

HUMANITAS OVIDIANA IN METAMORPHOSES. SOME LITERARY AND PHILOSOPHICAL PERSPECTIVES

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Abstract: In our study, we will analyze how the concept of humanitas Romana was reflected in literature, in general, and in the creation of the Latin poet Ovid, especially. Although in Metamorphoses we do not meet a coherent philosophical system, however, the influence of Pythagoras and Heraclitus' philosophy strongly manifests, leading, together with the authentic humanist vein of the Latin poet, to what is known today as humanitas Ovidiana.

Keywords: humanitas (humanity), urbanitas, rusticitas, clementia, saevitia

Ovid represented, mainly through his poem *Metamorphoses*, a model for posterity. During the Middle Ages, one can speak of a true "aetas Ovidiana" and in this period appeared editions, adaptations and imitations of Ovid's mythological poem. In the Renaissance, Ovid's *Metamorphoses* are considered once again a major landmark.¹ In modern times, this masterpiece is approached from various perspectives. Ovid receives many labels, modern interpreters characterizing Ovid in *Metamorphoses* as a poet tributary either to 'Augustanism'² or to 'anti-Augustanism'.³ Ovidian epic is compared with Callimachus's narrative style⁴ and the labels are countless: the poet is frivolous,⁵ brilliant,⁶ playful and tragic in an adolescent manner going up to irreverence.⁷

Therefore, the complexity of Ovid's art continues to produce perplexity among both the boundless admirers and among the critics that are inclined to deny some of the merits of this surprising poet. Controversies were held around many aspects of the *Metamorphoses*, and one of these *hot spots* is represented by the artistic value of the humanity reflected in Ovid's poem. Many scholars appreciate the humanity transfigured in *Metamorphoses*. For example, Brooks Otis ends his work *Ovid as an Epic Poet* emphasizing the humanity of the Latin author:

*"When all is said and done, the poet's own humanity comes through."*⁸

And Herman Fränkel assigned to Ovid a sympathetic and almost Christian kindness, especially in the debut poetry. Fränkel considers that Ovid treats each character of his mythological poem with compassion and demonstrates an exemplary *humanitas*:

¹ Patricia J. Johnson, *Ovid before Exile. Art and Punishment in the Metamorphoses*, Wisconsin, The University of Wisconsin Press, 2008, p. 8.

² C.P. Segal, *Myth and Philosophy in the Metamorphoses: Ovid's Augustanism and the Augustan Conclusion of Book XV*, in *AJP* 90, 1969, pp. 257-292.

³ Leo C. Curran, *Transformation and Anti-Augustanism in Ovid's Metamorphoses*, in *Arethusa* 5, 1972, pp. 71-91.

⁴ Heather van Tress, *Poetic Memory Allusion in the Poetry of Callimachus and the Metamorphoses of Ovid*, Leiden, Brill Academic Publishers, 2004, pp.2-3 and further.

⁵ René Pichon, *Histoire de la littérature latine*, Paris, Hachette, 1896, p. 408 and further.

⁶ Andrew Feldherr, *Playing Gods. Ovid's Metamorphoses and the Politics of Fiction*, Princeton and Oxford, Princeton University Press, p. 160.

⁷ Patricia J. Johnson, *op. cit.*, supra nota 1, p. 9.

⁸ Brooks Otis, *Ovid as an Epic Poet*, Cambridge, 1970, p. 374.

“He was far from drawing caricatures, as Lucian did later on; good-natured, responsive, and kindly as he was, he took his characters for what they purported to be. His sensitive heart went out with brotherly charity to all creatures, first to the men or those who were like men, but then also to animals, and sometimes even to plants. He was both worldly-wise and playful.”⁹

Other specialists – for example G. Karl Galinsky – contests, in some respects, the humanity of the Latin poet. He says that “terms like ‘humanity’ are usually applied to authors in a blanket sort of fashion and without much specific discussion.”¹⁰ After Galinsky, Terence and Cicero had *humanitas* because they said so and he suggests the presence of a sort of ‘cruelty’ in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, rejecting the humanity of the Latin poet in many passages.¹¹ Galinsky ignores, however, what it meant the concept of *humanitas* in antiquity and, of course, at Ovid, Terentius or Cicero. He understands through *humanitas* mainly what it is understood today, after a superficial analysis, through ‘humanity’. The term comes from the Latin *humanitas* and has spread easily into the modern languages of Europe, being perceived nowadays with the sense of ‘totality of people’ or, as it is in the case of Galinsky, with the meaning of ‘goodness, kindness, humanitarianism’. Franz Beckmann emphasizes the spread of the term in modern languages:

