Vixens and Values: The Modern Metamorphoses of Garnett and Vercors

Franz Kafka's Die Verwandlung is the best-known example of modern metamorphosis fiction, but it is not the only example of its kind. There are other works which exploit the same theme of an immediate change of form from one animal into another. I am thinking of David Garnett's Lady Into Fox (1922) and Vercors' Sylva (1961). Especially interesting is that the latter is written as an answer to and comment on the former. In Garnett a woman turns into a fox, and in Vercors a fox turns into a woman.

This direct relationship between an English and a French writer has been noted before, but only in passing. Yet right at the start of Sylva Vercors tells us he has Lady Into Fox in mind, and says: Il est remarquable de toutes façons, qu'un prodige de même nature se trouve à l'origine de récits tellement différents, l'un d'un Tchéque, l'autre d'un Anglais. Vercors means Kafka and Garnett and he mentions them to provide a brief genealogy for his own metamorphosis fiction. However, Kafka and Garnett describe a zoomorphizing of humans, while Vercors makes a commentary on this by literally anthropomorphizing an animal. The degeneration, real or psychological, of a higher order of animal to a lower is replaced by the reverse transformation.

As a literary mode metamorphosis is derived from the model set by Ovid. The story of Acteon embodies the method. Acteon spies the naked Diana and as a punishment is turned into a stag. The great hunter becomes the object of his most frequent activity, and he dies a cruel death. In this story a powerful residual element of primitive sympathetic magic is evident. Dressing up as an animal, pretending to be the prey you desire, was a common form of ritual and suggests the implicit


transference between hunter and hunted, man and animal. By transferring the physical attributes of an animal onto a man, the man, in a psychological sense, becomes temporarily the animal about which he feels strongly. This process is clearly evident in Acteon’s change into a stag. Thus, we can describe animal metamorphosis as the imaginative representation of the changing of a human into a totemic form most appropriate to his deepest self. This resolution implies a fixing of a human being into a more essential reality. The movement is from the existential to the essential, and the change undergone by Acteon is a resolution in fixity of the type of person he inherently is. A truth is embodied in a permanent end, a psychological stasis is attained through the resonant medium of animal metamorphosis.

The Ovidian pattern of transmutation acts as a metaphor, or even a fantasy, to describe the hidden impulses that lurk within the human being. In modern animal metamorphoses this pattern is the same. In Kafka and Garnett, the animal state into which a human finds himself implies the laying bare of an inner nature. In Vercors the process is inverted. However, Kafka, Garnett, and Vercors are consistently similar to each other and different to Ovid in that the act of metamorphosis occurs very early in the story and is not therefore a resolution. This change in where the metamorphosis occurs in a text suggests that modern animal metamorphoses are a deliberate variation of the Ovidian pattern.

The action of modern metamorphoses then opens out from the fixed moment of change into further flux. The abruptness of the modern metamorphosis is an extreme and unalterable fait accompli and the identification of man and animal is explored in consequence of the magical transformation. With Garnett and Vercors especially, the narrative is as much concerned with those who observe the metamorphosis as it is with the person who is changed. The direct experience of metamorphosis within Gregor Samsa and the agonised growing consciousness of his condition is what gives Kafka’s tale its terrible power. But even with Kafka a reader’s interest is turned towards the social consequences of metamorphosis, whereby the change of form itself is a dramatic means of focusing attention on the alienating or bestializing of modern man. This is well known with regards to Kafka, but the relationship of Garnett and Vercors to the tradition of animal metamorphosis, as well as to each other, remains to be fully examined.

3 For a discussion of the psychological transference between man and animal see Francis Klingender, Animals in Art and Thought (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul 1971), especially chapter five.
Since Garnett’s work is so little known a brief synopsis of *Lady Into Fox* is a useful prelude. One day, without apparent warning, Mrs. Silvia Tebrick changes into a vixen. The occurrence is fantastic and the reader is asked to suspend disbelief for the rest of the tale. The narrator offers some half-hearted explanations for what has happened but finally reverts to calling it simply a ‘miracle.’ The reader must accept the metamorphosis in a similarly unquestioning way.

