

# ERYSICHTHON GOES TO TOWN

James Lasdun's Modern American  
Re-telling of Ovid

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# ABSTRACT

The Erysichthon of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* is given, in James Lasdun's re-telling of the story, a repeat performance of chopping down a sacred tree, receiving the punishment of insatiable hunger, selling his daughter, and eating himself. Transgressive greed, impiety, and environmental destruction are elements appearing already amongst the Greek sources of this ancient myth, but Lasdun adds new weight to the environmental issues he brings out of the story, turning Erysichthon into a corrupt property developer. The modern American setting of "Erysichthon" lets the poem's themes roam a long distance down the roads of self-improvement, consumption, and future-centredness, which contrast with Greek ideas about moderation, and perfection being located in the past.

These themes lead us to the eternally unfulfilled American Dream. Backing up our ideas with other sources from or about America, we discover how well the Erysichthon myth fits some of the prevailing approaches to living in America, which seem to have stemmed from the idea that making the journey there would lead to a better life. We encounter not only the relationship between Ovid and Lasdun's versions of the story, but between the earth and its human inhabitants, and find that some attitudes can be traced back a long way.

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*To John, The Believer  
... and Supervisor  
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ask,  
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# CHAPTER ONE

## INTRODUCTION

This is a thesis about a man who eats himself. Why would he do such a thing? As usual, both nature and nurture contribute to his behaviour, which is actually imposed upon him in punishment. Erysichthon,<sup>1</sup> as the eighth book of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* tells us, chops down a tree in a sacred grove and offends the goddess Ceres, who sentences him to insatiable hunger. James Lasdun re-tells the story in a modern American<sup>2</sup> setting.<sup>3</sup> As we read his poem, we wonder: why did this person retell the Greek myth of Erysichthon in this specific time and place? We will meet with many opportunities to compare Ovid's version with Lasdun's, but our journey will also lead us into a discussion of America, to look at the environmental destruction caused by the excesses of exploitation and consumerism, and into the heart of the American Dream itself. Before we go any further, indeed, we need to take an introductory look at what this term means, because we will be using it throughout our chapter on Lasdun's poem, which forms the major part of the thesis following the preparatory material in chapters two and three.

There are many ways to define the American Dream, and to define what is *not* the American Dream, but the hazy separating line shifts from American to American, and commentator to commentator, as well as with variations of time and place. As a personal emotive term referring to

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<sup>1</sup> It will quickly become apparent that we are talking about the 'Erysichthon' who appears in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and the other original sources we will detail, rather than the 'Erysichthon' who is the son of King Cecrops of Athens. Because our primary ancient text is in Latin, the Latinised names of figures and places are generally used throughout – except when a source using the Greek versions is being discussed.

<sup>2</sup> A geographical clarification: when referring to "America" and things that are "American" in this thesis, it is the nation of the United States of America – not the whole North American continent, nor South America – that is being signified.

<sup>3</sup> It is deeply appreciated that John Davidson suggested taking a look at Lasdun's poem, which was rather fortunate, for it became the focus of this thesis.

something inside the mind, the American Dream could be considered to have a different meaning for every person who conceives of it – after all, it does motivate a variety of different behaviours. This need not make it a term of problematic usage, for the context in which it is placed usually reveals the particular near-constant aspect or aspects of the Dream to which the text or speech refers.

The term was first used in recorded print around the beginning of the twentieth century: “the possible rise of fortune that is the universal American dream and hope” was an idea promoted by “fashion and home magazines” according to D. G. Phillips’ *Susan Lenox: her fall and rise*.<sup>4</sup> The first use of the term that was widely recognised and taken up can be found in the 1931 book by American self-made historian James Truslow Adams, *The Epic of America*.<sup>5</sup> The term appears more than thirty times in the book<sup>6</sup> – in fact, Adams wanted *The American Dream* to be its title, but his publishers refused the idea.<sup>7</sup> One of his many definitions is “that dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for every man,<sup>8</sup> with opportunity for each according to his ability or achievement”.<sup>9</sup> Seven decades later, American academic and writer Jim Cullen was of course allowed to use the term in the title of his book, *The American Dream : A Short History of an Idea That Shaped a Nation*<sup>10</sup> (as are countless other authors). Cullen emphasises the plurality of the

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<sup>4</sup> OED Online (Draft revision June 2010) “American dream” (or “- Dream”) citing Phillips (1917) I. xxiii. 439.

<sup>5</sup> Adams (1932).

<sup>6</sup> Cullen (2003) 4.

<sup>7</sup> Nevins (1968) 68 n.41.

<sup>8</sup> There are many casualties whenever one American tries to speak for the whole of America. While female people, like all Americans, can share in the American Dream (unlimitedly through the mind, but outside of it only up to the limits imposed by the society in which they live – though these can even influence the thoughts), unfortunately the now-dated default-male-gendered language of many historical sources such as this can make it sound (to the modern ‘equalised’ ear) as if females are excluded – merely the hands that rocked the cradles in which lay the hungry Dreamers.

<sup>9</sup> Adams (1932) 404.

<sup>10</sup> Cullen (2003). The book begins with a quotation from Thoreau, who, along with Emerson, happens to be one of the grand old early (nineteenth century) pastoralists who were inspiring commentators on the American environment, and remain heavily quoted today (as well as another naturalist, John Muir, hero of the American national parks movement, whose life ran into the early twentieth century).

American Dream(s), and manages to divide them into overlapping chapter topics such as “Upward Mobility”,<sup>11</sup> “Equality”,<sup>12</sup> and “Home Ownership”,<sup>13</sup> which are even generally chronological<sup>14</sup> – perhaps future sources on the subject will extend beyond even the most recently documented incarnations of the American Dream. Cullen’s goal is to be “suggestive not exhaustive”.<sup>15</sup>

An even fresher, briefer report on the Dream can be found in an April 2009 copy of *Vanity Fair* magazine. David Kamp’s article “Rethinking the American Dream” happens to pick up on Adams’ use of the word ‘richer’ in his definition of the American Dream – “he wasn’t just talking about richness of experience”.<sup>16</sup> Nor, of course, is *Vanity Fair*, since richness of money and consumption is proposed as the ideal life within its pages – Kamp is careful never to float too far from material shores, but he does cover a lot of matters. Complemented by bright, posed 1950s photos of nuclear families in domestic bliss (the article may be dutifully-researched and well-considered, but these are, after all, the pages of a fashion magazine), the article asks whether events such as the recent economic recession<sup>17</sup> are challenging or changing the “shared national ideal”<sup>18</sup> and contributing to many Americans’ loss of faith in the American Dream.<sup>19</sup> Kamp proposes various ways in which the American Dream has been conceived, some of which remain current. For example, it can manifest itself as patriotism, extreme wealth,<sup>20</sup> or a global democratic mission.<sup>21</sup> Earlier it seemed to mean “freedom *from* want” rather than “freedom *to*

<sup>11</sup> Cullen (2003) Chapter 3: “Dream of the Good Life (II): Upward Mobility” (59-102).

<sup>12</sup> Cullen (2003) Chapter 4: “King of America: The Dream of Equality” (103-131).

<sup>13</sup> Cullen (2003) Chapter 5: “Detached Houses: The Dream of Home Ownership” (133-157).

<sup>14</sup> Cullen (2003) 7-8.

<sup>15</sup> Cullen (2003) 9.

<sup>16</sup> Kamp (2009) 83.

<sup>17</sup> The recession has spawned a number of non-fiction books of a new genre that could be labelled ‘banker thriller’ (where the party in peril seems to be the American Dream itself), with titles such as *Fool’s Gold : How Unrestrained Greed Corrupted a Dream, Shattered Global Markets and Unleashed a Catastrophe* (Tett [2009]).

<sup>18</sup> Kamp (2009) 78.

<sup>19</sup> Kamp (2009) 80.

<sup>20</sup> Kamp (2009) 80.

<sup>21</sup> Kamp (2009) 140.

want”, which contrasts with the excessive shopping that has also become a feature.<sup>22</sup> The oft-mentioned states of home ownership, car ownership, and owning a television on which to watch aspirational family sitcoms featuring Americans doing the same things were postwar domestic American Dreams.<sup>23</sup> Their acquisition, along with a college education,<sup>24</sup> was fuelled by a postwar consumer credit boom which still continues with today’s even greater willingness to go into debt.<sup>25</sup>

Achievement will always be relative to what everybody else has – families that may have two or more of the material possessions families dreamed of in the 1950s-1970s now do not have ‘very much’.<sup>26</sup> Instead, there could be a car and a television for every individual in a family, and still they are not satisfied. But this is exactly what we’d expect if the people are chasing an ever-receding American Dream – the Dream undergoes metamorphoses to constantly escape their grasp. By its end the article is making similar points to David Brooks’ writing<sup>27</sup> (even quoting an article that he wrote about luxury tract housing development) and finishes with suggestions to fellow Americans about “recalibrating our expectations” and that the “middle class” should accept continuity rather than the upward mobility that immigrants may still hope for.<sup>28</sup> It is difficult to imagine American people being happy with a living standard that “remains happily constant from one generation to the next”<sup>29</sup> – some would label this settling-for-sustainability as un-American! The lacklustre ending of the article is slightly disappointing – it is simply not as exciting as the traditional, gloriously unreasonable rallying cries of the American Dreamers, who, according to many of the other sources available, still roam and populate the land.

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<sup>22</sup> Kamp (2009)140.

<sup>23</sup> Kamp (2009) 140.

<sup>24</sup> Kamp (2009) 140.

<sup>25</sup> Kamp (2009)141-142.

<sup>26</sup> Kamp (2009) 142.

<sup>27</sup> We will be meeting many of Brooks’ ideas about America and Americans in our chapter on Lasdun’s poem.

<sup>28</sup> Kamp (2009)142.

<sup>29</sup> Kamp (2009)142.



The current Oxford English Dictionary definition of the American Dream is “the ideal that every citizen of the United States should have an equal opportunity to achieve success and prosperity through hard work, determination, and initiative”.<sup>30</sup> America’s Merriam-Webster Dictionary emphasises a similar notion of equality and prosperity, separating the usages to mean both the idea and the realisation of the American Dream: “an American social ideal that stresses egalitarianism and especially material prosperity”, as well as “the prosperity or life that is the realization of this ideal”.<sup>31</sup>

For a visual definition of the American Dream, one could look at a comic illustration in *Time* magazine entitled “The American Dream, Supersized”, subtitled “Immigrants often have big ideas about their new life. And often they’re right”.<sup>32</sup> The story, told from first-hand experience, features an American couple asking their daughter how she enjoyed her school trip to the Lower East Side of Manhattan. The trip was supposed to help the class learn about the tough, cramped, hard-working and hopeful lives of immigrants arriving a century ago, but the daughter says her favourite aspect of the trip was “Watching *The Simpsons* in the limo” (their hastily-arranged back-up transport after the school bus broke down).<sup>33</sup> However, the authors are suggesting that maybe *that is the whole point* – “Hadn’t most immigrants [including this girl’s Latvian great grandmother] come to America to make a better life for themselves and their descendents? Who’s to say that by *better* they didn’t mean ridiculously so?”.<sup>34</sup> In the final panel, the authors have imagined a boat full of historical and contemporary immigrants expressing their hopes of wealth and a high living standard for their descendents. For example, one hopes “that my children’s children will someday watch moving pictures in the back of vast

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<sup>30</sup> OED Online (Draft revision June 2010) “American dream”.

<sup>31</sup> *Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary* (2010) “American dream” (“often capitalized D”).

<sup>32</sup> Handy & Sweeny (2006).

<sup>33</sup> Handy & Sweeny (2006).

<sup>34</sup> Handy & Sweeny (2006).

horseless carriages that also have iceboxes”, like the daughter in the featured family does; and another that, “God willing, my children will go to medical school and then become rich by injecting women’s faces with poison to make them look younger”.<sup>35</sup> In this way, the American Dream can be and has been real.

All of the meanings that are mentioned so far above are relevant to the way the term is used in connection with Lasdun’s poem. Throughout our chapter on this, we will also bring in material from other authors, such as John Cheever and David Brooks. The thoughts we are able to have about this topic at this time in history owe a great debt to previous thinkers, whose theories (anthropological, structural, and otherwise) are often so ingrained as options that we do not think of their names even as we use aspects of their techniques. They are also prompted and informed by the way we receive information today – the technology available means people can discover much in a short space of time, which affects what they will say, and what they will seek to hear. One can find what Ovid and what an American pop star have to say about a single topic, without leaving one’s chair, though unfortunately we cannot listen to Ovid’s own voice telling us in an audio file. When we are trying to reach a conclusion, we do need to listen to both, and everything else we can. Hence the sources for American and environmental aspects of this thesis are wide-ranging. There are extensive footnotes in this section in particular, running in parallel but expanded directions to the text. To avoid a disjointed experience, the longer ones could perhaps be read independently at leisure so as not to interrupt the reading of the main text.

As background, the ancient sources of the Erysichthon story are briefly discussed in our second chapter. Translators are specified when first used, and any deviations from the originally-stated translators (such as the occasional use of an alternative translator, or a more literal interpretation) are marked. Line numbers are those of the original text

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<sup>35</sup> Handy & Sweeny (2006).

unless stated. Grateful acknowledgement is given to John Davidson for the translation of Tzetzes on Lycophron *Alexandra* 1393, and assistance in many other instances of translation.

It is true that Erysichthon's story "does not belong among the great, commonly known Greek myths",<sup>36</sup> as Galinsky admits, but it *is* in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, which is considered a handbook on the subject, amongst its many purposes. Perhaps the height of the popularity of this particular myth is yet to come, since the world seems to be growing in relevance to it. The principal translation we will use for Ovid's *Metamorphoses* is that of A. D. Melville in the 1986 Oxford World's Classics edition – use of the text without a translator credit can be assumed to be this version. The line numbers in Melville refer not to the translation but to the Latin text (the F. J. Miller edition of which Kenney explains is generally used there).<sup>37</sup> A. S. Hollis' notes to the untranslated 1970 Oxford edition of the eighth book are particularly detailed and helpful.<sup>38</sup> We spend our third chapter on Ovid before launching into Lasdun.

There are books and articles that dissect Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, and some studies that concentrate on the Erysichthon myth, such as McKay's *Erysichthon : A Callimachean Comedy*.<sup>39</sup> Moreover, many scholars concentrate on later versions of the myths within the *Metamorphoses*. This thesis is not so much a study of the 'Reception' of the myth in Lasdun, as an exploration of the things it brings with it: greed, consumption, environmental destruction. We are looking at something that does not seem to have been investigated thoroughly before, particularly from a Classical stance: there are no books published about Lasdun's poem to consult – it is only ever mentioned in passing and in

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<sup>36</sup> Galinsky (1975) 5.

<sup>37</sup> Kenney commentary (1986) 381.

<sup>38</sup> Hollis' notes in Ovid *Metamorphoses VIII* (1970).

<sup>39</sup> McKay (1962).

reviews. It is a 'small' work on the scale of all literature, but it reveals big things.

## CHAPTER TWO

# ORIGINAL SOURCES

The available original sources for the Erysichthon myth are limited to the written record of eight voices from ancient Greek, Roman and Byzantine ages – those of Hesiod, Hellanicus, Callimachus, Palaephatus, Lycophron, Ovid, Antoninus Liberalis, and Tzetzes’ commentary on Lycophron – and three vase paintings.<sup>1</sup> Only two of these sources – Callimachus’ *Hymn to Demeter* and Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* – offer more than scattered fragments, a passing reference or a brief summary. We will begin by examining all the literary sources except for Ovid (the primary source of James Lasdun’s 1994 poem). We will then consider Ovid in more detail in the following chapter.

The earliest surviving literary source is the *Ēhoîai* (Catalogue of Women), a matrilineal genealogical poem surviving in fragments, which was popularly attributed to Hesiod in antiquity, though it seems unlikely that it is his work alone.<sup>2</sup> Hesiod seems to have lived around 700 BCE, so is regularly compared with and contrasted against his approximately contemporary fellow voice of Greek epic poetry, Homer.<sup>3</sup> In Merkelbach and West’s Fragment 43a of the *Ēhoîai*, a very fragmentary fragment itself, we are told of the man, *Ἐρυσίχθων*

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<sup>1</sup> The three known depictions of the Erysichthon story on vases all feature the same pivotal moment: an enrobed goddess or nymph figure beside a tree, pleading with outstretched arm or arms, as the naked Erysichthon or satyr lifts his axe high in the air and leans in for the chop. A description of the variations in the ways of showing this enthralling and horrific scene would be better suited to a whole chapter. It is only on the Attic red-figure pelike that the tree has rows of leaves to clothe its branches. Curiously, Gantz says this is the sole depiction of Erysichthon that we have ([1993] 69). The other two sacred trees look somewhat chewed-at, but this makes them look even more vulnerable to the axe that is about to break the upper border frieze of each bell krater with the arc of its impending swing. The vase paintings are listed in the *LIMC* IV.1 entry “Erysichthon I” (Kron [1988] 14-18) and shown in *LIMC* IV.2 (13).

