

Introduction

Ovid begins the *Metamorphoses* by promising his readers, quite literally, the world. The gods who inspire the poet's song are asked to lead his narrative "from the first creation of the cosmos to my own times" (1.3–4). Alongside the grandeur of the project they set in motion, however, the lines already signal a number of questions that Ovid's audience will have to confront throughout the fifteen books that follow. To start with, the technical terms used to describe the composition of the work present it as a kind of hybrid, paradoxically claiming the qualities of two antithetical poetic forms: on the one hand, the song will be "unbroken" (*perpetuum*, 1.4) like the extended, homogeneous narratives of epic—and, indeed, the *Metamorphoses* marks Ovid's first use of the distinctive meter of epic poetry, the dactylic hexameter. On the other, the word that means "lead down" (*deducite*, 1.4) also means "spin fine" and was used in this meaning by Latin poets to describe the writing of short, exquisitely crafted pieces. How can Ovid's poem be at once short and long, grand and refined? The contradictory formal expectations raised by this description relate to a distinction in strategies of reading that are at the core of this book and that are complemented by the second paradox the brief proem sets in play. The word *perpetuum* applies both to the narrative form of the work, which will not be disassembled into a sequence of individual poetic units, and to the material that it describes, the history of time that connects past with present in an unbroken chain. Conversely, the suggestion of "fine spinning" in *deducite* directs attention above all to the nature of the poetic product itself, its artistry and style. Without crudely reducing the poem to an epic subject treated in a refined style, this opposition broadly raises the question of how much the reader should focus on the content of the work, the story it tells, and how much on Ovid's poem itself as a literary artifact.

The issue of the relationship between the subject matter and its artistic representation emerges more dramatically in the poem's first two lines:

*In nova fert animus mutatas dicere formas
Corpora: di, coeptis (nam vos mutastis et illa)
Adspirate meis . . .*

(1.1–3)

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My mind drives me to speak of forms changed to new bodies: gods,
favor my beginnings, for you have changed them too.

The external universe is to be characterized above all by changes of form: the gods invoked to aid Ovid's composition are appropriately those who produce change. This already suggests not only that the poetic artifact is to be coextensive in time with the material it describes (it moves from the beginning to the now, just as time itself has done) but that it will in a sense be subject to the same "physical" laws as the world it describes. In fact, the first changed form we encounter comes not in a story the poem tells but in its own linguistic structures. As the reader unravels the opening sentence, his initial impulse may be to construe the first four words as a complete syntactical unit: "My mind drives me into new things."¹ He would be encouraged in this interpretation by the learned poet's conventional promise of originality, to avoid the well-trodden path according to the precepts of Callimachus, a crucial poetic predecessor. However, the word *corpora* that begins the second line cannot fit in this construction and reveals that the only syntactically possible meaning of the sentence is "my mind impels me to speak of forms changed to new bodies." This transformation in the linguistic surface of the text already suggests that the literary work itself comprises an entity parallel to the outer universe. And if Ovid seems initially to subordinate his creation to this external reality by making its development dependent on the same animating forces, the gods, that created the real world,² the repeated first-person pronouns create an undertow of distance and separation, drawing attention to the author's own role in making and defining the world he describes. Ovid's "beginnings" stand juxtaposed to the "first origin of the world," and Ovid's time (*mea tempora*), time as defined and measured by the author,³ forms the work's conclusion. To blur the distinction further, when Ovid begins his narrative with the creation of the cosmos, he does so in terms that make the divine creator's actions resemble the forging of the Shield of Achilles in Homer's *Iliad*.⁴ This effect emphasizes the analogous roles of the artist and god as creators but also, more fundamentally, reverses

¹ Kenney 1973.117; 1976. Treated in detail by Wheeler 1999.8–30.

² The priority of the external world is also suggested by the expression *animus fert dicere*. *Animus fert*, as von Albrecht 1961 has shown, represents a claim to the epic objectivity of the Homeric narrator, inspired by a reality outside himself, while the verb *dicere*—as opposed to the Vergilian "*canere*" or "*loqui*"—suggests the religious language of the *vates* as prophet, as interpreter of the god's will. See Spahlinger 1996.29–32.