”Das lateinische Wort *humanitas* ist unserem eigenen und überhaupt dem europäischen Sprachgebrauch nicht fremd. Wir Deutschen kennen und verwenden die Ausdrücke ‘human’ und ‘Humanität’, und in gleichem oder doch verwandtem Sinne sagt man im Englischen ‘human’ und ‘humanity’, im Französischen ‘humain’ und ‘humanité’, im Italienischen ‘umano’ und ‘umanità’, im Spanischen ‘umano’ und ‘humanidad’.”¹²

To this list we could add the terms of ‘uman’ and ‘umanitate’, from Romanian. Beckmann also highlights the confusions generated by this term. However, *humanitas*, in antiquity, did not mean only the ‘totality of people, humanitarianism, kindness’, which does not seem to find Galinsky in Ovid’s poem.

In ancient Rome, the concept of *humanitas* represented the foundation of culture and knowledge. Ancient people dissociated in the semantic area of the concept of *humanitas* a psycho-moral hemisphere consolidated on humanity, goodness, compassion, mercy, and a cultural-philosophical hemisphere, based on instruction, education and culture. From the need to define their relations with the foreigners, the Romans tried to combine the principles of the Greek *philanthropia* with the traditional Roman values and thus appeared the psycho-moral component of the concept. But the notion of *humanitas*, who was born in the cultural context of the Scipios and was subsequently developed by Cicero or Seneca, reinvigorates and transforms the Hellenistic concept of *paideia*, of the education of human spirit by cultivating philosophy and science, thus appearing the cultural-philosophical component of the notion.

⁹ Hermann Fränkel, *Ovid : A Poet between Two Worlds*, Berkeley and Los Angeles, University Of California Press, 1945, p. 90.

¹⁰ G. Karl Galinsky, *Ovid’s Metamorphoses, An Introduction to the Basic Aspects*, Berkeley and Los Angeles, University of California Press, 1975, p. 110 and further.

¹¹ *Ibidem*.

¹² Franz Beckmann, *Humanitas. Ursprung und Idee*, Münster Westf., Aschendorffsche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1952, p. 5 and further.

The product resulting from the combination of the two Greek notions, *humanitas*, was reflected in literature by Terentius, Vergil, Ovid or by other Latin writers, was theorized by the treaties of Cicero and Seneca and was put into practice through laws and legal processes.¹³

Ovid's belonging to the concept of *humanitas* is often judged by the frequency of words *homo/ humanus/ humanitas*¹⁴ in his literary work. But the application of such a method does not throw light on the attachment of the Latin poet to the notion of *humanitas Romana*, because, in essence, the disseminating of the concept in Ovid's work emerged also from the author's attitude, from the conveyed ideas or from the content. *Humanitas Romana* related to several values that were part of the conduct code of a Roman citizen and are virtually impossible to translate into Greek because, for example, they are different from the Greek notions of *eusébeia* or *ethos* and because we have to take into account the specific *interpretatio Romana: pietas*, the manners/ *mores* and also *dignitas, gravitas, integritas, clementia, aequitas, lenitas, mansuetudo, moderatio, indulgentia, iustitia, fides*, and so on.¹⁵ The idea of *humanitas* subsumes all these values that can be found, in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, in character's behavior and that lead finally to what would later represent the humanism.

The term of *humanitas*, together with the adjective *humanus*, has a wide semantic area. One of the meanings refers to the human quality of behaving in a civilized manner and of being cultivated inculcated in people through education and training. In this regard, we find near the concept of *humanitas* the notion of *urbanitas*.¹⁶ From this point of view, for Ovid, the opposition *urbanitas - rusticitas* illustrates the predilection of the poet for the cultural-philosophical component of *humanitas*, envisaging instruction, education and an exquisite, civilized conduct of a human being. For example, in the myth of the metamorphosis of Daphne in laurel – structured into five parts: 1. the dispute between Apollo and Cupid (M. I, 452-473); 2. the effect of Cupid's arrows (M. I, 474-502); 3. the pursuit of Daphne (M. I, 502-542); 4. the desire for metamorphosis and the way in which the transformation is achieved (M. I, 543-556); 5. the compromise between Apollo and Daphne (M. I, 557-567) – Apollo is afraid of not being confused with a hirsute peasant. As a good student of the arts, Apollo insists on *urbanitas*, when such a quality can only disadvantage him because Daphne lives far from civilization (M. I, 474). The god, ardent of love, does not understand, at least at that time, the antagonism between his world and that of the nymph, somehow just as a civilized Roman citizen was surprised by the differences, evident now, between himself and the countryman, which was a representative of the notion of *rusticitas*; the townsman no longer understood the severe mores, the decrepit clothing and the austerity from the rural areas. By means of Apollo are expressed, to a certain extent, also Ovid's opinions relating to the human quality of being civilized and, especially, we encounter an example of a young Roman who