<sup>2</sup> West (1985) 127. *Ēhoîai* is a plural formulation taken from the words for ‘or she who’, which is how the stories of the interconnected succession of women are introduced (Green [2005] 281).

<sup>3</sup> West (2003) 700.

(Erysichthon), whose daughter was the radiant, “quick-eyed”, “Beautiful-haired”<sup>4</sup> *Μήστρα* (Mestra).<sup>5</sup> Sisyphus (who, like Erysichthon, is descended from Aeolus) tries to acquire her to marry his son, Glaucus.<sup>6</sup> Her maternal parentage is not mentioned,<sup>7</sup> despite the function of the work, but her insatiate father, nicknamed “Aethon” (burning) for his fiery appetite, has sold Mestra as a wife.<sup>8</sup> However, instead of contributing to a new line of kin, she utilises the shape-changing powers she is given by another abductor, Poseidon, and escapes back to her hungry, exploitative father.<sup>9</sup> Reading between the “massive gaps” in the papyrus,<sup>10</sup> it appears that a quarrel over the exchange, between Erysichthon and Sisyphus, had to be arbitrated, possibly by Athena herself.<sup>11</sup>

In fragment 43b,<sup>12</sup> we see repeated from 43a the fact that Erysichthon is the son of Triopas. He cut down a tree sacred to Demeter, who was angry and punished him with insatiable hunger.<sup>13</sup> His daughter is described as “*Mestra, a sorceress, who could transform herself into every kind of animal*”, whom he sold daily to feed his hunger.<sup>14</sup> Most’s fragment 71 (MW 43c) reconfirms from Philodemus, *On Piety*, that Poseidon “*is said to confer this kind of ability upon*

<sup>4</sup> Hesiod fr. 69 Most (the Loeb edition, which provides a translation and concordances with Merkelbach & West).

<sup>5</sup> Hesiod fr. 43a MW.

<sup>6</sup> Hesiod fr. 43a MW. Note that ‘Mestra’ means ‘she who is wooed’ – Robertson suggests that the bride-gifts she would receive are “the *aition* of a form of ritual begging” ([1984] 384). Coming from the Burkert-inspired standpoint that “Most Greek myths are inspired by ritual”, he reminds us that “ignorance of ritual vitiates most of modern theorising about the myths” (370). Burkert proposes the Erysichthon story’s connection with begging (or gift-collection) ([1979] 135).

<sup>7</sup> However, the tiny fragment of text, “*by her mother*” (Hesiod fr. 43a 34 MW) may mean that Mestra returns to the home of both her father *and* mother, but it is difficult to tell when there are unknown quantities of words missing. Doherty makes a point of this possibility ([2006] 324 n.71).

<sup>8</sup> Hesiod fr. 43a MW.

<sup>9</sup> Hesiod fr. 43a MW, confirmed by Rutherford (2005) 101.

<sup>10</sup> Gantz (1993) 175.

<sup>11</sup> Hesiod fr. 69 Most.

<sup>12</sup> Hesiod fr. 43b MW, or 70 in Most. This fragment is a Scholium on Lycophron’s *Alexandra* 1393 (it is “*as Hesiod says*”), a text which we discuss further below.

<sup>13</sup> Hesiod fr. 43b MW.

certain human beings, such as *Periclymenus* and *Mestra*".<sup>15</sup> When, in fragment 43a, he himself abducts *Mestra* to *Cos* himself (which, oddly, may have happened either side of her episode with *Glaucus*), she has a son, *Eurypylus* (who become king of the island), then returns to her father in *Athens*.<sup>16</sup> The fact that *Poseidon* is also her great grandfather<sup>17</sup> is, characteristically of such genealogies, immaterial.

In the fifth century BCE, the prolific Greek logographer *Hellanicus*, of *Mytilene* on *Lesbos*,<sup>18</sup> wrote works of early mythography, ethnography and chronography.<sup>19</sup> Unlike his contemporary, *Herodotus* the historian, he did not come to conceptualise a "single, universal current of events exceeding purely local spheres of activity".<sup>20</sup> However, *Hellanicus* was still innovative: he "sought to reconcile the contradictions in mythology, though with greater credulity and less rationalization than *Hecateus* or *Herodotus* had applied to the task",<sup>21</sup> and he established what turned into a given genealogical measurement, the fitting of three generations per century,<sup>22</sup> as a tool for bringing about chronological order in the "disparate corpora of *mythoi*".<sup>23</sup> Volume 1 of *Robert Fowler's* collection, *Early Greek Mythography*, offers us evidence of two brief mentions of *Erysichthon* in *Hellanicus*, in fragments 7 and 122.<sup>24</sup> The second volume will provide scholarly commentary to these quotations,<sup>25</sup> but it is yet to appear.

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<sup>14</sup> Hesiod fr. 70 Most.

<sup>15</sup> Hesiod fr. 71 Most.

<sup>16</sup> Hesiod fr. 43a MW.

<sup>17</sup> West (1985) 174. (Genealogical tables of the *Deukalionidai*, one of which shows *Erysichthon's* descent from *Poseidon* and *Kanake* via *Triopas*, according to *Hesiod's Catalogue*.)

<sup>18</sup> Howatson (1997) 264.

<sup>19</sup> Meister (2005) 79.

<sup>20</sup> Grant (1980) 190.

<sup>21</sup> Grant (1980) 190.

<sup>22</sup> Grant (1980) 190.

<sup>23</sup> Harding (2003) 667.

<sup>24</sup> *Hellanicus* fr. 7 and 122 in Fowler (2000).

<sup>25</sup> Oxford University Press (2010) online catalogue.

Fragment 7 tells us that in the first book of *Deukaliōneia*, one of his mythographical works, Hellanicus “says that *Erysichthon the son of Myrmidon was called the Fiery because he was insatiable when it came to food*”.<sup>26</sup> (Two further sources, Aelian I. 27 and Eustathius, tell us the same thing<sup>27</sup> – Jacoby’s commentary on this fragment, which is 4 *Hellanikos von Lesbos* F7 in this older collection, provides some discussion.<sup>28</sup>) The word for “the Fiery”<sup>29</sup> is the same one seen in Hesiod, *Αἴθων* (Aethon).<sup>30</sup> We know this from having the massively significant expanse of Athenaeus’ *Deipnosophistae* (*Philosophers at Dinner*) available to us. In this, his only surviving work,<sup>31</sup> the Greek grammarian and rhetorician from Naucratis, Egypt, displays the fact he is prodigiously well-read. Plenty of the material within the fifteen books (there could have originally been twice as many<sup>32</sup>), written around 200 CE, survives nowhere else. He refers to around a thousand ancient authors, from Homer to his own day, by constructing a friend’s account of imaginary conversations (covering all manner of topics) between learned Greek and Roman guests at a banquet, in the form of a symposium dialogue in the style of Plato.<sup>33</sup> At Book 10.416 Hellanicus’ work is quoted in the context of a discussion about gluttony, along with descriptions of other greedy people besides Erysichthon.<sup>34</sup> This is the first time we hear Myrmidon named as a parent – the Thessalian figure is now “entered into competition with Triopas in literature for the dubious honour of being Erysichthon’s father”, as McKay puts it.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Translated by Gulick, from Athenaeus 10.416b.

<sup>27</sup> McKay (1962) 8.

<sup>28</sup> Jacoby (1957) *FGrHist* 4F7 commentary 435.

<sup>29</sup> Athenaeus 10.416b.

<sup>30</sup> Hesiod fr. 43a and 43b MW.

<sup>31</sup> Edwards et al (2003) 202.

<sup>32</sup> Edwards et al (2003) 202.

<sup>33</sup> Llewelyn-Jones (2003) 99.

<sup>34</sup> Athenaeus 10.416b.



In Fowler's fragment 122, Erysichthon's father is once again said to be Triopas.<sup>36</sup> This statement, which contradicts the information supplied in fragment 7, comes from Stephanus Byzantinus, a Greek Christian man who taught in Constantinople in the sixth century CE. Principally a grammarian, he does not pay attention to Ptolemy's scientific treatise on geography, nor does he order material historically – "His prime interest is the correct formation of ethnic adjectives".<sup>37</sup> Here in fragment 122, he lets us know that Hellanicus mentions the city of Triopion (or Triopia), a city of Caria, as taking its name from Triopas.<sup>38</sup>

The next three authors of original sources to be discussed were close contemporaries during the Hellenistic period, and it is difficult to ascertain which of their works was written earliest. However, if we introduce the short account of Palaephatus first, it will provide an interesting contrast in purpose to those of both archaic Hesiod and classical Hellanicus. His friend Aristotle, whom he followed to Athens (for he may have been his lover<sup>39</sup>), may have conferred upon him the name Palaephatus (the "poetical adjective" *palaiphatos* means "spoken long ago"<sup>40</sup>) as a pseudonym when he was writing, sometime in the second half of the fourth century BCE<sup>41</sup> - the "somewhat confused accounts of the *Suda*"<sup>42</sup> (an encyclopaedia from the tenth century CE) give us little to be certain of about his origins and life.<sup>43</sup> In number 23 of the *Peri Apístōn* or *On Unbelievable Tales* that we have, Palaephatus is cynical about the purported shape-changing abilities of Mestra, Erysichthon's

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<sup>35</sup> McKay (1962) 8. For discussion of the Erysichthon story's associations with the eponymous Myrmidonians of Thessaly, see McKay (1962) 8, 35.

<sup>36</sup> Hellanicus fr. 122 in Fowler.

<sup>37</sup> Browning (2003) 1442.

<sup>38</sup> Hellanicus fr. 122 in Fowler.

<sup>39</sup> Stern (1996) 2.

<sup>40</sup> Stern (1996) 1. For helpfully expanded details about Palaephatus' approach, see Stern's "Introduction" 1-25.

<sup>41</sup> Fornaro (2007) 376.

<sup>42</sup> Stern (1996) 2.

<sup>43</sup> Stern (1996) 1-4.

daughter, saying that “*it’s the sort of thing a ridiculous myth would assert*”.<sup>44</sup> In the handful of sentences that form the rest of this piece, he explains the practical reality of the story: Erysichthon laid waste to his fortune, but his daughter was attractive and eligible. She was continually on the receiving end of wooing-gifts from men, suitors who (rather than straining her estate like the suitors of Penelope, elsewhere in Greek myth, though unmentioned) were benefiting her poor father.<sup>45</sup> In “*those days*”<sup>46</sup> livestock were given instead of money, so, “*When the Thessalians saw that Erysichthon’s possessions were increasing they said: ‘It’s all Mestra: her father’s horse and cow, and the other animals too.’*”<sup>47</sup>

This is typical of the way in which Palaephatus applied systematic rationalisation in the *Unbelievable Tales*: by stating that the myths were, indeed, not to be believed in the state in which they were told, but that the fantastic events could be reduced to everyday, magic-free comings and goings that actually happened. In the *Peri Apístōn* he applied this unromantic treatment to many myths, and sometimes the results were “more absurd, in fact, than the myths themselves”<sup>48</sup> – unfortunately we only have the epitome (summary) version of the grand work to examine. Palaephatus seemed to think that misunderstanding was the standard cause of the ordinary inflating into the extraordinary. He explains this in a prologue to the collection, where he reassures the reader that he personally investigated the evidence for every tale, on location.<sup>49</sup> He opted for “historical interpretations that were associated with geographical and ethnographical interests” over using philosophy and theology.<sup>50</sup> Although fundamentalist in the degree he practised it, his method of striving to make the stories “plausible in human

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<sup>44</sup> Palaephatus 23 trans. Stern.

<sup>45</sup> Palaephatus 23.

<sup>46</sup> Palaephatus 23.

<sup>47</sup> Palaephatus 23.

<sup>48</sup> Trzaskoma et al. (2004) 329.

<sup>49</sup> Palaephatus’ introduction to *Peri Apístōn*.

<sup>50</sup> Fornaro (2007) 377.

terms”<sup>51</sup> can be detected in many other thinkers’ approaches to myth.<sup>52</sup> We are not told of any insatiable hunger here, but it is interesting to envisage how Palaephatus would have demythologised the punishing spike in Erysichthon’s post-tree-felling appetite if he had included that aspect of the myth in his rationalisation.

It is left to the Greek poet-scholar Callimachus, who is both the second most significant author of an original source to be discussed here, and the second of our Hellenistic trio, to offer us a lively description of the bingeing scene in the Erysichthon story, or rather, ‘syndrome’ of events. Callimachus (c.310-305 – c.240 BCE) came from the Greek colony of Cyrene (in modern Libya), and worked in the Alexandrian Library, under commission from the Egyptian king, Ptolemy II Philadelphus.<sup>53</sup> Despite the fact that the work in question here is a reverent *Hymn to Demeter* (the *Sixth Hymn* in a set of six that mimic the form of *Homeric Hymns*, but which were perhaps designed for private appreciation by the educated rather than having a civic function in a public performance in the manner of the *Homeric Hymns*<sup>54</sup>), Erysichthon’s hunger, a vortex into which whole animals disappear, is undeniably side-splitting for the appreciator. It is the oddest and most memorable part of the 163-line hymn, especially since there is a complete absence of Mestra and her metamorphoses in this version. Outside the tale of Erysichthon, the piece is a poem portraying or rejoicing in peaceful and plentiful nightfall, the time when the fast is broken for devotees at the described festival for Demeter, which may be the Greek Thesmophoria, held in autumn.<sup>55</sup>

Here in the *Hymn*, narrated in dactylic hexameter, Erysichthon winds up an embarrassing stay-at-home son after he goes woodchopping with his band of

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<sup>51</sup> Cameron (2004) 217.

<sup>52</sup> Trzaskoma et al. (2004) 329.

<sup>53</sup> Howatson (1997) 110.

<sup>54</sup> Howatson (1997) 110-111.

<sup>55</sup> Trzaskoma et al. (2004) 80.

twenty strong men in Demeter's sacred grove.<sup>56</sup> After a rude offer to axe Demeter (who is disguised as her public priestess Nicippe) as well as the sacred poplar beloved by her forest nymphs,<sup>57</sup> Demeter punishes him with the insatiable hunger well-expressed in the French translation by Cahen: "*une faim terrible et cruelle, une faim ardente, énorme, mal dont la force le rongait. Malheureux!*".<sup>58</sup> This "*faim ardente*" uses the same Greek word to describe the *burning* hunger that has been shaped into the Aethon name for Erysichthon in Hesiod<sup>59</sup> and Hellanicus<sup>60</sup> already: *αἴθωνα* (aethona).<sup>61</sup> One can only imagine what Erysichthon may have been like had he had a PlayStation, microwave and modern-day pizza delivery at his service; here he has cooks who "*refused him nothing*",<sup>62</sup> and he consumes "*the heifer which his mother was keeping for Hestia*"<sup>63</sup> and even the mouse-hunting farm cat.<sup>64</sup> We don't hear of Erysichthon's death, though it sounds a mere word or two away, when his father, Triopas, begs Poseidon: "*Either remove from him this awful malady or take him and feed him yourself – for my tables say 'no more'*".<sup>65</sup> Despite exhausting his estate's resources,<sup>66</sup> "*all that was left of the poor creature were skin and bones*"<sup>67</sup> and we are left to wonder how Erysichthon's family cope long-term with their hungry 'skeleton' in the closet if they cannot be completely rid of him. As Hopkinson suggests, the painfully emaciated form of Callimachus' insatiate Erysichthon may have helped Ovid

<sup>56</sup> Callimachus *Hymn to Demeter* 33-39 trans. Hopkinson (1984). There is an entertaining multitude of translations of Callimachus' *Hymns* available.

<sup>57</sup> Callimachus *Hymn to Demeter* 40-55.

<sup>58</sup> Callimachus *Hymn to Demeter* 66-68 trans. Cahen (1972). Into English, "*a cruel and terrible hunger, a burning hunger, huge, the force of which corroded him badly. Wretched man!*".

<sup>59</sup> Hesiod fr. 43a MW.

<sup>60</sup> Athenaeus 10.416b.

<sup>61</sup> Rutherford (2005) 104.

<sup>62</sup> Callimachus *Hymn to Demeter* 106 trans. Hopkinson.

<sup>63</sup> Callimachus *Hymn to Demeter* 108.

<sup>64</sup> Callimachus *Hymn to Demeter* 110.

<sup>65</sup> Callimachus *Hymn to Demeter* 103-104.

