>15</sup> In an important article on 900, Bontempelli states that "i pittori italiani del Quattrocento" are the closest visual parallel to the poetics of "novecentismo:" "per quel loro realismo preciso, avvolto in una atmosfera di stupore lucido, essi ci sono stranamente vicini" (Bontempelli: *L'avventura novecentista*, in: *Opere scelte*, p. 765).

<sup>16</sup> I am working on this question myself. For initial results, see Giammei: *Ariosto, The Great Metaphysician*, in: *Modern Language Notes* 132 1 (January 2017), pp. 135-162.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. *Italian Modernism. Italian Culture Between Decadentism and Avant-Garde*, ed. by Luca Somigli and Mario Moroni, Buffalo, Toronto and London 2005; Riccardo Castellana: *Realismo modernista. Un'idea del romanzo italiano 1915-1925*, in: *Italiannistica* 39 1 (January-April 2010), pp. 23-45; *Sul modernismo italiano*, ed. by Romano Luperini and Massimiliano Tortora, Naples 2012; Alberto Comparini: *Una proposta per il modernismo italiano. La mitologia esistenziale modernista*, in: *Rassegna Europea di Letteratura Italiana* 41 1 (January-June 2013), pp. 103-124.

<sup>18</sup> This is what Bontempelli intends to revive: the motto of his novecentismo and Realismo magico is "inventare i miti e le favole necessari ai tempi nuovi [...] noi cerchiamo l'arte d'inventare favole e persone talmente nuove e forti, da poterle far passare attraverso mille forme e mille stili mantenendo quella forza originaria; appunto come avvenne dei miti e dei personaggi delle due ere che ci hanno preceduto" (Bontempelli: *Da l'avventura novecentista*, p. 768).

tached from the narrow horizons of fascist art. Ovid is the only classical source<sup>19</sup> in *Giro del sole*, the 1941 triptych of foundational stories that Bontempelli wrote in Venice as a disillusioned fugitive, a masterpiece that all but closed his career.<sup>20</sup> It is interesting to notice that de Chirico, in the same years, empathized with the historical figure of Ovid (with his isolation, with his exile) by painting the “*baroccheggiante*” autobiographical oil *Ovidio presso i barbari*.<sup>21</sup>

## 2. Rescuing vs. Restoring Ovid, from Prussia to Valòria

Leopardi's ideas about Ovid certainly had a wide echo in Italy's late modernity. Particularly resonant was Leopardi's association of the *Metamorphoses* with the persistent quality of imagination, which changed into affection during the course of poetry's evolution in all classical authors except Ovid. Still, in order to hypothesize a meaningful genealogical stream for the interpretation and appropriation of Ovid's influence in Italy's Magical Realism, de Chirico's unique European education is undeniably relevant. The stateless Greek-born intellectual brought with him to his elective homeland not only what he and his brother had learned and invented in Montparnasse, but also the relatively remote artistic and philosophical trends that shaped his formative years in Germany, an advanced intellectual environment that was not very connected to Italy. Critics have extensively discussed the importance of Nietzsche, Schopenhauer, and Weininger as theoretical bedrocks for the birth of the Scuola Metafisica,<sup>22</sup> which deeply affected the development of Magical Realism among many other cultural experiences of 20th century Europe. For the purpose of this chapter, however, the German master of interest is not a philosopher but a painter: Max Klinger. It is known that Klinger's symbolist aesthetics, along with Böcklin's, was a central source of inspiration for Metaphysical art and Surrealism, but it is his original

<sup>19</sup> The other two tales (*Le ali dell'ippogrifo* and *La via di Colombo*) are based respectively on Ariosto's *Orlando furioso* and on Christopher Columbus' first journey to the Americas.

<sup>20</sup> *Giro del sole* is arguably the last book project that the author worked on in autonomy. The following book, *L'amante fedele* (which won the Premio Strega in 1953 when it was published by Mondadori), is a collection of short stories published after 1940, and its realization was possible thanks to the help of the great surreal writer Paola Masino, who assisted Bontempelli throughout the severe illness that eventually killed him in 1960.

<sup>21</sup> On the work, see the catalogue *de Chirico. La metafisica del paesaggio 1909-1970* (Arezzo, 18 November 2000-14 January 2001), ed. by Fagiolo dall'Arco, Bologna 2000, p. 90.

