

Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and the transformation of metamorphosis in Christoph Ransmayr's novel *Die letzte Welt*

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Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and the transformation of metamorphosis in Christoph Ransmayr's novel *Die letzte Welt*

Despite its status as a postmodernist work based on an ancient author, Christoph Ransmayr's *Die letzte Welt* (1988) had an almost universally favourable initial reception, being accorded the highest accolades by the German Press. Martin Hielscher referred to it in the *Deutsches Allgemeines Sonntagsblatt* (09.10.1988) as a 'meisterhaft geschriebener Roman', Volker Hage in *Die Zeit* (07.10.1988) termed it 'einer der schönsten Romane der Gegenwart' and the reviews of Katharina Kaeve in the *TAZ* (30.09.1988) and Harald Eggebrecht of the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* (22.10.1988 and 23.10.1988)¹ concurred in according Ransmayr the highest praise for his novel, which has been placed alongside Umberto Eco's *Il nome della rosa* (1980)² and Michael Ende's *Die unendliche Geschichte* (1979) for the way it draws on historical events from another age.³

The genesis of *Die letzte Welt* cannot be traced back to a love of classicism originating in Ransmayr's schooldays, since the compulsory reading of Ovid at the Benedictine monastery at which he was schooled did not excite him at all at that time. It was only years later after meeting Hans Magnus Enzensberger at the 'Trans-Atlantik' and his commission to translate a section of the *Metamorphoses* for the ninth volume of *Die Andere Bibliothek* 'Wasserzeichen der Poesie oder die Kunst und das Vergnügen, Gedichte zu lesen' (1985), that Ransmayr became drawn into protracted adaptation work involving Ovid's epic poem. Ransmayr recalls that the novel simply came out of a conversation with Enzensberger and the latter's suggestion about what should appear in 'Die Andere Bibliothek':

Man sollte die 'Metamorphosen' sozusagen entrümpeln, man sollte eigentlich dieses Werk noch einmal in einer Art zeitgenössischer Prosa zu erzählen oder zu übersetzen versuchen. [...] Mir hat Enzensberger damals vorgeschlagen, ob ich nicht den Versuch machen möchte, ein Stück aus den 'Metamorphosen' oder vielleicht das ganze Buch in eine Art zeitgenössische Prosa zu bringen.⁴

Ransmayr worked on an adaptation of the Daedalus myth from Ovid and rendered it in a prose version for this particular ‘Wasserzeichen der Poesie’ volume. Enzensberger was so satisfied with Ransmayr’s work that he suggested he turn not just to a single episode but consider transforming the whole of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* into contemporary prose, which led to Ransmayr embarking on just this project in *Die letzte Welt*:

Das Verfahren Ovids selber anzuwenden, nämlich diese Tradition, die Gestalten der griechisch-römischen Mythologie zu nehmen, und zu einer Art Rohmaterial für meine eigene Geschichte [zu machen], den Versuch zu unternehmen, sich diese Gestalten anzuverwandeln in einem romanhaften, erzählerischen Zusammenhang...⁵

Die letzte Welt is a post-modern novel that demonstrates an interest for the ancient world, uses the device of intertextuality and contains apocalyptic events, three elements that are frequently cited as being indicative of postmodernist texts. It draws heavily on Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* in many ways, and is saturated with direct allusions to Ovid’s work:

Zwar ist *Die letzte Welt* durch ein dichtes Geflecht von Zitaten und mehr oder weniger stark vermittelte Anspielungen intertextuell sowie strukturell auf die *Metamorphoses* bezogen.⁶

Structurally too, Ovid’s epic poem with its fifteen books is comparable with Ransmayr’s novel divided into fifteen chapters, but what should be asserted from the outset is that in addition to featuring many of the metamorphoses Ovid employs, albeit adapted to suit his purposes, Ransmayr’s treatment of Ovid is far more intensive than his predecessors, since he incorporates Ovid as a character, makes multiple references to Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* in the text and far from hiding the direct references to Ovid’s life and Ovid’s epic poem, luxuriates in his differentiation from the original by appending an ‘Ovidian Repertoire’ to his work. As this aspect is one that distinguishes Ransmayr’s work from all his predecessors, it is worthwhile commenting on how he incorporates these allusions and references to Ovid’s life and work, before moving on to analyse how the metamorphoses in Ransmayr’s text differ from Ovid’s original work.

First, specific references are made to Naso, or Ovid himself, Publius Ovidius Naso; indeed the protagonist Cotta is searching to find Ovid or the remnants of his manuscript of the *Metamorphoses*. Though he fails to find him in Tomi, a town on the Black Sea, now known as Constanța in Romania, he imagines – albeit in a state of madness – that he later encounters him along with his servant Pythagoras in Trachila.⁷ Second, many aspects of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* are adapted, reformulated or simply directly cited, which has the effect of giving Cotta's fictional account of his search to find Ovid's manuscript in Tomi both authenticity and a sense of verisimilitude. Barbara Vollstedt has alluded to these techniques in her work concerning how Ransmayr has adapted Ovid's myths:

Ransmayrs Ovidadaption geschieht auf unterschiedliche Weise: es gibt direkte und unveränderte Zitate, bloße Namensübernahmen, Gestalten, die mit Ovids Figuren ein Gemeinsames haben, und recht ähnliche Verwandlungsepisoden.⁸

Third, Ransmayr's novel approaches the theme of metamorphosis and Ovid in a quite different way than previous works that adopt one specific metamorphosis of a human being into a bird, animal or insect. The metamorphoses included cover transformations into animals, birds, insects, and petrification and metamorphoses into trees, so that it is not possible to restrict Ransmayr's text to one kind of metamorphosis, since the allusions cover the whole spectrum of different types of transformation all taken from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*.

In chapter I, Ransmayr firmly situates Ovid in the story by mentioning Naso's name many times over and mentioning Cotta's quest to find the exiled poet in Tomi. As Cotta investigates rumours surrounding Naso, he meets with a myriad of confused responses from the inhabitants of Tomi, some taking Naso for the crazy man who occasionally turns up with fishing rods and sits out on the rocks; others for the dwarf Cyparis who comes to town in his covered wagon every August to show his movies on the slaughterhouse wall; but finally though they are not sure whether he is still alive, Tereus, Fama and Arachne recall that 'Naso der Römer war, der Verbannte, der Dichter, der mit seinem griechischen Knecht in Trachila

hauste'(12–13). Cotta learns via his Greek servant Pythaogras that Naso is not in fact dead, and confirms that he did systematically set fire to all his works in his study in the Piazza del Moro to destroy them. In chapter III, Ovid's work is specifically and expressly named, to let the reader know that it is not his *Tristia*, *Fasti*, *Epistulae ex Ponto*, *Ars amatoria* or *Remedia amoris* but specifically the *Metamorphoses* of Ovid that Ransmayr is concerned with here. As Kurt Bartsch points out, whilst the novel works at destroying irrational mythological statements and supplying apocalyptic discourse, it is primarily concerned specifically with 'das Ovidsche Verwandlungsprinzip':

Denn Ransmayr interessiert nicht das antike Werk als solches, sondern das von diesem vermittelte, allwaltende Prinzip der Verwandlung, dem folgerichtig auch der Prätext, Ovids *Metamorphoses*, und die von ihm überlieferten Mythen unterworfen sind.⁹

Pythagoras fills in the background behind Ovid's exile. Ovid was at that time enjoying success and fame on all fronts. He had written a tragedy which was being performed in one of the most fashionable theatres of the empire, book shop display windows were replete with his works for sale, and his *Metamorphoses* project was of four or five years standing. However, his name was unfortunately often mentioned when the conversation turned to scandal or political intrigue. Yet, it was Naso's desire to move away from the theatre and enjoy the kind of applause only accorded to the Emperor Augustus in his stadiums that led to his downfall. The mystery around Naso's whereabouts is not resolved here, as Pythagoras reports only that Naso has gone off into the mountains a long time ago. Back in Rome, Naso had given advance readings of the myths that formed the basis for his *Metamorphoses*:

In seinen Lesungen aus den *Metamorphoses* brachte Naso aus jedem Zusammenhang gelöste Personen und Landschaften zur Sprache, Menschen die sich in Bestien verwandelten und Bestien in Stein (53).