Although suddenly changed in form Mrs. Tebrick only slowly changes her human habits; it takes weeks before her mental animalization matches her physical change. Mr. Tebrick attempts to comfort his wife and at all times remains obsessively loyal to her. But Mrs. Tebrick soon becomes wholly vixen and desires to live wild in the woods with others of her species. Reluctantly, Tebrick lets her go but later becomes a self-appointed godfather to his wife’s litter. The story reaches its tragic conclusion when Mrs. Tebrick is mauled to death by a pack of fox-hounds, and Mr. Tebrick, though badly hurt by the same hounds, slowly recovers his sanity.

The plot implies that there is some latent quality of foxness in Mrs. Tebrick — her maiden name is in fact Fox. She is literally terrified by the close proximity of the fox-hounds a few moments before her change of form. So intense is this fear, made yet more intense by Tebrick’s attempts to ‘drag her’ towards them, that Mrs. Tebrick changes into the form which represents her innermost being. We are told that Mrs. Tebrick had been brought up in a remote and exclusively female environment, and we infer that her knowledge of men was limited. She is only recently married and thus her reversion to a state of foxhood could be interpreted as a young bride’s disquiet at the trauma of love. Her desire to be single, to be indeed Fox again, results in her change of form.

The narrative throws us back to Ovid’s account of Daphne’s metamorphosis into a laurel tree. Garnett says that the title of his story was suggested by the caption ‘Daphne mouée en laurier’ on a sixteenth century woodcut of the Ovidian scene. We recall that Daphne’s change is brought about when she is trying to escape from the advances of the god Apollo. In Ovid’s story a young virgin takes fright at the thought of a sexual encounter and finds release from this trauma in being transformed into an object that by its very nature is incapable of physical love. Mrs. Tebrick is rather like Daphne in that she has been brought up in a sheltered, female environment, and thus has grounds for being apprehen-

sive about men. Of course, their situations are not exactly parallel in that Daphne is turned into an inanimate object and Mrs. Tebrick into an animal. Nonetheless, the parallel, even with its modifications, is clear.

There is a similar correspondence between Apollo and Mr. Tebrick in that both are described as being of an amorous nature. The narrator comments that after the metamorphosis of his wife, Tebrick blames himself for having been 'much more like a lover than a husband.' This insistence reinforces the theme of marital tension, and the Daphne and Apollo reference elevates the theme into a larger and more universal context. It should be added though that the parallel between mythological Greece and rustic England is imbued with its own comic effect — an effect that Garnett himself seems all too aware of.

We recall that after Daphne's transformation Apollo embraced the laurel tree and made a devotional commitment to the objectified phenomenon of that which he had most desired:

He placed his hand
Where he had hoped and felt the heart still beating
Under the bark; and he embraced the branches
As if they still were limbs, and kissed the wood,
And the wood shrunk from his kisses, and the god
Exclaimed: 'Since you can never be my bride,
My tree at least you shall be!'³

If we were to replace the images of a laurel tree with those of a vixen, we would have Mr. Tebrick's situation after the metamorphosis of his wife. In *Lady Into Fox* the process of adoring the love-object is taken to very great extremes. Like Apollo, Tebrick at first attempts to cherish the loved one as if it were still human, but the vixen shrugs off this attention, shrinking 'from his kisses' as it were, and follows her new nature. The loss felt by Tebrick is a parallel to Apollo's forlornness. But Ovid's story breaks off at this point, whereas for Garnett it is the starting point of a whole other drama. The remainder of the novel develops a theme which is a more realistic counterpart to literal metamorphosis. It is almost as if Garnett offers us a vision of the life that Apollo would have had (*mutatis mutandis*) if he had persevered in adoring his tree.

