

SOME ASPECTS OF THE STRUCTURE OF THE PHAETHON EPISODE IN OVID'S *METAMORPHOSES*

Although scholars have expended increasing efforts over the last twenty years or so in either detecting or establishing large structural and thematic units within Ovid's *perpetuum carmen*,¹ little attention, as far as I am aware, has been directed towards the evident care taken by Ovid in his arrangement of material within individual episodes, and the resultant over-all structure of those episodes.² The aim of the present paper is to focus attention upon a single episode to which Ovid seems to have paid particular attention in these respects. I refer to the long story of Phaethon, which occupies the last part of book 1, and most of the first half of book 2, of the *Metamorphoses*, and intend to explore two different lines of approach in examining the structure of this episode.

Before discussing the structure and the arrangement of the constituent part of an episode one should always define one's limits, i.e. state the points in the text at which the story begins and ends, and between which it is introduced, developed, and concluded by the poet. The starting-point of the narrative under discussion is to be regarded as 1.747, where, after the story of Io is concluded, her son Epaphus and his alleged companion Phaethon are introduced;³ the question of the narrative's end-point, however, does not admit of a single, simple answer, and is a topic to which I shall be returning later in this paper.

The structure of the Phaethon episode has hitherto been oversimplified and regarded as essentially bipartite. Rohde⁴ divided the main body of the story into two sections of 131 and 179 lines respectively: 'tum *maxima* pars sequitur, quam bipartitam esse facile intelleges: 19–149 Sol et Phaethon, 150–328 Phaethontis iter et mors.' Alternatively Bömer⁵ divides 'die *eigentliche* Phaethon-Geschichte' into 'zwei fast gleichgrossen Teile—II 1–149 (Sol und Phaethon) und II 150–303 (Fahrt und Weltbrand)',⁶ that is two sections of 149 and 154 lines in length.

¹ Notably by L. P. Wilkinson, *Ovid Recalled* (Cambridge, 1955), pp.147–8; B. Otis, *Ovid as an Epic Poet*² (Cambridge, 1970), pp.83–5, 93, 129, 168, 278; cf. W. Ludwig, *Struktur und Einheit der Metamorphosen Ovids* (Berlin, 1965). Objections to the kinds of analyses suggested by Wilkinson and Otis in particular are made by R. Coleman, 'Structure and Intention in the *Metamorphoses*', *CQ* N.S. 21 (1971), 461–77, esp. 464 n.3 (the above works of Wilkinson, Otis, and Coleman are hereafter cited by author's name *simpliciter*). Cf. G. K. Galinsky, *Ovid's Metamorphoses, An Introduction to the Basic Aspects* (Oxford, 1975), pp.79 f. Suffice it here to say that it is by no means agreed that 'there are four unmistakable divisions or sections of the work', as Otis (p.83) asserts (my italics).

² But see esp. the *Pars Prior* of H. Peters, *Symbola ad Ovidii Artem Epicam Cognoscendam* (Diss. Göttingen, 1908).

³ This tenuous link with the preceding

Io episode, no doubt contrived by Ovid, is perhaps not the only connection between the Phaethon episode and those stories related earlier in book 1. See Coleman, p. 466, '... the narrative joins are less important structurally than the thematic relationships between individual tales ... a strong thematic link ... is provided by the prominence of Apollo'. For the principle cf. Otis, p.xii, but against the equation of Apollo with the Sun-god tacitly made by Coleman see the convincing arguments, with full documentation, of J. E. Fontenrose, *AJPh* 61 (1940), 429–44, esp. 433, 436, 440.

⁴ A. Rohde, *De Ovidi arte epica capita duo* (Diss. Berlin, 1929), p.10.

⁵ P. Ovidius Naso, *Metamorphosen: Kommentar* von F. Bömer. Buch I–III (Heidelberg, 1969), p.222.

⁶ My italics in both citations. I am being unfair to Bömer in quoting an isolated sentence out of context, especially since he

I contend that both these bipartite theories, because they concentrate on only the main section of the narrative and do not embrace the story of Phaethon in its entirety, present a somewhat superficial view of an episode whose structure is, as I shall show, rather more intricate.