This detail allows Ransmayr to reinforce that the ambit of Ovid's work like his own is metamorphoses of human beings, especially petrification. But at this stage the difficulty with Naso's work is that the more he reads out these stories of transformations, the more the public

draw the conclusion that really he is writing a *roman à clef* about Roman society, using the characters in his myths as allegories for notable public figures.

An unfortunate scandal follows the performance of *Midas*, a play claimed to be based on one of the readings Naso had given from his work-in-progress. Violence ensues and the public have an abiding memory that comes to be associated with Ovid's play: the figure of one of the senator's bodyguards found on the banks of a large reedy pond near Rome, chained with his knees and wrists smashed. Naso is subsequently granted the honour of giving one of the speeches at the opening of the new stadium, and he duly obliges, but his ill-advised rendition conjures up the horrors of plague, drought and death and proves disastrous in that according to the authorities he fails to give the emperor due reverence, omits genuflections and his speech lacks humility. The authorities find fault with both the content of the speech and call Ovid's personal character into question both for his proposed *Metamorphoses* project, which in their view had degenerated into an exposé of and insult to Rome, and his provision of occasional lodging to whores in his villa on the Piazza del Moro. The channels of bureaucracy precipitate a flood of governmental information on Naso that leads to him being regarded as an enemy of the state, an affront to Rome. The image of the poet and the content of his works are distorted and the disapproving motion of the emperor's hand misinterpreted to such an extent that rumours start of an appropriate sentence for Naso. A presiding judge renders an opinion on the emperor's gesture, shortly before his lunch break, dictated to an apathetic clerk in the presence of two witnesses, interpreting this motion of the emperor's hand as 'Begone. Out of my sight.' Naso is thus accordingly sentenced to be exiled to the end of the world, to Tomi.

Naso does more than feature in the novel. Theodore Ziolkowski explains the influence Naso and his metamorphic myths have had, according to some commentators, on the inhabitants of Tomi, both changing their lives and occasioning transformations:

But it is suggested that Ovid did more than merely record stories or transmute into mythological narrative the incidents and figures he witnessed. It is hinted that the poet, through the power of language, actually brought about some of the metamorphoses he described. For instance, long after Ovid's disappearance, Cotta witnesses how his landlord Lycaon, who scampers through the mountains dressed up in a wolf's pelt, is seemingly transformed into a wolf and killed by a rockslide. The most terrifying episode comes at the end, when the ancient tragedy of rape and infanticide is re-enacted by the butcher Tereus, his wife Procne, their son Itys, and her sister Philomela. Cotta, cowering in the dark to hide from the raging butcher with his axe, sees what appears to be "the fulfilment of what had long been written on the scraps and pennants of Trachila"...when the enraged Tereus raises his axe, two birds—a swallow and a nightingale—flutter away, pursued by the hoopoe into which the butcher was seemingly transformed.¹⁰

As the events in Tomi unfurl before our eyes, there is in every sense a feeling evoked in the reader that Naso has gone to this town of iron and made these living inhabitants objects of his fictional project, to the extent that his *Metamorphoses* are conversely being played out on a real stage, rather than real life forming the basis for his imaginative writing style. There is textual evidence that Naso is implementing the metamorphic scenarios from his imaginative work, the *Metamorphoses*, onto Tomi's town dwellers, so that their lives are predestined, interwoven with Naso's work, 'Was nun geschah, war nur die Erfüllung dessen, was längst auf den Fetzen und Wimpeln Trachilas geschrieben stand.' (284) At the carnival Ransmayr indeed expressly suggests the influence Naso may be having on those around him, in particular on Tereus' choice of costume:

Wie sonst käme der Schlachter eines verlorenen Kaffs zu der Vorstellung, sich zur Fastnacht in einen Sonnengott zu verwandeln, seine Ochsen in Feuerpferde? (94)

Specific references to Ovid's *Metamorphoses* appear sporadically throughout the work and other pieces of his writing that appear on the snail covered stones in Chapter I. Here, Cotta reads from one of the scraps of cloth pinned to piles of stones that reveal various fragments of poetry that Pythagoras has copied including the legend 'Keinem bleibt seine Gestalt' (15). This is a verbatim German translation of the opening words of a verse in Book XV of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* in the part entitled *The Doctrines of Pythagoras*: 'Nec species

sua cuique manet...’ (XV, 252).¹¹ In Chapter VI, Ransmayr narrates that although the banished Naso had no contact with the opposition, nor with moderates or fugitives of the state, many of his poems appeared in the flyers of the resistance:

Das erste Menschengeschlecht
 Kannte kein Gesetz und keine Rache
 Ohne Soldaten zu brauchen
 Lebten die Völker sorglos
 Und in sanfter Ruhe dahin (127).

These five lines are cited directly from the episode *The Ages of Mankind* in Book I of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* (I, 89–100), and this direct incorporation of Ovid’s original text into his own along with the constant references to the title of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* makes the events Ransmayr relates concerning Naso’s personal history more credible, facilitating authenticity and intertextuality. Moreover, Ovid and his *Metamorphoses* become an obsession for the protagonist Cotta, evidenced in Chapter VII by his attempts to find Naso or at the very least bring back to Rome a new version of the *Metamorphoses*, or a copy smuggled into exile by the poet.

Ovid and his *Metamorphoses* pervade the whole novel, with references to the work connecting together to haunt Cotta at every turn. In Chapter VIII, as Cotta wrestles with his insomnia, he realises the strength of Ovid’s influence, as it becomes clear to him that he had failed to notice that he had been living all along in a room in Lycaon’s house with tapestries on the walls resembling the scenery of the *Metamorphoses*. This detail of the tapestries is skilfully positioned directly before the description of Arachne’s house, so that the reader then surmises that all along Cotta has failed to notice that the wall in his room is decorated with Arachne’s tapestries that depict metamorphoses into birds. Cotta’s constant mental preoccupation with Ovid’s epic poem is evidenced by the fact that after noting Echo had testified to a *Book of Stones* and Arachne to a *Book of Birds*, he writes a letter to Cyane (which is fated never to reach her at the Via Anastasio), wondering whether the

Metamorphoses had not in fact been conceived from the very beginning as a great history of nature, ascending from the stones to the clouds. Later it is Pythagoras, Naso's servant, who appears to be suffering almost telepathically from Ovid's metamorphic project:

Pythagoras behauptete, in den Augen von Kühen und Schweinen den Blick verlorener, verwandelter Menschen ebenso zu erkennen wie im Gestarre eines betrunkenen Erzkochers schon das Lauern des Raubtiers; behauptete, im Verlauf der Wanderung seiner eigenen Seele die gepanzerten Körper von Echsen und Offizieren bewohnt zu haben... (252)

These thoughts of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* possess him to such an extent that he believes he must communicate these stories further to others, so that he first carves words on the tables in Phineus's brandy cellar with his fingernails and pocket knife, then graduates to writing on the walls of houses and on trees with chalk, even insanely scribbling on runaway sheep and pigs.