This more realistic theme is subsumed within the character and character development of Mr. Tebrick. For with each successive degeneration of his wife, Tebrick's psychological condition undergoes a

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corresponding change, and the novel becomes a study in degradation from the human to the bestial. At first, when Silvia maintains some semblance of humanity, Tebrick tries to arrest the degeneration of the woman he loves. This stage is reminiscent of Apollo’s incredulous effort to caress Daphne when she was already mostly a tree. To save her from going naked, Tebrick clothes her. But despite Silvia’s initial inclination to love music and to follow religious observances, finally the true animal nature emerges and she becomes wholly vixen. Through his perverse determination not to lose his wife, Tebrick mimics her bestialization — even to the extent of abandoning human society completely. Though he remains a human being in form, towards the conclusion of the novel he becomes deeply involved with Silvia’s fox litter and through this association becomes adept at animal-like movement: ‘Mr. Tebrick now could follow after them [the cubs] ... and could go through a wood as silently as a deer ... But what was most strange of all, he had got a way of going doubled up, often almost on all fours with his hand touching the ground every now and then, particularly when he went uphill.’ A reversion to an ape-like creature has taken place, the implication being that while Tebrick cannot transform himself into a fox he can at least turn back the evolutionary clock and become a more elemental kind of anthropoid.

Tebrick finds an almost transcendent happiness in thus sinking back into the non-human animal world. But it cannot last. An Apollo cannot find requited love in a laurel tree, and a man cannot change his nature to suit the altered condition of his partner. There is a level of humour in this. Garnett offers us a fable, trivial on one level, in which a faithful husband willingly gives up his human status to make himself more acceptable to his wife. But this triviality is sharpened by a harder edge. For within the fable there is an intensely felt impulse to submerge into the simpler world of animals and to retreat from the world of humans. It is this impulsion which betrays an implicit comment on the human condition in 1922, and which perhaps made *Lady Into Fox* the enormous success it was.

III

Garnett’s novel follows the degeneration brought about by the metamorphosis of a woman, and despite the tenacity displayed by Mr. Tebrick, the effect of the whole is regressive. In Vercors’ *Sylva*, on the other hand, we see the reverse of this. The inversion of idea leads out of Vercors’ echoing of the plot of *Lady Into Fox*. The initial fox-hunt, the narrative

6 David Garnett, *Lady Into Fox* (London: Chatto & Windus 1922) 86
reference to it, the sudden change of form, the gradual psychological adjustment, the narrator's personal and more subtle psychological change — all occur in Vercors. As with Garnett, the reader's initial interest is captivated by the Ovidian occurrence, but this interest is quickly overtaken by the implied humanization of Albert Richwick, the narrator. The animal metamorphosis acts as an initial ploy to effect a more plausible human change — a fantasy to elucidate a psychological transformation.

The effect of this in Sylva is to awaken Richwick through what at one point he describes as 'la plénitude ineffable de sa vie de renard asservi à la seule nature — à la seule nature.' Because of this understanding, sublime in intensity, Richwick gradually sheds his brutal positivism to emerge as a better human being. This humanizing keeps exact pace with Sylva's progress in leaving behind her former animal nature. The reversal of Garnett is more than obvious.

Vercors' adoption of this theme is significant in view of his direct association with the French resistance movement during the Second World War. He was instrumental in organizing les Éditions de Minuit which, at peril of those involved, published works which supported the resistance movement. In his moving account of those times, La Bataille du silence (1968), Vercors establishes what he calls his 'personal metamorphosis' whereby he accepts the call to his own kind of moral action in the face of the German occupation of his country.

His response to the invasion finds particular emphasis in an essay from his collection Plus ou moins homme (1949), in which his 'postulat apodictique' is stated plainly: 'Quelle est la différence — la nouveauté essentielle qui un jour a fait surgir l’homme de l’anthropoïde?' What distinguishes man from the other animals and what fostered the transition from animal to human? Without doubt, the physical and moral atrocities of the war prompted this question for Vercors, and his 'personal metamorphosis' answered it with a belief in 'la lutte,' the condition of revolt which mitigates a degeneration into sub-humanity. To give in to the German invasion represents for Vercors a sinking back into pre-humanity, whereas acceptance of 'la lutte' is a sign, of human, moral duty. Revolt and active moral choice are for Vercors an antidote to psychological and moral animalism. This point of view stands in obvious contrast to Garnett's implied sentiment that man is happiest when he seeks to sink into passive, animal consciousness.

