

poetry london

Autumn
2023

Issue
106



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Refuge in the Storm?

Rachel Hadas on translating Ovid and finding comfort in a world plagued by apathy and disaster

Late in the final book of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, the poet channels Pythagoras, assuming the voice of the Greek visionary whose impassioned condemnation of meat-eating inspires the virtuous early Roman king Numa. For a few hundred lines, before returning to the legends of early Rome, Ovid's voice sounds very different from what we've become accustomed to up to that point in the poem. Charles Martin in his translation of the *Metamorphoses* signals this switch from blank verse to hexameters when it's Pythagoras speaking. In Ovid's Latin, the *Metamorphoses* is in hexameters throughout, but the change in tone and diction in this portion of the poem's final book is unmistakable.

Pythagoras (c. 570-500 BCE) wrote nothing down; now, as in antiquity, we can only surmise about his distinctive style from a distance. But when Ovid (43 BCE-18 CE) as Pythagoras is expatiating on the universe, he sounds a lot like Lucretius. This Roman poet of an earlier generation (c. 99 BCE-c. 55 BCE) was the author of a single great work, *De Rerum Natura*. Lucretius's non-narrative poem deals – in hexameters – with the shuffling back and forth of atoms, and many other matters including the pointlessness of fearing death, all in the magisterial manner Ovid assumes when he is speaking in Pythagoras's

voice: something between lecturing and haranguing. Ovid's Pythagoras is stern, impassioned, and prone (as he himself admits) to digressions, so that his core concern of advocating vegetarianism tends to get lost amidst more cosmological matters, only to reappear. Most unexpectedly, perhaps, the voice of this Ovidian Pythagoras is reassuring, consoling, even kind. As this Pythagoras continues to pound in the lesson – a lesson that might be disconcerting – that nothing is stable, it's not hard to derive an unlikely consolation from this stern message.

It was this unexpectedly comforting voice that impelled me to translate the few hundred lines where Ovid cedes the floor to Pythagoras. There was no need for a new translation, but as Nikhil Krishnan has recently written about his intense engagement with Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, when we read the classics it's salutary to slow one's impatient pace and try to follow every thought, to relish every phrase or even every word. For me, translating the Ovidian Pythagoras's words into rhymed fourteeners was a pleasurable challenging way of applying the brakes, avoiding skimming and slipping over the surface. Grappling with Pythagoras's lecture line by line, I caught a lot I would otherwise have missed – for example, the heartrending description of the sacrifice

of a spotless steer. But above all, I was struck by a passage that echoes both the wording and, even more, the sentiment of the renowned *suave mari magno* passage in which, at the start of Book II of *De Rerum Natura*, Lucretius tells us how pleasant it is to stand above the fray of human life, as if one were watching storm-tossed ships at sea – not, the poet hastens to assure us, because watching shipwrecks are pleasant, but because the sensation of being untroubled is so valuable and, yes, pleasurable. In A E Stallings's rendering, here is the Lucretian passage:

How sweet it is to watch from dry land
 when the storm-winds roil
 A mighty ocean's waters, and see another's
 bitter toil –
 Not because you relish someone else's
 misery –
 Rather, it's sweet to know from what
 misfortunes you are free.
 Pleasant it is even to behold contests of war
 Drawn up on the battlefield when you are
 in no danger.
 But there is nothing sweeter than to dwell
 in towers that rise
 On high, serene and fortified with teachings
 of the wise,
 From which you may peer down upon the
 others as they stray
 This way and that, seeking the path of life,
 losing their way [...]

(*De Rerum Natura* II. 1-10)

Here, Ovid as Pythagoras is speaking:

It is a joy for me to leave behind
 dull earth, and high among the stars
 henceforth to make my way;
 carried by clouds, to stand on Atlas'
 shoulders, and to see
 irrational humanity everywhere struggling
 – men

in dread of what awaits them, because it is
 unknown.

(*Metamorphoses* XV. 146-150)

Both the Lucretian vignette of the observer of troubled seas or troops preparing to fight, and the Ovidian/Pythagorean image of the philosopher with the heavenly vantage point, convey a sense of perspective that is notably absent in our own doom-scrolling era, when it's hard not to skim the headlines day by day, hour by hour. Hence my own most important takeaway was the sense of comfort conveyed by this serene Pythagorean vision: nothing lasts forever.