<sup>66</sup> This kingdom is only a "little world" (Otis [1970] 66, citing Hans Diller's [1934] "Die dichterische Eigenart von Ovids *Metamorphosen*" 28), so there are fewer resources to consume before everything is gone than there might be in grander palaces.

<sup>67</sup> Callimachus *Hymn to Demeter* 93.

dream up such a graphic autophagic end for Erysichthon.<sup>68</sup> We will certainly be revisiting Callimachus' version as likely inspiration for Ovid's. The exploits of the gluttonous young man are book-ended by harvest-season invocations to the fertility goddess Demeter,<sup>69</sup> reminding us that it is, after all, her hymn, and it was disrespecting her that led Erysichthon to become a race-horse-devouring, cross-roads-begging shame on the house of Triopas.<sup>70</sup>

It is worth noting here, as K. J. McKay spends a substantial section of his detailed 1962 study *Erysichthon : A Callimachean Comedy* doing, that the Erysichthon story may have an origin or a relation in a surviving Coan folktale.<sup>71</sup> It is entitled "Myrmidonia and Pharaonia", or, "The Fairy's Revenge", as R. M. Dawkins calls it – in 1950 he published his translation in *Forty Five Stories from the Dodecanese*,<sup>72</sup> after it was told to Jacob Zarraftis (who collected it for W. J. D. Rouse<sup>73</sup>), by Hadzi-Yavrouda, a woman of Asphendiou on Cos at the end of the nineteenth century.<sup>74</sup>

The folktale bears many remarkable similarities to the Erysichthon story, which we may pick out ourselves thanks to Hollis' appendicising of a relevant section from Dawkins' book.<sup>75</sup> For example, elements of the folktale which we will see when we discuss Ovid's version include an arrogant man (here, a prince) who urges his terrified wood-chopping companions (one of whom hesitates) to ignore an oak's groans and bleeding.<sup>76</sup> After the oak's heavy fall, the voice within threatens punishment: "*Even as god punished your wicked father, even so and three times worse will He punish you*".<sup>77</sup> (The voice

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<sup>68</sup> Hopkinson (1984) 26.

<sup>69</sup> Callimachus *Hymn to Demeter* 1-23, 118-123.

<sup>70</sup> Callimachus *Hymn to Demeter* 109, 114-115.

<sup>71</sup> McKay (1962): the section is "Erysichthon and Mestra on Kos" (33-60).

<sup>72</sup> Dawkins (1950) 334-349, as cited in McKay (1962) 33-60.

<sup>73</sup> Who referred to it in *Folklore* 10 (1899) and 16 (1905), according to McKay (1962) 33 n.4.

<sup>74</sup> McKay (1962) 33-34.

<sup>75</sup> Hollis (1970) 154-157.

<sup>76</sup> Hadzi-Yavrouda trans. Dawkins (1950) as appendicised in Hollis (1970) 154.

<sup>77</sup> Hadzi-Yavrouda in Hollis (1970) 154-155.

comes from the blood-soaked Dimitroula, who has been hiding in the tree in order to watch a battle between the ploughman she is in love with, and a representative of the king of Myrmidonia [the king is in love with her] – after all the fighters fall, a temporary survivor of the carnage and well-drowning goes to the king’s son and “darkly hints at some kinship between Dimitroula and the spirits of the wood”, which motivates him to fell the grove.<sup>78</sup>) The prince’s punishment, just as in Ovid, arrives in his sleep, although his dream has several extra elements. First, a fairy leads him to the trees he chopped down, which are on fire, and the blaze increases and burns him.<sup>79</sup> This causes painful sores, which crack to the bone when a cold wind arrives to torture him further.<sup>80</sup> Then the figure of an impossibly mal-nourished old woman with many grotesquely-described skin conditions draws near, reaches for the sword that he had plunged into the oak, breathes “seeds” all over it, and tells him, “*I am the Ravening hunger.*”<sup>81</sup> The prince’s mouth gapes open, the woman inserts the sword, then draws it out, leaving the seeds of hunger inside him, which provoke desperate dreams of food. He wakes, starving, and eats till he reaches poverty, attempts to make money out of his two children, and finally eats himself.<sup>82</sup>

Both McKay and Hollis tentatively discuss the very real possibility that this folktale (or at least some of it) is a *direct transmission from antiquity* (!) – Cos has been continuously Greek-populated since then – with unconcealed awe at such a rare feat of the oral tradition.<sup>83</sup> If it were indeed this ancient (and there are plenty of reasons it may have actually just be a re-telling from a written source such as Ovid somewhere in the intervening centuries), then we have another ancient source for the Erysichthon story. Unfortunately, McKay tells

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<sup>78</sup> McKay (1962) 34.

<sup>79</sup> Hadzi-Yavrouda in Hollis (1970) 155.

<sup>80</sup> Hadzi-Yavrouda in Hollis (1970) 155-156.

<sup>81</sup> Hadzi-Yavrouda in Hollis (1970) 156.

<sup>82</sup> Hadzi-Yavrouda in Hollis (1970) 157.

us that the descendents of Hadzi-Yavrouda, who was old at the time of the story-gathering, cannot be traced for further discussion.<sup>84</sup>

The final author of an original source from the Hellenistic period is the poet Lycophron. Some or all of the work *Alexandra*, the 1474 lines of which are a tangle of splendidly knowledgeable but complicated, obscure references to both familiar (but, when alluded to, hard to recognise) beings and locations as well as unfamiliar ones, may have been written much later by a person of the same name or family as Lycophron of Chalcis, Euboea, himself born c.320 BCE.<sup>85</sup> It is uncertain how long he lived, but we know that around 283 BCE, Lycophron, like Callimachus, made it to Alexandria to work in the library, and that the Suda credits him with *Alexandra*.<sup>86</sup> In iambic trimeters,<sup>87</sup> the work is narrated by the watchman of King Priam's daughter Cassandra (who is called Alexandra here), and is about the prophecies she made concerning the Trojan War.<sup>88</sup> The passing mention of interest here refers to Erysichthon's daughter, though not by name, when it talks of Erysichthon, as Aethon:

him who of old was utterly hated by the goddess Cyrita.<sup>89</sup> the  
father of the crafty vixen who by daily traffic assuaged the raging  
hunger of her sire – even Aethon, plougher of alien shires.

Lycophron *Alexandra* 1391-1396 trans. Mair.

This asserts that 'Mestra', Erysichthon's versatile fund of a daughter, was up to something more akin to prostitution.

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<sup>83</sup> McKay (1962) 35-37 and Hollis (1970) 131-132. Hence we are discussing the folktale in this chapter rather than alongside the story from Ovid's *Metamorphoses* that it so resembles – we do not even know which came first!

<sup>84</sup> McKay (1962) 34 n.1.

<sup>85</sup> Grant (1980) 266.

<sup>86</sup> McHardy (2003) 534.

<sup>87</sup> Fraser (2003) 896.

<sup>88</sup> Zimmermann (2005) 926.

<sup>89</sup> Cyrita is the goddess Demeter (Mair [1921] commentary 610).

A few centuries passed in the world, during which time Jesus Christ was born and Ovid wrote his *Metamorphoses*, which we will reserve for detailed discussion after this introduction to other original sources, since it is our primary source for the modern American re-telling. The next mention of Erysichthon beyond Ovid takes place sometime during the second – third centuries CE, in a less famous *Metamorphoses*, that of Antoninus Liberalis.<sup>90</sup> This mythographer wrote his forty-one tales in Greek – his own Latin name may be due to the fact he lived at the time of Antonine emperors of Rome.<sup>91</sup> Like Lycophron in the previous original source,<sup>92</sup> Antoninus Liberalis explicitly makes ‘Mestra’ a prostitute, albeit a magical one whose escapes were presumably always made before any sexual transaction took place.<sup>93</sup> She is used as an example (along with Tiresias) of gender-switching in myth: “*Hypermestra had frequently sold her body in the form of a woman for a fee, becoming a man to bring food to her father, Aethon*”.<sup>94</sup> This original source is unique in two particular ways: First, it is the only place where ‘Mestra’ is upgraded to ‘Hypermestra’, and we are not sure why: it could be in error.<sup>95</sup> Second, it is her gender which undergoes metamorphoses, not her species as in all previous mentions of ‘Mestra’. As McKay declares, this cannot be a mistake for it is the very reason she is brought up.<sup>96</sup>

The final original source to be considered before Ovid (and the final source we shall consider original, though it comes much later than the rest) is a commentary in Greek on Lycophron’s *Alexandra* by the twelfth century CE

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<sup>90</sup> Celoria (1992) 2.

<sup>91</sup> Celoria (1992) 2.

<sup>92</sup> Lycophron *Alexandra* 1391-1396.

<sup>93</sup> Antoninus Liberalis 17.5. Antoninus Liberalis’ version of the Erysichthon story, a paragraph within the story of Leucippus, “might be traceable to Nicander” (Anderson [1972] 401) of the second century BCE. Nicander wrote another *Metamorphoses*, the lost *Heteroioumena*, the second book of which included the tale told in Antoninus Liberalis 17 (“Leucippus”), as the ascription at the head of the chapter tells us, although we cannot be certain Antoninus Liberalis wrote the ascriptions (McKay [1962] 28).

<sup>94</sup> Antoninus Liberalis 17.5 trans. Celoria (1992).

<sup>95</sup> McKay (1962) 28.

<sup>96</sup> McKay (1962) 28.



Byzantine poet Joannes Tzetzes. Born c.1110 CE (and dying between 1180 and 1185 CE), he was a part-Georgian professional writer who never made enough money.<sup>97</sup> In the commentary, Tzetzes explains that Erysichthon cuts down Demeter's grove, gets punished in the customary appetite-magnifying way,<sup>98</sup> and Mestra is considered a prostitute – she seems to become less and less highly regarded as the centuries roll by:

*He [Erysichthon] had a sorcerer's daughter, Mestra, who metamorphosed into every living shape. Her father sold her and was kept in food on a daily basis. She would then change her shape again and run away back to her father.*

Tzetzes on Lycophron *Alexandra* 1393.

This is nothing particularly new, just a reiteration of what happens in the text. Tzetzes also suggests that the story is an allegory.<sup>99</sup>

Having used the words 'limited' as we introduced 'all' of the original sources, we must keep in mind that this is an evolving field, and new sources or fresh interpretations continue to come to light. For example, Marios Skempis published an article in 2008 positing that Erysichthon is the *“Aἴθων”*<sup>100</sup> in an anonymous elegiac fragment collected in *Supplementum Supplementi Hellenistici*, because Callimachus mentions he hunts (*Hymn to Demeter* 81-82), and the Aethon in the fragment is also a hunter.<sup>101</sup>

Further brief mentions or unusual deviations in ancient sources pepper the more detailed lists, giving the feeling of perhaps several different original stories in operation. For example, we could include Pseudo-Hyginus'

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<sup>97</sup> Kazhdan (1991) 2136.

<sup>98</sup> Tzetzes on Lycophron *Alexandra* 1393.

<sup>99</sup> Tzetzes on Lycophron *Alexandra* 1393.

<sup>100</sup> *SSH* 970.22.

<sup>101</sup> Skempis (2008) “Erysichthon der Jäger: *SSH* 970.22 und Call. *Cer.* 81-2” 365.

*Astronomica*,<sup>102</sup> which tells of a Triopian who destroys Ceres' temple to make a roof for his own house, and is inflicted with the regular torturous hunger, but also other torments including a snake, which may have propelled him into becoming the constellation Ophiuchus, the Serpent-Holder, in death:

Some, too, have said that he is Triopas, king of the Thessalians, who, in trying to roof his own house, tore down the temple of Ceres, built by the men of old. When hunger was brought on him by Ceres for this deed, he could never afterward be satisfied by any amount of food. Last of all, toward the end of his life, when a snake was sent to plague him, he suffered many ills, and at last winning death, was put among the stars by the will of Ceres. And so the snake, coiling round him, still seems to inflict deserved and everlasting punishment.

Pseudo-Hyginus, *Astronomica* 2.14 trans. Grant.

However, we have seen the 'Erysichthon' character punished many times throughout the ancient ages as we covered all of the prominent material, and identified the oft-recurring elements of the story (such as impious tree-destruction offending the goddess, punishment with insatiable hunger, and the selling of a daughter), so we can move forward to our examination of Ovid's version (which certainly embraces those three components).

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<sup>102</sup> Pseudo-Hyginus *Astronomica* 2.14.

## CHAPTER THREE

# OVID'S ERYSICHTHON

### Introduction

Ovid had established his position as a principal literary figure in Rome when suddenly, in 8 CE, the Emperor Augustus banished him. This may have been for both a literary offence and a perceived association with a sexual scandal involving Julia, Augustus' also-banished granddaughter. Ovid spent the rest of his life in exile in remote Tomis, on the edge of the Black Sea and the empire itself.<sup>1</sup> Thus Ovid knew the taste of punishment (just or unjust) for actions (executed or not), although the *Metamorphoses* in which we find the punishment of Erysichthon was started c.1 CE, so by the time exile was upon him, he was finalising the work.<sup>2</sup> Ovid wrote in the *Tristia* from Tomis that he threw the manuscript on the fire in misery.<sup>3</sup> Feeney makes a comparison between the *Metamorphoses* and Virgil's *Aeneid* – to start with, the metre, dactylic hexameter, is the same. Both works have enormous scope,<sup>4</sup> but Virgil's is no match for Ovid's, which covers the time period from “*the world's beginning/ down to my own lifetime*” (*Met.* 1.3-4). He says that Ovid's legendary destructive action is deliberately similar to that of Virgil, who died before finishing the *Aeneid* and may have ordered it burned (fortunately Augustus did not let this happen).<sup>5</sup> Luckily in Ovid's case, too, the work survived as there were copies elsewhere, so this theatrical deed did not prevent the *Metamorphoses* from being read,<sup>6</sup> and indeed recited out loud. The educated receivers of Ovid's text, familiar with the literary traditions such as epic and tragedy from which Ovid borrowed,

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<sup>1</sup> Grant (1980) “Ovid” 300.

<sup>2</sup> Hollis (1970) “Introduction” ix-x.

<sup>3</sup> Hollis (1970) “Introduction” x. Hollis is citing Ovid *Tristia* 1.7.13 ff.

<sup>4</sup> Feeney (2004) “Introduction” xvi.

<sup>5</sup> Feeney (2004) “Introduction” xix.

<sup>6</sup> Hollis (1970) “Introduction” x.

were able to acquire the *Metamorphoses*, or read it in a Roman public library, and it is designed in conveniently performance-length books of about seventy minutes, complete with a circular reference back to their beginnings, and closing hints of what is to come in the following book.<sup>7</sup>

Erysichthon's tale in the *Metamorphoses* is cocooned within multiple tales of transformation. His story runs from lines 738-878, the last tale in the eighth of the fifteen books. It is heralded by the narrator letting us know that Theseus, a listener here, has enjoyed the previous tale, told by Lelex, of the hospitality of Philemon and Baucis, so, "*More marvels of the gods he wished to hear*" (*Met.* 8.726-727). The river god Achelous now obliges,<sup>8</sup> addressing him, "*my very brave man*" (*Met.* 8.728)<sup>9</sup> and mentioning the shape-changing Proteus in the preamble (*Met.* 8.731-737) to his first mention of the similar powers of Erysichthon's daughter (*Met.* 8.738-739) and beginning his story. We know that his daughter's name in some other sources for the story is Mestra, but Ovid does not use it, even though it had been articulated since Hesiod,<sup>10</sup> and Ovid is very likely to have numbered Hesiod's version amongst his sources for the story.<sup>11</sup> However, through the 'Mestra'-character's transformation, the story fits into the theme of the work.

Apart from transformation, which is for Ovid the "single potential unifying thread that ran through the chaotically diverse bundles of stories in the Greek and Roman traditions"<sup>12</sup>, there are some other distinct themes to be identified. Today the *Metamorphoses* may potentially be found amongst many of the sections of a bookstore: poetry, 'Greece & Rome', 'myths & legends', classic works of literature, foreign language, or

<sup>7</sup> Raeburn (2004) "Translator's Note" xxxvii-xxxviii.

<sup>8</sup> "*And thereupon the Calydonian river,/ Propped on his elbow, turned to him*" (*Met.* 8.727-728) – without the addition of 'god' after "*river*" in this translation (unlike Miller's [1977/1916] in the Loeb), a delightfully surreal image is imparted. Ovid's tale undergoes new metamorphoses under every translator.

<sup>9</sup> This is a more literal translation. Melville has "*my brave Theseus*".

<sup>10</sup> Hesiod fr. 43a MW.