<sup>22</sup> On Nietzsche in particular, see Ara Merjian: *Giorgio de Chirico and the Metaphysical City. Nietzsche, Modernism*, New Haven 2014.

approach to Ovidian mythology that makes him particularly important for narrative experiments as well.

A good point of departure in linking Klinger to Italy's Realismo Magico via de Chirico appears in the memoirs of Dimitris Pikionis, a Greek architect who studied with Giorgio in Munich at the beginning of the century. Pikionis is not a minor figure in de Chirico's intellectual biography: the correspondence between the two artists is intimate and revealing, and it is probably in a letter to Pikionis that de Chirico first used the term Metaphysics in referring to his pictorial projects. In his autobiography, the architect remembers that Klinger, around the middle of the first decade of the 20th century, was the most admired artist by the students of the Beaux Arts academy in Munich:

We sat for hours, all of us, in the engraving workshop of the Neue Pinakothek, leafing through the illustrated books numbered as a musical composition (Opus I, II, ...) occasionally disrupted by the artist's suggestive intermezzos [...]: the song of Ossian, Ovid's hymns, Hermes with Jupiter's eagle and Prometheus in chains.<sup>23</sup>

Despite the generic mention of "hymns," the Ovidian work that is more directly linked to Klinger's engravings is, again, the *Metamorphoses*. The cited cycle of prints *Opus II*, completed in 1879, is one of the most surprising cases in the long history of the poem's visual fortune, an ironic subversion of the traditional relationship between iconographies and their textual sources.<sup>24</sup> In it, Klinger – through the visual intermezzos recalled by Pikionis – imagined alternative endings for the tragic episodes of three famous couples from the *Metamorphoses*: Pyramus and Thisbe, Narcissus and Echo, and Apollo and Daphne. The subtitle of the booklet is *Rettungen Ovidischer Opfer*, literally 'the rescues of Ovid's victims,' and the salvages (which consist of incongruous happy endings) do not imply any deviation from the exquisite symbolist style of the representation: the cycle could be exhibited along with Baroque and Neoclassical ones without looking out of place.

Klinger subtracted the key narrative element (namely, the metamorphosis itself) from Ovid's plots, turning the classical myths – with their religious background and uncompromising morals – into narrative images of pastoral, serene taste. Such a gesture, I believe, is a fundamental precedent for de Chirico (and, downstream in the genealogy of influences, for Bontempelli): Ovid, one of the most authoritative classical sources, can now be approached on an even footing,

<sup>23</sup> I am translating this passage from Roos' Italian version of the text in Gerd Roos: *Giorgio de Chirico e Alberto Savinio. Ricordi e documenti: Monaco Milano Firenze 1906-1911*, Milan 1999, p. 220.

<sup>24</sup> On *Opus II*, see Marsha Morton: *Max Klinger and Wilhelmine Culture*, London 2014, pp. 220-226.



as an equal interlocutor, by a modern artist. Reviving the classic, in this case, does not mean simply retelling his stories with a new, modern style, but rather directly acquiring his mythopoetic ability in order to misremember (and therefore reforge) his untimely tales. De Chirico's painting elaborates this in different ways: his marmoreal Ariadnes await Dionysus in absurd urban settings, his later 'romantic' landscapes are crossed by a flying Hermes or by a goddess sitting on a cloud.<sup>25</sup> His Ovidian iconographies from the Forties (like the recurring subject of Perseus rescuing Andromeda) are re-invented to include modern jewelry and hairstyles, 16th century armors, monsters stolen from Rubens, and horses copied from Delacroix.<sup>26</sup> The autonomy of the modern imitator (or re-inventor) is liberating. Bontempelli's own understanding of this innovative reception of Ovid was, in my speculation, mediated by the *Metafisica*. Indeed, the author explicitly pays homage to the *Metafisica*, this form of non-futurist and willingly Italian avantgarde, in the comprehensive title of his most surreal novellas *Due favole metafisiche*, which center on living puppets, mannequins, and modern magicians.<sup>27</sup> Before concluding this essay with an analysis of the most emblematic case of Bontempelli's revival of the *Metamorphoses*, I wish to consider two opposite cases of Ovidian appropriation that were written in the Twenties, right after the publication of the *Metaphysical Fables* and in the prime of Bontempelli's fruitful intellectual relationship with the de Chirico brothers.