Ransmayr's work therefore cannot be categorised as one that deals with a specific category of transformation, since all the different categories of metamorphosis into stone, into animals and into birds are variously either suggested in the text or relayed by characters in a dream. Ransmayr uses an array of different devices to portray metamorphosis and adapt Ovid's epic poem in his novel, and Vollstedt comprehensively refers to the whole range:

Der Österreicher stellt einige Metamorphosenerzählungen in verschiedenen Fiktionen innerhalb seiner Fiktion dar: Echo erzählt Ovids Geschichten, Cyparis zeigt Verfilmungen, Cotta erinnert sich an Erzählungen oder träumt sie, die Tomiten tragen Faschungverkleidungen, die "Metamorphosen"-Figuren darstellen, auf Cyparis' Planwagen ist Actaeons Tod gemalt gemalt und Arachnes Teppichen sind Vogelmetamorphosen eingewebt.¹²

Ziolkowski's list is comparable, but for him the crucial aspect is that to relay these transformations Ransmayr has to adopt these different techniques to incorporate Ovid's myths into his fiction and account for them in a plausible manner:

In the first place, many of the stories of metamorphoses are recounted by informants who allegedly heard them from Ovid: Echo, for instance, relates stories ending in the petrification of human beings while Arachne weaves into her tapestries nothing but tales of birds and flying. Second, Cotta has visual experiences of transformation in his

dreams (notably of Argus and Io), in the films shown by the dwarf Cyparis (Ceyx and Alcyone, and the series of violent deaths), and in the advertisement painted on the canvas cover of Cyparis's wagon (Actaeon).¹³

The latter example of how Ransmayr avoids the problem of being unable to describe a physical transformation comes when the author relays the metamorphosis of Actaeon, changed by Diana into a stag. Unable to reconstruct the original episode in this form of writing, Ransmayr incorporates the metamorphosis of Actaeon into his own text by mentioning that a scenery painter had decorated Cyparis's canvas wagon with the *Death of Actaeon*, allowing him to elucidate how Actaeon met his death being torn to pieces by his own bloodhounds, at the same time enabling him to allude to the episode involving the transformation of Actaeon in Book III of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (III, 173-250).

The transmission of Ovid's poem to this twentieth century work is not in question, as Holger Mosebach expressly makes clear:

Verschiedene explizite und implizite Hinweise verweisen deutlich auf eine direkte Bezugnahme Ransmayrs auf die *Metamorphosen* des Ovid. Der (post-) moderne Roman rückt den Autor der großen Hexameter-Dichtung ins Blickfeld, thematisiert die Suche nach eben diesem Werk, übernimmt das Leitmotiv Ovids und macht die Verwandtschaft mit einem „Ovidischen Repertoire“ am Schluss des Buches explizit.¹⁴

One notable example of transmission is Ransmayr's play on the doctrine of transmigration of souls, where Pythagoras refers to 'das Wunder der Seelenwanderung' and adverts to his previous existence as a salamander, an artillery man and a swineherd girl. Ransmayr circumvents the problem of representing metamorphosis in a realist postmodernist setting by having these metamorphic myths narrated to individual characters. He uses two techniques; first, narration, as where Naso tells Echo stories about people being changed into stones and Arachne tales about metamorphoses into birds, and second, dreams to facilitate the representation of metamorphosis, as in Cyparis's dream that he is transformed into a tree:

Manchmal schlief er während der Vorführung über solchen Sehnsüchten ein und träumte von Bäumen, von Zedern, Pappeln, Zypressen, träumte, daß er Moos auf seiner harten rissigen Haut trug (25).

As Helmut Bernsmeier observes, it is another feature of the work indicative of its relation to Ovid's work that it contains characters that share exactly the same names as those in Ovid, but have slightly different contrasting lives. Bernsmeier cites the example of Tereus, who rather than being a Thracian king is given a whole new set of characteristics, transformed into being Tomi's butcher, who habitually carries out violent acts such as smashing the skulls of bulls.¹⁵ Ransmayr chronicles these differences in the explanatory appendix he appends to his novel, referred to by some literary commentators as his 'Ovidian Repertoire.' That is a further device that enables the incorporation of metamorphosis into the text, since the explanations regarding the Ovidian character necessitate clarification of the transformations they undergo in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. Whereas Ovid's characters retain their characteristics even after being transformed, in Ransmayr's novel the characters lose their previous identities, taking Tereus as an example:

Die Lebewesen, die sich in Ransmayrs Roman verwandeln, verlieren aber ihre Identität, so auch Tereus, der zwar ebenfalls zu einem Wiedehopf wird, aber als Verwandelter keine Merkmale des grausamen Schlachters mehr trägt.¹⁶

The first metamorphosis I would like to analyse in detail in *Die letzte Welt* is that involving the ropemaker called Lycaon. As the reader assumes, reading between the lines—no physical metamorphosis is graphically rendered in the text—Lycaon shapeshifts from his existence as a human being into a wolf. This metamorphosis is founded on the myth of Lycaon in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (I, 233–237), but Ransmayr's adaptation of the mythical transformation of Lycaon is quite distinct from Ovid's. Before Cotta arrives, Ransmayr lays the groundwork in Chapter I to facilitate the possibility of a man turning into a wolf with his comment that insomniacs in Tomi thought at times they could hear wolves

howling: ‘Wer in den Nächten wachlag, glaubte manchmal Wölfe zu hören’(10). This firmly places the image of wolves in the mind of the reader from the outset, so that later on one all the more readily believes the metamorphosis of Lycaon into a wolf from the early clues scattered throughout the text. As with the transformation of Tereus, Procne and Philomela, Ransmayr adapts Ovid’s mythical tale told in a short piece of narrative and expands it in the manner of a murder mystery writer, who leaves clues throughout the text as to the perpetrator of a crime.

His novel parallels the structure in Ovid, since the name Lycaon is introduced from the outset in Chapter I just as Ovid introduces Lycaon at the start of the *Metamorphoses* in Book I. But whereas Ovid’s interpretation of the Lycaon myth is contained within 80 lines of verse (I, 166–243), Ransmayr scatters clues of the possibility of a metamorphosis occurring over ten chapters, placing allusions to the wolf-metamorphosis sporadically from Chapter I to Chapter XII. Chapter IV focuses to a greater degree on Lycaon, being more concentrated with many references to the character. Leaving the poet’s house, Cotta descends the serpentine path to the beach, and he hears a noise that sounds like naked feet slapping on cobblestones:

Cotta erkannte in diesem Läufer tatsächlich den Seiler; barfuß den Vollmond im Rücken, hastete er über den Glimmerschiefer, der wie ein großes, geborstenes Dach über das Kar verstreut lag, ins Gebirge. (84)

When Cotta calls to his landlord, he marvels at the way he runs off. Then the sound of Lycaon’s rapid inhalation and exhalation of breath following this exertion is compared to a howl, saliva is spotted frothing at his mouth and then when Lycaon stumbles, Cotta remarks on how he recovers and sprints off on all fours, adeptly repeating the phrase ‘auf allen vieren’ in the same sentence for emphasis. The above quotation cleverly incorporates the detail that Lycaon is barefoot, casually inserted into his phrasing along with the landscape imagery most commonly associated with the wolf-man transformation, namely that it happens on the night of a full-moon. Within a page we are advised of Cotta’s first visit to the ropemaker’s house on

the day of his arrival in Tomi, where Cotta recognises the stone-grey moth-eaten fur pelt lying in Lycaon's open safe as the skin of a wolf: 'das Fell eines Wolfes' (86). But whereas we are confronted with an overt actual visible physical transformation of Lycaon's human body into a wolf's form in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, here the allusion to his lycanthropic metamorphosis is subtle: we never actually see Lycaon change shape, but can only infer that he has done so behind the scenes. Vollstedt summarises the particular aspects from the original Latin of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* that Ransmayr draws on here and reproduces in modern German regarding the attributes of the wolf:

Für die Wolfsexistenz des Seilers hat Ransmayr einige Wolfsmerkmale von Ovid übernommen. Der Seiler Lycaon scheint nachts zu heulen (84). "Heulen" ist vergleichbar mit dem ebenfalls lautmalersichen lateinischen "exultat". Lycaon läuft "wie in einer ungeheuren Wut" (84). Wut oder Raserei, lat. "rabies", ist ein Merkmal des Ovidischen Lycaon. Das Fell, in das sich Lycaons Kleidung in den "Metamorphosen" verwandelt, liegt bei Ransmayr als vermeintliche Jagdtrophäe im Panzerschrank (85). Der Ovidische Lycaon behält nach seiner Verwandlung die grauen Haare des arkadischen Herrschers ("Canities eadem est") und noch bei Ransmayr erscheint Seiler Lycaon als "gebeugter grauhaariger Mann" (221). Außerdem hat der Seiler graue Füße und geht auch an kalten Tagen barfuß (9). Die Aussage: "Wer in den Nächten wachlag, glaubte manchmal Wölfe zu hören" (10), ist eine Anspielung auf Lycaon, bevor dieser namentlich erwähnt wird (13).¹⁷

Bartsch has identified that in the novel 'Elemente des Kriminal- bzw. Detektivromans (Erzählverfahren des Nachspüren)'¹⁸ exist generally but specifically in Chapter V. Cotta, in the manner of a detective, takes a mental note of the evidence that a metamorphosis has in fact occurred, as he observes 'daß Lycaon wieder barfuß war, sah die zerschundenen Füße, die Hände mit den rissigen Nägeln' (99) and poses himself the question whether these hands with cracked nails and the bruised feet of this old man had once been claws and limbs of a wolf. He runs a dialogue with himself appearing to need to confirm the fact that he had recently heard wolves in the mountains: 'Wölfe, sagte Cotta; ich habe im Gebirge Wölfe gesehen', and the repetition of the unusual word 'Gebirge' adroitly reminds us of Cotta's description of the ropemaker running in the moon-lit night in the previous chapter, which also

contains the word 'Gebirge'. This can be no coincidence, since shortly it is reinforced by Echo whispering back to Cotta 'Wölfe...im Gebirge?' It is by this cumulative power of suggestion that Ransmayr relays the suggested metamorphosis to his reader; Cotta's casual mention of a wolf's skin in a safe, his perception of wolfish characteristics in Lycaon's running style and physical movement, followed by the constant repetition of the motif of wolves in the mountains. A further remark follows in Chapter X that Lycaon had once again run off into the mountains wearing the moth-eaten wolf's costume from his safe. The repetition of the 'ins Gebirge' here has the affect of tagging Lycaon with this leitmotif of being someone with an affinity for a wolf's costume, who habitually goes off running into the mountains on all fours. At the end of Chapter XI, Cotta comes across vultures feasting on the fly-infested carcass of a wolf near the ruins of Trachila and this combined with the factual note at the end of Chapter XII that Lycaon has left his house leaves the reader to draw the natural conclusion that Lycaon at some time ran into the mountains and somehow metamorphosed into a wolf.

We can discern from this that Ransmayr adopts a technique that differs from all of his predecessors, Hoffmann, Gotthelf and Kafka. Ransmayr adds layer upon layer of descriptive clues to the wolf transformation with ever-increasing frequency, until the reader draws the conclusion that Lycaon is perfectly capable of metamorphosis and indeed probably has transformed back and forth into a wolf out of Cotta's vision. But crucially as opposed to Gotthelf and Kafka, and indeed Ovid, as with Bachmann's Undine figure, there is no graphic detailed physical description here of the metamorphosis. As Ziolkowski observes, the Lycaon metamorphosis is one that is presumed by the reader, without a vivid description of the change:

The transformations of actual human beings, finally, are always only apparent: Lycaon the rope maker, who in his (reversible psychic) state of lycanthropy runs barefoot across the hills clad in a wolf's pelt...¹⁹

Harzer analyses the differences between Ovid and Ransmayr in a different light, emphasising the importance of the difference in the duration of the transformation. In Ovid, the transformation of Lycaon into a wolf is irreversible, whereas in Ransmayr we never actually witness Lycaon change but infer from the clues laid before us that there are multiple transformations back and forth into a wolf and then back into the form of a human being:

Statt der irreversiblen Metamorphose des wölfischen Lycaon aus den *Metamorphosen*, erzählt *Die letzte Welt* also die Geschichte anscheinend reversibler und unsichtbarer Werwolfsverwandlungen.²⁰

Although irrefutably Ransmayr draws heavily on Ovid generally for the material from which he constructs his writing, the physical metamorphoses that are at the root or heart of Ovid can no longer be relayed in postmodernism by the obvious straightforward depiction of physical transformations of the body, described in glorious detail.

And this is not solely confined to Ransmayr's adaptation of the Lycaon myth, but can be applied to his adaptation of Ovid's Arachne myth, since Ransmayr's Arachne differs substantially from the girl who changes into a spider in Ovid. Whereas Ovid's Arachne is descended from the purple-dyer, Idmon of Colophon, and is famous for her artistry as a weaver, Ransmayr's Arachne in *Die letzte Welt* comes to the coasts of Tomi aboard the ship of a purple-dyer and becomes a deaf-mute weaver, who lives in a dilapidated house and weaves into her tapestries stories she has read from Naso's lips, as Klaus Lindemann and Raimar Stefan Zons point out in their general study of the motif of the black spider in German literature:

Am Ende aller Metamorphosen, in Christoph Ransmayrs *Die letzte Welt*, ist freilich Arachne selbst zur „taubstummen Weberin“ geworden, die ein „schwefelgelber Schleier“ über das Meer nach Tomi getragen hat. Statt Geschichten zu weben und Texten zur Sprache zu verhelfen, deutet sie nur noch mit dem Finger auf die nahende und endgültige Katastrophe. Diese wiederum kündigt sich von den Rändern der Zivilisation her an, wenn „in den Ruinen einer seit Jahrzehnten unbewohnten Gasse Spinnen von der Größe einer Menschenfaust“ lauern.²¹

Ransmayr's Arachne as a weaver maintains her associations with Ovid's Arachne, whose skill is to weave and whose fate it is to be turned into a spider, but because Ransmayr's Arachne does not metamorphose physically, this allows Ransmayr to play with the metamorphic association by making his character Arachne a gifted weaver and referring on more than one occasion to her own tapestries, evocative of the Ovidian tapestries depicting the multiple transformations of Zeus, Neptune and Phoebus woven by Arachne in Book VI of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. In *Die letzte Welt*, Echo recalls how Arachne stares at the glistening pattern which the cold sun left on the sea, a play of light she would later weave into her tapestries with white and silk threads from Cythera. Ransmayr's allusion to Arachne's tapestries has the effect of recalling the seductive content of Arachne's tapestries in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*.²²

Another aspect of Ransmayr's technique is that he uses characters possessing exactly the same names as those in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, but whilst many of the aspects from Ovid are simply replicated, his characters are parodies of Ovid's. They might differ slightly, or are endowed with more realistic qualities, and these transformations are relayed in such a way as to avoid the obvious problem Ransmayr faces of portraying metamorphoses in a postmodernist realistic setting.