<sup>11</sup> Hollis (1970) 129. As opposed to McKay (1962) who thinks there is "no chance" (44) Ovid draws directly on Hesiod (44-45).

<sup>12</sup> Feeney (2004) "Introduction" xiii.

textbook. It is possible to view the work simply as a collection of myths, an academic resource, evidence for various elements of ancient culture, though it would be difficult not to be swept up into its compelling imaginativeness. It defies categorisation into any genre, and so it is important to look at what is within the whole work in order to see where the Erysichthon myth fits amongst the other stories.

## Personified Abstractions

One way to approach themes in the *Metamorphoses* is to identify the four personified abstractions we encounter, because one of them appears in the Erysichthon story. The abstractions have their own four set-pieces where they briefly become characters, which is a technique inspired by the personification of Rumour in Virgil's *Aeneid*<sup>13</sup> - Ovid even makes Rumour his own final personified abstraction (*Met.* 12.43). The first, that of Envy (*Invidia*) (*Met.* 2.760) appears in the second book when Aglauros, eldest daughter of King Cecrops, is punished by Minerva for her greed. When Mercury sees the three daughters of Cecrops participating as virgins in the festival of Pallas, he falls in love with Herse (*Met.* 2.726). He comes to the house asking Aglauros for her go-ahead to seek her beautiful sister's hand in marriage, but Aglauros tells him to go away and come back with gold (*Met.* 2.750-751), in payment for such an approval! Part of Erysichthon's sin is also greed (for whatever personal gain he was making by exercising his hubris and trying to clear a sacred grove of trees), and in the contemporary re-telling of his story by James Lasdun – yet to be discussed – he suffers a similar fate to Aglauros, who, after being infected with excruciating Envy, metamorphoses into rock outside her sister's door, courtesy of the entering Mercury (*Met.* 2.819-832). Minerva already has reason not to favour Aglauros for it is she, amongst the sisters, who takes a peek at the mysterious motherless baby of Vulcan, who is in a box Minerva has given them with strict instructions

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<sup>13</sup> Kenney (1986) commentary 390, referring to Virgil *Aeneid* 4.173-197.

against opening. The goddess remembers this when she goes to seek Envy from the *“gruesome sunless hovel”* (Met. 2.760-762) where she resides, munching on vipers. Minerva only goes up to the door, *“since she might not pass”* (Met. 2.766) for she would then become contaminated.<sup>14</sup> Envy, *“Her cheeks are sallow, her whole body shrunk”* (Met. 2.775) does Minerva’s bidding physically, by entering the sleeping girl’s room, where on her breast she *“laid her withering hand and filled her heart/ With thorny briars and breathed a baleful blight/ Deep down into her bones and spread a stream/ Of poison, black as pitch, inside her lungs”* (Met. 2.798-801) and places images of Herse, happily married to Mercury, in her head to incite wild jealousy (Met. 2.803-805).

Ovid gives a similar description to the Hunger (*Fames*) that enters Erysichthon, in the second of the set-pieces: *“her face sallow, her eyes/ Sunken”* and *“beneath her hollow loins/ Jutted her withered hips”* (Met. 8.801-804). On reaching the sleeping Erysichthon, she performs the same sort of body-filling action that is usually figurative, but with these personifications of Ovid, becomes literal: Hunger *“wrapped him in her arms/ And breathed upon him, filling with herself/ His mouth and throat and lungs, and channelled through/ His hollow veins her craving emptiness”* (Met. 8.818-820). When he ends up eating himself (Met. 8.877-878), one wonders whether the goddess foresaw and intended things to go this far.

In regard to the final demise of Aglauros, *“distraught/ All night, all day, in utter misery,/ Wasting away in slow decline, like ice/ Marred by a fitful sun”* (Met. 2.807-808), guarding her sister’s door out of burning envy instead of the first-desired private enterprise, one wonders whether she would have been feeling a third motivating emotion – that of sisterly protection from this keen son of Jupiter, this personal Courier to the Underworld, known amongst other things for his swift thievery – had she not been wasting away with Envy inside. Perhaps her intentions would

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<sup>14</sup> Kenney (1986) commentary 390.

have become good ones: to make sure one of her own blood did not feel pressured to marry an eager immortal with wings on his ankles in a hurry, even if he were an exalted god who had spied her as he flew through the Athenian sky.<sup>15</sup> Alas, the gods do not always allow mortals to put into practice the lessons they teach through their punishments. One cannot help but feel sorrow and terror for her (and wonder what her beautiful sister thought when she encountered the dark new statue in the house) when she tries to block the path of Mercury but feels “a numbing weight” which “*Stiffened her muscles; as she strained to stand/ Upright her knees were stuck; an icy chill/ Seeped through her limbs, the blood paled in her veins*” (*Met.* 2.821-824). Ovid’s description of being turned to stone slowly enough for these horrifying details to be perceived individually is as disturbing as any science-fiction or fantasy horror film scene of imposed transformation on a living, feeling being. Mercury has done this to her now merely because she was blocking his path, in her own home.

One small technical difficulty does get in the way of gods who summon personified abstractions, but they overcome it with ease. As with the summoning of Envy, the deity commanding Hunger to enter Erysichthon cannot meet directly with this opposing force – perhaps as when one tries to push the same ends of a pair of magnets together, they cannot be together. “*Ceres and Hunger – so the Fates decree - / May never meet,*” (*Met.* 8.785-786) so she sends a nymph to do this work. Once again, this same route to a solution is taken by Juno, in her role as goddess of marriage, in the eleventh book. She sees Alcyone praying to her for her husband King Ceyx’s safe return from a trip to consult an oracle. This travel motive turns out to be tragically ironic when a storm causes his shipwreck, and he drowns murmuring her name (*Met.* 11.562-567). Juno cannot bear Alcyone (unknowingly) contaminating her altar by praying for a dead man (*Met.* 11.583-584). So she sends her messenger Iris to the

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<sup>15</sup> Like a bird. Ovid likens his sharp-eyed flight to that of a kite circling above its prey (*Met.* 2.716-718). This is amongst the more straightforward of Ovid’s similes. As Galinsky says, Mercury already has wings, “so why not compare him to a bird?” ([1975] 165).

cave of Sleep (*Somnus*) (*Met.* 11.589-591), who in turn delegates the task of impersonating the ghost of Ceyx (before promptly falling back to sleep) to Morpheus (*Met.* 11.633-635), who, with his skill of taking on the characteristics of humans, is basically “Metamorphosis personified”.<sup>16</sup> Morpheus appears this way to Alcyone in a dream, and this lets her know Ceyx is dead (*Met.* 11.652-655). Her resultant shore-leaping suicide is saved by a transformation into a kingfisher (*Met.* 11.731-733). It is also a seaside shape-change that sparks off Erysichthon’s daughter’s innumerable metamorphoses in the eighth book, which contains other avian metamorphoses,<sup>17</sup> including a specific female-avian seaside metamorphosis<sup>18</sup> to be discussed further on. Indeed, the beach becomes a veritable Ladies’ Changing Room in the *Metamorphoses*, just as it is the liminal area between aquatic-surviving (or airborne) life and land-dwelling creatures, floating and standing, and drowning and breathing. At the end of their long story, bringing life to the cliché *the calm after the storm*, Ceyx becomes a kingfisher too, and the pair live their semi-oceanic existence touchingly united, floating their nest of eggs on the waves as the seven eponymous ‘halcyon days’ of calm seas during winter allow (*Met.* 11.744-746).

Aeolus the Wind-god is Alcyone’s father, and is able to still the waves like this, but obviously this aspect of nature is not entirely under his jurisdiction: Alcyone did warn Ceyx that although her father “*rules the winds of heaven,/ Holding imprisoned all their stormy strength,*” (*Met.* 11.431-432) he cannot always simply save a sailor in trouble, for, “*once the winds are loosed and seize the main,/ Naught is forbidden them*” (*Met.* 11.433-434). No particular character put the pair through their ordeal, and only the generic group, “*the gods*” (*Met.* 11.741) metamorphosed the pair into birds. In this story, fate is brought about by a natural event that just happens *naturally*, with ill fortune (and salvation)

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<sup>16</sup> Fantham (1979) 338.

<sup>17</sup> Perdix (*Met.* 8.251-255), Nisus (*Met.* 8.145-146), and Scylla (*Met.* 8.150-151).

<sup>18</sup> Scylla (*Met.* 8.150-151).



falling in seemingly arbitrary fashion,<sup>19</sup> as opposed to specifically and punitively as in so many other cases, including Erysichthon's own. In the end, the birds Ceyx and Alcyone are "protected by the very elements that destroyed the human Ceyx".<sup>20</sup> The gods are largely "conspicuously absent"<sup>21</sup> as Michael Simpson points out in the commentary on his own translation of the *Metamorphoses*. Aeolus has power but is not producing these events – the waves' anger is not caused by a god's anger, and Juno makes an appearance, but she directs no metamorphoses. The metamorphosis of Ceyx and Alcyone plays a similar role to the one it plays for the deserving couple who turns into intertwined trees in the eighth book, Philemon and Baucis: for both pairs, "transformation is salvation, guaranteeing continued union".<sup>22</sup> With the story surrounding the personification of Sleep, we have also discovered contrasting metamorphoses to those surrounding the Erysichthon story.

Sleep is the third of the *ekphrases* and the physical state during which the first two have entered their victims Aglauros and Erysichthon. Father Sleep is the only one of the personified abstractions who is male, which is interesting considering sleep is the most passive (though no less consequence-filled) of the four, and his dwelling is all dim quietness and narcotic plants – not repulsive like the others'. So personified abstractions do not always follow ancient ideas of active and passive gender roles in the most obvious ways. Besides, the set-pieces for Envy, Hunger and Rumour all employ appropriate evil-female characteristics (those of wasting away, the opposite of life-giving, an important female role). These suggest witches of later times and cultures, such as Baba Yaga of Russia, witches in Grimm's Fairy Tales and indeed the pan-European and British Isles tradition, and the Wicked Witches of the *Wizard of Oz*<sup>23</sup> in popular culture.

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<sup>19</sup> Kenney (1986) commentary 442.

<sup>20</sup> Fantham (2004) 87.

<sup>21</sup> Simpson (2001) commentary 395.

<sup>22</sup> Fantham (2004) 87.

<sup>23</sup> Baum (1997/1900) and Fleming et al. (1939).

A very short distance away, in the twelfth book, we meet the fourth personification, Rumour or reputation (*Fama*). She bears many similarities to the Rumour described in the fourth book of the *Aeneid*,<sup>24</sup> and was created “in direct emulation of Virgil”.<sup>25</sup> Elaine Fantham points out the fact that Virgil’s personification of Rumour “seems to be related to the screech owls, which Romans identified with witches”.<sup>26</sup> Indeed, she “flies” (*Aeneid* 4.184) “*Shrieking through the darkness*” (*Aeneid* 4.184-185) and “*broods*” on the tops of buildings (*Aeneid* 4.186-187) and is rather witchy: a “two-way transmitter [that sounds like “Twitter”!]<sup>27</sup>], listening for gossip as well as spreading it by mouth”,<sup>28</sup> which she does through a hideous presence, borne of the Earth: “*Monstrous, deformed, titanic. Pinioned, with/ An eye beneath for every body feather, and, strange to say, as many tongues and buzzing/ Mouths as eyes, as many pricked-up ears*” (*Aeneid* 4.181-183). The creature of many “eyes” and “buzzing” happens to evoke the multi-angled movement-detecting camera screens (that hang in urban corners like roosting owls) and electronics of modern security surveillance – we may wonder: to what sort of omnipotent protector/witch have we entrusted the safety of our society?! The paranoia brought on by modern rumour is harnessed by commercial entities such as drug companies and security contractors, so that mass panic results in mass profit. Today, perhaps in modern equivalent to a *Metamorphoses* storyline, corporate deities fetch rumour to do their bidding, via their messenger, the corporate-controlled media. Rumour’s activity is “*bringing great cities fear*” (*Aeneid* 4.187), rather like the Wicked Witch of the West uses her crystal ball to spy on Dorothy and her company as they make their way to the Emerald City – she even flies herself and is served by an army of flapping monkeys.<sup>29</sup> Virgil’s Rumour

<sup>24</sup> Virgil *Aeneid* trans. Fitzgerald (1996) 4.173-197.

<sup>25</sup> Kenney (1986) commentary 390.

<sup>26</sup> Fantham (2004) 113.

<sup>27</sup> Birds twitter, and the word is also the name of an internet-based social and information network (launched 2006) with which users can rapidly and widely share personal information, and often gossip. Its existence and popularity are often thought to be an indicator of new lows in the mixing of public and private spheres of life.

<sup>28</sup> Fantham (2004) 113.

<sup>29</sup> Baum (1997/1900) and Fleming et al. (1939).

even takes “*evil joy*” in spreading herself (*Aeneid* 4.189-190). She does not need to be sought by a clean-handed goddess via a servant – she is omnipresent. Is this the oppressive medium through which we receive information about the world, second hand via such a sinisterly-networked creature?

In both Virgil and Ovid we detect more than a hint of disapproval of the Rumour that is idle gossip (one wonders whether or not they could possibly have imagined the role rumour now occupies in the world, and warned against it taking hold over more secure information!). Ovid’s Rumour’s well-ventilated dwelling is “*built throughout/ Of echoing bronze; it all reverberates,/ Repeating voices, doubling what it hears*” (Met. 12.46-47). It sounds like a cancerous switchboard or a chamber like that of a wind instrument. But no sweet, distinct musical tones are produced, merely, “*muted murmurings/ Like waves one hears of some far-distant sea*” (Met. 12.49-50). Perhaps the two storytellers’ negative portrayal of this form of information dissemination come about because they are storytellers and they wish their stories to be pure and unclouded by personal interest – but that assumes there can be an objective version of a story! Perhaps the element that separates stories from gossip is that of maliciousness – or at least ambiguity and an alien context. It depends what one thinks the opposite of Rumour is: Truth? Clarity? Benevolence? Rumour of their love reaching the wrong ears is disastrous for Dido and Aeneas. However, as the Trojan War opens in the *Metamorphoses*, the rumour that Rumour brings to the Trojans of the Greeks’ approach is already a rather expected fact and her carrying it gave neither side a major advantage. So the information was curiously insignificant<sup>30</sup> – an excuse for Ovid to personify Rumour, perhaps.

The problem with gossip is that since people *do* want to know this sort of information – they create an Erysichthonesque hungering void for it themselves (as we can see from the stories about high-profile

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<sup>30</sup> Fantham (2004) 113.

entertainment-industry people in tabloid media today – people will swap their money and time for Rumour – and this *fama* also short-circuits unknown ‘personalities’ to similar fame or notoriety in the sphere of reality television) – it is an important PR concern. So when Erysichthon becomes an embarrassment to his family in Callimachus’ version of his story in the *Hymn to Demeter*, his family goes into damage control mode, trying to suppress the shame of his massive appetite by making up numerous excuses for him not to attend public functions: he is away debt collecting or counting his flocks; he has been gored by a boar or wounded by a discus, he is abroad, he took a fall from a chariot... (*Hymn to Demeter* 73-86). “So long as resources lay in the house of Triopas, only his private chambers were aware of the evil”<sup>31</sup> (*Hymn to Demeter* 111-112). But once he has eaten everything his family has, he must become a beggar (*Hymn to Demeter* 113-115). Unfortunately for his family, this probably spells an end to the prevention of rumours surrounding their ruined son Erysichthon. In the *Metamorphoses* Ovid does not place Erysichthon amongst caring family members, save his possibly indifferent daughter. This is an aspect of Callimachus he did not adopt.

If Ovid has imitated Virgil so closely, and we know this because we have the passages from both works to compare, it bears consideration that other parts of the *Metamorphoses*, despite the distinct Ovidian flavour throughout, may have been taken from sources of which we have no surviving record. Certainly he is informed by a great many other works and traditions, but are we to doubt his creative originality? Probably not, when the *Metamorphoses* is so carefully assembled and contains links from story to story with overarching themes in such a clever and deliberate (even when off-hand in manner) order that it seems that no part of this giant jigsaw puzzle would fit anywhere else without disrupting the perfectly matching edges along which the other stories join one another.

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<sup>31</sup> Trans. Hopkinson (1984).