In concentrating on the main action of the story both Rohde and Bömer, for the purposes of their admittedly brief structural analyses, ignore the concluding lines of book 1. Ovid could quite easily have terminated the first book with the apotheosis of Io,¹ but in fact commenced the new story of Phaethon in order both to incite his readers to start the following book and to impart a certain *perpetuitas* to his poem.² These lines are just as much a part of the story as the events which are related in book 2, and in an investigation of the over-all structure of the Phaethon episode they should not be ignored. Similarly, in Rohde's summary of the episode's structure the first eighteen lines of book 2—the *ekphrasis* on the Sun's palace and the scenes depicted on its walls—are omitted and dismissed as 'nihil . . . nisi lumen quoddam orationis epicae'.³ In fact they are nothing of the sort, and I shall return to this point below.

In the final 33 lines (747–79) of book 1 we are presented with the background of and motivation for what is to happen in the second book. This section consists of the introduction of Epaphus and Phaethon, their boyish quarrel, arising from the former's taunt at the latter's parentage, and the resulting interview between Phaethon and his mother Clymene, who confirms that he is born of the Sun-god, and suggests that if he is still unconvinced he may wish to consult the Sun-god personally and obtain further confirmation of his parentage at first hand (775: 'si modo fert animus, gradere, et scitabere ab ipso'). The book ends with Phaethon leaving his mother and travelling to the abode of the Sun. This serves the function of preparing the reader for an interview between Phaethon and the Sun-god. However, the interview does not materialize at the very beginning of book 2, the narrative being interrupted by the description of the Sun's palace,⁴ and the reader is left in a state of temporary suspense. We may already detect here associations with or forebodings of what is to befall Phaethon in book 2: the dominant *emicat* (776—a first-foot diaeresis) is of course not infrequently used of flames or sparks of fire,⁵ destined to accompany Phaethon's ride in profusion, and it is reinforced in 777 by the clever use of *concupio* ('concupit aethera mente'), significantly used also of something catching fire, and the usual word for contracting an illness or disease.⁶

gives (p.223) a tabulated synopsis of the entire story, plus appendages, from 1.747 to 2.400. However, such a view of the episode's structure is, I believe, misleading.

¹ Cf. G. Lafaye, *Les Métamorphoses d'Ovide et leurs modèles grecs* (Paris, 1904), p.82 n.3; J. M. Frécaut, *RÉL* 46 (1968), 253 n.3.

² The device of bridging books by the continuation of a story is of course employed elsewhere. See Lafaye, *ibid*; Coleman, p.471.

³ Rohde, *op. cit.*, pp.11 f.

⁴ On this feature cf. C. P. Segal, *Landscape in Ovid's Metamorphoses. A Study in the Transformations of a Literary Symbol*,

Hermes Einzelschriften 23 (Wiesbaden, 1969), p.7.

⁵ See *TLL* s.v. I.3.a.a ('generatim de fulmine, igni, aliis rebus nitidis'). The figure is continued and strengthened by the heavily ironical 'flagratque cupidine currus' (2.104). There is a similar play on *emicat* at Virg. *Aen.* 6.5, on which see the note of Serv. Dan. ad loc. and K. Quinn, *Virgil's Aeneid, A Critical Description* (London, 1968), p.161.

⁶ e.g. Virg. *Aen.* 4.474, 502; of something catching fire see e.g. Caes. *B.C.* 2.14.2, and, figuratively, Ov. *Met.* 7.17, 9.520; Cat. 64.92. See further *OLD* s.v. lb, 8a, and *TLL*.