One method is to narrate the metamorphosis or presumed transformation through the eyes of the protagonist, or a character who is dreaming, in a confused state or even drunk, so that his perception is faulty, allowing the metamorphosis to occur in the real world, where otherwise it would not be logically possible. It is the fragile perception of the character that makes (using Ziolkowski's term) the transformation 'plausible', since the reader can then wholeheartedly believe in the dream representation of metamorphosis. In this context Harzer contrasts the different approaches to the myth of Cyparissus in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and Ransmayr. In Ovid, the handsome youth from Cea kills Apollo's stag by accident, for which Apollo turns him into a tree that can lament forever the mistake. Whereas the metamorphosis

is for punitive purposes in Ovid, Ransmayr's Cyparis has as a symbolic animal companion a stag and is dreaming of his ancient Ovidian transformation as an escape from humdrum reality:

Dient sie bei Ovid dazu, den sich verzehrenden Cyparissus in einen Trauer-Baum zu verwandeln, so wird diese Verwandlung hier zu einem eskapistischen Tagtraum umfunktioniert.²³

A further illustration is their differing treatments of the myth of Ceyx and Alcyone. In Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Alcyone, on seeing her husband Ceyx's silent bloodless corpse being washed up into the shore by the lapping waves, leaps into the air, acquiring wings and a slender bill that betray her transformation into a bird. As she tries with her futile kisses to revive her lover, the gods out of pity transform them both into birds. By contrast, Ransmayr enables the surrealistic transformation of Alcyone and Ceyx into birds by casting them as the leading protagonists in a melodrama that the dwarf Cyparis the projectionist beams on the walls of Tomi's slaughterhouse, in an episode where the local inhabitants interpret Ovid's tale as it unfurls before their eyes. First, Alcyone dreams that she finds Ceyx clinging to a scrap of lumber, drifting alone in the sea spray with seaweed in his hair and sea anemones and mussels perched on his shoulders. She awakes with a start to find Ceyx sleeping next to her. Missing Ceyx who subsequently goes to sea, Alcyone checks a Spanish galley for the return of her beloved but finds only shipwrecked strangers. But the dream comes true when during her daily beach vigil, Alcyone espies a stranded corpse out in the sea, and she now begins to take on the shape of a kingfisher, gives several graceful flaps of her wings until she arrives above Ceyx, who as in Ovid's myth undergoes a transformation into a bird:

... war der stinkende Schaum in den Haaren nur ein Kranz aus Daunenfedern, weißer, frischer Flaum, taten sich also Perlenaugen auf; Augen. Dann erhob sich aus dem von einer sanften Brise ziselierten Meeresspiegel ein geschnäbelter, zierlicher Kopf, blickte ruckend und wie verwundert um sich, ein kleiner, gefiederter Körper, der sich flügelschlagend aufrichtete und dabei Salzblüten, Wasser und Wundschorf abschüttelte. Und die Zuschauer, die nun keinen Leichnam und keine Trauernde mehr, sondern nur zwei auffliegende Eisvögel sahen, begriffen... (39)

Whereas Ovid's episode in Book XI of the *Metamorphoses* refers to Ceyx and Alcyone generally as birds, Ransmayr treats the couple specifically as kingfishers, probably because in the Greek myths this is the bird most often associated with the Alcyone figures.²⁴ Vollstedt finds in this 'allmählichen Verwandlungsvorgang eines Menschen in einen Vogel'²⁵ a point of comparison with Hoffmann's gradual depiction of the metamorphosis of the Archivarius Lindhorst into a bird of prey in *Der goldne Topf* mentioned earlier:

Schon war er in der Nähe des Koselchen Gartens, da setzte sich der Wind in den weiten Überrock und trieb die Schöße auseinander, daß sie wie ein paar große Flügel in den Lüften flatterten, und es dem Studenten Anselmus, der verwunderungsvoll dem Archivarius nachsah, vorkam, als breite ein großer Vögel die Fittige aus zum raschen Fluge. –Wie der Student nun so in die Dämmerung hineinstarrte, da erhob sich mit krächzendem Geschrei ein weißgrauer Geier hoch in die Lüfte (I, 204).²⁶

It is certainly true that these transformations are both gradual, but what I think links Ransmayr to Hoffmann and sets these two authors apart from Gotthelf and Kafka is the key difference that Ransmayr and Hoffmann are operating either side of the boundary that separates a dream from reality. As Moray McGowan comments, '*Die letzte Welt*'s quest for Ovid and the manuscript of his *Metamorphoses* dissolves the boundaries between reality and fiction in a maze of allusions and inversions.'²⁷ Vollstedt too reinforces this aspect of Ransmayr's narrative technique, which plays with the borders of reality and fantasy in a way reminiscent of the nineteenth century Hoffmann, stating that in relation to Cyparis, as distinct from Ovid, the transformation is not effected by a God, but stands in its own right as 'ein psychologisch erklärbares Traumbild.' Vollstedt emphasises here how Ransmayr utilises a narrative space between 'Traum and Realität.'²⁸ Ransmayr appears to switch between fiction, dreams and reality to such an extent that at times the reader like the inhabitants is perplexed, showing that Ransmayr's interest is 'focused entirely on the problematic relationship between fiction and reality and on the poet's visionary powers.'²⁹ This has been underlined in relation to

Ransmayr's treatment of the Cyparis myth as well as the myth of Lycaon. And in the above example from Hoffmann, it is crucial to remember that Lindhorst's transformation into a bird is a psychological one rendered by Anselmus's dream state. The same applies to the 'Beinahe-Metamorphose'³⁰ of Cotta into stone in chapter VIII, where Cotta falls into a deep reverie where he imagines his own petrification:

Sein Haar verwuchs mit dem Moos, die Nägel seiner Hände, seiner Füße wurden zu Schiefer, seine Augen zu Kalk. Vor der ungeheueren Masse dieses Gebirges hatte nichts Bestand und Bedeutung, was nicht selbst Fels war (189).

What this metamorphosis shares with Kafka is that it is a metamorphosis of the main protagonist, what it shares with Hoffmann is that it operates through dreams; what differentiates it from Kafka is that it uses this dream state to relay the metamorphosis and what differentiates it from Hoffmann is that there Anselmus the main character does not metamorphose; it is only the characters surrounding him that transform, perceived through his own dream state. But this is only one example of Ransmayr's metamorphoses and so comparing and contrasting with his predecessors an isolated metamorphosis from his whole range of different techniques may not take us much further in an attempt to clarify metamorphosis representation. What is clear, however, is that where he does use a character who is dreaming of a transformation, that aligns his writing style with Hoffmann and this is one of the key differences from Kafka's representation, expressly stated not to be a dream on the part of Gregor Samsa.

Another major transformation story that dominates *Die letzte Welt* is Ransmayr's distinctive treatment of the myth of Tereus, Procne and Philomela. The main elements of this myth in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* are those of Tereus's rape of Philomela (his wife Procne's sister) together with the cutting out of her tongue to keep her silence, Procne and Philomela's revenge by their murder of his son Itys and subsequent serving up of his body to Tereus in a

meal out of vengeance and the transformation of Procne into a swallow, Philomela into a nightingale and Tereus into a hoopoe bird:

corpora Cecropidum pennis pendere putares:
 pendebant pennis. quarum petit altera silvas,
 altera tecta subit, neque adhuc de pectore caedis
 excessere notae, signataque sanguine pluma est.
 ille dolore suo poenaeque cupidine velox
 vertitur in volucrem, cui stant in vertice cristae.
 prominet inmodicum pro longa cuspide rostrum;
 nomen epops volucris, facies armata videtur.

[As they fly from him you would think that the bodies of the two Athenians were poised on wings! One flies to the woods, the other rises to the roof. And even now their breasts have not lost the marks of their murderous deed, their feathers are stained with blood. Tereus, swift in pursuit because of his grief and eager desire for vengeance, is himself changed into a bird. Upon his head a stiff crest appears, and a huge beak stands forth instead of his long sword. He is the hoopoe, with the look of one armed for war (VI, 667–674).]

Ransmayr adheres to the generality of the myth, whilst adding his own particular ingredients in terms of the characters and their actions. Ransmayr turns Tereus, the King of Thrace, into Tomi's butcher, a violent man who slaughters and disposes of animals, whose preoccupations include shattering the skulls of bulls and beating his wife Procne into the bargain. This violent aspect is a reflection of the butchery involved in Tereus's original deed of cutting out Philomela's tongue. Ovid's Procne, the daughter of Pandion and slayer of her son Itys, becomes in Ransmayr's fiction the beaten wife of Tereus. She is the only inhabitant of Tomi who is ignorant of the fact that Tereus is cheating on her with some whore; her only protection against Tereus is a growing corpulence. Ransmayr cleverly initially keeps the identity of Tereus's sexual conquest a vague secret:

Der Schlachter verschwand manchmal tagelang aus Tomi, und es war ein schlecht gehütetes Geheimnis, daß er Procne dann mit irgendeiner namenlosen Hure, die nur ein Schäfer einmal hatte schreien hören, oben in den Bergen betrog (30).