Nothing in nature keeps its shape, as I
 continue learning;
 from golden age to iron age, the eras keep
 on turning [...]
 Nothing ever stays the same, for artful
 nature keeps
 refashioning the same materials into
 different shapes.
 In all creation, trust me, things never
 disappear;
 they change their form.

(251-254)

Shufflings and shiftings may occur as things
 move back and forth,
 but nothing's lost or gained; the sum is
 constant here on earth.

(257-258)

Chaos, once predicted and expected, once understood as permanent, offers its own skewed stability. When nothing lasts, when everything that comes to pass is transient, this magisterial tone is comforting. Smoke from Canadian wildfires? A passing thing. Tyrannical political leaders, spineless politicians, angry citizens – all this has happened

before, says Pythagoras, and it will all happen again. ‘That red-hot furnace Aetna, furious and sulfurous now, / won’t be forever fiery, nor was it always so.’ (340-341) In some ways, it’s easier to believe the truth of this as we get older and as the earth heats up. Aetna’s furnace, comparable on our puny human scale to anger, which can similarly sear and scorch, scar and destroy, did not always burn with such heat – and will not.

The comfort such passages provided was, I found, all the more welcome because the prevalent mood in our own time is not acceptance of change, but anxiety bordering on panic. The feeling tends to be either that things are moving too fast, we can’t keep up, it’s exhausting – or, equally frightening, the sense that things will always be just like this. Either they’ll stay the same, or they’ll get worse: not a ticking clock, as Bill McKibben has recently said, but more like a time bomb. Permanent disarray is the best we can hope for, but continued chaos and deliquescence are far more likely.

The thought that this speeded-upness might be a default condition is not reassuring. Katherine May, in her 2023 book *Enchantment: Awakening Wonder in an Anxious Age*, captures the anxiety of our current and extended moment in her meditation on vigilance:

Danger, when it is always imminent, does harm. It doesn’t need to actually arrive. You exhaust yourself in the act of forever looking over your shoulder. Your body readies itself to fight and never quite discharges that chemical cocktail. [...] what you do, with every fibre of your being, is watch. You are incessantly, exhaustingly

alert. You don’t dare ever let up, just in case the danger takes advantage of your inattention.

This queasiness bordering on alarm, this unease edging toward hysteria we are immersed in now, constantly poised on the cusp of or reacting to some new development which is both anxiously foreseen and vertiginously unexpected, cries out for reassurance.

For me, Ovid’s Pythagoras was an unexpected source of reassurance. But why should I have been surprised? The same anxieties have always roiled humanity. We’re afraid of death because it is unknown. We’re afraid of the future. We’re afraid of loss and change.

Pythagoras says:

In all creation, trust me, things never disappear;
they change their form. What we call birth means something is astir,
something new is coming; it’s a process of transition.
And equally what we call death is merely a cessation.
Shufflings and shiftings may take place as things move back and forth,
but nothing’s lost or gained; the sum is constant here on earth.

(253-258)

Something new is coming. In one revision of my translation, I wrote ‘something new is brewing’ – like a concoction in a caldron, or like a looming storm. Then, ignoring the echo of the song in *West Side Story*, I changed the verb back to ‘coming.’

Something new is coming, or brewing, every day now, every minute, or that’s

how it feels. One new something that has already arrived – arrived quite a while ago, but we are only now trying to assimilate it – is artificial intelligence. Without a doubt, for example, ChatGPT would be able to translate Ovid infinitely faster, minus all the scribblings and revisions, the second and third thoughts, than what I have suddenly begun undertaking for the past few weeks, prompted by precisely this atypical piece of Ovid's poem. And though I'm not impatient to put it to the test, AI could surely also render Ovid into rhymed fourteeners. Such a task would not be beyond its speedy scope.

But what's the hurry? Let me inhabit my own private, moist, spongy realm of memories and doubts – my personal fears and dreams, my private echoes and second guesses. In my murky human swamp, its signals blinking like fireflies at dusk, other fireflies – Ovid, Lucretius, Pythagoras – flash their way toward me through the neural network, loom in the gloaming, float away again. They are kind presences, kindred. We're all poets, all living in troubled times, as if there were any other kind of times. In some way we understand each other.