The narrative of book 2 is divisible into three main sections, the first of which ends, as Bömer and Rohde indicate, at line 149, with the Sun's final words to Phaethon before the latter climbs onto the doom-fraught chariot. As previously mentioned, the description of the Sun's palace which opens book 2 and with it this first section is dismissed by Rohde as mere epic embellishment.¹ But if we read (as we are intended to do) the opening lines of book 2 immediately after the concluding lines of book 1, during which our attention is clearly focused on Phaethon, we are surely meant to observe, through Phaethon's amazed eyes, not only the Sun's palace but also the reliefs which depict the universe Phaethon is soon to set ablaze.² The theory of a link between the scenes portrayed on the Sun's palace and the disaster which is to follow is confirmed by the verbal repetition of 'Doridaque et natas' (2.11) at 269: 'Doridaque et natas tepidis latuisse sub antris'. Doris and her daughters, depicted in peaceful security on the walls of the palace, will be compelled to take shelter from the scorching heat of the chariot as it careers, out of control, beyond its usual path.³ The serenity of the scenes on the palace doors obviously serves the purpose of heightening the contrast with the chaos which ensues. Moreover this description of the Sun-god's lavishly adorned palace is balanced by that of his equally lavish but potentially deadly chariot (107–10).⁴ Clearly then the first 18 lines of book 2 serve a definite function at this point in the narrative, and should not be disregarded as irrelevant adornment.⁵

Otis has observed⁶ that Ovid has laid much stress on the dissuasive nature of the Sun's speech to Phaethon (49–102), but the position of this speech in the structure of the narrative has not, I believe, been hitherto noted. In the division of 149 lines which I (agreeing with Bömer on this point) have postulated, this 54-line speech is exactly central, being flanked by 1–48 (48 lines) and 103–49 (47 lines). It is within this speech that Ovid puts into the Sun's mouth not only a reference to Jove's thunderbolt, the instrument of Phaethon's death (61 and 311 f.), but also a vivid description of, *inter alia*, the Scorpion (82–3),⁷ the personified constellation which will be the immediate cause of the conflagration since it is through Phaethon's fright at seeing this 'animal', threateningly exuding its dark venom, that he drops the reins of the chariot, thus allowing the horses to run even more amuck (195 f.).⁸

¹ In the recent work of Galinsky (above, p.402, n.1) it seems *ex silentio* that he also attaches no significance to this *ekphrasis* (pp.97, 221). H. Fränkel, however, *Ovid, A Poet between Two Worlds* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1945), p.86, does attach some significance to these lines

² On this see Fränkel, *op. cit.*, p.86; H. Bartholomé, *Ovid und die antike Kunst* (Diss. Münster, 1935), p.75 (cited Wilkinson, p.156). The seemingly facile and redundant addition of 'quod imminet orbi' (describing the sky) at 2.7 is a further anticipation of later events, since we can take *imminet* in its more sinister sense of 'threatening'

³ Cf. the references to the fishes, 2.13 and 265–6.

⁴ The connection between the two

passages was tacitly made by Sen. *Ep.* 115.13, citing lines 1–2 and 107–8. Both the reliefs on the Sun's palace and the chariot were the handiwork of Vulcan (= *Mulciber*, 5)—*Vulcania munera*, 106.

⁵ Cf. E. J. Kenney in J. W. Binns (ed.), *Ovid* (London, 1973), p.140: 'Not all Ovid's descriptions, of course, are symbolic, but very few if any are otiose.'

⁶ Otis, pp.112–13, 393.

⁷ It is noteworthy that 61 and 82, both premonitory, are also memorable Golden Lines.

⁸ Similarly, Phaethon's reactions as he looks down from the highest point of his orbit (2.178 f.) are the same as those which the Sun, in this speech, says that he experiences in the same situation (2.64 f.).