Ransmayr inserts this important detail into his text almost casually in the background, which makes the impact of Philomela's return to Tomi after being left for dead on a hillside all the

more powerful, since at this point the reader can then make the classical connection between the obscure reference to some unnamed whore earlier and Philomela, the object of Tereus's lust in the original Greek myth.

Moreover, the time span of the events surrounding these bird transformations in Ransmayr is quite different from Ovid's treatment. In Ovid, the whole episode involving these characters is dealt with in one continuous piece of poetic narrative in Book VI (412–674), whereas the mythic story of how these characters are transformed into birds in *Die letzte Welt* begins in Chapter II and ends in the concluding Chapter XV, almost spanning the entire novel, which adds suspense. When the reader comes across the names of Tereus and Procne in the text, it is natural to then wonder if and when Philomela will appear and when, whether and how Ransmayr will manage in a postmodernist realist setting to have these characters transformed into birds as they were in the Greek myth. This elongated narration of the myth interspersed by other stories allows Ransmayr to scatter allusions to the Ovidian myth like clues through the text.

In Chapter IV, Cotta in his drunken state stumbles across a masked carnival procession, that includes 'lebenden Steinen, Vogelmenschen' (90), allusions to petrification and the transformations into birds, and surely it can be no coincidence that Tereus is present, wearing a birdcage strapped to his head, a clue or symbol of his connection to the bird transformations to come. Similarly, at the end of Chapter XIV when Philomela returns, the brandy-seller interrogates Philomela in his own crude way, opening his mouth, sticking out his tongue and wrapping his hand around it, to then shout out the question 'Who? Who?', which calls to mind the sound of the Hoopoe bird's characteristic call.³¹ In Chapter XV the scene is set for the ensuing metamorphosis of Tereus, Procne and Philomela, as we see Tereus carrying the body of his dead son, Itys, and it is made clear that 'Procne hatte ihren Sohn herausgenommen aus der Zeit und zurückgelegt in ihr Herz.' Tereus, menacingly wielding an axe and with a murderous intention, embarks on a house search in Tomi to find out where

Procne and Philomela are hiding. As he finds Procne in Cotta's house, the metamorphosis is precipitated by events:

Tereus hob die Axt, um zu tun, was ihm Trauer und Haß befohlen. Sprang seine Opfer an. Aber nicht zwei Frauen hoben abwehrend die Arme, sondern zwei aufgeschreckte Vögel breiteten die Flügel aus; ihre Namen waren im Archiv von Trachila verzeichnet: Schwalbe und Nachtigall. Mit rasenden Flügelschlägen durchmaßten sie die Seilerei, schnellten durch das zerbrochene Fenster ins Freie und verloren sich im nachtblauen Himmel, noch ehe aus dem krummen Stiel der Axt ein weiterer Schnabel, aus Tereus Armen Schwingen und seine Haare zu braunen und schwarzen Federn geworden waren. Ein Wiedehopf folgte den beiden Geretteten in einem geschwungenen, wellenförmigen Flug, als gleite er auf dem Nachhall von Procnes Stimme dahin (284).

This metamorphosis is the closest Ransmayr gets to placing a mythic transformation in his realism, as it appears to be part of the actual chain of events in reality. Admittedly, it is during a period where Cotta is described as being exhausted and falling asleep, nodding off for a second. One could rush to interpret these transformations as part of Cotta's dreams, but that explanation appears to be negated by the text. Immediately prior to Tereus wielding the axe, we are told Cotta has awoken to the enchanting melody of Procne's voice, so this suggests that he is back firmly in the real world. If that is the case, apart from Battus's petrification, this is the only transformation placed in reality as opposed to transformations being narrated from one character to another, metamorphoses being justified by a dream sequence or occurring in the movies Cyparis projects onto the walls of Tomi's slaughterhouse.

The inhabitants appear immune to the strange goings-on in Tomi, to the extent that when Battus turns to stone, the initial shock is soon superseded by a wave of indifference.³² The possibility of the metamorphosis of human beings into animals in Tomi or an epileptic son of a grocer turning to stone, standing as a statue in the store among the sauerkraut, is admitted in the town of Tomi as an everyday possibility, to the extent that because Tomi has

suffered so many strange incidents in the past, the fantastic metamorphoses that occur appear simply to be logged and entered indifferently into the accepted folklore of the town.

One important aspect of Ransmayr's technique mentioned above that now requires further clarification is how he adopts characters from the ancient world of Ovid and adapts them by providing new identities, though the metamorphic aspect of the character predominantly remains. In the case of Battus, for instance, Ovid's Battus is a Messinian shepherd, who sees Mercury driving a herd of stolen cattle. He vows his silence, but Mercury returns later disguised as a stranger to test him, and Battus breaks his oath. For this indiscretion Mercury transforms him to stone (II, 707–707). Ransmayr's Battus by contrast is the son of Fama the grocer; a miner, he suffers from epilepsy and a compulsion to grab and touch everything to assure himself that it exists. Fama keeps stinging nettles on the shelves of her store as a deterrent, which proves ineffective. Battus finds his niche in life as the operator of an episcopa Fama had ordered years ago, but his obsession with the machine leads to his wish never to leave the grotto and Fama has to lay down a mattress so he can sleep near this basic projector of images. Later, Fama enters to see her son crouching motionless beside the machine and realises he has become petrified:

Fama schrie. Denn noch bevor sie entsetzt und zärtlich über die Stirn ihres Sohnes strich, wußte sie, daß dieses verstörte Wesen, das sie unter Qualen geboren und am Leben erhalten hatte, zu Stein geworden war (214).

One wonders why Ransmayr's handling of this petrification metamorphosis differs so much from Ovid's original myth, and why in this particular case Ransmayr should wish to depart from his borrowed source to such a degree. The main difference here is that whereas in Ovid the metamorphosis is clearly punitive—Battus is being punished for breaking his oath—in Ransmayr's grocer shop the rationale for this metamorphosis is far from apparent and has left critics baffled. I would advance the proposition that the only conclusion one can really draw here is that the petrification theme is appropriate to reflect the behaviour of Battus, who

because of his fixation with the machine has now relinquished his freedom of movement, tying himself day and night to the service of the projector, failing to leave the room, and that because he no longer wishes to move from this beloved object, his fate of becoming a stone statue is somehow merited for his obsession with new technology.

This innovative argument remains in fact the only possible reason for the transformation but on the face of it, one wonders why Ransmayr chooses these circumstances to relay this petrification, when he could have adhered to the original myth and changed the story along the lines of Battus breaking some dreamed-up oath or promise to one of the other characters who in revenge transforms him. The fact that Ransmayr keeps the petrification motif inherited from Ovid is commendable, for if he had imaginatively turned Battus into a bear, or placed him in another transformation category for no explicable reason, that indeed would have weakened the tie with Ovid beyond recognition. Ransmayr's novel is certainly strengthened by keeping the same transformations for the same characters and indeed the mere mention of the Ovidian name heralds the transformation.

