

THE LAUREL CROWN

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1. APOLLO AS —

A god is simultaneous. There is no essence in the god that holds itself apart from his other qualities, a manifold condition mortal language cannot record, save by the awkwardness of the hyphen (prophet-poet-hunter) set in perpetual loop. But even that naming contains an order the god's own nature denies as accurate. Why can Apollo brag to Cupid about his hunting prowess?

I can strike wild beasts — I never miss.
I can fell enemies; just recently
I even hit — my shafts were infinite —
that swollen serpent, Python, sprawled across
whole acres with his pestilential paunch.

His arrow never misses because the arrows themselves are prophetic: they've struck dead their prey before they've ever been launched. They are a form of the god's own desire — a desire different than human desire. Human desire, as Socrates points out, arises in us from a sense of what we lack. We want only what we do not possess. But what does a god lack?

A god lacks only lack. The god's story, brought down into song, put to words the god himself need not use to express his tale, inflicts a peculiar damage on the god. It makes the god relatable, desirable, and capable of desire. The poem itself provides by its lines a ladder the god unwittingly must climb down, and then the godly world and the human world imperfectly coincide.

For a god, for Apollo, desire accomplishes itself. It arises not from lack, but in the reconfirmation of his completeness. A god's desire proves him a god to himself, for what he wants is already at hand. The arrows are infinite because none ever need be fired. Like the god's own simultaneous nature, the arrows are in their quiver, the arrows are strung, the arrows sling through the air, and the arrows pierce into their prey all at once. And like their

owner, they partake of his nature. The arrow in the quiver speaks prophecy. The arrow on the sprung string sings. The arrow in the hind is a hunter.

2. DAPHNE'S BEAUTY

Beauty is strangely singular: singular because it heightens the qualities of the type to which it belongs and from which it distinguishes itself; strange because within beauty is some unnamable quiddity, so that beauty is singular but no single thing, a quality everywhere but nowhere specific, which acts upon those who recognize it as a magnet acts on an iron filing. We are drawn to what we see but cannot explain. Beauty seems to speak, to call, to beckon us; it creates in us desire for which it also seems the source. When we walk toward beauty, when we pursue it, we do so because beauty seems to contain something of us within it, but a something transformed. We expect from beauty ourselves, but ourselves metamorphosed — an apotheosis of the self into god or into child, but a self only accomplished in the strangeness of that beautiful one who is not us. We must enter beauty; but beauty wants to stay inviolate.

Daphne's father, the river-god Peneus, demands of her a husband so that he may have grandsons. He sees in his daughter the work at which her beauty hints — that work of drawing forth whose consequence is generation. But Daphne wants none of it:

But his daughter scorns,
as things quite criminal, the marriage torch
and matrimony; with a modest blush
on her fair face, she twines her arms around
her father's neck: "Allow me to enjoy
perpetual virginity," she pleads;
"o dear, dear father, surely you'll concede
to me the gift Diana has received
from her dear father."

Beauty does its own knowing within the beautiful, almost a separate life within Daphne's life — and so she blushes in

recognition of the erotic while at the same time she pleads to be saved from it. Beauty expands the blood and brings it to her cheek, though the prospect of marriage turns Daphne inwardly pallid. But beauty is its own wish — a wish whose power supersedes the lesser desires of the one who is beautiful. Beauty makes use of her, regardless of Daphne's will or intent. Beauty is in the face and in the body, it informs the form. It acts as an intelligence, but has no mind; it acts as a will, but has no power. Beauty conducts its work, a natural force within the one whose fate is to be beautiful, anonymous but singular, marking identity but having none itself. Beauty cannot be tamed by she who is beautiful. It is elemental. It hides paradoxically in its own showing forth. Beauty hides in vision. It is its own life, embodied in another that is also itself — and with that life, it contradicts Daphne's "deepest wish." Beauty contradicts her with herself.