¹³ For the practical side of the notion see: Richard A. Bauman, *Human Rights in Ancient Rome*, Routledge, London, 2000, p. 3 and further.

¹⁴ For the recurrence of these words in Ovid's poetry, see: Rudolf Rieks, *Homo, Humanus, Humanitas. Zur Humanität in der lateinischen Literatur des ersten nachchristlichen Jahrhunderts*, München, Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 1967, pp. 28-39.

¹⁵ W. Schadewaldt, *Humanitas Romana*, in *Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt* 1, 4, 1973, pp. 43-62.

¹⁶ Gian Biagio Conte, *Latin Literature. A History*, translated in English by Joseph B. Solodow, Baltimore and London, The John Hopkins University Press, 1994, p. 805.

frequents the lounges of the most refined city of the time, Rome, even if all these are reflected in an apparent Greek coating, as in the comedies of Plautus.

“*Cui placeas, inquire tamen; non incola montis,/non ego sum pastor: non hic armenta gregesque/horridus observo. Nescis, temeraria, nescis,/quem fugias: ideoque fugis. Mihi Delphica tellus,/et Claros, et Tenedos, Pataraeaeque regia servit./Iuppiter est genitor. Per me, quod eritque fuitque/estque, patet: per me concordant carmina nervis.*” (M. I, 512-518)

“*Then walk with me and ask me who I am.
Surely my home is not in mountain passes,
Nor am I shepherd or wild-haired stable boy.
O ignorant, unknowing, thoughtless child
Who runs in darkness-and from whom? from me?
Jove is my father and I am lord of Delphi;
My temples stand at Claros, Patara,
And beyond the cities, glimmering Tenebros,
Enchanted Island of the eastern seas.
Where caves and temples speak you hear my voices,
The past, the present, and the yet to come;
My lyre sounds the soul of harmony.*”¹⁷

Although in the case of the nymph Daphne, love did not win, a rarely encountered situation, in other instances, throughout Ovid’s mythological poem, the opposition *urbanitas-rusticitas* is mitigated by using a powerful means: love. Love reigns over *urbanitas* which characterizes Apollo, and over *rusticitas*, which characterizes, for example, the cyclop Polyphem (M. XIII.)

Another connotation of the concept of *humanitas Romana*, highlighted by Ovid, is related to the idea of doing the right thing. *Humanitas* acts as a stimulus to avoid a savage and brutal behavior towards other members of the human race, and here again the presence of the distinction *clementia-saevitia* highlights the dissemination of *humanitas* in Ovid’s mythological poem. The divine and human characters in *Metamorphoses* oscillate between acts of mercy and acts of barbarism, causing the reader’s approval when they respect the values generated by the concept of *humanitas* or his disapproval when human rights are flagrantly violated.

The balance, the moderation in all are desiderates of the concept of *humanitas*. The metamorphosis itself does nothing else but restore a lost balance. The metamorphosis is an act of awareness but and also of life evolution, it is the solution of a drama, because, on the one hand, the character realizes its own change and, on the other hand, the drama suddenly ceases to be human, sinking in a universe of nature. Intermediate life between conscious and unconscious, the metamorphosis is an excessive solving, a restoration of balance, a mitigation of the excesses.

Ovidiu tries to give life to the concepts that, in philosophy, appeared perhaps to the Romans too abstracted and theorized. The literature being a metaphor, being ineffable, being experienced as life itself, irradiating a powerful attraction among all, becomes for Ovid the

¹⁷ Ovid, *The Metamorphoses*, translated and with an introduction by Horace Gregory, New York, The Viking Press, 1958, p. 19.

sensitive embodiment of the idea of *humanitas*. The way in which the notion of *humanitas* is reflected in Ovid's work is perhaps the best test of the dissemination of the concept in the Roman mental of the age.