

The Cage of the Object and the Forest of the Subject: On the Ecological Revision of the Metamorphosis Logic and the Life Community in The Overstory to Metamorphoses

Shu Sun

*College of Foreign Languages, Qiqihar University, Qiqihar, China
School of Western Languages and Cultures, Harbin Normal University, Harbin, China
xiaoshu998877@163.com*

Abstract. In Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, the classical paradigm of transforming gods into plants as an escape mechanism is presented, in which the poet regards trees as the object of human emotional projection and the cage of fate. Richard Powers' *The Overstory* reconstructs this mythological archetype through modern plant science, transforming metamorphosis from physical alienation to cognitive awakening, shifting the narrative subject from anthropocentrism to the ontology of trees, and rewriting the isolated fate fixation into an interconnected life community. *The Overstory* is not a simple retelling of classical myths, but a profound ecological ontological revision, aiming to break the objectifying gaze of anthropocentrism and rebuild the ethical symbiotic relationship between human and non-human lives.

Keywords: *The Overstory*, *Metamorphoses*, ecological revision, subjectivity, life community

1. Introduction

Metamorphoses is the most outstanding masterpiece of Publius Ovidius Naso, an ancient Roman poet, and one of the most influential mythological epics in the history of world literature. Completed around 8 AD, this work is not only a comprehensive collection of ancient Greek and Roman myths, but also a bridge connecting classical civilization with later Western art and literature, known as the encyclopedia of myths. Ovid's *Metamorphoses* is a grand epic about change, love and pain. Breaking the tradition of scattered and independent mythological stories in the past, it takes "metamorphosis" as the core motif and narrates the stories from the initial chaos of the universe to the Roman Empire at that time and even the deification of Julius Caesar in chronological order. "In *Metamorphoses*, Ovid... secretly implants Roman allusions, scenes and stories to expand the mythological and historical depth of Rome, extending the influence of Roman culture to ancient times in a rhetorical way." [1] Wrapped in myths and centered on human nature, influenced by animism and Pythagoras' doctrine of metempsychosis, it holds that all things in the universe are in eternal flow and change without fixed forms. In the myths narrated by Ovid, humans can become gods, gods can become animals, and gods can turn into trees, stones or stars. Through thrilling

metamorphosis stories, the poet attempts to reveal the impermanence of the world and the fragility of life, and explore the essence of existence and the boundaries of life.

Two thousand years later, in 2018, Richard Powers' *The Overstory* was published, arousing extensive academic attention to its ecological narration. In the process of creation, Powers integrates botany, myths and legends, religious thoughts, modern technology and other multi-disciplinary knowledge, endowing the work with distinct interdisciplinary characteristics and profound ideological connotations. With a grand time and space structure spanning nearly two hundred years, *The Overstory* unfolds its narration from the Westward Movement in the United States in the 19th century to the Internet information age in the 21st century, focusing on nine main characters closely bound to the fate of trees, and constantly shifts the narrative subject to trees in the narrative process, constructing a grand fable about humans and trees. Powers criticizes the exploitation of forest resources by humans to satisfy desires under capitalist logic. By describing the process in which the protagonists gradually restore their perception of trees and re-establish kinship with trees in the plight of the modern era, he connects the fates of humans and trees, hoping to reduce the oppression caused by anthropocentrism and build a life community network where humans and nature depend on each other and coexist harmoniously.

In the Western literary tradition, "humans turning into trees" is an ancient motif. From Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, an ancient Roman poet, to *The Overstory*, a Pulitzer Prize-winning work by contemporary American writer Richard Powers, the logic behind this motif has undergone a fundamental inversion. The former regards metamorphosis as the end of human subjectivity and a cage for escape, while the latter reconstructs it as a cognitive leap for human consciousness to break through the limitations of senses and return to the life community. This transformation from "escapist alienation" to "cognitive return" not only reflects the drastic change of the view of nature over two thousand years, but also reveals the paradigm shift from anthropocentrism to ecological holism. Traditional interpretations often regard *Metamorphoses* as a romantic imagination of the integration of humans and nature, but in essence, it is the anthropocentric or theocentric view held by the poet. The trees/plants transformed from humans/gods in each story are only another form of humans, silent objects. Completely opposite to Ovid, Richard Powers reconstructs the "human-tree relationship" in *The Overstory*. He restores trees from "transformed objects" to "conscious subjects", and successfully breaks Ovidian "cage of the object" and constructs an interconnected "forest of subjects" through three ecological revisions of *Metamorphoses*—the cognitive reversal of metamorphosis logic, the de-anthropocentrism of narrative subject, and the community reconstruction of fate view. The relationship between humans and trees is not physical alienation, but spiritual return.