## Themes and Motifs in the Eighth Book

Outside of the four abstractions, which, apart from their personifications, sew threads of thematic material running through the whole work, there are many other themes and motifs detectable in the *Metamorphoses*. Love and sexuality, family relations, birds, the sea, indeed the five classical elements of earth, water,<sup>32</sup> air, fire and aether, and trees appear frequently in this enchanted world. In the Erysichthon passage, love is in short supply, but sexuality (commercialised – by a family member, escaping which ‘Mestra’ changes into a bird at one stage), water (as the sea), earth and fire (as the burning hunger of the ‘earth-tearer’, as his name translates), and of course trees feature heavily, but one only has to leaf through the pages to discover that it is no unique combination. For example, in the longest of the stories in the whole poem,<sup>33</sup> that of Phaethon in the second book, there are multiple parallels with the eighth book: elements with destructive or saving forces, the burning earth (like Erysichthon’s burning hunger), descriptions of constellations (Ariadne’s happy ending), rivers (the River God), sisters who turn into trees (nymphs who turn into islands, and a nymph inhabiting a tree that Erysichthon chops down), and Cycnus metamorphosing into a swan (various bird transformations, usually water-borne also).

As well as equivalents in the *Metamorphoses*, we get contrasts, often closer together. The potential for expanding a remarkable character in the story is well-exploited by Ovid. Hunger, with “*her joints wasted and huge, Her knees like balls, her ankles grossly swollen*” (*Met.* 8.807-808) is dangled unpleasantly in front of the audience like a corpse, for eight creepy lines (*Met.* 8.801-808). But it is in the description of Erysichthon’s actions that we get the best drama. Erysichthon’s greed reaches pantomimic proportions and his behaviour and punishment contrast well with the immediately preceding *xenia* of Philemon and Baucis, who offer

<sup>32</sup> See “Appendix A : Bodies of Water” for further points on water as a theme.

<sup>33</sup> Raeburn (2004) in an introductory summary of the second book, 45.

unconditional hospitality to the disguised gods Jupiter and Mercury, and are appropriately rewarded. In fact, Brooks Otis, who finds much pleasing symmetry and plan in the structure of the *Metamorphoses*, points out that the Philemon-Baucis story is at the mathematical centre of the whole work, and could be interpreted as holding the central theodicean message: “that the gods really do have power and that metamorphoses really do occur”.<sup>34</sup> One story shows what happens when people respect this; the next shows the consequences of refusing to do so. Solodow, more convincingly, disputes the existence of such a purpose in Ovid’s art: the literary style he uses “obstructs any moral interpretation”<sup>35</sup> and Erysichthon’s hunger seems to be a “supernatural event” tricking us into expecting a moral point and then not putting any forth,<sup>36</sup> rather as his daughter tricks her buyers. In Ovid, we find ourselves in a fairground with rides and freak shows purely for our own entertainment, compared with the place of worship in which Callimachus keeps us, and in which a story featuring punishment would lead us to believe we were housed.

The other stories in Book 8 are interestingly related to Erysichthon’s story too, beginning with a relationship between a daughter (Scylla) and a powerful father (Nisus, King of Megara). This relationship stands in stark contrast to that of (King) Erysichthon and his daughter, for Scylla betrays her father (though she is granted soliloquies like ‘Mestra’ on the beach) for the enemy King Minos whom she watches and desires (*Met.* 8.23-42). Erysichthon’s daughter, on the other hand, ends up *helping* her father (though she is coerced and he is doomed). Following Scylla’s story, the daughter of Minos, Ariadne, also has a troubled relationship with her father. His own trouble is the Minotaur, the beast that is half-bull, half-man, which features in a short passage, till it is killed by Theseus, who succeeds where others have mortally failed. Ariadne provides the thread

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<sup>34</sup> Otis (1970) 344.

<sup>35</sup> Solodow (1988) 159-160. Even if Ovid is using “moral language” at the beginning of the tale, it has “evaporated” by the end (162).

<sup>36</sup> Solodow (1988) 162.

with which Theseus finds his way out of the Labyrinth (the Daedalus-designed maze in which Minos keeps this accursed product of his wife's bestial adultery, an act made possible by another invention of Daedalus), and runs off with him when he does (*Met.* 8.174-175). She abandons her father, only to be abandoned in her sleep by an uncaring Theseus once they reached the island of Naxos<sup>37</sup> (*Met.* 8.175-176). She is rescued from this state by Bacchus, who is ready to comfort her broken heart by tossing her crown up to become stars.<sup>38</sup> This is another case of god-about-the-beach, this time Bacchus, being only too happy to sleep with a girl like Ariadne or 'Mestra', but also grant her rescue from some fix, whether that be sudden abandonment or paternally-enforced prostitution. The father-daughter stories are at either end of the book – as if it were a real book, or an image on one half of a piece of paper which, when folded, produced its symmetrical opposite on the other side. Similarly to 'Mestra' and her father, Ariadne, as the equipment-supplier behind Theseus' success at the Labyrinth, is dealt with ungratefully by the man she does help. Both girls find themselves used for their female bodies, but retain their life. As a hero with other missions to accomplish, Theseus doesn't waste killing-time on helpless (and, as far as he is concerned, very innocent) Ariadne, and Erysichthon, inexplicably, does not cross a further boundary and commit 'korephagia'.

From the Minotaur story we cut to Daedalus himself, also trapped on an island: Crete. The story of Daedalus and Icarus presents an unheeding son falling to his death when the wax on the wings his father creates for them to fly away melts; whilst that of Perdix, Daedalus' gifted nephew, has a boy change into a partridge. So now we get male-child instead of female-child stories, and the direction and speed that seem to haunt Daedalus' life: downwards and rapidly. There is the falling out of the sky of his son (*Met.* 8.228-230), demonstrating that when a mortal tries to metamorphose without the gods, he fails painfully (note that 'Mestra', with

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<sup>37</sup> "*Dia*" in the Latin.

<sup>38</sup> Ovid tells the story of Ariadne's abandonment in more detail in *Ars Amatoria* 1.527-564.

the god Neptune's help, is much more successful, without even trying); and there is that extra kind of falling – being *pushed* – from a high place, a fate from which a god, Pallas Athena in this case, decides to half-save the boy Perdix, by transforming him (a successful, goddess-accomplished metamorphosis) into the height-fearing bird that still carries his name (*Met.* 8.251-255). The boy who flew too close to the sun was punished, even though it was his father's wings that brought him into the temptingly-beheavened sky (so the death was a punishment for his father also, trying to appropriate the magic of a creature he was not), whilst the boy who was a victim of his uncle's jealousy gained a little divine intervention on the way down – after all, he had not committed an act of hubris, despite his cleverness. There is a fine line between drowning and becoming a bird (either way, one loses one's human life), but the gods appear to have made a distinction about who deserves which – if we are to consider that there could be some consistent order to their chaotic judgements.

It is worth noting that in several instances both male-offspring and female-offspring's fates are settled in or near a briny broth: Scylla watches as Minos departs, correctly taking this as a 'no,' and bitterly pronouncing that his own wife's seeking affection with a bull was hardly surprising - "*you were the fiercer beast*" she says (*Met.* 8.137). Her speech takes place as "*the shore recedes,/ And I too on the shore*" (*Met.* 8.139), evoking 'Mestra's' seaside words of desperation and relief. Scylla, too, finds relief, or rather, has relief thrust upon her, when her father, metamorphosing into an osprey, claws at her as she clings to Minos' boat, falls, and with a gust of wind and another maritime-avian metamorphosis, becomes a Shearer bird (*Met.* 8.150-151). In contrast, Icarus, the unwise adventurer, makes fatal contact with the sea (*Met.* 8.228-230) (surely a conclusion is not so simple as 'crazy infatuation deserves some mercy; foolish disregard of instructions deserves none' – fate is nothing if inconsistent in Ovid). This is another example of Ovid's tactic of drawing attention to parallels in the detail of stories here in the eighth book (and throughout the *Metamorphoses*), giving the reader a



feeling not only of mirror-images but of stories turned inside out, almost as if there were a single story written on a page that is then folded into many shapes, birds and beasts, by Ovid's origami talent.

This makes it difficult to quantify the stories – some could be thought of as different versions of, or parts of, others, and they certainly form a continuous whole. It depends on what one decides the stories are *about*: Take feathers, for instance – they give life to heartbroken Scylla as she finally hurls herself into the waves after Minos' departing fleet, and they also save Perdix, yet their failure is the downfall of Icarus. Feathers giveth, feathers taketh away – just like any theme, it could be significant, or decorative – and perhaps the decoration in Ovid, the elaboration, feathers and beach-speeches, is where the point is. We do not know what literary weight he is about to give to something as light as feathers, or as heavy as seawater, or as minor as the fact that some humans try to be birds and fail, and others never intended to be them but somehow end up succeeding.

The large middle section of the eighth book is taken up by tales of success and dismal failure in Calydon, beginning with an epic hunt by uncharacteristically clumsy heroes, and later, a tragic soliloquy.<sup>39</sup> The ravenous pursuit of flesh obviously links the story of Meleager and the Calydonian Boar with Erysichthon's own food-pursuing and flesh-consuming frenzy. Unlike Erysichthon, King Oeneus of Calydon does remember to respect the goddess of agriculture, and so, "*To Ceres gave the first-fruits of the corn*" (*Met.* 8.274), but he loses his son, Meleager, because he neglects to pay tribute to Diana the huntress (*Met.* 8.277-278), who, outraged like Ceres will be later in the book, sends the eponymous boar to wreak destruction upon the land (*Met.* 8.281-282).

Passing descriptions of things in the story recall other stories from the eighth book. For example, the large and ferocious boar is said to dwarf

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<sup>39</sup> Raeburn (2004) in an introductory summary of the eighth book, 293.

*“the bulls of fertile Sicily”* (*Met.* 8.283), which happens to be the place where Daedalus (both creator of Pasiphae’s cow-costume with which she mated a bull, and designer of the Labyrinth in which the half-bull offspring was enclosed) found refuge after his unpopularity with Minos. This small fact about Daedalus’ whereabouts is briefly mentioned at the very beginning of the middle section (*Met.* 8.260-261), but combined with the mention of cows and bulls again (*Met.* 8.297) fourteen lines after the boar-size comparison, it may mean that Ovid was pricking our memory to illuminate the intricate weave of recurring images, giving more of the one-single-story feeling: perhaps now we could also suggest that the story is about the fatal size of animals or hunger and the fatal actions of parents. Erysichthon’s burning hunger is brought to mind when we hear of the boar’s *“eyes ablaze with fire and blood”* (*Met.* 8.284) and how *“his burning breath/ Seared the green leaves”* as he destroyed the countryside (*Met.* 8.289-292).

Oeneus needs to get rid of the rampaging boar, so arranges a band of high-profile figures to hunt it down (*Met.* 8.299-300). Included amongst these are his son Meleager, and also the huntress Atalanta – with whom Meleager falls in love at first sight (*Met.* 8.325-326). Atalanta is not named in the *Metamorphoses*,<sup>40</sup> just as the ‘Mestra’ character in the Erysichthon story is not named – perhaps the two anonymous women share reasons for Ovid’s not naming them. The boar is not easily brought down (especially since Diana continues using her divine powers to resist this coming about) and it is again described using the familiar vocabulary of burning: *“flames/ Blazed from his eyes; flames issued from his throat”* (*Met.* 8.356), foreshadowing Erysichthon’s burning, piggish greed. Nestor happens to leap into a tree to escape (*Met.* 8.366-368) (thereby living to be a hero in the Trojan war), the saving embrace of which may be especially ominous for the man who later chops down a tree – which, if the next lines describing the boar sharpening his tusks on an oak relate to Nestor’s same tree, is of the same species (*Met.* 8.369-370). After much

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<sup>40</sup> Kenney (1986) commentary 422.

blundering, Atalanta, or “*the Tegean girl*” (*Met.* 8.380) as Ovid refers to her, strikes the boar with an arrow (*Met.* 8.380-381), enabling Meleager to eventually officially kill it (*Met.* 8.415), like a hero, but not before it guts Ancaeus (*Met.* 8.401-402) and another tree blocks the blow of “*Pirithous, Ixion’s son*” (*Met.* 8.410). Meleager’s admiring gesture of giving the spoils to Atalanta is disapproved of by the male hunters – “*They took the gift from her, the right to give/ From him*” (*Met.* 8.436), and in a passing mention we learn that Meleager was actually fathered by Mars (*Met.* 8.437), even though Oeneus has been his parent. Indeed, Meleager suddenly rages warlike against his fellow hunters over the issue of his right to offer the spoils to a woman, and he kills both his uncles, Plexippus and Toxeus, in hot blood (*Met.* 8.439-444).

In the next story, which continues the Calydonian troubles immediately, Meleager’s mother Althea is giving thanks for her son’s success when she sees the dead bodies of her brothers being carried by (*Met.* 8.445-446), which puts her in an agonising quandary – to avenge their murder, or spare her son? She chooses the former (*Met.* 8.450), becoming the first mention in the eighth book of a mother severing herself from or destroying her offspring (unless we count Pasiphae’s imprisoned Minotaur, whom she would hardly have nursed anyway). Here we come to another instance of the destructive association of the element of fire. The figurative “*burning*” (hunger) (*Met.* 8.829) that is placed within Erysichthon by an angry goddess is placed in Meleager by decision of a mortal woman who literally burns him – the two instances have different but equally destructive consequences. At Meleager’s birth the three Fates had given him the same lifespan as a log of wood they placed on Althaea’s hearth (*Met.* 8.451-455). She quickly saved it from the flames and secreted it away, but now she brings it out, knowing it holds the power to end her son’s life (*Met.* 8.460-461). She wavers in front of the fire, agonising over the decision for a long time, before finally throwing it in, and even the flames themselves are “*unwilling*” (*Met.* 8.514) to be part of this lethal act. The burning of the brand causes Meleager, somewhere else, to suffer the grotesque end of spontaneously combusting from the

inside: He feels “*a hidden fire/ Scorching his vitals and courageously/ Suppressed his agony*” (*Met.* 8.516-517). His family are distraught, and to add to that, Althaea decides she cannot live with her decision, and kills herself with a dagger (*Met.* 8.532).

Diana is finally satisfied with her revenge on Oeneus, and as his daughters excessively mourn Meleager, she transforms some of them into birds (*Met.* 8.542-546) – the guinea-fowl which is *meleagris* in Greek – a feminine version of the name Meleager. We have already seen four other instances of the motif of transformation into a bird in the eighth book: Nisus becoming an osprey (*Met.* 8.145-146), Scylla saved as a seabird (*Met.* 8.150-151), Icarus the failed fake-bird (*Met.* 8.228-230), and Perdix saved from the fall by partridgification (*Met.* 8.251-255). The flying abilities of a bird are often looked at as the most unattainable of all the other species’ adaptations that humans may mimic, and it almost becomes a too-oft told joke that the characters in Ovid’s tale must turn into something. Perhaps the story becomes about the compulsory nature of metamorphoses, and how they lead to both tragedy and comedy, but they will always happen, just as the passing of time does metamorphose everything in the world. Perhaps metamorphosis in Ovid is just a theatrical exaggeration of the human condition.

There also appears to be a motif of destructive elemental forces emerging: burning fire, drowning water. In the next section, an interlude before the final two stories in the eighth book (which are told from his residence), we meet Achelous the River god when he invites Theseus into his cave (*Met.* 8.558-559). Although it doesn’t harm Theseus, his stream is swollen, sweeping “*massive trees*” away (*Met.* 8.552). The elemental force of water is winning over the trees, but no one is punished when it is only a nature versus nature battle – as opposed to what happens when a man, Erysichthon, destroys a tree. The water also takes “*huge boulders*” (*Met.* 8.553), and “*cattle*” (*Met.* 8.554), rendering helpless the “*ox*” and “*horse*” (*Met.* 8.555), as if they were Erysichthon, with a distended boulderlike abdomen, and the animals he devoured –

perhaps deliberately, perhaps accidentally listed like characters that have not yet come on stage being glimpsed parading in the wings. But the force of the river also seems to foreshadow the hunger of Erysichthon – unsafe, it “*Drowns many a strong man in its swirling waves*” (*Met.* 8.556-557), till it becomes a “*slender*” stream again (*Met.* 8.559).

In Achelous’ home Theseus and his company are served by river-nymphs, and the river god is prompted to tell the tale of the five islands out to sea (*Met.* 8.577-578), as if his guests were admiring his newly acquired landscaped real estate. The islands were once nymphs who had forgotten to include Achelous in their festive rites. As we have seen from Diana, and as we shall see in the Erysichthon story from Ceres, scorning a god can bring about severe punishment: Achelous turned the nymphs into the Echinades islands (*Met.* 8.587-589). Fortunately for Theseus earlier, ditching Ariadne on the island of Naxos has no such consequences for either of them, but we do seem to have a small recurring image of girls on, or as islands. Achelous points out another island that was once a nymph too: Perimele – cast out by her angry father Hippodamas for being loved as a lover by Achelous (*Met.* 8.593-594). She was looked upon favourably by Neptune when Achelous asked for his help (*Met.* 8.601-602). Neptune will help another non-virgin girl, Erysichthon’s daughter, a little further along in this book, but in this upcoming circumstance it will be Neptune himself who is the cause of her state. He seems to have a soft spot for a girl in trouble. Being ‘saved’ in this circumstance means she gets to be an island too (*Met.* 8.609-610) (presumably instead of not existing in any state at all any more). The elements of fire, water and earth all seem to have significant parts to play in the book, with earth here being represented by the islands, which are in water itself – both supporting and drowning things throughout the stories. As well, the stories are geographically connected by their proximity on the earth itself: Calydon, the River Achelous, and Thessaly (where Erysichthon lives) adjoin one another in the upper part of Greece.