³ An effect reinforced by self-citation since, as Barchiesi 1991.6 points out, the word links the final goal of the diachronic *Metamorphoses* to Ovid's synchronous poetic treatment of the Roman calendar, the *Fasti*, which begin with the word *tempora*. For a full discussion of the implications of the significance of the pronoun in *mea tempora*, see Feeney 1999.

⁴ Wheeler 1995.

the priorities of literary representation and what it represents. Here it is not simply a question of the literary text reproducing or imagining an external event set in motion by the divine actor; rather, the actions of the god himself appear as a reflection or imitation of an earlier literary representation. The originary text of classical literature thus comes to mold the origins of the world itself.

To return to where we began, if Ovid does begin by promising his readers the world, he makes it unclear which world that is, the world of our external experience whose history and shifting form become accessible through the poem, or the poem as world, an artificial creation whose extent and diversity make it an equivalent to the larger cosmos, and whose vivid “realizations” of the stories told can assume the appearance of reality for the audience. This opposition in turn helps shape the strange oscillation of styles that has subjected Ovid’s text to so many contradictory critical responses. For, as we shall discover, Ovid characteristically combines passages of great “realism”—in the sense that his representations come to seem real to the readers, drawing them into the narrative, and allowing them to recognize sympathies between themselves and the characters whose experiences are described—with continual reminders of the poet’s own manipulating presence and of the artifice through which he shapes the text, reminders that redirect the reader’s attention to the work’s artistic surface. The connection between these alternative ways of reading and the question of the priority of world and work with which we began is itself far from straightforward. To be absorbed into the narrative can be construed as passing through the text to enter the governing “reality” behind it or as the ultimate proof of the capacity of the literary artist to make a fiction that counts as real. Conversely, those passages that seem to draw attention precisely to the constructive role of the artist undercut the very point they make by anchoring the reader’s perspective outside the poem and reminding him of the status of the text in the “real” world: this is, after all, only a poem. My first aim in this book is to draw attention to this opposition as an informing principle of Ovidian narrative and to show how the tension created between these two modes of reception generates the hermeneutic and emotional complexity of so much of his text.

Ovid’s suggestion of the potential autonomy of his own fiction, while central to the poetics of the *Metamorphoses*, is hardly unique to it. Works from Chaucer’s *Book of the Duchess* to *Harold and the Purple Crayon* imagine a text made world, as the creative process produces an actual space for the reader to enter. The device of the “book within the book” or *mise en abyme*, though not restricted to fiction,⁵ can also create a

⁵ For the phrase and the now classic explication, see Dällenbach 1977.

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reader in the text whose experience, to the extent that it resembles and differs from that of the work's actual readers, can make them at once less and more conscious of the activity in which they are engaged. These techniques have become defining characteristics of contemporary "magic realism," where, as in Ovid's poem, the blurring of the boundary between fiction and reality complements intrusions of the fantastic into a narrative unwilling to relinquish the claim to represent events located in the world of our own experience. One obvious explanation for the omnipresence of such phenomena is that they expose something essential about the reception of all fiction: a suspension of disbelief that is never quite total, that even in the case of the most "absorbing" play, film, or novel always exists in counterpoise to an awareness of who and where one is.⁶

But an appeal to a universal law of fiction fails to exhaust the importance of this phenomenon as it operates in any single text. Even if the experience of fiction is always at some level the same, its significance in a given set of historical and cultural circumstances will vary dramatically. Indeed, the choice to make the workings of fiction explicit can often herald some pressure on, or demand reexamination of, the role that fictional representation plays in a society. Thus, magic realist representations of readers drawn into the plot of what they read—such as Julio Cortazar's "The Continuity of Parks," where a man sits down to read a murder novel only to discover that he is the victim—have been understood as a way not so much of demonstrating a book's absorptive powers but rather of claiming for it a status beyond that of mere entertainment, of warning off the reader looking only for diversion. This impulse in turn can be interpreted as a reflex of these works' postcolonial origins—a reaction to the sense that one's own experience has already been scripted by the texts of a distant culture—or related to the operations of the marketplace, where outsiders rely on the entertainment value of their works to reach the lucrative markets of the West.⁷ How might Ovid's construction of his poem's fictionality make sense in the context of Augustan Rome and what it can tell us about the terms in which the text can participate in that culture?