Ovid appears as a precious icon in the serialized novel *La famiglia del fabbro* (published as a volume in 1932 but written in the last years of the previous decade), a grotesque farce that explores themes of justice, obsession, and the exhilarating horrors of provincialism. Set in the fictional isolated town of Valòria, the novel tells the story of Eteocles, a smith who is wrongly accused of murder and is tried. The judge finds him not guilty, but with a "*scheda bianca*" rather than a full absolution: a formal acquittal that expedites the trial but leaves room for doubt in the gossipy and wiseacre parochial community of Valòria. Too farcical to be compared with Dostoyevsky's and Kafka's masterpieces, the novel chronicles the protagonist's progressive mania over his innocence: he wants to be tried again, he confesses crimes he never committed in order to be arrested and repeat the process, he ends up involving his family in his fixation and cages his wife and children with him in the local courthouse while the townsfolk side with or

<sup>25</sup> I am thinking in particular of the liminal masterpieces of the so called Baroque (or Romantic) phase of his painting, after the Ferrarese experience: *Ottobrata* (1924) and *Paesaggio romano* (or *Villa romana*) dated 1922 by the artist.

<sup>26</sup> It is not a case that the 1941 *Perseo libera Andromeda* that was exhibited at the Venice Biennale was re-titled *Ruggiero libera Angelica* and then *San Giorgio e il drago* by the artist, playing with the stratigraphic approach that I mentioned afore.

<sup>27</sup> The two novellas *La scacchiera davanti allo specchio* (1922) and *Eva ultima* (1923), one based on Lewis Carroll's *Alice* and the other on Villiers de l'Isle-Adam's *Eve future*, were collected in the volume *Due favole metafisiche*, Milan 1940.

against him in alternating waves of collective euphoria. The smith's obsession with justice is paralleled, in the plot, by a metaphorical obsession with the past developed by his brother-in-law, Leronio, a solitary elderly man who acquires an old wardrobe from a peasant. When a local friar, Brother Paolo, sees the wardrobe, he realizes that it is an authentic 15th century piece and helps Laronio peel off centuries of old dust and varnish from one of the shutters, revealing a Renaissance portrait of Virgil. The finding changes Laronio's life: the valuable wardrobe becomes the center of his existence, he develops a paranoia for possible thefts and intrusions, and he starts studying Virgil in order to connect with his new found treasure. When Danilo (a high-school professor from the city who enjoys the town life and wants to marry Eteocle's daughter Stella) manages to enter Laronio's house by pretending to do research on Virgil's portrait, a revealing dialogue takes place in front of the piece of furniture:

– Voi avete capito, avete capito: Virgilio; e ora stiamo facendo anche l'altro, quello di destra; dice fra Paolo che certo sarà Ovidio, sapete che cosa è Ovidio?

– Sì sì, lo so, ma lasci che la tiri su...

– No, noi che sappiamo le cose dobbiamo rimanere in terra. Io ho letto l'*Eneide*. Ovidio no, non lo so ancora...

– Bene – interruppe Danilo – le porterò io un Ovidio, se permette, ma ora...

– Ovidio? Avrò un Ovidio, io? me lo porterete?

– Glielo prometto. Domani.

La gioia dette un po' di vita al Laronio, lo mise in un'estasi della quale il giovane profitto per sollevarlo e trascinarlo fino al letto, ove lo fece sedere sulla sponda.<sup>28</sup>

Virgil's imperial epic is familiar and easy to access even for a solitary old man in the countryside like Laronio: in late modern Italy, children study the *Aeneid* starting in middle school, and many popular translations are widely available. Ovid, on the other hand, is an exciting surprise for him, and he seems to have no clue "what an Ovid is." A true joy pervades his fragile body (and mind) when Danilo promises to bring "an Ovid," and the young professor even gets invited to join him and Brother Paolo in their restoration work as a result. The following day Danilo keeps his promise, but instead of giving Laronio an Italian version of the *Metamorphoses* he brings a copy of the book in Latin, with no translation. Danilo, the only truly educated character in the novel, is interested in the mere monetary value of the wardrobe: he plans to convince Laronio to write a testament in favor of the daughter-in-law, his fiancé Stella, so she can inherit the object. Laronio, on the other hand, starts reading the Latin verses – indecipherable for him – while Brother Paolo shows Danilo how he is restoring Ovid's portrait on the wardrobe. He reads aloud from Book I, skipping the first four lines of the prothesis to stutter about the chaotic origin of the cosmos (vv. 5-7) in a language

<sup>28</sup> Bontempelli: *La famiglia del fabbro*, in: *Romanzi e racconti*, II, p. 368.

that he doesn't understand.<sup>29</sup> From this episode on, Danilo attends to the restoration of the pictorial Ovid every day, nourishing Laronio's progressively irrational obsession by telling him of a Renaissance artist named Laronio like him, an ancestor who was probably the first owner of the precious wardrobe (though we know that the old man casually bought the object for a modest price).