Such programmatic statements are not made openly in Vercors' fiction, for the conventions of modern fiction require that such ideas be em-

7 Plus ou moins homme (Paris: Albin Michel 1950) 19
bodied in narrative action rather than spelled out in authorial comment. In his novel *Les Animaux dénaturés*, the program is carried in the framework of Darwin's 'missing-link' theory. A new species, half-human half-ape, is found and this prompts the question: what is man and in what ways is he different from the other animals? The answer here is a variant and an expansion of 'la lutte': 'pour passer de l'inconscience passive à la conscience interrogative, il a fallu ce schisme, ce divorce, il a fallu cet arrachement. N'est-ce point la frontière justement? Animal avant l'arrachement, homme après lui? Des animaux dénaturés, voilà ce que nous sommes.'

An understanding of this sort leads to a renewed sense of moral direction for the central protagonists of the novel. The same change, though a much more dramatic one, also occurs in *Sylva*. The effect is more intense because the change from unconsciousness to consciousness is embodied in a literal metamorphosis. The actual metamorphosis is presented to us as a phenomenological fact. Yet although Sylva, the changeling, is from the first a fully-formed human, all her instincts remain at first animal. Her position is a mirror-image of Mrs. Tebrick who maintained strong vestiges of humanity weeks after her abrupt change. Sylva refuses to wear clothes (Mrs. Tebrick insisted on wearing hers for a time), defecates all over the carpet, and at one point attempts to return to the fox-hole she had just left. Just as Mr. Tebrick comes to love his wife even more because she is now a vixen, so Richwick finds Sylva compellingly attractive because of her animal innocence. Her behaviour brings out in him an uneasy mixture of the paternal and the sexual. More importantly, she leads him to feel 'un émoi visuel si intense qu'il en était voluptueux, c'était le sentiment exaltant que la vie, que simplement la vie, voilà le seul miracle' (p. 33).

Richwick thus comes alive and shrugs off his unhealthy misanthropy. But Sylva too must undergo change if she is to live in the human world. Both of them must leave their 'beastly' parts behind. A Dr. Sullivan proves useful in helping Sylva. He becomes passionately interested in her as a unique experiment in evolutionary Darwinism:

En fait, cette créature nous ramène cinq cent mille ans en arrière: quand les tout premiers hommes, avec leur cerveau entièrement constitué, mais encore vide comme celui-ci de toute expérience, de toute connaissance ont surgi tout à neuf, de l'animalité! Ce qui va se passer dans cette cervelle-ci sera d'un intérêt inouï ...

(p. 106).

Clearly, we have returned to the central preoccupation of Les Animaux dénaturés. Sylva offers Vercors' telescopic view of the growth of human consciousness: evolution and the history of consciousness compacted into a few months.

The action of Sylva suggests an expanding concept of human growth and awareness. For Vercors, the desired idea is a continuing process of metamorphosis. This is most forcefully suggested in his definition of what metamorphosis in the modern context is: '... l'intuition lumineuse que la qualité d'une âme ne se mesure pas à ce qu'elle est, mais à ce qu'elle devient' (pp. 260-1). This definition is reinforced when Sylva gets pregnant by a village oaf and gives birth to a fox-cub. Vercors deliberately shatters our sense that Sylva is now a complete human being. Instead, we are thrown into a radically new problem and a new kind of metamorphosis. This sudden turn of events opens up a panorama of further changes of form, whereby each new life must make its own struggle into real human consciousness. The birth of the fox-cub is the logical outcome of the maxim 'la qualité d'une âme se mesure ... à ce qu'elle devient.' Similar to this outward manifestation, is Sylva's more subtle philosophical and moral development. She asks Richwick the disturbing question 'Pourquoi qu'on existe, tout ça?', and when he answers that man just doesn't know, she explodes with 'Mais alors, quoi, on ne sait rien?' From this condition of ignorance regarding the meaning of life, the only direction is the upward struggle into human growth. To be able to ask the question and then to revolt from the idea that there is no answer, is the condition of resistance which implies for Vercors a metamorphosis of animal into man and then from beastly man into moral man.