The very posing of such a question about Ovid still needs some defending. For one of the most beguiling responses to Ovid's assertions of the constructive power of art and the alterity of the world of his fictions is to take them at face value. Critics working along these lines have suggested an analogy between Ovid's procedures and aestheticizing *l'art pour l'art* movements of the nineteenth century. Projecting these conclusions back to the political context of late Augustan Rome, they depict a

⁶ Feeney 1991.224–49, citing Newsom 1988.134–35.

⁷ Thiem 1995.

poem whose aim is to provide sophisticated amusement and escape for the disaffected upper classes. Like Ovid, members of a generation too young to remember the serious struggles of the civil wars, these frivolous young nobles were also excluded from meaningful occupations by the growing self-aggrandizement of the imperial family.⁸ The artificial reality of the Ovidian text irresistibly recalls those other illusionistic retreats, the luxurious villas whose painted landscapes and trompe-l'oeil gardens open up comparable imaginary vistas.⁹ Yet recently scholars have been reminded that such elaborate interior spaces, when viewed in the context of the Roman house, were never purely aesthetic monuments set back from the outer world but also stage sets where the very public identities of their owners were forged and displayed.¹⁰ In a similar way, if we do not focus exclusively on the illusions the poem creates but also remember the social realities of the text itself—and we shall repeatedly see that the very conspicuousness of Ovid's disclaimers invites us to do just that—efforts to isolate the poem from any kind of context become less tenable.

Those who have read a political agenda in Ovid's poem have frequently identified that purpose as the expression of authorial attitudes toward the regime of Augustus. The most dramatic and best-known incident in the life of the poet, his relegation to the Black Sea in 8 CE, validates such investigation by suggesting that there was indeed a political component to the poet's activities, whether personal or artistic, and that they were regarded negatively by the emperor. While the fact of relegation fuels efforts to uncover anti-Augustan elements in the poetry, the self-justifications Ovid sent back from exile use the *Metamorphoses* itself as testimony to the poet's glorification of Augustus.¹¹ As Stephen Hinds has pointed out, the most potent aspect of Ovid's allusions to the regime is precisely their indirectness. The comparison of Jupiter's assembling the gods to the emperor's summoning the Senate (1.163ff.), for example, sets in motion an analogy that follows the conventions of panegyric but can seem less flattering, given the cruel and indulgent acts of Jupiter that receive so much attention in Ovid's work. The poetry can sustain either point of view while distancing both from the authority of the poet. For Hinds, Ovid's technique of political commentary heralds the only form that criticism of the emperor can take under an increasingly authoritarian

⁸ Above all, Little 1972, also Lyne 1984 and even Rosati 1983. Comparable are the conclusions of Due 1974.88 that Ovid "has nothing against praising the emperor: praise, even flattery was a becoming part of good manners. But Ovid thoroughly lacked any deeper understanding of true Augustanism."

⁹ Bernbeck 1967.135–38.

¹⁰ In particular by Wallace-Hadrill 1996.

¹¹ For a review of the arguments and bibliography up through 1993, see Bretzigheimer 1993.

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regime, an ostensible panegyric seeded with irony, although, as he admits, the very nature of his argument makes it impossible ever to prove Ovid's intentions.¹²

Though he ultimately opted for a subversive Ovid, Hinds's analysis pointed toward an important redefinition of the terms in which the poetry's political aspect was discussed as attention was directed away from the intentions of the author toward the effect on the audience. Many recent studies, including this one, start from the premise that poetry puts in play contrasting views of the emperor so that it becomes a touchstone for the audience to consolidate or reconsider its own position in relation to the center of Roman power. For Denis Feeney, the questions that the poem opens up about the believability of fictions ultimately flow into a discourse about the summit of imperial self-representation, the claim to divinity. "With an apparent guilelessness that never entirely vanishes, Augustus' repeated assertions of his quasi-divine status are taken at face-value by Ovid, and nobody—not Augustus, nor Ovid, nor any reader—can circumscribe the limits at which the implications of this status cease to register."¹³ Alessandro Barchiesi ends his discussion of the effects of closure in both the *Metamorphoses* and the *Fasti* with the position that far from simply responding to external conditions, favorably or unfavorably, Ovid's work has itself summoned up the debate between Augustans and anti-Augustans through the very fact of its "erratic irony,"¹⁴ crystalizing alternative responses to the regime through its own ambiguity.