*

A few weeks ago, my husband and I visited my cousins J and H, nonagenarian sisters who have lived in the same apartment building on Central Park West for I don't know how many decades. We hadn't seen them since before the pandemic. The husband of the elder sister had died, and both my cousins, and the surviving husband, were frailer

and thinner than I remembered, but they were all still lively and welcoming. Kin: these sisters' father was my uncle, my father's eldest brother. I am my father's youngest child, born late in his life. My cousins are twenty years or so older than I. Their father and my father didn't get along, but they don't hold it against me. Soon they will be gone – though there's no predicting the order in which people depart. Perhaps one or more of them will outlive me; or rather, maybe I will get to inhabit some other body first.

Our own bodies change constantly, so what
we were before
we aren't now; won't be tomorrow.

(214-215)

Outside their window, Central Park was violently green. A few people I could see wore masks, though the pandemic was over, more or less. Wasn't it? More likely, as Ovid-Pythagoras says of fire, new blazes break out in new places as subterranean shiftings take place. The virus travels (not underground, but the principle's the same) in order to re-emerge in some new spot.

For if earth's a live animal engaged in
respiration,
she'll need new outlets to accommodate each
exhalation,
plenty of openings through which she can
expel her flame.
These air holes, though, inevitably alter over
time;
whenever the earth shifts, she makes such
airways change their path;
some she seals up, while others open to let
out her breath.

(342-347)

Things pass – we need to be reminded of this, but also we are beginning to believe it, even to predict it. Even at the scale of a single day or hour, perceptions, moods, reactions, what we want to say and do not say – all this changes shape, and we come to expect and foresee it.

Magisterial is comforting. Whenever I'm tempted to believe that everything is going to hell, I remember the poets, my relatives, friendly fireflies in the twilight. And I remember the mysterious river Ovid-as-Pythagoras also mentions, which, as legend has it, 'is icy cold at noon and yet at dawn and dusk it's warm' ('source'). And yet.

It would be comforting, and comfortable, to sign off on this note of constant change. Plenty in my recent experience confirms it. A couple of miles down a steep hill from the porch where I like to sit and stare out at the rock garden is a little brook named the Water Andric by Scottish farmers who settled this land in the eighteenth century. For most of the past decade and more, the Andric has run low, sometimes no more than a clear brown thread moving between mossy rocks. In 2011, Hurricane Irene barrelled through, and the course of the Andric changed. In one place, brook and dirt road changed places; in another, the road collapsed into the fast-moving high water.

In the following months, a culvert was inserted under the collapse; the road was mended; a decade passed. Last week, early in July 2023, it rained again – not a hurricane but a longer downpour. The Andric, now white water, foamed

furiously down its course, the culvert was washed out, the road collapsed again. Thirty-five miles away, in the state capital, people canoed across the street. Cows found themselves in muddy living rooms. Refrigerators, trees, dead chickens and cats and dogs floated down swollen rivers – all scenes Lucretius or Ovid's Pythagoras would have relished describing. Early in the *Metamorphoses* is a vivid description of a flood.

'What a tragedy!' a friend recently wrote to me about the floods in Vermont. Well, no, more like a disaster. Or not even that: if you take the long Pythagorean view, just a change, albeit a change that takes the toll changes take. The trouble is that, unlike the changes Ovid as Pythagoras describes, this change is part of a larger pattern for which our species is responsible: climate change. And unless we – all of us – behave in a way we seem to be incapable of behaving, this rapidly increasing change is irreversible. The anxious crowds scurrying aimlessly to and fro, whom Pythagoras contemplates from his cloud, are frightened by their ignorance of what death will bring. Our problem is the opposite: we know too much. True, like Lucretius's observer of the storm-tossed ships, we may take pleasure in the thought that we aren't kayaking down what used to be Main Street. We can be glad that we weren't among the passengers on the submersible that imploded on its way down to inspect the *Titanic*. But it's harder and harder to overlook the fact that we are now all passengers on an increasingly precarious voyage, with no one to blame but ourselves and each other. And what about the hundreds of refugees

who have drowned trying to cross the Mediterranean on their way to better lives? We may not feel directly responsible for their plight; but as Amanda Gorman has recently written, global apathy has greeted the spectacle of the countless refugees who have perished on their way to what they hoped would be better lives. *Apatheia*: the Greek word, with its alpha privative, signifies a negative ideal. Absence of feeling was a Stoic goal, as *ataraxia*, the absence of passion, disorder, or confusion, was a goal of the Epicureans.