We now reach the aforementioned story of the divine reward for the hospitality of Philemon and Baucis. It is prompted from the mouth of Lelex by another of the guests, Ixion's young son Pirithous, who scoffs at his host's marvellous tales of the gods' deeds (*Met.* 8.612-615). Here we meet another oak tree (as well as its accompanying lime tree), the last before the one Erysichthon destroys, but it won't be the same tree – this one stands in Phrygia, where the folktale probably originates.<sup>41</sup> Hollis briefly mentions some ideas about sacred trees in Asia Minor – that those found in recent times may be shrine-like in purpose, or perhaps indicate vegetation worship.<sup>42</sup> There is certainly an element of this amongst protective Ceres and her loyal nymphs in the Erysichthon story. The trees in the Philemon and Baucis story *are* in fact Philemon and Baucis: The humble old couple take in the gods Jupiter and Mercury, disguised as ordinary mortal travellers, and offer the strangers warm food and all the modest comforts available, even a foot bath,<sup>43</sup> when thousands had turned them down (*Met.* 8.628-629). Receiving hospitality is of course a relevant topic when hospitality is being received (though the reason Lelex got onto the topic is the upstart who did not believe that the Gods could work miracles, which they do in this story). Giving and receiving hospitality in the ancient world involved ideals of generosity, appreciation and mutual respect. The hospitality Philemon and Baucis provide is generous, particularly when considered relative to what they have overall, as they have very little to offer (unlike the river god Achelous' at his home, in which the storyteller is dining): "The whole menu implies a virtuous and frugal enjoyment of the earth's bounty: this establishment is a survival from the Age of Gold".<sup>44</sup> We are aware that Erysichthon was not a man of piety nor moderation (even before his bingeing, he recklessly chops down a tree that is clearly wanted alive by others for higher purposes). In this way, the Philemon and Baucis myth contrasts nicely with the Erysichthon story that follows it. Erysichthon has his lack

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<sup>41</sup> Hollis (1970) commentary 108.

<sup>42</sup> Hollis (1970) commentary 109.

<sup>43</sup> This detail is omitted in some manuscripts – for a discussion see the commentary of Anderson (1972) 394.

<sup>44</sup> Kenney (1986) commentary 424.

of moderation punished by a goddess; Philemon and Baucis have their hospitality, a part of which is the observing of traditional generosity to guests (which demonstrates a lack of personal greed), rewarded – by that goddess’ brother.

When the wine becomes self-renewing and the gods out themselves (the climax of any party), leading Philemon and Baucis away uphill from their little home and changing it into a temple whilst flooding the rest of the unfriendly domiciles (*Met.* 8.696-697), the astonished couple are offered a reward of their choice: they choose to return to their home, where the gods make them guardians of this new shrine until they die - at the same time, as requested. Their simple wish expressed by Philemon – “[...] *Grant that the selfsame hour may take us both,/ That I my consorts tomb may never see/ Nor may it fall to her to bury me.*” (*Met.* 8.709-710) – is reminiscent of the biblical statement of Ruth (*Ruth* 1.16-17), sometimes known in its musical settings as “A Song of Ruth”, or, “Entreat Me Not to Leave Thee”: “*Where thou diest, will I die, and there will I be buried*” (*Ruth* 1.17). Once their lives have ended they are given the touching gift of eternal togetherness as “*Two trees from one twin trunk grown side by side*” (*Met.* 8.720). This is not the only biblical parallel in the story: The gods’ act of flooding out an unworthy village and saving two chosen people, who have their home turn into a shrine, recalls God’s act of flooding the world to rid it of evil people, and directing Noah to save his family and one pair of all the animals in the Ark (*Genesis* 6-9). Vegetation is present in the peaceful ending of both stories – in the form of Noah’s symbolic olive leaf from the dove on its penultimate reconnaissance flight (*Genesis* 8.11), and the intertwined trees Philemon and Baucis metamorphose into at the ends of their long lives – the fulfilment of the gods’ promise.

Both these stories of flood followed by peace are placed in the Anatolia region. From elsewhere in the ancient world and earlier in the *Metamorphoses* (the first book) come the even more biblically-aligned stories of The Flood and Deucalion and Pyrrha. Jupiter brings about a

world-scale flood to get rid of evil people and restart humanity, upturning the usual order of things: *“in the woods/ The dolphins live and high among the branches/ Dash to and fro and shake the oaks in play”* (Met. 1.302-303). Fish amongst the oak leaves is one of the many fantastically bizarre images Ovid provides for this time in the forming of the world. It seems to be fine that a god would destroy innocent wildlife and all the woods (presumably the trees drowned as a side-effect of The Flood aimed at humans) but it is a different story altogether when Erysichthon goes woodcutting amongst the oaks. When The Flood comes, Deucalion and Pyrrha are the Greek equivalent of Noah and his wife, devout survivors of the destruction, which even takes the *“temples and shrines”* (Met. 1.287) and leaves them to repopulate the world by the stones they cast and the life forms that emerge, autochthonous: *“often, in one creature, part alive, Part still raw soil”* (Met. 1.428-429). It is possible that primordial stories such as this, of a disenchanted deity cleansing the face of his earth with water and then applying a few chosen beings to or from the surface, derive from a common story ancestor.<sup>45</sup> Again, Ovid dwells on divine dishing out of harsh punishments for bad behaviour and magnificent rewards for the good. Of the former, we are about to discover the massive extent.

## Further Details in Ovid’s Erysichthon

Finally we are brought to the last story in the eighth book, that of Erysichthon and his daughter. It bears many parallels to, and contrasts with, the other stories as we have noted, and could be interpreted as a bringing-together of the many strands of the whole of the eighth book.

Ovid describes Erysichthon as wicked in his nihilistic destruction, and his axe strike is *“impious”* (Met. 8.761), the perfect opposite to the actions of the gentle Philemon and Baucis (Met. 8.639-671). We have, in a sacred

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<sup>45</sup> Perhaps it could be said that they involve Jungian archetypes also.



grove, an oak tree that has “*matured/ In centuries of growing strength*” (Met. 8.743) to tower above the other trees as if they were grass (Met. 8.750) – it is now so big that it is “*itself/ A grove*” (Met. 8.744). People have hung “*wreaths and garlands*” in it, and “*votive tablets, proofs of prayers fulfilled*” (Met. 8.744-745). This shows that the tree is authentically magic, but if we are still doubting how special it is, Ovid tells us that Dryads (tree-nymphs) like to dance beneath it too (Met. 8.746). Clearly it is the worst possible choice for logging.

But Erysichthon does not care. He states that even though the tree is loved by the goddess, and even if it were the goddess herself he would still chop it down (Met. 8.756). Unlike in Callimachus’ *Hymn to Demeter*, where a young Erysichthon is planning on building a banquet hall, the mature man (of age if not behaviour) in Ovid has no discernible motivation for his destruction – it is an act of pure wickedness.<sup>46</sup> He is also involving other people in his crime – he “*bade his woodmen fell/ That sacred oak*” (Met. 8.752-753). They hesitate, and watch the tree’s human-like reaction to his raised axe: it “*Shuddered and groaned, and every leaf and acorn/ Grew pale and pallor spread on each long branch*” (Met. 8.758-760).

Then Erysichthon strikes the trunk, which bleeds, “*As when a mighty bull is sacrificed*” (Met. 8.763-764). He ought to be doubly surprised – “*blood*” (Met. 8.764) is coming out of a tree, and he may not even be used to seeing it coming out of a sacrificial animal, since, just before we are given the setting of the sacred grove, the first thing we are told about him (after the fact of his daughter) is that he is “*a man/ Who spurned the gods and never censed their shrines*” (Met. 8.739-740).

When one of his woodmen protests Erysichthon’s actions, he turns to him and beheads him on the spot for being so “*pious*” (Met. 8.767). It is interesting to note that gods and goddesses have reacted in similar, or

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<sup>46</sup> Solodow (1988) 17.

even far more grotesque and contrived punishing fashions when a mortal offends them (often for being exactly the opposite of the woodman who took a stand against destruction), but their impulsive angry gestures go completely unpunished. For example, Diana sending a wild boar to ravage a whole community – not just their forgetful leader; Achelous turning girls into land masses; and Jupiter and Mercury flooding and destroying a whole mountain-foot village when the occupants didn't even know the significance of their casual refusal to take in strangers. For who is there to punish gods but other gods? We do not see any of this in the eighth book of the *Metamorphoses*, but god-god disciplining has happened elsewhere.

Ceres' actions against Erysichthon are not quite as divinely heinous as they may have seemed had he not been given fair warning, and had his actions not been so wantonly destructive even without being so to a goddess. With her dying breath, Ceres' nymph warns him, from within the tree he is chopping, that: "[...] *punishment is nigh for what you do [...]*" (*Met.* 8.772-773). But Erysichthon finishes the job anyway, felling the tree with the help of ropes (it is quite a struggle – the tree seems to be resisting), and unfortunately it also brings down smaller neighbouring trees, in a magnification of the effect of Erysichthon's blows (*Met.* 8.775-776).

Since the tree is personified with human characteristics, it is as if the tree and the nymph within are part-metamorphoses of one another. Hardie notes the "equivalence and coexistence of the nymph with her tree", and a thematic link between this and Meleager (who dies because the piece of tree that corresponds with his life is burned – parallel fates must occur for the man and the log), and Philemon and Baucis (who 'live' as trees of themselves rather than dying).<sup>47</sup> Most of the other metamorphoses in the eighth book happen during the story, but the nymph's life is part of the tree, so this is not a metamorphosis in the traditional sense: she was

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<sup>47</sup> Hardie (2002) 242.

already in this state when we were introduced to her, as if she were the soul of the tree. We have already met people who are part of plants – Philemon and Baucis metamorphose into trees (*Met.* 8.714-719) – but not a human-like entity of the divine world who is naturally and already part of a tree. The nymph speaks from within the tree as if she wears it as her outer layer. The idea of a tree revealing a female human-like creature is also seen in the tale of Orpheus. Eurydice, his wife, is an oak nymph (in some versions) herself, and we meet her elsewhere in the *Metamorphoses* when she dies (*Met.* 10.23-63). Orpheus has his own musical relationship with nature: “Orpheus’ power to draw trees behind him motivates the catalogue of trees”<sup>48</sup> says Raeburn of the poem-list of trees in the tenth book. Trees are very important characters in the *Metamorphoses*, so when a sacred one is destroyed, there must be consequences.

Suddenly, as soon as Erysichthon’s deed is done, the other Dryads are wearing black in mourning for their sister, and entertaining thoughts of punishment for Erysichthon for his grievous transgression (*Met.* 8.779). It is only now that Ceres herself becomes involved, as a go-to authority, which contrasts with Callimachus’ version, where she cries out when she senses trouble (*Hymn to Demeter* 41). Her nymphs tell her; she agrees with a nod that shakes the crops (*Met.* 8.780-781):<sup>49</sup> Erysichthon needs to be punished in a way “*most piteous, were pity not made forfeit by his deed*” (*Met.* 8.782-783). Instead of giving him the opposite of what he has done to the world (which would, perhaps, be a limiting of resources in some way or other – since he was greedy), Ceres takes what Erysichthon is already, and dramatically exaggerates it by asking hunger to enter his body.

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<sup>48</sup> Raeburn (2004) in an introductory summary of the tenth book, 380.

<sup>49</sup> Griffin asks whether or not this moment provides “a hint of volcanic activity” (Griffin [1986] 58) in the article, “Erysichthon – Ovid’s Giant?” – the giants’ restless subterranean movement, after the Gigantomachy, was said to cause volcanic activity. Griffin’s less shaky evidence that Ovid may be conceiving of Erysichthon as a giant includes his powerful physique (58), bloodthirstiness (58-59), and Thessalian location (62 and 62 n.32).

The fetching of Hunger is one swathe of the story that differs from Callimachus' version, where Hunger was not a character – Demeter simply decreed that Erysichthon would be hungry (*Hymn to Demeter* 66), as if she were casting an instant spell. Instead of dwelling on the sorrows wrought on a family by impiety, as Callimachus does, Ovid rolls his story along quickly in a parody of epic style, emphasising with sweeping exaggeration the action-packed moments and the grand gesture of a goddess ordering a journey to fetch Hunger,<sup>50</sup> from “*Scythia's farthest bounds*” (*Met.* 8.788) in the Caucasus. She dispatches an oread (Dryad nymph of mountain trees) in a flying dragon-led chariot to the cold, barren home of Hunger. Galinsky, too, believes that Ovid's version intentionally contrasts with Callimachus', and it is an example of Ovid's “deliberate tendency” to *referre idem aliter* when he retells myths – they are altered from the versions of the authors who we know comprise some of his sources.<sup>51</sup> He goes on to say that Ovid had “greater success in evoking the vitality of myth”<sup>52</sup> because he applies more imagination, inconsistency of style, and immense variation in tone, veering from the grave to the ridiculous.<sup>53</sup> Early in his book, *Ovid's Metamorphoses : An Introduction to the Basic Aspects*, Galinsky picks up and continues to use the Erysichthon passage for displaying representative Ovidisms – even eight pages after starting to do so, claims about Ovid are still being “exemplified by his treatment of the Erysichthon myth”, and it is “such a good example” so often.<sup>54</sup>

If hunger can be personified – as a starving woman, “*her joints wasted and huge*” (*Met.* 8.807) – then perhaps Erysichthon, in this story (with no particular parentage as he is given in other versions, and no other family beyond his daughter) is Ovid's example of greed personified: the only actions he takes, whether through his own drive or that imposed upon him as punishment, are greedy. If plenty (Ceres) and starvation (Hunger)

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<sup>50</sup> Otis (1970) 66-69.

<sup>51</sup> Galinsky (1975) 5.

<sup>52</sup> Galinsky (1975) 6.

<sup>53</sup> Galinsky (1975) 6-11.

<sup>54</sup> Galinsky (1975) 13.

are two sides of the same coin, then Ceres must battle the greedy Erysichthon for her side.

She is winning. The oread does not waste any time delivering the message before flying home (*Met.* 8.809-813) – Hunger is an uncomfortable sight to behold, and seems to make the oread hungry by her mere presence: not only has malnutrition de-conditioned Hunger's face, hair and body, but "*her parchment skin revealed/ The bowels within*" (*Met.* 8.803). She is able to go and breathe herself into Erysichthon and go home again without waking him. He starts to dream that he is eating, and wakes hungry. Now Erysichthon's greed does not know the limits of the stomach. He eats everything that his environment can provide: "*whatever sea or land or air/ Can furnish he demands*" (*Met.* 8.830-831). Even at the same time as he is eating, he complains that it is not enough and asks for more (*Met.* 8.832). Ironically, his hunger increases with the quantity of food he eats, as a fire burns more the more it has burnt, rather than being sated (*Met.* 8.837-838) – "*Food compels food; eating makes emptiness*" (*Met.* 8.841-842). This sort of torture-punishment born of divine caprice is hardly uncommon in the world of Greek myth: every time Prometheus grows a liver, it is pecked away; Sisyphus rolls the stone up, the stone rolls itself down again.

Erysichthon's daughter stars in her own passage in the story once Erysichthon has consumed all available food and "*exhausted his ancestral wealth*" (*Met.* 8.843-844): he sells her so that he can buy more to eat (*Met.* 8.848). As happens in the *Metamorphoses*, the feature which links this episode to the last is that of a character changing into an animal, plant, object or element. Achelous tells us that Proteus was known to change into all of a youth, lion, snake, boar, bull, stone, tree, river and fire (*Met.* 8.732-737). Listing these things in the introduction very gently but specifically foreshadows parts of Erysichthon's story. A tree is what Erysichthon chops down to begin his troubles. With Neptune's aid Erysichthon's daughter changes into animals such as "*A mare, a cow, a bird, a deer*" (*Met.* 8.873) so that she can escape (and be

re-sold), and her first metamorphosis is into a (fisher)man (*Met.* 8.853-854). (Like Proteus, she can change back to her original form and into other things many times, but usually humans in the *Metamorphoses* metamorphose once and stay that way.) The water element is relevant because it is her association with Neptune that brings Erysichthon's daughter her powers of transformation, and her father's hunger is even compared to the "*insatiate sea*" (*Met.* 8.835) into which all rivers flow without ever making it full. Erysichthon's hunger is likened to a fire inside his belly (*Met.* 8.829). Ovid is likely to have known of the name Aethon (the burner) from previous accounts of the story, such as (perhaps) Hesiod.<sup>55</sup> If we can count both genders of bovine animal as the same basic transformation, then we can say that 'over fifty percent' of Achelous' list of examples of Proteus' metamorphoses are covered (by equivalent metamorphoses, or at the very least by re-mentioning the list item in a different context), in the Erysichthon story also.