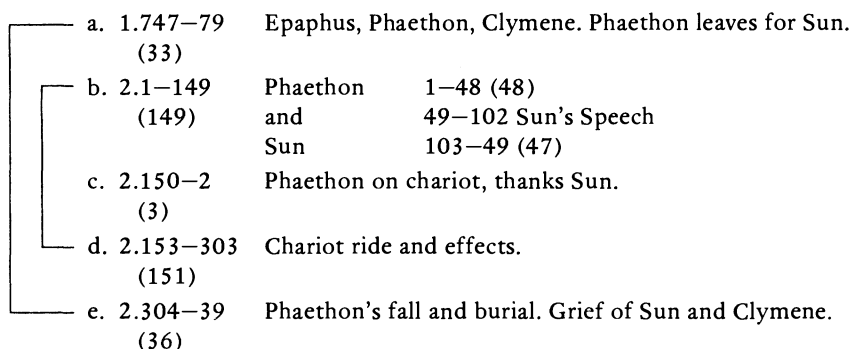
Lines 150–2 form a transition from the first of the three main sections of this book to the second: Phaethon, his interview with the Sun ended and the latter's entreaties ignored, is ready for the next stage of his adventure as he takes his place on the chariot, ready to commence the disastrous journey. In this transitional respect these three lines serve the same purpose as do the last four lines of book 1: the reader's interest is aroused but the continuity of Phaethon's direct participation in the narrative is interrupted, in this case by the focusing of attention upon the Sun's steeds (153: 'interea volucres . . .').

The second main section of the narrative of book two is that which comprises the chariot ride of Phaethon and its disastrous consequences (153–303).¹ 151 lines in length, it nicely balances the earlier 149-line section of Phaethon's interview with the Sun (1–149). We are prepared for the final section of the narrative by Tellus' address to Jove, urging him to take action to deliver the universe from imminent destruction (299–300: 'eripe flammis/si quid adhuc superest, et rerum consule summae').

The third and final section (304–39, 36 lines) opens with our attention directed away from Tellus and upon Jove (304: 'at pater omnipotens . . .'), who, rather embarrassed at the situation, feels constrained to hurl his thunderbolt at Phaethon,² and thus check fire by fire—points made by two characteristically Ovidian wordplays, syllepsis (not zeugma),³ and polyptoton.⁴ The section ends with Phaethon's burial by the *Naidēs Hesperiae* (325) and the Sun's and Clymene's remorse, and in length balances the introductory one at the end of book one.

To summarize, the over-all structure, which is consolidated by verbal cross-reference, subtle adumbration, and continuation of metaphor, may be represented diagrammatically in figure 1.

Figure 1



¹ I can detect no apparent or plausible subdivisions within this section, which is one of chaos as Ovid directs the reader's attention alternately to Phaethon and to the distress for which he is responsible: the subjects of these lines are constantly changing. Cf. Otis, p.113; Kenney, op. cit., p.142.

² After he has done so, the thunderbolt's effects upon the horses of the Sun are described (314–18)—here again the reader's interest in Phaethon is aroused and then

suspended.

³ 312–13, 'pariterque animaque rotisque/expulit'. Cf. Galinsky, op. cit., p.143 with n.37 and refs.; p.248. The differentiation between syllepsis and zeugma is a bee which buzzes in E. J. Kenney's bonnet. See e.g. *CR N.S.* 22 (1972), 40; *ibid.* 25 (1975), 34; cf. his note on *Lucr.* 3. 614 (Cambridge, 1971).

⁴ *ignibus ignes* (313). See Bömer ad loc. and on 3.95; *Met.* 2.280–1, 15.175 and esp. 15.88 f.; J. M. Frécaut, *L'Esprit*

My second line of approach in examining the structure of this episode is based on a chiastic arrangement of motifs,¹ represented in figure 2:

Figure 2

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|---|--|-----------|
| — | lineage of Phaethon: concern over his birth. | 1.747–75 |
| — | Phaethon's journey to the Sun. | 1.776–9 |
| — | description of palace. | 2.1–18 |
| — | Sun-god's fatal oath. | 2.40–8 |
| — | description of chariot. | 2.107–10 |
| — | Phaethon's journey on chariot. | 2.150–303 |
| — | death of Phaethon. | 2.304–66 |

In taking this second view of the episode's structure I have assumed that the impact of a particular motif upon the reader, and the importance of that motif for the episode as a whole, are not necessarily proportional to the number of lines which the motif happens to occupy in the text. As is seen from the diagram, the framework of the story is birth and death: it is the questioning of Phaethon's lineage and birth, and his epic concern to discover his true pedigree,² which are responsible for Phaethon's visit to the Sun-god, and thus also for his death, which concludes the episode,³ once more with the epic overtones of the grief shown by Phaethon's mother, father, and sister.⁴ The journey of Phaethon to the Sun, giver of life, corresponds to his death-ride, and the connection between the *ekphrasis* at the beginning of book two and the description of the Sun's chariot (2.107–10) has already been noted.

