

One Face of Nature: Chaos in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and *Fasti*

The openings of Ovid's roughly contemporary *Metamorphoses* and the *Fasti* parallel each other in presenting images of Chaos, although in contrasting ways that set the two passages in a productive dialogue. Immediately after the four-verse prologue to the *Metamorphoses*, the poem begins its cosmogony—and its universal history—with Chaos, calling that undifferentiated state “one face of nature” (1.6 *unus erat toto naturae vultus in orbe*). This catachresis, presenting and immediately withdrawing a face that might have personified and explained cosmic (and, ultimately, national) origins, raises questions about authority and subjectivity that will haunt the poem through to its first-person epilogue. Meanwhile, in the corresponding part of *Fasti* (right after the prologue), Ovid demands that the divine authority of his interlocutor, Janus, derive from Greek identity (1.89-90 *quem tamen esse deum te dicam ...?/ nam tibi par nullum Graecia numen habet*)—and the god replies that the Greek called him Chaos (103 *me Chaos antiqui ... vocabant*).

The striking and unparalleled metaphor in *vultus* strangely personifies the world before the world. In the present context the word clearly stands in for “element, basic substance”: the point is that before creation there was a single undifferentiated substance, afterwards resolved into the four elements. *Vultus* is most commonly used when a facial expression is at issue: when you see how someone is responding to you, so you can respond to them. In what could be called the first metamorphosis in the narrative, such a face appears (at least on the level of the poem's rhetoric) and then evaporates, perhaps priming us to look for the responsive minds similar to our own behind the phenomena of nature in the poem's long series of changes of persons into trees, rock formations, and so

on, until the last metamorphosis in the poem—that of “the better part” of Ovid into his text—entices us into imagining that the voice we have been listening to is that of a living person (15.873-9).

The passage at least teases with the possibility of dialogue with some cosmic authority, an idea fundamental to the *Fasti*. In *Metamorphoses* 1.6 Chaos is what “they have called” (*quem dixere Chaos*) that single face of nature; the implication is that it may have other—overlapping or contradictory—explanations and identities. The Janus episode in the *Fasti*—the earliest “reception” of the cosmogony of the *Metamorphoses*, and potentially a reciprocal commentary on it—exploits this opening, suggesting that the cosmology of the *Metamorphoses* is incomplete, is hiding something from us—as if the *Fasti*, in expanding the prosopopoeia in *Metamorphoses* 1.6 into a full speaking, responsive and responding, divinely authoritative person, at the same time disclosed that Chaos had at least one more face, one facing away from the viewer or reader.

Chaos cannot have both one and two faces. The Janus of the *Fasti* calls his two-facedness a present sign of his former chaotic nature (113 *confusae quondam nota parva figurae*)—which in the *Metamorphoses* conversely is the point of “one face.” Chaos is lack of differentiation—lack of the very prerequisite of the *Metamorphoses*’ very subjects: metamorphosis, change, and time. In the *Fasti* lurks a message that Chaos does not, in fact, lie outside of time and change: Janus, although in a sense representing eternal time as a metonymy of past and future (114), is by no means outside of temporality or space, for he also is imperial, uniting the world under Rome in imperial terminology (139-40 *sic ego perspicio ... Eoas partes Hesperiasque simul*—in parallel to 85-6 *Iuppiter arce sua totum cum spectat in orbem / nil nisi Romanum quod tueatur habet*). His

metamorphosis into the custodian of the four-element world (116-20), in turn, cannot be supplemented straightforwardly from Ovid's poem on metamorphosis: the two poems collaborate on a cosmogony narrative without definitively completing each other's version.

There is little or no specific bibliography on the relationship between these passages, outside the commentaries, which will be cited (along with relevant passages) on the handout.