Thinking about the drownings, the smoke from wildfires, the floods in Vermont and elsewhere, and the deadly and unrelenting heat now blanketing much of the globe, I'm less comforted than I used to be, less than I'd like to be, by the philosophers considering chaos from above. Uncomfortably, I just looked again at what Lucretius says. It's 'sweet' (*soave*) to contemplate the storm-tossed ships, he writes, 'Not because you relish someone else's misery - / Rather, it's sweet to know from what misfortunes you are free.' But it's a pretty delicate distinction.

A E Stallings, whose 2007 translation of Lucretius I've been citing, wrote a powerful poem in 2018 about the plight of the refugees trying to cross the Aegean. It's hard to believe Stallings didn't have the Lucretian passage in mind when she wrote about a kind of gratification:

My love, I'm grateful tonight
 Our listing bed isn't a raft
 Precariously adrift
 As we dodge the coast guard light, [...]
 I'm glad that the dark
 Above us, is not deeply twinned

Beneath us, and moiled with wind,
 And we don't scan the sky for a mark,

Any mark, that demarcates a shore
 As the dinghy starts taking on water.
 I'm glad that our six-year-old daughter,
 Who can't swim, is a foot off the floor [...]

Stallings ends by considering the quality that gives her poem its title. Empathy, another Greek word, though not one we see in Lucretius or Ovid's Pythagoras, is now thought of as a desirable quality, associated with generosity, fellowship, the milk of human kindness. Isn't it the opposite of apathy, for example? Yet 'Empathy' ends on a note of piercing and pitiless clarity – not pitiless toward the plight of the refugee family, but pitiless in relation to the rest of us. I feel for these people, says the poet, to the extent of being grateful not to be them:

Empathy isn't generous,
 It's selfish. It's not being nice
 To say I would pay any price
 Not to be those who'd die to be us.

Stallings's poem toggles between the vividly imagined refugee family on their raft and her own securely bedded family. She's not on a cliff looking down, she's in the black water – and she is not. That poetry allows her to occupy both spaces is both the blessing and the curse of our human capacity for paying attention.

Where do we locate ourselves? The relentless barrage of news means that every day, every hour, we see much more than we're prepared to process. We may not be riding on a cloud above the fray. But we're in a cloud of information, daily exposed to articles about climate

grief, told that there will never be normal weather again, that the heat records broken today will be broken again tomorrow, that next year will be hotter than this year. We may not be refugees from a war-torn or poverty-stricken country, but many of us are on the way to becoming (a phrase one hears more and more often) climate refugees. We're looking down from this informational height at our own storm-tossed and overcrowded ship.

Many years ago, when I was a child and our family's television set was new, I was frightened by hearing something in the news about – was it the 1956 Hungarian Revolution? I can't remember now. What I do vividly remember is anxiously asking my mother about this latest scary development. My mother, who somehow managed to be at once well-informed, candid, and discreet, answered me: 'Don't worry, honey. Things have been this way for a long time.'

The comfort one takes in reading the words of Ovid's Pythagoras is akin to my mother's insight, which was both true and incomplete. Yes, things have always been frightening. And (as she didn't say) things always change. But in this moment of global upheaval, when words like 'apocalyptic' don't feel hyperbolic, comfort is a vanishingly scarce commodity. I'm lucky to be able to find some crumbs of it among the poets.

and *Love and Dread* (Measure Press, 2021); *Ghost Guest* is forthcoming this fall (Ragged Sky Press, 2023). She has translated Euripides's Iphigenia plays, and is among the many translators of *Tales of Dionysus: The Dionysiaca of Nonnus of Panopolis* (University of Michigan Press, 2022).

Rachel Hadas's recent books of poetry are *Pandemic Almanac* (Ragged Sky Press, 2022)