Just like the main storyline, the epilogue of Laronio's subplot<sup>30</sup> is tragic and comic at once. The old man is found by Danilo, Stella, and other characters inside his wardrobe, between the two fully restored portraits of the classical poets, imitating their pose. A crown of laurel on his head, the *Metamorphoses* in his hand, Laronio dies singing a line from the end of the episode of Phaeton in Book II.

It would be easiest to interpret this scene as one of hubris, the sin that condemned the son of Clymene. However, rather than a tragic hero, Laronio seems more like a victim – a victim of Ovid, one that was not rescued by modern imagination. His ironically narrated condition embodies the kind of approach to the classics that, from the author's point of view, is to be avoided: obtuse veneration, ignorant imitation, devotion. Laronio parrots Ovid – a much less familiar, and therefore more prestigious model than the already visible Virgil on the wardrobe – without even discerning his words, and, significantly, he links a vague sense of 'understanding' with his position on the ground during his confession to Danilo: a humiliation in the etymological sense of the word. His Ovid is a meaningless idol, an item that the learned professor can bring to his house, a promised image to be revealed by scrubbing an old piece of furniture.

### 3. Taking Mythology Seriously, or How to Remake Ovid

An opposite relationship with the classical source is established by Bontempelli himself, as a character, in his fictionalized autobiography *Mia vita morte e miracoli*, another collection of montaged episodes published in magazines and journals between 1923 and 1929 and finally collected in a volume in 1931. The first memory narrated after the premise is titled *Storia di un'Eco* and is a subtle, elegant rewriting of Ovid's episode of Narcissus and Echo from Book III. The author remembers a childhood summer, spent in a countryside house close to the hills. One of his friends, Mario, invites him on a trip to a knoll because, as he puts it, there is an echo there ("Là c'è un'eco").<sup>31</sup> Massimo is not convinced, but he follows Mario and experiences the acoustic phenomenon for the first time ('I had read some description of the echo' the author comments, 'but I never be-

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., p. 369.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., pp. 396-398.

<sup>31</sup> Bontempelli: *Mia vita morte e miracoli*, in: *Racconti e Romanzi*, I, p. 926.

lieved it actually existed: ‘avevo letto qualche descrizione dell’eco, ma non ci avevo mai creduto’).<sup>32</sup> The sound of the echo is a shock to him, and he can’t stop thinking about it. He goes back alone to the knoll the following day, experimenting with the reverberations of his voice in the silence and trying to establish the origin of the echo’s responses, realizing that they actually come from another space: “da un altro spazio, da un’altra lontananza, da una diversa infinità, da una dimensione in cui i miei limiti corporei non potevano aver parte.”<sup>33</sup> The obsession with the echo triggered by these first playful encounters is not treated as a torment, but rather as a problem to be understood and solved. The protagonist starts to suspect that the echo is really everywhere, but does not reveal itself in unworthy places – either because such places have degenerated from an initial pureness or because they still need to be ‘tested’ in order to be considered worthy of the echo. After the first appearance of the echo in an urban space, far from the isolation of hills and mountains – an echo of steps on cobbles in the silence of the night – a sudden epiphany reveals the tale’s strong (and yet subtle) bond with Ovid’s original myth: “Un giorno d’improvviso m’apparve l’idea, che l’eco stava alla mia voce come l’immagine nello specchio alla mia persona visibile.” The echo must be related to the child’s voice the same way the image in the mirror is related to his visible person. This realization is immediately linked by the author with the plot of *La scacchiera davanti allo specchio*, which elaborates the idea of Carroll’s *Through the Looking Glass* and is the first of Bontempelli’s *Favole metafisiche*. It is also connected with Bontempelli’s idea of a ‘compact mirror for the voice,’ or ‘portable echo,’<sup>34</sup> and it is generally marked as his first entry to magical thinking, to lucid mystery, to Magismo. Any reader of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* understands immediately the relation between *Storia di un’eco* and the fable of Echo and Narcissus: in a way, by connecting acoustic and visual reflections through a child’s imaginative logic, the story is an interpretation, a reading of the myth. It is an explanation of the reason why the destiny of a nymph condemned to repeat everyone’s last words is so fatally interlaced with the one of a demigod in love with his image in the mirror. No direct mention of Ovid, no actual case of intertextuality is needed to remake the myth this way, rescuing Echo and Narcissus from the tragic, schmaltzy story that Romanticism liked so much.