2. Reversal of metamorphosis logic: from "escapist alienation" to "cognitive return"

Metamorphosis in literary works includes changes in appearance, transformation of species, and circulation of consciousness and soul. In ancient Greek and Roman mythological epics, metamorphosis is to warn the gods: in Ovid's writings, metamorphosis is often a tragic ending. Whether to escape the pursuit of gods or unbearable pain, humans turning into trees is not a sublimation, but a downward alienation. "While demeaning animals and nature, he provides a standard for judging good and evil." [2] In this logic, trees are passive objects, scenery for the curtain call of the dramas of gods and heroes, not subjects with independent wills. In *The Overstory*, Powers connects with Ovid's poetic thoughts by describing that Westerford receives a copy of *Metamorphoses* from her father on her fourteenth birthday, depicts modern humans' attachment to

trees, and further proves that trees have awareness and resistance like humans, realizing the reset of cognition.

In the first volume of *Metamorphoses*, the Sun God falls in love with Daphne, the daughter of the river god, and courts her in the forest. To escape the pursuit of Apollo, Daphne begs her father for help at the moment she is about to be touched: "Father, your river has a spirit, save me! My beauty is too attractive, change it, destroy it!" [3] Immediately, her limbs become stiff, her skin turns into bark, and her hair becomes leaves. Although she turns into a tree, Ovid writes: "All that remains is her charming grace." [3] The metamorphosis here is the last resistance of the body to violence, but its cost is the complete loss of humanity. Daphne preserves her chastity, but loses her voice (only rustling in the wind), trapped in a static plant form, becoming the raw material of Apollo's trophy (laurel wreath).

The Ovidian metamorphosis logic is essentially closed, a defensive mechanism. Humans or gods turning into trees is the loss of humanity and the embodiment of divine punishment. In Ovid's verses, metamorphosis is an extreme defensive mechanism, or a punishment from gods for human transgressions. It means the interruption of human subjectivity. Humans/gods turning into trees means that the narrative time shifts from dynamic historical time to static natural time, and degenerates from complex ethical relations to a single physical existence. This is a process of "dehumanization", a downward alienation. In Ovid's narration, trees have no perception, no communication, only the attribute of being watched. Humans or gods turning into trees means being degraded from "subject" to "object", from "speaker" to "spoken". As scholars point out, this metamorphosis does not endow plants with life, but imposes human tragedies on plants. Trees become the ultimate cage of human dilemmas—the body is imprisoned in a wooden structure, and the spirit is frozen in eternal pain or fear.

Richard Powers redefines the relationship between humans and trees in *The Overstory*, and the logic of metamorphosis in the author's narration is essentially open. Patricia Westerford, the core character in the book, does not physically turn into a tree, but realizes the "metamorphosis" of consciousness through scientific discoveries. This is an upward awakening, an expansion of the boundaries of human cognition to the plant world.

Influenced by her father since childhood, Westerford is very interested in plants, and finally obtains a doctorate through her talent in forestry research. In her research, she finds that trees are not static objects, but subjects with complex perceptual abilities. The book describes in detail how she proves through experiments that when a tree is attacked by insects, it releases volatile organic compounds to warn neighboring trees to start defense mechanisms. Through Westerford, Powers writes: "We can only understand the biochemical behavior of individual trees by regarding them as members of the forest community." [4] Westerford's "metamorphosis" occurs at the cognitive level. She no longer regards herself as an observer above nature, but integrates her consciousness into the overall network of the forest by understanding the language of trees. She feels that she is no longer an isolated individual, but a node in a huge life network. As Thoreau said: "In this vast tranquility, I am delighted to realize that there is a deeper and more lasting life in nature than what we see. Trees are like patient lovers waiting for us." [5]

3. Remolding of fate view: from "individual fixation" to "life community"

In the Western literary tradition, trees often carry profound symbolic meanings. From the tragic characters solidified into trees due to divine intervention in Ovid's writings to the intelligent forests interconnected through fungal networks depicted by contemporary American writer Richard Powers in *The Overstory*, the image of trees has undergone an ontological leap from static objects to flowing

subjects. This evolution of images reflects the profound remolding of human fate view: shifting from an isolated, eternally static "individual fixation" imposed by external divine power to an interconnected, dynamically evolving "life community" constructed by internal relations.

In Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, "metamorphosis" usually serves as the ending of narration. This kind of metamorphosis is not the beginning of evolution, but the end of fate; it is not the continuation of life, but the solidification of existence, the stagnation of cosmic time and eternal tragedy in narration. The metamorphosis in Ovid's writings is often a punishment for transgressions or the ultimate solution to inescapable desires. Once humans or gods turn into non-living forms such as plants or stones, their living time comes to an end, replaced by a static, uncommunicative eternity. In the cosmic picture of *Metamorphoses*, fate is imposed from top to bottom by the Olympian gods. There is no inherent organic connection between individuals and nature, or between individuals. The stories narrated by the poet are also scattered stories of gods and heroes divided into four ages. Daphne, the daughter of the river god, turns into a laurel tree, and the beautiful boy Cyparissus turns into a cypress tree. The trees in these stories are isolated from each other, each bearing an independent, non-interfering joy and sorrow. This world view reflects the atomized characteristics of pre-modern society: humans are isolated entities, fate is an external, unchangeable destiny, and the relationship between humans and nature is one-way projection or utilization, rather than two-way communication.

In the tenth volume of *Metamorphoses*, Ovid describes the story of humans turning into trees. The protagonist Cyparissus is the most beautiful boy among the Cean, deeply loved by Apollo, the Sun God. He loves a sacred deer on the plain of Carte, which belongs to the local nymphs, and the boy and the deer are inseparable. One day, when Cyparissus takes a nap, he mistakenly thinks that the deer resting in the bushes is attacked by wild animals and stabs it to death with a spear. After discovering the truth, Cyparissus is overwhelmed with grief and begs Apollo to let him mourn forever, to mourn for eternity. Moved by his deep affection, Apollo turns him into a cypress tree. Since then, the cypress tree has become a symbol of sorrow and mourning. Its tree shape is pointed like a spear, and its branches and leaves are dark green and drooping all year round, as if crying forever. The Sun God sighs sorrowfully: "I will mourn for you, and you will mourn for others; you will be companions with those who mourn." [3] Gods, humans, animals and plants all appear in this story, showing different attributes and functions respectively. As guides, gods control the dynamic and static forces in the universe. Humans and animals under the control of gods have only one chance to survive. After the death of the animal, to continue the love for the animal, the human can only choose to terminate the human form and beg the god to fix it into a plant, becoming a "tragic stagnation".

Completely different from Ovid's static picture, Richard Powers constructs a dynamic world based on modern ecological discoveries in *The Overstory*. Here, the forest is no longer a simple collection of trees, but a huge living body with perception, communication and memory. In the narration of *The Overstory*, human fate is closely bound to the survival of the forest. Through the life stories of nine main characters, the novel shows how humans gradually transform from plunderers of nature to members of the community (or fail to do so).

In the story of Douglas Pavlicek, Dougie, who participates in a sociological experiment, becomes Prisoner 571—without freedom and exploited by others. After rebellion, he walks out of the dungeon-like experimental field and joins the army as an Air Force technical sergeant. In an explosion, Douglas falls from the plane and is saved by being caught by fig branches during the fall. The author writes in the book, "He thought: I am dead. No, a voice corrects near his cheek: The tree saved your life." [4] Different from the characters in Ovid's writings who lose their humanity after

turning into trees, humans in *The Overstory* achieve redemption by entering the forest and integrating into nature. At the end of the novel, facing the crisis of ecological collapse, the surviving humans do not seek salvation from divine power, but realize that they must step back and give way to the self-repair ability of nature. The image of "seed" here has a dual meaning: it is both a biological regeneration mechanism and a symbol of cultural and ethical continuation. Different from Daphne's static laurel tree, the seeds in *The Overstory* represent future possibilities and flowing becoming. Fate is no longer a fixed end, but a continuous, co-evolutionary process. Only by acknowledging themselves as part of the "life community" and abandoning the illusion of dominance can humans find the meaning of survival in the ecological crisis.

By comparing the "individual fixation" fate based on divine punishment in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* with the "life community" fate based on biological interconnection in Richard Powers' *The Overstory*, the relationship between humans and nature in Western literature has been fundamentally reconstructed: from an atomized tragic monument to a dynamically symbiotic superorganism. This transformation not only reveals the limitations of anthropocentrism, but also proposes an ecological salvation path based on relational ontology.

4. Conclusion

Ovid's *Metamorphoses* shows the insignificance and helplessness of humans in the face of cosmic forces, and its fate view is essentially pessimistic and static. Trees are fossils of emotions, recording the inescapable loneliness of humans. In the context of ecological crisis, Powers' *The Overstory* puts forward a hopeful and dynamic fate view. Trees are wise teachers, revealing that life can only continue through connection and symbiosis.

From Daphne's laurel to Westerford's forest, literary imagination has completed a profound ecological turn. It tells us that true eternity does not lie in the solidification of individual forms as depicted by Ovid, but in the continuation of relations and the cycle of life, which is exactly what Powers advocates. In the context of the contemporary Anthropocene, Powers' concept of "life community" is not only a modern response to Ovid's ancient myths, but also the only way for humans to reconstruct their own fate and seek ecological salvation.

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