What are the relative merits or defects of these analyses? A quick glance will show the first analysis to be more attractive than the second: every line of the episode is accounted for and has its place in the over-all structure of the story, which balances well arithmetically. In these respects the chiastic arrangement of the second analysis appears less satisfactory: it will be seen that, numerically speaking at least, the contrasted motifs are exceedingly unbalanced. However, more important than the details of the two analyses are their poetical implications.

et l'humour chez Ovide (Grenoble, 1972), p.53 and n.105. The device was employed to suggest violent confrontation in epic: Enn. *Ann.* 572 V; Furius Bibaculus *ap. Macr. Sat.* 6.3.5 (fr. 10 Morel); Claud. *Quad. ap. Aul. Gell.* 9.13.16 (fr. 10^b Peter); Virg. *Aen.* 10.375–6, 11.615 (cf. *Met.* 6.243), 12.748, and Pease on 4.83; Luc. 1.6–7, 7.573; Stat. *Theb.* 8.399; Sil. 9.324–5.

¹ For other examples of similar arrangement of motifs see e.g. L. P. Wilkinson, *The Georgics of Virgil* (Cambridge, 1969), pp.327 f.

² It is surely no coincidence that at 2.19 Phaethon is referred to by the matronymic *Clymeneia proles*—at least the identity of his mother is not in doubt.

³ L. P. Wilkinson, *CQ* 36 (1942), 124, has expressed surprise that Phaethon's fall

is summarily dealt with by Ovid in four unspectacular lines (2.319–22), but should we expect a longer, more spectacular description of Phaethon's death at the end of this episode? I believe we should not. In the *Aeneid* the death of Turnus is allotted only three lines (12.950–2), and here, as in Virgil's epic, it is not the actual death itself, but the circumstances of the death, which are of prior importance (a tenet which denies any significance to the amount of text which the motif occupies, spectacularly or not).

⁴ Galinsky, *op. cit.*, p.135, believes that the 'excessive' grief of Phaethon's family is 'too overdone to be touching.' Be that as it may, the relevance of his reference to lines 239–62 at this point is his discussion eludes me.

The most obvious question raised by the two approaches is that of the very different emphasis they place within the story. The first structural analysis clearly centres on Phaethon as he stands joyfully on the Sun-god's chariot, about to start his journey. The dramatic irony of his present and short-lived gaiety as he grasps in his hands the very reins which will bring about his own destruction is manifest (the situation here is exactly parallel to that at Virg. *Aen.* 2.239, where the youth of Troy are rejoicing in tugging at the ropes which will pull the wooden horse into the city, and will thus be the means of their own destruction).¹ It is of course through Phaethon's own persistence and boyish obstinacy that he finds himself in this position. We have to some extent been prepared for the moment he blurts out his impetuous request for the Sun's chariot—almost before the Sun-god has finished his oath: 2.47, 'vix bene desierat . . .'—since we have already been told of his boastfulness (1.751–2, cf. *tumidus*, 754) and his self-acknowledged impetuosity (*ferox*, 758, cf. *inpiger*, 779). It is after the introduction of the chariot (2.105 f.), and more particularly after his disastrous journey starts, that the adjectives qualifying Phaethon change with his change in circumstances: he is no longer *magnanimus* (111), but *inscius* (148), *infelix* (179), *ignarus* (191), *trepidus* (194), and *mentis inops* (200)—we sympathize, and are meant to sympathize, with Phaethon's hopeless incompetence.

