

Notes on
"Nel Corpo Oscuro Della Metamorfosi"

Given the difficulty of finding an accurate definition for the word "poetry" and explaining what makes certain poems good, it is not surprising that baring the essential qualities of an exceptionally good poem might seem an impossible task. The problem is compounded when we find that rare poem which possesses an almost mystical ability to touch us in such a way that we, at times, think we feel just what the poet must have felt when he set the words to paper. When we do find such a poem, when we feel that we know it, that we have analyzed the lines and found the images, each successive reading convinces us that we do very little more than scratch at the surface. Still more ideas and images are yielded with each new reading. We make new connections from one line to the next; we perceive the images and ideas differently, connect them to each other in new ways. This ability to yield up new things which touch us and hold our interest is an essential part of good poetry.

No serious reader of poetry expects to read a poem one time and immediately absorb all of it, but modern poetry, in particular, which is not often bound by traditional conventions usually demands a number of readings before all the images and meanings are clear, if they ever are. Mario Luzi's "Nel Corpo Oscuro Della Metamorfosi" is certainly such a poem.¹ One of the factors which makes second and successive readings of "Metamorfosi" imperative is its length. When a poem is composed of seven long sections that together cover more than fifteen pages, the significance of images presented near the beginning of the piece is bound

to change as the poem progresses. In "Metamorfosi," Luzi gives us a series of transformations in association with specific images that are reintroduced throughout the poem so that a layering of these transformations occurs.

Before a serious discussion of the major transformations within the poem itself can begin, one must give careful consideration to the title: "Nel Corpo Oscuro Della Metamorfosi." The title of any poem is important for two very obvious reasons. It serves, because of its function as title, as an overview of the poem itself. We expect the title to reflect the content of the poem, for it is often the title which first attracts reader attention. Aside from this function, the title of a poem, because it precedes the poem, can create certain expectations for the reader. Even before he begins to read the poem, he may have formed an idea of what the poem is about, and he may be expecting certain images or events to be contained within the piece. Certainly, "Nel Corpo Oscuro Della Metamorfosi" is a title which not only attracts attention, but also raises certain reader expectations.

After eliminating the prepositions and articles in the title, we are left with only three words: "corpo," "oscuro," and "metamorfosi." These three words not only produce strong initial reactions with the reader, but lend themselves well to close scrutiny. For example, even without particularly careful consideration from the reader, the importance of a word such as "metamorphosis" manifests itself. While, in simplest terms, "metamorphosis" means roughly the same thing as "change" or "transformation," as both a word and an action (because we usually think of a metamorphosis as something that happens), it presents more possibilities and should elicit more responses from a careful reader. Luzi himself obviously knows the power of this word, for although he chooses the word "metamorfosi" for the title, he refers to the observation that inspired him to write the poem as a transformation in his

notes:

Il senso della trasformazione è quasi un luogo comune. Si trova manifesto o latente in tutti i nostri sentimenti. E non parliamo dell'azione che sarebbe inconcepibile senza. Senonché noi oggi viviamo la trasformazione da svegli e l'avvertiamo in forma violenta e grandiosa come essenza della nostra epoca. Questa poesia osa farne il suo discontinuo argomento.

(Luzi, p. 264)

The fact is that transformation and metamorphosis do not mean the same thing. Metamorphosis provides two very important images which transformation does not. By definition, metamorphosis is not only a change from one form to another, but a very radical change where the two forms are not necessarily recognizable as the same creature in different states. The changes from caterpillar to butterfly and tadpole to frog represent such changes. Caterpillars become butterflies and tadpoles become frogs; however, the two different stages of each life form certainly bear little resemblance to each other. Perhaps Luzi means to imply that the change within our times is so radical that the product of change bears little resemblance to that which came before. This sense of radical change is also obvious within the three major transformations presented in the poem.

Another factor that makes "metamorfosi" a strong word is that "metamorfosi" suggests not only a change from one state to another, but also the very act of change itself. While we can see the gradual metamorphosis of a tadpole to a frog, the actual process by which the change takes place remains a mystery to us. Even more mysterious is the change from caterpillar to butterfly, which is entirely hidden from view. All that we are able to see, and even this is rare, is a caterpillar forming

a cocoon and a butterfly emerging from it. What happens within the cocoon, within the actual state of metamorphosis, we cannot see. Luzi's title, in fact, points out the inability to perceive the metamorphosis clearly: "Nel Corpo Oscuro Della Metamorfosi."