As both of these comments make clear, what had been a position of weakness, with the poet forced to renounce his own authority—or too self-evidently making such a gesture to indict his loss of liberty—has become one of strength. From imagining a poet unable to express his own views without indirection in the face of repressive forces from outside, we have moved to a poem that determines its audience's definitions of that "outside." The impact of new historicism, and in Latin studies the work of Duncan Kennedy in particular,¹⁵ has sharpened the recognition that literature exists within the larger political culture rather than commenting on it from some distant vantage point, and that therefore to focus analysis on the mere transmission of authorial opinion about seemingly external events and practices provides only a limited perspective on the political efficacy of any text. The "Augustus" that previous scholars would have Ovid support or oppose himself bears a name whose meaning is determined by a process of discourse in which the text participates

¹² Hinds 1987b.24–31.

¹³ Feeney 1991.224.

¹⁴ Barchiesi 1997b.272.

¹⁵ Kennedy 1992.

and in which any positive statement summons up a host of alternatives from its diverse audience.

My project in this book is informed throughout by these new readings of Ovid. The “politics” of *Metamorphoses* it addresses does not mean the same thing as Ovid’s politics, and readers will find no explicit discussion of the attitudes of the poet toward the emperor. Rather my goal is to expand our understanding of the modes by which the work facilitates the audience’s reflection on and redefinition of the hierarchies operative within Roman society. (If relatively few episodes in the poem refer directly or transparently to Augustus, it is surprising how many hinge on inequalities in power relations more generally, as superiors and inferiors alternately punish, exploit, confer benefits on, and deceive one another.) A good example of this difference in emphasis comes in my treatment of the poem’s self-proclaimed subject, metamorphosis. Metamorphosis can easily find an external referent that allows it to be read as part of a commentary on contemporary politics. In the face of a regime then intensely interested in manifesting its stability and permanence, the voices within the poem that insist on change as the only immutable law seem to offer a dangerous challenge. Conversely, the persistence of identity that sometimes seems within the poem to survive even the most radical changes of form gibes with Augustus’s repeated assurances that he had restored the past rather than replacing it. The question of what metamorphosis means—and in chapter 1 I argue for the impossibility of pinning down a stable view of metamorphosis—does indeed impact on the audience’s understanding of contemporary politics. But metamorphosis is more than just a term to be defined, whose definition can then be extended outward from text to world. Within the poem, the experience of metamorphosis becomes a means by which characters and audiences apprehend the workings of a variety of forces. Metamorphosis, as a tool for deception, as the immortalization of the subject, as justified punishment, or as cruel victimization, confronts characters with the fact of their vulnerability or power and its conflicting meanings and consequences. And, as I demonstrate in part 2, a connection with the world outside the text exists for this aspect of metamorphosis as well in the spectacles and sacrifices that similarly gave audiences the choice of identifying with victims or victors, and of recognizing a self in the captive works of art that adorned the imperial city. In this way, the poet not only mobilizes reflection on the imperial regime but creates a new space for the experience of power. Ovid is not just writing about the emperor; he is, in this sense, writing as emperor.

In addition to expanding our view of the techniques by which Ovid engages his audience in examining its place in and understanding of Roman society, it is equally important to expand our awareness of the breadth of

that society. The debate about Ovid's "Augustanism" has further skewed investigation of the political dimension of Ovid's work by defining politics almost solely in terms of the emperor.¹⁶ That is not to say that the name of Augustus will be absent from the pages that follow—far from it. But as opposed to reading the poet's treatment of Augustus primarily to ascertain the author's opinions of the regime, or even, as Feeney and Barchiesi have done, to demonstrate the multivalent portraits that mobilize the audience's judgments of the new empire, I will be arguing, above all in the second chapter, that by highlighting his own efforts to represent Augustus Ovid invites attention precisely to the capacity of his poem to become an element in political discourse. The presence of Augustus within the poem involves much more than the question of whether the stories the emperor tells about himself are credible. As a figure who is so undoubtedly a real presence in the extratextual experience of Ovid's readers, Augustus's appearance in the text also compels an evaluation of the extent and capacities of the poem's constructions of the world. And more than a poetic strategy is at work here, for the emperor's omnipresent self-representations transformed how members of all classes constructed their public identities. One of the consequences of such an environment will emerge as a blurring of the boundary between the author and the audience, as reception becomes itself a context for display. Thus, it is no accident that the poet's most distinctive definition of his own role as a poet depends precisely on the way he stages his own response to Augustus.