The second analysis presents us with a more Sun-god-centred tale, his spontaneous, irreversible, and fatal Stygian oath being the fulcrum of the chiasmic correspondences. There is no doubt of his affection for his son. As soon as Phaethon has told him of the problem of his disputed parentage, he lays aside his flashing rays, summons his son closer, and, embracing him, confirms his paternity (2.40 f.). He hastily takes the Stygian oath, an act he instantly regrets (49) on hearing his son's request, and when logical dissuasive argument fails he lays bare his own emotions, those of a father concerned for his son's safety:

91-4 pignora certa petis? do pignora certa timendo
et patrio pater esse metu probor. adspice vultus
ecce meos! utinamque oculos in pectore posses
inserere et patrias intus deprendere curas!

—all to no avail, of course. Resigned to the impending grief, he gives Phaethon sound, practical advice for the journey, ending with a final appeal (145–9) which again goes unheeded. The journey over, he is not only grief-stricken but embittered at what he believes to be Jove's excessively high-handed treatment of Phaethon, and has to be coaxed by all the other gods before he will once more grant his light to the world (381–400, a passage containing some moving pathos). The tragedy of the situation is that it is he who, through his zeal to confirm Phaethon's parentage and to dispel his anxiety on this count, is directly responsible for his son's death. It is he, not Phaethon, who is the truly tragic character of the episode, and as such, as is often the case, not in the title role.

There remains a problem alluded to at the beginning of this paper, the question of the narrative's end-point. This is a further implication of the foregoing structural analyses, since each entails a different end-point for the episode: in

¹ Cf. *Met.* 2.151–2, '... manibusque datas contingere habenas/gaudet . . .', and *Aen.* 2.239, 'sacra canunt funemque manu contingere gaudent'. The irony of Phaethon's joy and the contrasting emotions of the Sun

were further stressed by the juxtaposition of the particples at Stat. *Theb.* 6.322, 'gaudentem lacrimans astra insidiosa docebat'. Cf. D. Vessey, *Statius and the Thebaid* (Cambridge, 1973), pp.212 f.

the first analysis, line 339, in the second, 366. Is the Heliades episode a coda or an integral part of the whole? It is an important question, and one which by implication applies to the Cynus episode also.

The narrative continuity of book 2 would certainly not be broken if the Heliades and Cynus episodes were to be removed:¹ we would then have the description of Clymene's grief (333–9) followed quite naturally by that of the Sun-god's (381–400), the transition to the Callisto story remaining unaffected. Why were these episodes included by Ovid? Each is a simple story of metamorphosis, whereas the long Phaethon episode itself is not. The metamorphosis theme did not of course dominate every story of the *Metamorphoses*, and we seem to have here an instance of such a story being followed by metamorphoses of an incidental, and even an anticlimactic, rather than an integral, nature.² The Heliades and Cynus episodes are not integral to the Phaethon story itself, yet they are not unrelated or irrelevant appendages since they involve relatives of Phaethon who are belatedly introduced into the narrative: it has been several hundred lines since a conventional metamorphosis has occurred, so the poet feels obliged at this point not to keep his readers waiting any longer.

To conclude, the Phaethon episode exemplifies the great care which Ovid was capable of paying to the arrangement and coherence of his narrative material, and to which attention was drawn by Peters.³ Rohde was surely right in saying of the Phaethon episode,⁴ 'hic . . . Ovidius . . . fabulam quandam tam fuse atque diligenter enarrat, ut per se sit exiguum carmen epicum.'⁵

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¹ There are no earlier references in the Phaethon story to either the Heliades or Cynus.

² See Otis, p.81. Cf. Galinsky, *op. cit.*, pp.3 f., 49; Coleman, p.463; Wilkinson, p.145.

³ Peters, *op. cit.*, Praemonenda vii.

⁴ Rohde, *op. cit.*, p.28.

⁵ I am most grateful both to Mr. E. A. Slade for his comments on an earlier draft of this paper, and to the anonymous referee for his constructive criticisms and valuable improvements. For the faults that remain I, alas, am solely responsible.