His choice of the word "oscuro" enhances this very quality of metamorphosis. It is obscure, or hidden from the eye. He can never clearly perceive the transformation as it occurs. All that is seen are the beginning and end products. As Luzi says, the "corpo," the body or state, of metamorphosis is obscure, unclear. Furthermore, this word, "corpo," in conjunction with "nel" suggests an even more interesting vantage point for the transformation. No longer are we outside the metamorphosis observing it, rather we are contained within the metamorphosis itself. We are, or at least the speaker of the poem is, lost within the change. When the meaning of each word in the title is considered individually and then in connection with the other words, the impact of the whole title, "Nel Corpo Oscuro Della Metamorfosi," seems overwhelming. However, for all the power of this title, it is not until the second reading, after one sees the confusion of the poem's speaker as he observes the multiple transformations around him, that the title's possibilities can be fully realized.

The weight of the title manifests itself with three major transformations that Luzi explores in the body of "Metamorfosi." On the concrete level, the first and most obvious of these is the transformation of Florence after the flood of the Arno in 1966. Luzi does not date his poem by giving this specific information within the poetry itself, but, once again, gives these details in his notes:

Nelle sezioni 1 e 2 immagini (e incubi) negative della "città" la cui crisi si materializza in Firenze sommersa e devastata dall'Arno (secondo brano della sezione 1). La voce di sirena della natura insinua la sua tentazione nel terzo brano della sezione 2. (Luzi, p. 264)

The importance of omitting this from the body of the poem is two-fold. In the first place, because of the nature of the event, the devastating flood of Florence, actual explanation within the poem is unnecessary. Most readers of modern Italian poetry will probably be familiar with this event and make the connection between the flooded city presented in the poem and Florence within the first few stanzas. We receive much of this information from the speaker's conversation with the "anima nascosta" in Section 1:

"Prega," dice, "per la città sommersa."

And:

"Tu che hai visto fino al tramonto
la morte di una città, i suoi ultimi
furiosi annaspamenti d'annegata,
ascoltane il silenzio ora. E. risvegliati."
(Luzi, p. 133)

But no specific city and time are given here, so the flood need not apply to only Florence. The flood Luzi describes need not be an actual flood, but can also be a symbolic one. Luzi apparently intends for the flood to work on at least these two levels. Although he points out the connection to the actual flood in his notes and the flooding of Florence in 1966 was undoubtedly a devastating event, the main importance of the flood in the poem does not seem to be the actual ruin of Florence, but the symbolic

ruin of Western ideas, which, as the title of the poem suggests, the speaker also experiences from within. Not only is he caught up as a part of the metamorphosis surrounding him, but a metamorphosis also occurs within him. On one level, he observes, without completely understanding, the metamorphosis of which he is only a part:

Quante vite, questa per esempio
detta mia per inerzia e abitudine . . .
E ora lei che con lo sguardo perduto
affiora in superficie
sdrucendo una pellicola di pioggia
dal profondo della città pescosa,
prende per mano suo figlio, una mano,
mi sembra, sfuggente alla sua presa.
(Luzi, p. 134)

In this particular event, we assume, from the first two lines of the stanza, that, on the literal level, the speaker is observing a mother recovering her child from the flooded streets. If the end result of metamorphosis is a rebirth of types (the life force within the caterpillar, which dies, is reborn in the form of a butterfly) then we are seeing within this stanza a rebirth. From the speaker's description, it seems likely that the child is dead. The mother cannot quite grasp his hand; to the speaker, it seems to "sfuggente alla sua presa." Furthermore, the speaker is also deeply saddened by the event:

non pronunzia parola
mentre io ne ricevo dolore
più in là di quella causa, e ondate
d'un rimorso che tende allo spasimo
la parte infinitesima di tempo
in cui l'azione è sospesa, o il pulsar.
(Luzi, p. 134)

In the previous stanza, the speaker prepares us

for this death by telling the "anima nascosta" that "non c'è morte che non sia anche nascita." (Luzi, p. 133) Although tragic, the child's death is a metamorphosis. The event begins with language which is not only suggestive of the emergence of a butterfly, which we commonly associate with metamorphosis, but is also suggestive of the birth of a living child:

E ora lei che con lo sguardo perduto
affiora in superficie
sdrucendo una pellicola di pioggia.
(Luzi, p. 134)

The image produced here is very similar to the emergence of a child from the uterus as it breaks through the amniotic sac and, with this breaking, causes the amniotic fluid to escape. This image is further enhanced by language which suggests contractions, such as "ondate d'un rimorso che tende allo spasimo" and "l'azione è sospesa, o il pulsar." The choice of the word "pulsar" is particularly important, for while we do not know exactly what a pulsar is, we do know that it is characterized by the release of radio waves at short and relatively uniform intervals. This very word suggests the rhythmic contractions of a woman in labor.