To put Ovid in the center of the scene as a venerable master, an icon from an authoritative past, or more generally a traditionally conceived explicit literary model, means to perpetuate an unoriginal tradition of passéist classicism. It means to repeat Latin without understanding it, to restore an old and dusty ward-

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., p. 926.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., p. 930.

<sup>34</sup> The idea of a “specchietto per la voce, or ‘eco da tasca’” is suggested in Bontempelli: *Complimenti alla moda, e alle donne*, in: *Stato di grazia*, Rome 1931, pp. 21-34.

robe, to be crowned with fake laurel and die of obsession like Laronio in *La famiglia del fabbro*. The solution adopted in *Storia di un'eco* is instead tacit and allusive: the story could be appreciated without knowledge of the source, and could have been written by someone who never had an Ovid. Such a use of the source makes it possible to turn the fable into the natural phenomena that generated it in the first place, to give back to the elementary physics of sound and optics (far too obvious for a modern ear or eye) their archaic magic. The episode of Europa in *Giro del Sole* (1941) is a more complex and definitive step in this direction. In it, Bontempelli seems to try to rewrite myths with an absolute candor, as if they were never written before.

The hermeneutic game behind *Viaggio d'Europa* is refined. Since the plot is set in ancient times and there is no contextual modernization in the re-writing, readers can easily recognize the classical tale. However, the narrator suspends as much as possible his natural tendency toward the detachment of familiarity, treating the story as if it were new, unknown, and surprising.

A very effective way to make the old tale new is to narrate and describe what Ovid simply mentions or glosses over. The bulk of the text is the navigation of the bull, and the relationship between the god and the girl during the journey is explored at length, as if it were more relevant than its consequences (and it evidently is for a modern reader). Bontempelli takes advantage of the gaps in the original myth, focusing on practical and tangible aspects that are just too trivial for classical mythology. This way, the grandiose story from Ovid's masterpiece becomes almost an everyday, realistic chronicle. However, the elegant and terse style of the prose ("asimmetrica, vivente, popolare, come nel periodo ateniese dell'epoca d'oro, come in Platone," according to Gianfranco Contini)<sup>35</sup> maintains a very elevated, exquisite tone. The author cultivates a balance between "quotidiano" and "meraviglia" by subverting the classical physiognomy of a mythical tale. Effects of realism are carefully disseminated throughout the text, which does not need to deviate far from the original in order to assert its evident autonomy. As a consequence – just like in *Storia di un'eco* and in Klinger's visual experiments – the source is again deprived of its original tragic elements. Europa, the Mediterranean princess kidnapped by the bull, exhibits a childish, almost banal behavior. One could say that she reacts to unusual and supernatural events just as any young girl from ancient Lebanon would: she is initially scared when the bull starts swimming in the sea, then she cries thinking that she won't see her friends anymore, then she gets used to the navigation and even falls asleep. Her level of confidence with the beast increases progressively: she plays with the

<sup>35</sup> Gianfranco Contini: *Massimo Bontempelli*, in: *Italia magica. Racconti surreali novecenteschi scelti e presentati da Gianfranco Contini*, Turin 1988, p. 235. On Contini's seminal anthology, see Beatrice Sica: *L' Italia magica' di Gianfranco Contini. Storia e interpretazione*, Rome 2013.

bull, makes jokes with him, and ends up giving him timid orders when looking for a place to land. The suspension of disbelief necessary to accept that a magnificent bull could silently persuade a girl to ride him through the waters of the Mediterranean does not extend to details: at first we do not know how or to what degree the beast is supernatural; the girl talks to him like any girl would talk to a dog or a horse, and the incredible story seems rather plausible. Events that in Ovid, despite the original elements of realism, are narrated as neat and eternal, become nonchalant passages of quiet marvel. The child's point of view is a key element: it forces the reader, who may think they know the story already, to experience it with wonder. Here is what happens when the princess and the bull reach Crete, and the girl, tired of interpreting the silent actions and indications of the animal, loses her patience:

Tutt' a un tratto in una sùbita ispirazione gli disse:  
 "Toro, perché non parli? È strano che tu non parli."  
 Allora il toro dall'ombra parlò. Il toro disse:  
 "Non volevo spaventarti."  
 Europa ebbe un brivido ma lo represses e si ricompose:  
 "Bravo, ora potremo discorrere. Vedrai come sarà più bello."  
 Il toro taceva.  
 "Oh" protestò Europa "ora che possiamo parlare tutti e due, non abbiamo più niente da dire?"<sup>36</sup>

The irony, in the most classical sense of the word, is subtly powerful. The incongruous logic of childhood reacts on one hand with the secret magnificence of the divine interlocutor, and on the other hand with his disturbing intention to rape her: two elements that are known to any reader of Ovid, but that are not explicitly taken into consideration by the narrator. After all, at this point, the author has carefully followed the main elements of Ovid's version: from the trick of the herds to the plastic apparition of the bull on the shore, from the crowns of flowers to the seduction through an apparent meekness, up to the actual mythical abduction. The subsequent "viaggio," which gives the story its title, goes the way it should: Europa reaches the shores of Crete on the back of the bull. However, at this point, the fable has to progress. Bontempelli rejects all the possibilities offered by tradition (even those outside Ovid's version of the myth), crafting a gentle, comfortable solution for the female protagonist, an invention that is once again close to those "rescues" invented by Klinger that inspired de Chirico. Before doing so, he defuses further the solemnity of the fable, making it paradoxically even more believable when, after revealing that he can talk, the metamorphic bull (now turned into a woman) reveals his identity.

<sup>36</sup> Bontempelli: *Giro del sole*, in: *Opere scelte*, pp. 477-478.

“Che bellezza, una compagna. Giocheremo a palla, ce l’hai un tamburello? Ma poi torni un po’ toro?”

“No, no, non sono nemmeno una donna”

Europa si meravigliò molto: “E che diavolo sei?”

“Sono un dio”

“Un dio?”

“Non ti spaventare, Europa. Bada, non aver paura. Sono Giove”

Europa scoppiò a ridere.

Rideva buttata traversa sui cuscini senza potere fermarsi. Mordeva i cuscini, si stringeva la faccia tra le mani, scivolava rotolava si premeva a bocca in giù contro i tappeti, senza riuscir a chiudere quel diluvio che sgorgava da tutte le più ricche radici della sua innocenza. Quando poté fermarsi, tutta la stanza era allagata dal riso d’Europa. Il toro era rimasto malissimo.<sup>37</sup>

Again, the point of view of the protagonist forces readers to be surprised about what they already know. Jupiter’s revelation is awkward, and his reaction to Europa’s spontaneous and realistic laughter is embarrassment. Instead of dominating the girl as the unstoppable force that he is in classical mythology, the god seems to flirt with her. The two cited passages make it easier to accept, further on in Bontempelli’s narration, the most evident excursion from the *Metamorphoses*’ model: Jupiter maintains the meekness he exhibited on the beach, and he ends up accompanying Europa to a sort of bridal bed in order to lay with her as if in a serene honeymoon. The girl’s pregnancy is painless, it lasts one day and she sleeps through it. A final ‘cross-over’ with the tale of the Phoenix brings Europa back to her homeland, to her family, and to her symbolic destiny. In the end, the original myth from which Bontempelli began his new tale becomes a confused memory for the protagonist herself, who vaguely remembers, in a dream, that Jupiter who believed he was a god (“quel Giove che si credeva un dio”).<sup>38</sup> She finally meets her fate far from Crete, re-founding a West already freed from paganism and from the very same tradition from which her own fable originated.

Magismo, just as Metaphysical painting and literature (for instance in Savinio’s *La voce del drago*, in parallel with De Chirico’s depictions of Andromeda), directly competes with Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*. Authors like Bontempelli pretend not to know Ovid, or to forget his plots (or even to have never had an Ovid) almost echoing Dante’s bold line, “Taccia di Cadmo e d’Aretusa Ovidio” (and his even bolder rhyme, “io non lo ‘nvidio;” *If* XXV, 97-99). The paradoxical, counterintuitive aim of such a posture towards the classical master is no less than a full re-creation of mythology: the beginning of a true new classicism. Neither an imitation of the old one, nor a rejection of it.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., p. 479.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., p. 492.