3. PHOEBUS IS LOVETRUCK

Beauty un-gods the god. Cupid's arrow strikes the sun god to the marrow. Apollo sees Daphne, and wants to wed her, he hopes and he longs, "but though he is the god of oracles, / he reads the future wrongly." The allegory of Cupid's arrow recognizes that beauty — and the erotic impulse beauty embodies — is thrilling. The etymology of thrilling is "to pierce, to penetrate." Beauty conducts damage on whoever gazes upon it, even if that someone is a god. To be struck by beauty is to be wounded. That wound enters into the center of the bone (not the heart); it finds in the most stone-like aspect of the human body that woundable center whose function is to create the blood the heart pumps through it. Beauty is a wound that opens paradox: it finds the blood inside the bone, and it is there, precisely there, that it harms us. It opens the lacuna in the bone, opens a space of lack in what before seemed solid, whole. It is as true for the self as it is for the bone.

But a god is no ordinary self. A god is complete, intermixed, where each aspect of self is fully interpenetrated by every other aspect. This completeness removes the gods from the human compulsion to "know thyself." The Delphic Oracle can command such in part because he himself is exempt from the process. To

“know thyself” implies a partiality in the one doing the seeking — implies a blindness, a deafness, at the most intimate level of our relation to ourselves. Who we are we do not know. A god is different — is before such difficulties of self, self-knowledge, and lack. Friedrich Hölderlin senses this odd fact in “Hyperion’s Fate Song”:

Fateless, like a nursing infant asleep,
The gods draw breath;
Chastely preserved
In modest buds,
Their minds are always
In flower,
And their soulful eyes
Gaze calmly and eternally
In silent clarity.

Hölderlin’s vision of how a god sustains and exists in the world is a curious impossibility: the body is a bud that contains the mind’s full-blooming. A god exists in imminence and eminence at once. A god nurses on the air; breathing is his nourishment. As a plant thrives by sunlight, so a god thrives within the mere fact of his being — “like a nursing infant asleep” he takes in the stuff of his life without any conscious intent to do so.

Apollo is the sun god, the god of light — and like light, a god is an outward force. This dominant aspect isn’t separate from his other traits. It is by virtue of light that vision occurs, even the vision of the future. Poetry is a form of sight cast into song. To hunt relies upon revelation. When Apollo is lovestruck he is damaged in ways he cannot perceive, for the bliss of the gods is their ignorance. He feels the pangs of desire but cannot account for the harm desire causes in him. Daphne’s beauty acts upon him as a prism acts upon white light — it separates it into its component parts while still maintaining the previous unity. The god struck by desire, by beauty, by love, is a one who has become a many. The god in love grows complex as he grows empty, for emptiness is desire’s work. We want what we do not have.

4. PURSUIT

Apollo burns — not because he's the sun. Seeing Daphne's hair hang unadorned against her neck inflames him.

He sees her lips and never tires of them;
her fingers, hands, and wrists are unsurpassed;
her arms — more than half-bare — cannot be matched;
whatever he can't see he can imagine;
he conjures it as even more inviting.

This vision mimics prophetic sight, seeing that which to normal eyes is forbidden, but event is not what is revealed, nor is fate. Apollo places his own desire in his eyes, an act of will more than revelation, of imagination more than truth. When he approaches her, things do not go as the god had hoped:

But swifter than the lightest breeze, she flees
and does not halt — not even when he pleads:
“O, daughter of Peneus, stay! Dear Daphne,
I don't pursue you as an enemy!
Wait, nymph! You flee as would the lamb before
the wolf, the deer before the lion, or
the trembling dove before the eagle, but it is love
for which I seek you now!