The importance of this event goes far beyond the speaker's observation of it. As the first two lines of the stanza suggest, the experience contributes to his own metamorphosis:

Quante vite, questa per esempio
detta mia per inerzia e abitudine . . .
(Luzi, p. 134).

We already know that he is not always able to clearly distinguish between internal and external events:

non sono ben certo sia un'altra dalla mia
alla cerca di me nella palude sinistra.
(Luzi, p. 133)

Section 2 heightens the speaker's confusion and helplessness at being caught up by both the changing times and changes in personal philosophy:

O gioventù, per l'uomo
perduto in un amore senza limiti,
senza ritorno di coscienza, il punto
tra memoria e desiderio
si sposta, è alla deriva di un gorgo.
Passato ed avvenire s'invertono,
su sé si capovolgono, delfini
o tonni nella rete del senso.
Sono io dalla parte del torto, amen.
(Luzi, p. 135)

In many ways, this section is reminiscent of the title, "Nel Corpo Oscuro Della Metamorfosi." The speaker is not in control. It seems that he is being sucked into a giant vortex. Everything comes together at once: dreams and reality, past and future, life and death. He is not sure of his role, or even his physical existence, within this huge metamorphosis. The image of a man blundering around in a dark universe is created.

Although both this image and the speaker's confusion are apparent throughout Section 4, it is especially strong in the following passages:

Oppure quando un tempo sotto pressione
disperde la sua potenza inservibile
in una nube vorticoso di scorie
e tu stesso in una parte di te--non sai
bene quale--soffri, vorresti dormire,
ma un'inquieta
semicoscienza ti tiene sveglio

non del tutto presente alla metamorfosi
e al lungo dolore della nascita di un'epoca.
(Luzi, p. 140)

And:

lo sguardo assurro carico
della creazione, ti sembra. (Luzi, p. 140)

These two particular passages contain a number of words and phrases that seem unusually well suited to a metamorphosis, or rebirth. While "Metamorfosi" is the most obvious one, "nascita di un'epoca" not only enhances the transformation, but is reminiscent of the italicized stanza of Section 1, where we almost see an actual birth taking place. In the latter of the two passages above, "lo sguardo azzurro carico della creazione" suggests the emergence of some henceforth unseen creation, as does "cacciandoti dal chuiso dell'infermità dell'anima." In the last of these, we are given the feeling that a metamorphosis is almost complete, that the butterfly will soon emerge from its cocoon.

It is not until Section 5 that the third and most important metamorphosis is presented. This is the transformation of the church to which Luzi refers in the feminine singular. We immediately know that Section 5 is about the church, because Luzi begins with a quotation from Giovanna Marini: "Chiesa, Chiesa" He further states that the second stanza of this section, which is about a woman who has lost her husband in a Nazi concentration camp, is actually analogous to the Roman hierarchy's divorce of Christ.² However, what the poet of a piece says about it is not always the most accurate account of the poem's events. The connection between the woman, or women, in the section and the church must be clear from the poetry itself, while the events must also work on a literal

level. Aside from the opening quotation, which suggests that the section will explore the transformation of the church, Luzi makes numerous references of the church that illuminate our reading of this section. Near the end of the second stanza, he makes a reference to the "braccio radiale della croce." This particular image is one which is traditionally associated with the church, and, within the church, life after death. From a Christian point of view, this particular rebirth is the ultimate metamorphosis. It is not the transformation of the individual man, but of the church itself. Luzi goes on to add:

che ne sai tu
che ascolti non lei il manichine svuotato di
memoria che un poso le somiglia.
(Luzi, p. 142)

On one level, we see a change within the woman who has lost her husband in a concentration camp. She has, literally, become like a mannequin. The image Luzi presents here is of a woman who has not changed much in physical appearance, but has become void of emotion and memory. This is a very forceful image, one which will produce an immediate emotional reaction from the reader. Evidently, symbolically speaking, Luzi's reference here is also to the church. Luzi sees the church as a shell of its former self. It is no longer the spiritually enriching force that it once was, but seems to lack the very qualities that had made it strong. As Luzi says in the Section's opening sentence, "qualcosa la sovrasta e la domina." Luzi continues to use this metaphor throughout the section. Not until the last two stanzas of the section do we see the full extent of the metaphor:

Lei, l'agnello, vittima del brutta risveglio
siede ora nel suo angolo

franata dentro--può darsi--
ma eretta nell'amara dignità che le resta del
comprendere
a passa di grandi ore inutili . . .
sorride frattanto il suo pastore
e pastore della sua angoscia Giovanni.
(Luzi, pp. 143-144)