Battus's metamorphosis is one that requires further analysis, since it is one definite transformation in the novel that does occur in reality, without it being relayed through a dream sequence, a character's drunken imagination or any other further postmodernist technique, as Ziolkowski notes:

Since Ransmayr is not writing, like Rushdie, in the mode of magical realism, he cannot allow actual transformations of his characters, even reversible ones, to take place. The single case of apparent petrification, Fama's epileptic son Battus, is explained rationally by the cynical Lycaon as a medical anomaly, perhaps the result of an exotic disease brought to Tomi by Jason's tramp steamer and its cargo of unemployed riffraff.³³

This presents a considerable problem as to how this particular metamorphosis is allowed within Ransmayr's realism. His attempt to render it plausible occurs in Chapter X, when after all attempts to resuscitate the boy's body fail, the local inhabitants no longer

wonder at the epileptic's fate, but merely consider the statue an inconvenience to their access to the store. Is then the purpose of this metamorphosis to bring to our attention that awful changes are constantly taking place in our age that the general public simply have to get used to—no matter how fantastic—and accept, shrugging their shoulders so that the fantastic is consigned to the realm of commonplace in public consciousness? It is certainly notable that Ransmayr takes no really convincing steps to justify the incorporation of this physical petrification into his text, an anomaly which must remain 'eine unübersehbare Tatsache und ein unerklärliches Wunder.'³⁴ The only justification Ransmayr offers to fudge the issue and cover over what is on the face of it a fantastic transformation occurring in the real world is 'daß die Grenze zwischen Wirklichkeit und Traum vielleicht für immer verloren war' (221). A possible explanation might be that the 'Episkop' is somehow at the root of the reason for the transformation and this receives support by the fact that following Battus's petrification Fama throws his treasured possession away.³⁵ The only other justification offered is by Lycaon who suggests that it was a rare case of some disease the epileptic had picked up, some kind of lockjaw caught from the rabble around the Argo or while rummaging through trash on the beach.

In moving on from a consideration of a myth where Ransmayr departs greatly from the original, the last metamorphosis I wish to analyse in this section is the Deucalion and Pyrrha myth, which is worked into the novel by having Echo narrate to Cotta this episode taken from the exiled poet Naso's *Book of Stones*, and which in contrast to the story of Mercury and Battus, is far more conventional, adhering remarkably close to the original myth found in Book I of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (I, 313–451). Echo tells the story of how, according to Naso, Deucalion and Pyrrha were the last human beings on earth following a great flood that had devastated mankind. Their state of loneliness as last survivors comes to an abrupt end, when Pyrrha in a distracted state casually throws a hundred or more pebbles behind her from her position on a raft into a pond. Deucalion comes to his senses quickly when he sees these

stones growing, sprouting legs, arms and hands and Pyrrha then too becomes aware that the stone in the pond is gradually assuming the human form of a woman: ‘daß der Stein nach und nach die Gestalt eines Menschen annahm, einer zusammengekauerten Frau’ (168). In an effort to drive the woman away, Pyrrha throws a barrage of stones and Deucalion does the same with the undesired result that a host of human beings rises up out of the morass from each pond; women from Pyrrha’s pebbles and men from those Deucalion had thrown. And so out of a hail of stones, the new human race is born after the apocalyptic flood:

Und Menschen erhoben sich aus dem Morast; aus jedem Tümpel eine Schar. Die von Pyrrha geschleuderten Kiesel wurden zu Frauen, und Männer aus dem Schotter Deucalions (169).

In Ovid’s original myth by contrast, Deucalion wishes to have the power to restore the nations and far from suppressing any new life that comes from the stones, the pair’s act of casually casting the stones results from a visit to the goddess Themis, to whom they plead to reveal by what means the human race can be restored. She instructs them as they go to throw behind them the bones of their great mother, which they later comprehend as the stones of mother earth. Having jettisoned the stones, the metamorphosis of the pebbles into the human race then begins:

saxa (quis hoc credat, nisi sit pro teste vetustas?)
 ponere duritiem coepere suumque rigorem
 mollirique mora mollitaque ducere formam.
 mox ubi creverunt naturaque mitior illis
 contigit, ut quaedam, sic non manifesta videri
 forma potest hominis, sed uti de marmore coepta
 non exacta satis rudibusque simillima signis,
 quae tamen ex illis aliquo pars umida suco
 et terrena fuit, versa est in corporis usum;
 quod solidum est flectique nequit, mutatur in ossa,
 quae modo vena fuit, sub eodem nomine mansit,
 inque brevi spatio superiorum numine saxa
 missa viri manibus faciem traxere virorum
 et de femineo reparata est femina iactu.

[and the stones—who would believe it unless ancient tradition vouched for it?—began at once to lose their hardness and stiffness, to grow soft slowly, and softened to take on form. Then

when they had grown in size and become milder in their nature, a certain likeness to the human form, indeed, could be seen, still not very clear, but such as statues just begun out of marble have, not sharply defined, and very like roughly blocked-out images. That part of them, however, which was earthy and damp with slight moisture, was changed to flesh; but what was solid and incapable of bending became bone; that which was but now veins remained under the same name. And in a short time, through the operation of the divine will, the stones thrown by the man's hand took on the form of men, and women were made from the stones the woman threw.] (I, 400–413)

Now that I have explored the techniques Ransmayr employs in order to place metamorphoses into his text, allusions to both the poet Ovid and his *Metamorphoses*, a question remains that is less easy to unravel: why he is actually doing all this and focusing on metamorphosis as a concept. One possible solution advanced by a few critics is that by exploring the concept of metamorphosis, Ransmayr is able to look at the boundaries between a fictional text and reality, as Harzer observes:

Zwar greift die 'Letzte Welt' die fiktionalisierende Rahmung von Verwandlungsprozessen (im Film oder im Traum) ebenso auf wie phantastische, halluzinatorische oder karnevaleske Metamorphosen. Dies steht nun allerdings im Dienst einer impliziten Poetik, welche auf der Ebene der Geschichte die Grenze zwischen Text und Wirklichkeit problematisiert.³⁶

The use of the protagonist's dreams to convey metamorphosis is a strand Ransmayr shares with Hoffmann, but which distinguishes him from Kafka, since we are expressly told in *Die Verwandlung* that Gregor Samsa's transformation was no dream. Ransmayr's reluctance or deliberate strategy to avoid an elaborate description of the physical metamorphoses of the body in the text sets him apart from Gotthelf, Hoffmann and Kafka. Another difference from his predecessors is Ransmayr's variation in presenting the metamorphoses, whereas Gotthelf, Kafka and Hoffmann use only their own single method of representation, rather than multiple techniques. What we are concerned with then is a shift in the representation of metamorphoses from the psychological dream fiction of Hoffmann's *Der goldne Topf* (1814) to graphic physical metamorphoses of the body in the fiction of Gotthelf's *Die schwarze Spinne* (1842) and then the realism of Kafka's *Die Verwandlung* (1915), that

then sees a reversal in the postmodernism of Ransmayr's *Die letzte Welt* (1988) to using psychological dream states of the protagonist to relay metamorphoses that may or may not have taken place. In a sense this completes a circle, returning to the ambiguous dream metamorphoses of Anselmus in Hoffmann.

Ransmayr's novel owes a greater debt to Ovid's *Metamorphoses* than most German texts in its reliance on Ovid for its source material. Not only does it feature Ovid as a character, but Ransmayr includes a whole host of characters drawn directly from Ovid's epic poem, whose difference in persona is diligently recorded in the 'Ovidian Repertoire' he appends to his work. Ransmayr uses many techniques in order to convey the idea of metamorphosis without having to describe in graphic detail a transformation of the body. These include narration of the metamorphoses, the pictorial representation of the Death of Actaeon, a description of how characters react to the metamorphosis of Alcyone and Ceyx into birds in a film projected by Cyparis on the slaughterhouse wall, metamorphosis present in Cotta's dreams, and the hint of metamorphosis in the case of Lycaon by leaving evidence as to the transformation at intervals throughout the text. Ransmayr's transformations evidence a complete knowledge of the original source, but he has sought to relay the transformations with a variety of techniques, that allow quite innovative interpretations of specifically selected metamorphoses from Ovid. The author by no means attempts to include all of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and it is even debatable whether his motivation for using Ovid as an intertext is to introduce Ovid to a whole new readership, which might not otherwise come across Ovid's epic poem. Whereas Ovid's transformations are occasioned by gods and rationalised according to the individual circumstances surrounding the individual transformed, on the whole with Ransmayr it appears that he has selected negative, brutal and violent figures who are all suffering from something, whether it be their health, as in the case of Battus's epilepsy, or a life-threatening, violent situation, as in the case of Philomela and Procne. The

metamorphoses serve to liberate these figures from their particular private hells and allow them peace from their constant struggles after being changed into their new forms.³⁷

Endnotes

¹ Bernsmeier, Helmut. “Keinem bleibt seine Gestalt—Ransmayrs Letzte Welt.” Euphorion 85 (1991): 168–181.