But the new historicist perspective that blurs the distinctions between text and context also brings a risk of distortion, particularly when applied to Ovid's poem. For triumphal assumptions about the broad political role of all texts and the position they occupy in making rather than reflecting political discourse were not ones that the writer of the *Metamorphoses* or its audience would have taken as a given. Rather, as I have already suggested, the idea of the text in the world, so to speak, always exists in tension with a view of the creative capacities of poetry, of its ability to make a world that seems real but ultimately, and importantly, is not. If we hold fast to our own orthodoxies, either about the segregation of "poetry and life" or about their interpenetration, we will miss the experience the *Metamorphoses* offers of having such assumptions challenged. We will also overlook the genuine uncertainties with which Ovid probes the boundaries between reality and illusion and his acute awareness of the vulnerability and impotence of mere words.

¹⁶ See Habinek 2002, esp. 56: "Indeed the overattention to the relationship between poet and princeps that characterizes much recent work on Ovid comes close to being an avoidance of politics altogether."

The model of the poem's place in the world offered here draws its inspiration from the paradoxes presented by its form and content. The oscillations generated by the narrative between absorption in a fictional world and awareness of the text as a present artifact find an echo in the rival images of the cosmos within the poem, of an ephemeral world where everything changes in contrast with the permanent forms that so many of its characters assume. So we shall see Ovid respond to the realia of experience with a transparent textualization that charges them with new mythical associations and views them from new perspectives by placing them back in a narrative about change.

But at the same time as the *Metamorphoses* points out the fluidity of hard facts, the invocations of the immediate physical world of its audience anchor in the here and now a work that has sometimes seemed to float free in space and time. The constant appeal of the *Metamorphoses* in different epochs has sometimes been attributed to Ovid's decontextualization of myth. But as Feeney has recently argued, it is better to call the resulting narrative "universalizing" than "universal," for it treats myth not as pure story addressing aspects of human experience independent of particular cults or cultures but as something to be regrafted onto the specific local environment of the reader.¹⁷ The trees, animals, and statues that precipitate from his narrative become not just the products of literary description to be seen in the mind's eye; rather, real objects bring the distant world of his stories into the present. And this effect would have been all the more immediate to the poem's first readers, whose homes and cities were filled with the physical traces of Ovid's tales also in the form of artistic representations.

The weight it gives to this second aspect of textual "metamorphosis" also differentiates my work from the many important recent studies that have stressed the poet's ability to generate belief and "absent presences" through the illusions of representation. As opposed to looking at this illusionistic capacity from the text out, my emphasis will be to imagine how these efforts appear from the outside in, that is, from the horizons defined by the material and social circumstances of its first readers. Such an attempt raises two immediate difficulties. First is the infinite diversity of "realities" that first audience would have brought to its reading, and the absence of any evidence allowing us to gauge the range of responses that even a single artifact might have evoked. The semantic complexities of the text itself compound these problems: even if all readers did apply the same set of outside references to the interpretation of the poem, the way they would use them to construe its meaning would again be irre-

¹⁷ Feeney 1998.74.

coverably varied. Any project like mine must therefore be subjective and partial; I am not claiming the ability to recover even one Augustan reading as a historical fact. But that the poem was read by that first audience and that it formed an element in their reading of the world around them are historical phenomena whose interest and importance, both for Augustan culture as a whole and for our conception of Ovid's poem, are not diminished because they must be approached through the imagination.