It is only after reading this section that we can fully appreciate the female images that Luzi presented in the previous stanzas. Could it be that the woman in the last stanza of Section 1 is symbolically the church reaching out to her lost children? Perhaps the woman speaking in Section 2 is also symbolic of the church:

La voce sempre udita di donna
che fu di mia madre ed ora è sua, la voce
sacrificale che scioglie il nodo
amoroso e doloroso di ogni esistenza, si stacca
da qualche scambio di parole avuto
con molti intercalari, opaco, nella caverna
dell'anno
non in primavera, nei vapori della sua nascita.
(Luzi, p. 136)

Here again, Luzi uses beautiful, concrete images to complete the metaphor:

Voce afona spogliata della gorga
di lei che provvisoria
l'improntò della sua pena
e la chiuise nella stretta
di timidezza e d'ansia
del diverbio in cucina, della preghiera sulle
scale.
(Luzi, p. 136)

It is ridiculous to assume that the church has had a spat in the kitchen, but the important thing here is not the event itself, but the emotions associated with such an event.

Even the speaking "anima nascosta" must be scrutinized. The tone of the poem is certainly changed if it is the church that says the following:

"Risvegliati, non è questo silenzio
il silenzio mentale di una profonda metafora
come tu pensi la storia. Ma brutta
cessazione del suono. Morte. Morte e basta."
(Luzi, p. 133)

In Section 6, Luzi once more brings to our attention the various levels at which metamorphosis is occurring. Here, too, is the sense of confusion and helplessness one experiences within the "corpo oscuro della metamorfosi":

Mi trafigge nel sonno
col suo trillo d'allodola passata tra le maglie
della fucileria domenicale la vita
mentre io legato alla noria
del mutamento del mondo
(e sia pure, mi dico, con ali d'ippogrifo)
sorrido, non le rispondo. (Luzi, p. 145)

In this passage, the speaker clearly shows us that he is captured by change. The mention of a "ippogrifo" also evokes the image of metamorphosis because it is a creature formed from the parts of other animals. Its actual creation seems mysterious to us.

In the next two stanzas, the last two of this section, the speaker prepares us for the completion of the metamorphosis in Section 7:

Lo sboccio improvviso di più anima
nel mattino tutto sole di una fede senza sospetto
condivisa con me, anzi unica

e se possibile universa--è questo
che oscuramente aspetta, sono certo.
(Luzi, p. 145)

These lines present us with an image much like that of a flower bud in the moments before it explodes into blossom. The transformation has occurred within the bud, hidden from our eyes, but we are soon to see the end result. Likewise, we have waited patiently for the products of Luzi's metamorphoses, products which he will soon present to us.

The final section of "Nel Corpo Oscuro Della Metamorfosi" is very important because it provides a solution of sorts for the numerous changes running throughout the poem. While the completed metamorphoses of man and church are easily identifiable, that of the flooded city is conspicuously absent except for the word "recede," which is usually associated with water and is suggestive of the retreating of the flood waters from the city. Although this might seem rather odd, it is actually quite logical. Within the scope of the other transformations Luzi presents, the flooding of Florence is not particularly important. The importance of the event is that it serves as an inspiration, a "catalyst," for the metaphysical metamorphoses that Luzi sets forth in the poem. More than an actual event in this poem, the flood seems to be a devastation that symbolizes the changing nature of both man and church. It is as though the flood of Florence has provided Luzi the needed time and incentive to explore problems which have long troubled him. His solution to this search ends with Luzi's reaffirmation of faith and his recognition that change is necessary:

E puo non essere più la stessa,
subentrarle un'altra
che la perpetua, la sgomina,

la converte in lacrime . . .--penso
anni dopo--o evi--mentre le guardo le
pupille e sorprendo il mutevole e il
durevole strettamente mischiati nella
sorgente.

After metamorphosis is complete, when the butterfly
emerges from her cocoon and the bud bursts into
flower, we are able to appreciate the beauty that
often results from transformation. It is only the
metamorphosis itself that is obscure.

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NOTES

¹ Mario Luzi, "Nel Corpo Oscuro Della Metamor-
fosi," in his Tutte le poesie: Nell'opera del mondo,
ed. Aldo Garzanti (Milano: Società Italiana degli
Autori, 1978), pp. 132-147. All further citations
from this work are given in the text parenthetically.

² Mario Luzi, In the Dark Body of Metamorphosis
and Other Poems, trans. I. L. Salomon (New York:
W. W. Norton and Company, Inc., 1975), p. 110.