Unwittingly, unwillingly, Apollo finds himself cast in the role of the hunter. The woman he loves flees as does prey before a predator. Her lamblike, deerlike, dove-like flight forces Apollo into the role of wolf, lion, eagle. He pursues in desire, and she flees in fright. The erotic pursuit mimics the hunter's chase in maddening ways: the romantic pursuit is a form of nearing that is nearly indistinguishable from the hunter's careful approach. Both end in a hoped-for possession, though of a different nature: the erotic ends in a possession that is also a being-possessed. The difference is that the hunter stays silent, wants the deer to know nothing of his approach; he wants his arrows to appear from out of the stunned silence of the air. The lover pursues with words, with warnings, to set the beloved at ease, to calm, to tame. Words are the lover's arrows, which wound the heart through entering

the ear. The wound is a form of enchantment.

Apollo is a god of poetry, and the words he sends after Daphne as he chases her are god-driven words. That poetic power of language is a force that nature itself is attuned to, so that the stones and plants and beasts all respond to the lyric chord. For Daphne to flee from words meant to slow her, to turn her around, to alter her heart in such a way that it opens to the god she spurns, is for the god's poetic power to fail. Poetry is introduced to the unguessed-at fact of its own failure. Apollo is cast back upon his godly attributes as a final resource rather than a manifold manifestation of his nature; his gifts become a means to an end, an almost human use of power, rather than the apotheosis of those powers in the visage of the god. His godly manifestation — poetry, hunter's pursuit, light, prophecy — changes from being a pouring forth of his nature, a god's will-less excretion of his own godliness, to becoming a fund, a resource, a strength to turn to in order to achieve a desired end. The god acts no longer like a god, needing to know his gifts in order to use them.

As he chases Daphne he worries that she'll "stumble, fall, be scratched by brambles / and harm [her] faultless legs." Worse, he knows that "I'm to blame." She runs because he pursues, and all his efforts to slow her, to calm her, to seduce her, succeed only in making her flight more urgent, more frantic.

But now the young god can't waste time: he's lost his patience; his beguiling words are done; and so — with love as spur — he races on; he closes in. Just as a Gallic hound surveys the open field and sights a hare, and both the hunter and the hunted race more swiftly — one to catch, one to escape (he seems about to leap on his prey's back; he's almost sure he's won; his muzzle now is at her heels; the other, still in doubt — not sure if she is caught — slips from his mouth; at the last instant, she escapes his jaws): such were the god and girl; while he is swift because of hope, what urges her is fear.

But love has given wings to the pursuer;
he's faster — and his pace will not relent.

When Apollo's poetry fails he abandons words as a means of accomplishing his desire. But Apollo's self is not his desire, nor does he contain it. His desire runs out ahead of him, a hound hunting the hare, baying out at the site of the prey, urging the god to run faster, to keep up the pace. Desire alone outstrips the speed of the god; desire alone closes the gap between love and fear of love. Desire is more godly than the god.

5. METAMORPHOSIS

Knowing that she cannot outspeed the god who chases her, Daphne prays to her river-god father: "Help me, dear father; if the river-gods / have any power, then transform, dissolve / my gracious shape, the form that pleased too well." The instant her prayer ends it comes true: "a heavy numbness grips her limbs; thin bark / begins to gird her tender frame, her hair / is changed to leaves, her arms to boughs . . ." Where before she ran, now she is rooted.

Beauty acted within Daphne as a kind of division, working in her against her own will. Her wish is a formal wish. The answer to her plea enacts a change in her too-fair form, and the transformation that occurs unifies the chasm between her self and her beauty. Daphne's pain had been rooted in her consciousness of the difference between her inward self and her outward appearance. Form felt at odds with content. The answer to her prayer ends the agony between subjectivity and objectivity, between content and form. Beauty is a crisis, in part, because it undoes the ability to discern content from container — it is always simultaneously within the bearer of the beauty and larger than the bearer, in the same way that the beauty of a poem springs out from the confines of the poem's formal limits.