Having said something about what I mean by politics, I also want to offer a brief defense of a second key term in my title, fiction. For although the word derives transparently from the Latin verb, *finco*, meaning to mold or shape, an ancient theory of fiction has become something of a holy grail for literary critics. Scholars of the ancient novel in particular, the classical form that seems tantalizingly like the modern genre we most reflexively think of when we hear the term fiction, have used the virtual absence of any Greek or Roman account of what these works do to make us aware at once of the complex bundle of terms contained in our word fiction and the distance that separates it from any ancient categories of narrative. In light of this, one might have preferred to speak of "illusion" in describing Ovid's crafting of images that are accepted as reality. Yet, aside from the practical inconvenience that this word has recently featured in the title of another monograph on Ovidian poetics,¹⁸ "illusion" also throws disproportionate emphasis on but one aspect of the phenomenon I am studying here. Illusion certainly connotes the approximation of art to the status of the real, the blurring of the boundary between what one is made to see or hear and what is. And the very mention of illusion does indeed create precisely the hermeneutic tension between knowing that something is not there and thinking that it is or, in Philip Hardie's terms, between seeing the illusion as a presence or as an absence. "Fiction," by contrast, adds an emphasis on the uncanniness and improbability of the whole experience by stressing not so much the perceptions of the audience, or even the craft of the artist, but the fundamental "not-there-ness" of what is represented. Illusions surprise us by not being real, fictions by seeming to be.

My emphasis on the distance between fictional narrative and reality helps overcome any anachronism imported by the term fiction by moving us closer to the ancient categories of narrative. Ancient rhetoricians divided narratives into three classes according to their relationship to reality: histories (*historiae*) told what actually happened; *argumenta*, exemplified by the plots of new comedy, presented plausible stories, things that might have happened; and, finally, "tales" (*fabulae*) describe events that are not only "untrue, but separated even from the appearance of

¹⁸ Hardie 2002c.

truth” because they are unnatural or impossible.¹⁹ This last category, frequently exemplified by tales of transformation, would self-evidently be the one into which Ovid’s own narratives would fall.²⁰ However, what in this system seems a straightforward progression, from not being real to not seeming real, in fact folds together two potentially distinct modern criteria for marking off fiction from reality: that it is not “true” and that it is not realistic, or “make-believe.” Their absence of verisimilitude would seem to set Ovid’s stories of transformation programmatically in the category of *fabulae*, by ancient reckoning the one most removed from reality. And yet for all Ovid’s gesturing in this direction, his stories, like so much of what we call “myth,” combine elements of different narrative “genres” in perplexing and challenging ways.²¹ Thus, while their essential subject matter falls in the category of the unbelievable, not only do these narratives contain passages of great verisimilitude, sometimes leading into obvious anachronism, but they possess the chronological framework of history itself.²² And the very questions of whether anthropomorphized gods were either “real” or “believable” would inevitably depend on the predispositions of the audience and the context in which they were represented. Another important factor that generally makes reading fictional narratives more complex and problematic for ancient audiences was the general absence of a context, like that of the modern novel for example, in which men told fictions without relinquishing a claim to cultural authority and prestige; without this the line between fictions and simple falsity in describing reality (i.e., lies) becomes much harder to negotiate.

¹⁹ For examples of this classification, see Sext. *Gramm.* 1.263, *Rhet. ad Herr.* 1.13, Cic. *Inv.* 1.27, and Quint. *Inst.* 2.3.4 (quoted in the text).

²⁰ Thus, Sextus (1.264) includes the tales “of the companions of Diomedes changed into sea birds, of Odysseus changed to a horse, and of Hecuba to a dog,” in this class, and Martianus Capella (486.16H.) presents the transformation of Daphne as a paradigmatic *fabula*.

²¹ On the problem of classifying mythical narratives in this schema, see Konstan 1998. In this article Konstan also employs a different criterion for describing fiction, referentiality, that has interesting consequences for Ovid’s text as well. He argues that what makes the ancient novels different from other ancient narratives is the absence, for all their verisimilitude, of any external referent in relation to which claims can be judged as true or false: there is simply no Daphnis or Chloe outside the text “for Longus to have been mistaken about.” If we accept Konstan’s claims that both mythical events and conventional figures, including the “cunning slave” of comedy, can also serve as such referents, then Ovid in the *Metamorphoses* adopts a diametrically opposite fictional strategy to the novelists, whose work, Konstan argues, responds to the same set of historical circumstances. Whereas the novels offer “realistic” narratives that nevertheless describe figures with no existence outside of the specific text in which they appear, Ovid tells unbelievable stories whose referentiality is almost overdetermined—by their engagement with myth, their “historical” framework, and the variety of real objects, species, and practices that accrue from them.

²² See Wheeler 2002; also Cole 2004.