This makes it all the more strange that Ovid does not name Erysichthon's daughter. But it is not strange in the epic genre to use this "periphrastic method", as we have seen earlier in the eighth book with Atalanta being called "*The Tegean girl*" (*Tegeaea*) (*Met.* 8.317).<sup>56</sup> Perhaps he found naming her unnecessary, and too much a part of others' storytelling. The original drama Ovid has injected into the story makes it his own. Though he also resists any temptation to call her by some other name – surely there are raft of imaginative naming possibilities for such a character, but perhaps the addition would be too glaringly a divergence. Perhaps, then, Ovid enjoys the lingering haziness over Erysichthon's daughter – she is not always in human daughter form, and escapes the grasp of the men to whom she is sold just as she eludes our ability to say exactly what she is. Ovid doesn't define the indefinable.

For everything else that happens to her, it is hardly surprising that how she *is* referred to is in terms of her relationship to the male of the story.

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<sup>55</sup> Hesiod fr. 43a MW.

<sup>56</sup> Hollis (1970) commentary 133.

An expanded version could have started to shape for this daughter a life *out of which* she is plucked and bothered by her father, paying men, and the god Neptune – a story in which we would hear details of how this would affect her, which we do not hear much about from Ovid. What we do know of her nameless personal existence is that she appears to wish to avoid sexual contact – whether coercive or commercial – with male entities in the story; and that she is abused by all around her, her only escape route being the god-given talent of being able to change shape temporarily (we do not know exactly how long her disguises can last, only that they last long enough for her to escape – surely if she had the gift of permanent metamorphosis she would use it to escape for ever, unless her loyalty to her father overrides her sense of self-preservation). Her surprise at being a different being the first time seems to indicate that it is a state that Neptune puts her in, rather than the result of her own action, but after that it is treated as something which she brings on with her own agency.

In her suffering and nameless role, ‘Mestra’ is somewhat like a sister to the holy tree, whose peace is also destroyed by Erysichthon. It falls like a sacrificed bull to the ground because of Erysichthon’s greed; ‘Mestra’ is sacrificed upon the same altar. A few more words in this direction could convince us that Ovid was talking about the destruction of both environment and family that spurning the gods, destroying trees, and gluttony bring. However, as discussed earlier, it would hardly be the case that his message is entirely didactic – the story is a piece of art, multi-faceted, and just when we think we have secured a sensible angle, a slight turn throws light on another interpretation.

Incidentally, although Melville does not include the phrase, ‘Mestra’ is introduced as the “*wife of Autolycus*”<sup>57</sup> as well as “*Erysichthon’s daughter*” (*Met.* 8.738). This is the trickster Autolycus, as Hollis confirms – he suggests that the marriage happens after Erysichthon’s death, when

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<sup>57</sup> Trans. Miller (1977/1916) – other translations, too, tend to include the Autolycus point.

'Mestra' gets "settled down to respectable matrimony and a single shape".<sup>58</sup> According to this strange, isolated pairing, Erysichthon is Odysseus' great grandfather! For this she receives no credit.

What 'Mestra' is afforded is her lyrical passage by the sea – source of both her earlier torment and her current saviour, Neptune, "*Who did not spurn her prayer*" (*Met.* 8.852). This passage is nestled just before the end, almost in reversal of traditional dramatic form. An opera may have scenes of village dancing and festivities to set the scene, but Ovid puts the violence before the peaceful interlude. The level of violating and violent acts against places and people in this story recalls Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus*, which Feeney emphasises is a play after Ovid's tradition.<sup>59</sup> A tree is hacked down hedonistically, a daughter sold as if family meant nothing, carried no duty to nor wish to care, and in the end, Erysichthon turns his violence on himself: "*his own flesh supplied his appetite*" (*Met.* 8.878). There is unusually wicked drama in the fact that a man who took too much was then stricken with a condition that forced him to take too much into himself, and then began to lose bits of himself to his own greed. Again, we are showing that the punishment which Ceres gave may be seen as merely an exaggeration of the trouble already residing within Erysichthon.

Doing his will, 'Mestra' is pleasantly surprised to find that the man her father has sold her to is seeing a fisherman (this first time) in her place, this being confirmed by the fact that as he gets over his bafflement he politely wishes her/"him" good luck with fishing and smooth seas (and indeed, the sea has been kind to her at this time!) and enquires after a girl's whereabouts (*Met.* 8.859-861). It is nice to hear that she gets a moment of being "*Jubilant/ to find herself being asked about herself,*" (*Met.* 8.862-863) and responds saying she has not seen anyone else around – which she doesn't need to lie about. However, she does engage in a little one-sided double-entendre by referring to her "*skill*"

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<sup>58</sup> Hollis (1970) 133.

<sup>59</sup> Feeney (2004) "Introduction" xxxi.



(*Met.* 8.866) which appears to be fishing, but is actually metamorphosing.<sup>60</sup> Thus we are encouraged to share her elation and relief. If her time by the sea were positioned closer to the centre of the whole story, it would be like the eye of the storm.

As it is, it is a short seaside holiday, a little comic relief for the story-follower before learning of the gruesome doom of Erysichthon, who could not be satisfied even by repeatedly selling his shape-changing daughter, and “*began/ To gnaw himself, and dwindled bite by bite*” (*Met.* 8.877). Now that we have spent some quality time with this daughter, her father’s crazed actions contrast all the more with her reasonable going-about confronting the adversity of being the daughter of such a father. Ovid does introduce her by saying that she is “*undeserving*” (*Met.* 8.847) of a parent of this sort. We are reminded of just how much (King) Erysichthon had to lose, and lost, by the fact she still has her status, “*a highborn girl*” (*Met.* 8.848), with some options left up her sleeve. Oddly enough, Patricia B. Salzman-Mitchell’s book *A Web of Fantasies : Gaze, Image and Gender in Ovid’s Metamorphoses*<sup>61</sup> does not mention Erysichthon’s daughter, who, given that she is gazed upon, and switches her image and gender, one would think would be ripe for discussion under such a topic! Her omission proves just how common elements of ‘Mestra’ are in the rest of the *Metamorphoses* – there are obviously so many other examples to use, or other ways of conceiving of this one set of variables.

We have seen that when she entreats Neptune, who had on an earlier occasion stolen the “*prize of [her] virginity*” (*Met.* 8.850-851), he cooperates and turns her into other shapes. In this way the story is one of good, or at least blameless if somewhat passive, female entities being put through ordeals by a greedy or powerful male. Both the females, Ceres and the daughter, use what resources they have available to preserve themselves and their interests. But we do not hear of the daughter seeking punishment for Erysichthon’s wrongs like the goddess.

<sup>60</sup> Hollis (1970) commentary 146.

<sup>61</sup> Salzman-Mitchell (2005).

It is surprising that the punishment Ceres gave causes Erysichthon to sell his daughter, when the goddess knows the loss of a daughter herself: her distress brings winter to the land for that half of the year in which Proserpine is held in the Underworld (*Met* 5.565-567).

The metamorphoses of 'Mestra' are the (meal) ticket by which Erysichthon makes it into the *Metamorphoses*, so it has been worth concentrating on her awhile to complete our discussion of Ovid. The last we know of her is that she is still repeatedly re-bounding from foreign form to daughter, creating cash for her father, whose exact moment of final destruction we do not hear of. Does he finish the meal, of himself? That is not quite physically feasible (how can he ingest his own mouth, unless by turning into a void?), so we may assume he died at some point along the path of self-consumption. Ovid cuts away from the gruesome action before it becomes overdone, with Achelous rhetorically declaring "*But why spend time on tales of others?*" (*Met* 8.879) and returning to talking about himself, which he continues to do as the ninth book begins. As Galinsky puts it, "Erysichthon eats himself up, and having disposed of him, Ovid nonchalantly moves on to the next story".<sup>62</sup> This neatly describes the unhindered pace at which Ovid moves on from the spectacle of a man eating himself – we have been rubbernecking at the scene of an atrocity and have just been ordered to move on.

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<sup>62</sup> Galinsky (1975) 10.

## CHAPTER FOUR

# LASDUN'S ERYSYCHTHON

### Introduction

In 1994, a collection of translations and re-writings of stories from Ovid's *Metamorphoses* entitled *After Ovid : New Metamorphoses*, edited by Michael Hofmann and James Lasdun, was published.<sup>1</sup> All of the contributions were written especially for the book,<sup>2</sup> and one of Lasdun's own is "Erisychthon" [sic].<sup>3</sup> The 455-line poem, wittily transferring the greed of Erysichthon into a modern American context, is arranged into three sections of 20, 15 and 30 septets respectively. The first section introduces Erisychthon, a corrupt developer in an American town surrounded by vulnerable nature, which his ventures pollute and destroy.

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<sup>1</sup> Hofmann & Lasdun (1994).

<sup>2</sup> Hofmann & Lasdun (1994) "Introduction" xi.

<sup>3</sup> Hofmann & Lasdun (1994) 198-212. Lasdun swaps the 'y' and the 'i' and spells the name "Erisychthon". Where Lasdun's Erisychthon character is discussed, Lasdun's spelling is used.

For a to-and-fro discussion of this matter see the following items from the *TLS*:

First, a most unimpressed Peter Green's review of *After Ovid* (30<sup>th</sup> December 1994, 3-4), in which he laments the fact that it has become a recent trend to "turn Ovid into the philosopher he never was, to seek symbolic or psychological profundities where none may exist" (4). To lovers of imaginative re-writings of the *Metamorphoses* Green will come off as somewhat of a spoilsport, but by clearly stating his attitude (and perhaps altitude) before plunging into a tearing-apart of the contributions in the book, he does explain his reason for the negative review. Green notes that Lasdun "misspells" the name "Erysichthon" (4). In the 13<sup>th</sup> January 1995 issue, a letter from Lasdun appears, defending his choice of spelling by stating that "there is no such thing as orthodoxy in this particular matter". He indirectly suggests that Green, though an expert on Ovid, may not be well acquainted with "the tradition of classical appropriation" (15). This letter is followed by one from writer and academic Mark Rudman, also acknowledging Green's authority on the topic of Ovid's own work, but suggesting the classical scholar would not have to drastically modify his worldview to incorporate fresh re-writings more charitably: "[Green] seems to have forgotten that poetic adaption (including Ovid's) is an ancient and venerable tradition, precisely because poets are aware that so many accurate, or quasi-accurate, versions of the original texts already exist" (15). Finally Green's rebuttal letter from 27<sup>th</sup> January 1995 resists resolving the issue with either writer, but states, "I have nothing against *good* improvisation [...] but this was a commodity in short supply in *After Ovid*" (17).

In the second section, his crew are sent to begin work on his latest project in the local woods, and he angers an objecting hippie-like sect by showing his might in a chainsaw-wielding frenzy. The section closes with the particularly distressing felling of a sacred tree that appears to have some human characteristics. The third section sees his punishment: with guidance from “*the goddess*” (3.14), an indigenous woman called Gendenwitha fetches Hunger, whom Lasdun personifies similarly to Ovid’s *Fames*. Hunger enters Erisychthon in his sleep and he wakes ravenous, insatiably devouring the many rich foods available in the land of plenty in which he dwells, and pimping his devoted daughter on the street when his wealth is exhausted. In his agitation he begins to eat himself, staggering about his ruined landscape bleeding before the ultimate, new and strangely appropriate metamorphosis that Lasdun adds onto his story.

# FIRST SECTION

## Setting the Scene

It is a re-telling, an interpretation, a telling re-interpretation, rather than a translation, but during the first line, we could still be in a Greek mythological narrative: “*The scene: a town under mountains*” (1.1). We are given a “*scene*”, an element of theatre, like the Greek *skene*, a backdrop structure out of which actors may emerge, and mountains like those of the Greek landscape, recalling perhaps the ultimate mountain – the godly abode Mt. Olympus – and mountains of Ovid’s other tales. Immediately prior to the Erysichthon story in the *Metamorphoses* we read of Philemon and Baucis (*Met.* 8.618-728), who dwell in a low-lying town and ascend to safety with Jupiter and Mercury who flood the region. We wonder what hints of downfall, destruction or redemption will presently be foreshadowed. When there are mountains to travel up, there are mountains to travel down.

The next lines in Lasdun’s version rule out the possibility of a traditional pastoral landscape:

Clapboard, shingle and brick, the usual  
 Straggle of shopping malls, post-colonial  
 Factory outlets and fast-food chains  
 (1.2-4)

The word “*Clapboard*” as such resounds with the cheapness of hurriedly-constructed pre-fabricated buildings, and the features of the town display the architecture of a throw-away commercialism that shows no interest in long-lasting marble-strong beauty for future ages to appreciate – the Golden Arches have replaced the Golden Ratio. This is a late twentieth

century place designed to encourage the consumption of a large quantity of products as quickly as possible.

On the other hand, it is only modern clapboard that has shoddy connotations – otherwise we have a time-tested, successful way to create a home – and “*shingle and brick*” (1.2) are hardly the ingredients of throwaway buildings. So perhaps “*Clapboard, shingle and brick*” is a list innocent of the cheap bulk of the other things in the town – these are materials common in handsome New England exteriors, giving us geographical clues.<sup>4</sup> Appropriately for a scene-setting, “*Clapboard*” can also mean the black and white striped clapperboard used to begin and end shooting scenes in filmmaking, as in “Action!” and “Cut!”.

Lasdun then pans up through a small amount of farmland, and “*then woods*” (1.6) – the scene of so much of the magic in Ovid. Within Lasdun’s woods, “*the hulk of a disused chemical plant/ Drips and leaks*” (1.7-8) like a polluted and failing body. The human hulk whose metamorphosed fate will be poetically similar to the chemical plant’s, “*Erisychthon*”, is ironically introduced as the builder of this site, and the commercial spaces in town (1.9-12). Another one of the many pies he has fingers in is the local zoning board, which is handy for manipulating the re-zoning of “*Grade A Conservation*” (1.16) land down to “*Grade E, Suitable for Speculation*” (1.17) – a classic wily developer’s stratagem. The fact that the zoning code he has acquired for his property matches his own initial reinforces his power of ownership with a childlike stamp. ‘E’ is for ‘Erisychthon’, and all under his control. Erisychthon is rather like a modern god – omnipresent (through his commercial endeavours) and all-powerful (through his abuse of the position-breaking divisions of the separation of powers designed to protect vulnerable natural spaces from use for uncapped personal gain).

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<sup>4</sup> In an interview (Brearton [1999]), co-editor of *After Ovid* Michael Hofmann confirms that Lasdun’s poem is set in New England, but we will still look to the poem to reveal this itself throughout.

## Tar and Cement

Erisychthon also performs metamorphoses: “*magician-like*” he destroys the “*local beauty spots*” (1.19-20), which he has “*turned into parking lots*” (1.21). The action – he “*Tore to pieces*” (1.21) these places – is reminiscent of the Greek name Erysichthon in its literal sense of “*earth tearer*”. Although this story of destruction and/or development (depending on what one thinks ought to happen to a space) is common to the world, the scenario has become distinctly North American, much to many Americans’ disappointment:

They paved paradise  
And put up a parking lot  
With a pink hotel, a boutique  
And a swinging hot spot  
Mitchell “Big Yellow Taxi”<sup>5</sup>

Joni Mitchell’s famous lament in this song, that we “*don’t know what we’ve got till it’s gone*” also involves another theme of the Erysichthon story, trees, which in this case are uprooted and displayed for commercial gain, though Lasdun’s Erysichthon will not treat them with even this much respect (Section 2):

They took all the trees  
Put ‘em in a tree museum  
And they charged the people  
A dollar and a half just to see ‘em  
Mitchell “Big Yellow Taxi”

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<sup>5</sup> Mitchell (1970) “Big Yellow Taxi” lyrics.

Joni Mitchell is Canadian (this is very apparent in the ‘o’ vowels of “*Don’t it always seem to go*” in the song) but her long-time home is in America, as another of her 1970 songs expresses: “*California I’m coming home*” (Mitchell [1970] “California” lyrics).