The comparison between Garnett and Vercors I have been making is clear enough and establishes the different uses which each made of the device of metamorphosis. What is consistent, however, is that the device of animal metamorphosis is used as a general comment on the moral condition of humanity. As with the medieval Bestiarists, animals and their relationship to man are used as yardsticks by which human affairs may be clearly depicted. Vercors' belief is that the world can only be reconstituted from a state of 'animality' by a frank process of conscious humanizing, a concerted effort to eradicate from the individual the psychological forces that lead to a loss of humanity. This is a direct criticism of Lady Into Fox, and implicitly of Kafka's Die Verwandlung. Kafka and Garnett used the theme of animal metamorphosis — or more properly, human bestialization — within the span of a few years, and we may see in this a reflection of a world which believed itself to be slipping
into bestiality. The powerful images of men turning into animals, and vice versa, are the vehicles for the transmission of such unnerving sentiments.

The contrast between Garnett and Vercors raises interesting questions of a broader nature. For instance, why should the period of the First World War impel writers to describe the human condition in terms of a reversion to animality, and that of the Second World War not? Certainly, we need not look too far to find historical and cultural factors throughout our century which might lead writers to see civilization as irrevocably sunk. The Second World War is no less important in this regard than the first, and we might expect any metamorphosis fiction written under its impact to reflect an appropriate pessimism. It is somewhat surprising then that the war should have encouraged Vercors' explicit rejection of the regressive formula. Perhaps Vercors' temperament was more sanguine and he refused to see the inevitable consequences of historical facts. But given his direct involvement in the war this interpretation seems unlikely. More plausible is the idea that Vercors' overt belief in 'la lutte,' the perpetual struggle against evil and the passive inactivity which is the counterpart to evil, prevents him from accepting that the human cause is lost. However, it must be conceded that the publication date of Sylva, 1961, might also be a factor in Vercors' point of view. Against this though we must remember that the ideas inherent to Sylva had already appeared in Vercors' work as early as 1949 in Plus ou moins homme.

Important though the periods of the two wars are to a broad understanding of modern metamorphosis fiction, it would be a mistake to exaggerate their impact. Kafka's story after all was written two years before the outbreak of the First World War. Equally important is the rise of psychological and moral uncertainties which called into question previously accepted notions of ontology. Who am I? What does it mean to be a human being? What is the difference between a human and an animal if human beings behave more bestially than animals and if our biological heritage is animal through and through? The pervasive and unsettling influence of Darwin, Freud, Frazer, Bergson, and others, need only be mentioned as indications of the radical new problems which writers (and the general population) were obliged to confront. Darwin especially raised disturbing questions about the relationship between man and animal, and it could no longer be assumed that the difference between man and animal was one of kind.

Such an unsettling intellectual background, together with the political and social forces which culminated in the First World War, may suggest why animal metamorphosis is an appropriate medium for the representa-
tion of anthropological confusion. But if it is generally clear why animal metamorphosis has a certain obvious appropriateness, what is not so clear is why these modern metamorphoses took the form they did. The most common kind of metamorphosis literature in our post-Darwin age has been science-fiction. H.G. Wells's *The Island of Dr. Moreau* is a very clear example of this new variant of metamorphosis literature, and it is a variant which has been extended greatly with such novels as Olaf Stapledon's *Sirius* and Richard Adams's *Plague Dogs*. Vivisection and scientific interference in nature are the means by which science-fiction authors transform animals into humans and vice versa. Metamorphosis has been given a rational validation. Given the immense popularity of this newer form of metamorphosis it is the more interesting that Garnett and Vercors relied on the pure magic and pure fantasy of direct, Ovid-like changes of form.

The reasons for this choice can only be guessed at. The advantages of direct metamorphosis are those of dramatic surprise and amusement, and the effect on the reader is to cause him to respond more boldly to the extravagance of the fictional device. The author deliberately tests the reader's ability to adjust to an unusual situation and offers no rationalizing justifications for the lack of realism he exhibits. The disadvantage is the unwillingness of some readers to suspend disbelief. Such people perhaps should not read fantasy literature. However, as we have seen, the failure to suspend disbelief is only a slight problem in that the act of metamorphosis is very quickly over. Our attention is drawn very soon to the moral implications of the metamorphosis, whereby the latent tendencies and weaknesses of human characters are exposed and in part remedied. In essence, this is the purpose of animal metamorphoses: to lay bare human flaws and shortcomings by juxtaposing and intermixing human and animal qualities. Through an ambiguous presentation of the human/animal relationship, we see especially clearly what the human animal is and what he should be.

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