Beauty betrays what houses it . . . or it does so as long as no metamorphosis occurs. The end of such beauty is a miraculous violence whose work ends the crisis that birthed it. Beauty and

the beautiful become one, and in doing so change shape at the deepest level, deeper than the atomic. The change occurs at the metaphoric level. A metaphor is a form of tension created by distance, in this case, the distance between who Daphne is and what Daphne is. Apollo's desire for her is also a desire spurred and spurned by this metaphoric base of Daphne's allure. She is more beautiful for hating her beauty. But as bark begins to replace her skin, as her hair changes to leaves, as her fast-running feet become roots, as feeling is replaced by numbness (both of feeling and of thought), the division within Daphne collapses into unity. The metaphoric chasm implodes — it is as if two sides of a canyon suddenly closed, destroying the river that made it. In that implosion metaphor ceases to be metaphor and becomes instead a far stranger quality, one whose unity is not undermined by its own radiating complexity. Daphne becomes symbolic, that figure at once wholly particular and fully universal, subject and object at once. Her power is in what cannot be told apart. To be accomplished symbolically she must be destroyed metaphorically. That violence isn't one that removes one from existence but changes what that existence is. Form and content cease to be a crisis, and instead become an embrace.

6. THE LOVE FOR THE LAUREL TREE

Absurd to call a god young, but Apollo is “young” in Ovid's tale. A god is immortal, and so his youth isn't related to time. His youth is some other quality in him, a hint at inexperience, a hint that, in his Cupid-born love for Daphne, Apollo is learning something, about himself or about the world in which he omnipotent walks. What is a lesson for a god is also our lesson, those of us who share in his attributes — that is, those of us who would write poems that also are a form of vision and pursuit.

Apollo should cease to love Daphne when she changes into the laurel tree, his desire should lessen, should cease, having met the impossibility of its fulfillment.

And yet
Apollo loves her still; he leans against

the trunk; he feels the heart that beats beneath
the new-made bark; within his arms he clasps
the branches as if they were human limbs;
and his lips kiss the wood, but still it shrinks
from his embrace, at which he cries: "But since
you cannot be my wife, you'll be my tree.
O laurel, I shall always wear your leaves
to wreath my hair, my lyre, and my quiver . . ."

Apollo's love is furthered by its impossibility. His desire continues unaltered by the risk of consummation. Instead, his desire finds in its failure a renewed momentum. In doing so, his desire ceases to act merely on his behalf, ceases to be the hunting-dog yelping out to help the hunter's pursuit. His desire becomes instead a garlanded thing, a force who finds its only proof in the continued impossibility of wanting what it wants, wanting past the world's limit of what can be had. Desire wears a laurel crown, as does the god, as does the poet who practices the young god's art. Desire here meets its object, but the object has been transformed — has changed, in fact, because of desire's threatening pursuit. That metamorphosis does not end desire but commemorates it and speeds it on. What changes the young god into the god is his initiation into the work of wanting.

That work undoes him. To desire removes him from his own power, it makes him suffer in ways oddly parallel to she whom he pursues. He finds himself without resource, in a kind of sympathy even though in pursuit, for his desire outruns him, chases her who he loves, introduces the god to the impossible fact of his own incompleteness.

Poetry is birthed from such awful realization . . . a fact that denies the fact of one's own being, that says the self, even the godly self, is not sufficient unto itself. Poetry is a form of desire devoted to the impossibility of its own fulfillment. Its failure is crowned by the god's symbol, the laurel crown. The poet is partial; the poet is never complete. He wears a crown on his head made from the leaves of the laurel tree. The symbol doesn't complete him, but does the opposite. It incompletes the poet further, so that the poet's poem speeds out ahead, in pursuit of what he loves,

nearing it closely enough that what he loves must change, must transform, and take its truer shape, removed from violence, but marking that violence, where the poem barks out its location, and utters its song, and the poet approaches, lustful but hesitant, as desire changes into devotion, and devotion speeds ahead, involved in its own holy pursuit.



NOTE: Translations of Ovid are Allen Mandelbaum's (Mariner Books, 1995). The Hölderlin quote is from *Selected Poems of Friedrich Hölderlin*, Paul Hoover and Maxine Chernoff, trans. (Omnidawn Press).