² Bachmann, Peter. “Die Auferstehung des Mythos in der Postmoderne. Philosophische Voraussetzungen zu Christoph Ransmayrs Roman „Die letzte Welt“.” Diskussion Deutsch 21 (190): 639–651 and Mosebach, Holger. Endzeitvisionen im Erzählwerk Christoph Ransmayrs. Munich: Martin Meidenbauer Verlagsbuchhandlung, 2003. 125–217.

³ Kovář, Jaroslav. “Acht Thesen zu Christoph Ransmayrs Roman „Die letzte Welt“,” in Literatur und Kritik 25 (1990): 193–200.

⁴ Barbara Vollstedt’s interview with Christoph Ransmayr of 17.10.1996 in Cologne: Vollstedt, Barbara. Ovids “Metamorphoses”, “Tristia” und “Epistulae ex Ponto” in Christoph Ransmayrs Roman “Die letzte Welt”. Paderborn: Schöningh, 1998. 25.

⁵ *Ibid*, 27.

⁶ Bartsch, Kurt. “Dialog mit Antike und Mythos. Christoph Ransmayrs Ovid-Roman *Die letzte Welt*.” Modern Austrian Literature 23 (1990): 121–133 (p. 123).

⁷ Ransmayr, Christoph. Die letzte Welt. Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1991. 238. All further references are to this edition and will be followed by the page number of the text in brackets. The argument that he does not meet Ovid but is merely hallucinating is supported by Harber’s observation: ‘Er ist nun offensichtlich wahnsinnig geworden. Das Gefühl, verrückt geworden zu sein, beschlich ihn selber schon, als er in einer Art Halluzination den lebendigen Ovid wahrzunehmen glaubte’ in Henk Harbers. ““Die Erfindung der Wirklichkeit”: Zu Christoph Ransmayrs *Die letzte Welt*.” The German Quarterly 67.1 (1994): 58–72 (p. 62).

⁸ Vollstedt. Christoph Ransmayrs Roman “Die letzte Welt”. 30

⁹ Bartsch, Kurt. (supra): 124. The hypothesis that metamorphosis is a crucial concept for Ransmayr is explored by Gottwald, Herwig. Mythos und Mythisches in der Gegenwartsliteratur. Studien zur Christoph Ransmayr, Peter Handke, Botho Strauß, Georg Steiner, Patrick Roth und Robert Schneider. Stuttgart: Heinz, 1996. 23–26 and by Anz, Thomas. “Spiel mit der Überlieferung. Aspekte der Postmoderne in Ransmayrs ‘Die letzte Welt’.” Die Erfindung der Welt. Zum Werk von Christoph Ransmayr. Ed. Uwe Wittstock. Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1997. 130.

¹⁰ Ziolkowski, Theodore. Ovid and the Moderns. Ithaca; London: Cornell University Press, 2005. 179.

¹¹ Quotations from Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* will be cited from Volumes 42 and 43 of the The Loeb Classical Library, Second Edition of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* in six volumes. It is edited by Jeffrey Henderson, with an English translation by Frank Justus Miller and revised by C.P. Goold, published by Harvard University Press, in Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, England. Quotations will be cited in Latin and English followed throughout by a reference in the form of a Roman Numeral to indicate the appropriate Chapter followed by Arabic numbers to indicate the specific verses (e.g. XV, 871–9).

¹² Vollstedt. Christoph Ransmayrs Roman “Die letzte Welt”. 30.

¹³ Ziolkowski. Ovid and the Moderns. 182.

¹⁴ Mosebach, *Endzeitvisionen im Erzählwerk Christoph Ransmayrs*. 132.

¹⁵ Bernsmeier. 171. That Ransmayr's characters are all variations on the original is noted by Gleis, Reinhold. F. "Ovid in den Zeiten der Postmoderne: Bemerkungen zu Christoph Ransmayrs Roman *Die letzte Welt*." *Poetica* 26 (1994): 409–427.

¹⁶ Ziolkowski. 181. Other notable reviewers of the Ovidian repertoire are Vollstedt. *Christoph Ransmayrs Roman "Die letzte Welt"*. 185–187 and von Albrecht, who views it as an integral part of the novel.

¹⁷ Vollstedt. 58–59.

¹⁸ Bartsch. 130. See also Harzer, Friedmann. *Erzählte Verwandlung: Eine Poetik epischer Metamorphosen (Ovid—Kafka—Ransmayr)*. Tübingen: Max Niemeyer, 2000. 187. Mosebach (134) describes Ransmayr's technique as 'eine kriminalistische Suche'.

¹⁹ Ziolkowski. 182.

²⁰ Harzer, *Erzählte Verwandlung*. 187.

²¹ Lindemann, Klaus, and Raimar Stefan Zons, eds. *Lauter schwarze Spinnen: Spinnenmotive in der deutschen Literatur. Eine Sammlung*. Bonn: Bouvier, 1990. 9.

²² The allusion to tapestries in Ransmayr's novel recalls Ovid's Arachne's tapestries in Book VI, which depict Zeus in the guise of a swan seducing Leda, as Amphitryon bedding Alcmena, as a flame Aegina, and coming to Danae as a golden shower, as a shepherd for Mnemosyne and spotted serpent for Proserpina. Likewise Neptune metamorphoses into a bull for love of Canace, Theophane into a ram, Ceres into a horse and Melanthe into a dolphin. Phoebus is woven variously in his herdsman's guise, wearing a lion's skin, or hawk's plumage, or as a shepherd to fool Isse (VI, 108–128).

²³ Harzer, *Erzählte Verwandlung*. 186.

²⁴ In the Greek myth of Ceyx and Alcyone, Alcyone, the daughter of Aeolus, married Ceyx of Trachis and they were so happy in each other's company, they compared themselves to Hera and Zeus. Hera responded by letting a thunderstorm break over Ceyx's ship, and he was drowned. His ghost appeared to Alcyone, who leapt into the sea, whereupon some pitying god transformed them both into kingfishers: Graves, Robert. *The Greek Myths: 1*. London: Penguin, 1955. 163–164.

²⁵ Vollstedt. 45.

²⁶ Hoffmann, E. T. A., *Sämtliche poetischen Werke*, Ed. Hannsludwig Geiger, 3 vols Berlin; Darmstadt: Tempelverlag, 1963.

Vollstedt. 45.

²⁷ Moray McGowan, "German Writing in the West (1945–1990)." in Watanabe-O'Kelly, Helen, ed. *The Cambridge History of German Literature*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997. 440–506.

²⁸ Vollstedt. 41.

²⁹ Ziolkowski. 177–178.

³⁰ Vollstedt. 88.

³¹ In one version of the Greek myth, the swallow, having lost her tongue, screams, and flies around in circles, while the hoopoe flutters in pursuit of her, crying "pou? pou?" (where? where?), which approximates to the distinctive call of the hoopoe bird: Graves, Robert. *The Greek Myths: 1*. London: Penguin, 1955. 166.

³² Mosebach (169) notices too the indifferent attitude of Tomi's citizens.

³³ Ziolkowski. 182

³⁴ Harbers. 63.

³⁵ Vollstedt. 60.

³⁶ Harzer. 198.

³⁷ Mosebach. 139–144.