Toxins like those leaching from Erisychthon's "*chemical plant*" (1.7) were also the target of this fresh environmental movement. In "Big Yellow Taxi" Mitchell implored farmers to "*put away that DDT*" – she'd rather have speckled produce than the dangerous pesticide. With the help of publications such as the ground-breaking book advocating ground-healing, *Silent Spring* by Rachel Carson in 1962,<sup>6</sup> and public outcry, not least from such artistic quarters as the folk music scene,<sup>7</sup> the use of DDT was banned in the USA in 1972,<sup>8</sup> two years after "Big Yellow Taxi" came out.

Between Carson's book and Mitchell's song, another place in American popular music where the common rhetoric of the environmental movement can be heard is "Tar and Cement" sung by American one-hit-wonder Verdelle Smith in 1966.<sup>9</sup> The teller of the story in the song grows up like the tall grass in her<sup>10</sup> idyllic country town, then departs to seek her fortune far away in the big smoke. Here she experiences a city-worker's loneliness and alienation in her rented accommodation, dreaming of the flowers that will be waiting for her back home. Years later, she returns:

I looked for the meadows, there wasn't a trace  
Six lanes of highway had taken their place  
Where were the lilacs and all that they meant?  
Nothing but acres of tar and cement.

"Tar and Cement"

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<sup>6</sup> Carson (1962).

<sup>7</sup> For one recent example of recognition of the environmental themes in her work, Mitchell has been nominated for the 2011 John James Audubon Center Award for Art Inspiring Conservation (Irvin [2010]).

<sup>8</sup> Lytle (2007): "the EPA [Environmental Protection Agency] banned DDT in 1972" (223).

<sup>9</sup> Celentano (1966) trans. via various intermediaries to be sung by Verdelle Smith (1966). We can trace the easily translatable global sentiments of mourning a lost place of nature through early versions of the song: first it was sung by its Italian writer, Adriano Celentano, referring to the street where he grew up – "Il ragazzo della via Gluck"; then in heartfelt French as "La maison où j'ai grandi" sung by the Parisienne Françoise Hardy, before it was expressed in America (with American lyrics) through Verdelle Smith.

<sup>10</sup> Here, 'her' is used because the singer of this recording of the song is female. However, as noted above, the writer of the original version was male.



Although the “Tar and Cement” narrator uses the city as a space in which to make money, she becomes a victim of such Erisychthonesque development herself when she goes home to find it has taken over what she thought was a separate space, somehow immune to the rumbling approach of the cement truck of time. Perhaps the irony of knowing that the *demand* that increases such commercial places included her *own* makes her even more heartbroken. Whilst city money-making is not portrayed as regrettable greed, the song is one step short of suggesting that she would have been better off remaining in the country, where she was happy (and may not have needed the trappings of the urban lifestyle she went to seek anyway), even without the city as a basis for comparison. But, it is too late for that. We learn that economic transformation – metamorphosis into a person who has money (which is attained in the city) – comes at a price, just as the stages of life, the Ages of Man,<sup>11</sup> have their disadvantages and payoffs. Being young, “*the laughter of children*”, as expressed in “Tar and Cement”, is lost when wisdom, material possessions, and the worries associated with acquiring and keeping them are gained. But the process of replacing parkland with car parks involves new advantages and challenges.

### David Brooks’ *Paradise*

It is here, in the American car park, that we first run into New York Times columnist David Brooks and his 2004 essay, “Our Sprawling, Supersize Utopia”<sup>12</sup> that will soon lead us to the book which will prove so useful in discussing Lasdun’s “Erisychthon”. When discussing lifestyle in the

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<sup>11</sup>As described by Shakespeare’s character Jaques in *As You Like It* (2.7.144-167), but originating in ancient thought – for example, a passage from the Doctrines of Pythagoras as told by Ovid (*Met.* 15.214-236) includes a description of the ages of the human body in a similar fashion to Shakespeare.

<sup>12</sup> Brooks (2004a) (No page numbers are given for this essay because the text has been taken from *The New York Times*’ website rather than the original newspaper printing).

American ‘exurbs’<sup>13</sup> (the phenomenon of increasingly vast suburbs that sprawl beyond the suburbs), he says that the “ideal” of “acres” of “ample parking”<sup>14</sup> (like Verdelle Smith’s “*acres and acres*” of “*tar and cement*”) is ludicrously treasured:

These parking lots are so big that you could recreate the Battle of Gettysburg in the middle and nobody would notice at the stores on either end. Off on one side, partly obscured by the curvature of the earth, you will see a sneaker warehouse big enough to qualify for membership in the United Nations, and then at the other end there will be a Home Depot.

“Our Sprawling, Supersize Utopia”

Brooks’ point is that despite the plentiful parking, shoppers are still hilariously competitive for the closest spot to their destination, and will wait, with indicators flashing, for the occupants of a departing vehicle in a good park to “apparently read a few chapters of ‘Ulysses’” before surrendering the space, as if the journey to the desired park is as arduous and significant as Odysseus’ own journey home. This is a part of the lifestyle Lasdun’s Erisychthon is promoting with his development of “*malls, outlets, chains, et cetera*” (1.22) – those three types of large commercial establishments are mentioned as a trio three times within the first four stanzas of the poem, rather like the incantations of a property

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<sup>13</sup> The term ‘exurb’ was neologised by Auguste Comte Sectorsky in *The Exurbanites* (1955) (written in the same amused faux-documentary tone, and using pronouns such as ‘he’ and ‘they’ to follow the actions of exurbanites, as David Brooks’ uses to discuss his own human subjects in his books), and is currently defined as “A district outside a city or town; *spec.* a prosperous area situated beyond the suburbs of a city” (OED Online “exurb” and “exurbia” in *The Oxford English Dictionary* 2nd ed. [1989]), although ‘exurban’ as an adjective meaning “Of or belonging to a district outside a city or town; suburban; *spec.* pertaining to, or characteristic of, an exurb” first appeared in 1905 (OED Online “exurban” in *The Oxford English Dictionary* 2nd ed. [1989]). Brooks’ book offers a sub-chapter entitled “Exurbs” (Brooks [2004b] 44-53). If one supposes that the farther from the centre of a city to the countryside one is, the more rural the land will be, then a particularly remarkable aspect of exurbs is that they are incongruous phenomena in what one expects to see in the usual pattern of the city-country land use spectrum – it is as if the twentieth century bred itself a new species of populated area.

<sup>14</sup> Brooks (2004a).

developer's advertising materials. It appears that life for an American like this is a big game of seeing how little walking one can do. A newcomer being introduced to the use of such space on the American scale takes time to get over the inevitable amusement at the practice of getting in the car to *drive* to the next store within the parking lot!

They may be creating Paradise, they may be paving it and putting up parking lots, but the title of the book from which Brooks' essay is adapted suggests the former: *On Paradise Drive: How We Live Now (And Always have) in the Future Tense*.<sup>15</sup> It was a follow-up to his 2000 book *Bobos in Paradise : the New Upper Class and How They Got There*.<sup>16</sup> It seems that the already paved Paradise now has access via a paved Drive!<sup>17</sup> All this still leads to the sad refrain of "*tar and cement*" when the heartbreak of losing a natural environment due to what could be termed 'Force of Erysichthon' is felt by anyone from Ovid's Ceres to Verdelle Smith: "*Yet I can see it there so clearly now, where has it gone?*" she asks of the "*meadows*", "*lilacs*", and "*tall grass*",<sup>18</sup> just as Ceres' "*sister Dryads*" are "*Heartbroken by their loss – the grove's loss too*" (Met. 8.777-778) in Ovid. Even closer is the interrogation from Callimachus' Demeter: "*Who is felling my lovely trees?*"<sup>19</sup> (Hymn to Demeter 41).

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<sup>15</sup> Brooks (2004b).

<sup>16</sup> Brooks (2000).

<sup>17</sup> This recalls Modernist designer Le Corbusier's mind-expandingly futuristic idea that "the city is a factory for producing traffic" (Le Corbusier quoted in Brooks [2000] 126). A key book on city planning, Jane Jacobs' *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (1993/1961), criticised 1950s methods of town planning (including Le Corbusier's ideas, and the neighbourhood-destroying influence of urban renewal projects – which involve, essentially, racial segregation by stuffing all the 'problematic' people away into sky scrapers), and advocated diversity of space-usage and inhabitants, and a more humanistic, organic, un-planned approach to the formation of urban communities. So, as we are currently touching upon the topic of cars and the surfaces on which they drive around American cities, it is interesting to note that Jacobs did not see cars as the "villains responsible for the ills of cities" (7) as much as planners who thought that traffic-fixers like freeways would be a cure-all solution to the problems of cities. She stated that "The simple needs of automobiles are more easily understood and satisfied than the complex needs of cities", which need to be learnt intimately before solutions can be known (7).

<sup>18</sup> Celentano (1966) trans. via various to Smith's version.

<sup>19</sup> Trans. Hopkinson (1984).

A particularly interesting aspect of Verdelle Smith's plaintive refrain is her disbelief that a scene she can picture in her head does not exist in real life any more. Looking back at a bygone era longingly is an ancient Greek tradition found in many texts: they had their Golden Age, the perfect past.<sup>20</sup> For modern Americans, perfection seems to be relocated to the future<sup>21</sup> – with self-improvement,<sup>22</sup> with a move to the big city. David Brooks quotes these statistics: "In 2002, about 14.2 percent of Americans relocated. Compare that with the 4 percent of Dutch and

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<sup>20</sup> Evidence of a mythological era of painless abundance is to be found in Hesiod *Works and Days*, 106-20 – even this early, the Greeks were looking back.

<sup>21</sup> Of course this is not an exclusive trend – it is mixed with a generous helping of nostalgia for the past, but a past which, on closer inspection, often involves future-mindedness. For one well-known example, Americana rocker Bruce Springsteen's song *Glory Days* (from the best-selling 1984 album, *Born in the U.S.A.*) evokes a Golden Age of potential. As song narrator, he begins, "*I had a friend, was a big baseball player/ back in high school*", where he also knew a girl who could "*turn all the boys' heads*". But these characters seem to have gone on to have ordinary, un-glorious lives (though rich in Raymond Carveresque blue-collar poeticism) – Springsteen catches up with his friend at a roadside bar, but the best thing they find to talk about is the good old days; and he sometimes sits around reminiscing in the same fashion at the girl's house, who, despite her attractiveness in high school, is now alone looking after her children after splitting up with her husband. It brings them pleasure to remember how things once were, to remember the hopefulness there once was for the future. Finally Springsteen contemplates the future yet to come, and how he will likely continue looking back on "*Glory Days*": "*And I hope when I get old I don't sit around thinking about it/ but I probably will*". It could be the very fact that they constantly hope for a better future that prevents these characters from believing that they have 'made it' in the traditional sense – they still (probably) have to work hard, and they drink hard to relax, and they have the insight of a two-way perspective – they can remember themselves hoping for the future in the past, and they hope for it still, but fortunately, even in their perpetual dissatisfaction, nostalgia brings them joy, and the trials of current life are coped with by the remembrance of good times and hope. Therefore this song incorporates future-mindedness whilst showing it is not the only thought in Americans' heads – but it is a distinct inclination.

Brooks ends *Bobos in Paradise* (2000) with the hope that "if they raise their sights", the Bourgeois Bohemian class of Americans he has identified (formed from the educated elite who replaced the WASP elite with meritocracy after the 1950s, and combining the countercultural movements of the 1960s with the yuppie capitalism of the 1980s) will "go down in history as the class that led America into another golden age" (273). Despite Springsteen and Brooks' identification and concern with a certain 'class' each, the golden American future is a social-system-belief-transcending hope that any individual may have, and can be identified far and wide.

<sup>22</sup> Regarding the spiritual sector of the identified American trend of moving on and re-starting, the results of the *American Religious Identification Survey* (ARIS 2008) enable Kosmin & Keysar (2009) to estimate that 34% of adult Americans self-identify as "Born Again or Evangelical Christian" (9).

Germans and the 8 percent of Britons who move in a typical year.”<sup>23</sup> They start young: “According to the Census Bureau’s Current Population Survey, only a quarter of American teenagers expect to live in their hometowns as adults.”<sup>24</sup> Verdelle Smith’s incredulity that the leafy home she remembered and dreamed of is gone is matched only by her earlier belief in the fantasy of going to the city to “*push on*,” “*before it’s too late*”<sup>25</sup> to contribute to the rat race. The song happens to bind together elements of both the Greek idea of the perfect time (the Golden Age located in the past), and the American idea (perfection is located somewhere “in the Future Tense”<sup>26</sup> as the title of Brooks’ book says), which is appropriate given that it was originally written and sung in Europe, then by an American. This willingness to “pick up and head out for the horizon”<sup>27</sup> is one of the fundamental elements of the American Dream, aspects of which we are beginning to encounter in Lasdun’s “Erisychthon”, to which we now return.

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<sup>23</sup> Brooks (2004a). Brooks does not specify where he found these statistics, but they may come from the Census Bureau’s Current Population Survey mentioned in the next sentence when a similar quotation to this is made in *On Paradise Drive* (Brooks [2004b] 6-7), or from one of the sources of data mentioned in the short “Bibliographical Essay” in the back of the book (283-285), such as “the magazine *American Demographics*, which packs its pages with reliable statistics about everyday American life” (284).

It should be noted that *increased* residential mobility is one of the “myths” that American sociologist Claude S. Fischer (2010) cautions readers against believing too readily in his latest book, *Made in America : A Social History of American Culture and Character* – there are some past eras in which Americans moved around more than they do now (3-4), he says, squeezing his own fresh angle into the full circle of writers’ perspectives in works on American society (which requires researchers of this area to be ‘on the move’ even if their subjects are not). Fischer covers common territory, but in a style that is much less spontaneously excitable as Brooks’ (2004a and b). After “The Stories We Tell” (1-16) Fischer explores five familiar themes – “Security” (17-58), “Goods” (consumption) (59-94), “Groups” (95-160), “Public Spaces” (161-194), and “Mentality” (195-240) before his closing comments (241-246). Compare these with Brooks’ chapters such as “Out for a Drive” (Brooks [2004b] 15-64) and “Americans: Bimbos of the World” (86-110) (this label reflects a stereotype rather than Brooks’ own ultimate conclusion – it is followed by his chapter entitled “The Spiritual Wind” [111-126]).

<sup>24</sup> Brooks (2004b) 7.

<sup>25</sup> Celentano (1966) trans. via various to Smith’s version.

<sup>26</sup> Brooks (2004b).

<sup>27</sup> Brooks (2004a).

## Erisychthon at Home

*"This is our hero, Erisychthon"* (1.23) we are told of the parking lot creator, an introduction which is followed by a pseudo-heroic description. He certainly has physical mass, but although he is a bearded (1.33) *"Ex-boxer,"* (1.24) it seems it would not be the athletic musculature that a vase painter would labour over on a Greek hero like Herakles. Rather, he is the fat man, in the typical literary characterisation stereotype that implies greed and over-consumption (flaws that are too big and unromantic for him to really be a traditional 'flawed hero'), as well as having plenty to give: *"a cross between an ogre/ And Father Christmas"* (1.31-32). His three-hundred pound (1.32) bulk is violent – he can give *"a cuff on the chin that could knock you flat"* (1.35) (this seems to foreshadow the fate of the trees he will fell [2.80-105], whilst his being overweight may hint at his punishment, which will be, in fairytale fashion, an exaggeration of what he already is, or rather, what is already within him [3.65-176]) – and oppressive – *"built like a vat,/ With a great booming voice"* (1.33-34), but people are still drawn to him: *"He had a certain big man's swagger/ People admire"* (1.30-31). Because of this he is able to con them, and he ends up doing two years in a euphemistically-named *"White-collar/ 'Country Club'"* (1.25-26). On his return, his town *"received him back/ With open arms"* (1.27-28) – he does, after all, produce wealth.

In this description, we taste a little of the distaste for vulgar money-grabbing business that, throughout the twentieth century, was characteristic of aristocratic British coldness towards the bold, brash, unrefined visitor from America in so many stories. This visitor is usually a successful entrepreneur, *nouveau riche* from a new country.<sup>28</sup> Lasdun

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<sup>28</sup> A famous example is the elitist treatment prosperous businessman and MP, Rex Mottram, is given in *Brideshead Revisited* (Evelyn Waugh [1962/1945]) when he begins to court the eldest daughter of Lord Marchmain, Lady Julia Flyte, in an attempt to collect aristocratic status and old money, to marry with his new money. As the townsfolk in Lasdun's "Erisychthon" allow their local entrepreneur back after his disgrace, the Marchmain family let the slightly dubious Rex into their lives to various extents (at the very least, as a guest of their daughter), but not without conflict-producing disapproval (in which their Catholicism plays a part). As James Truslow

himself was born in London,<sup>29</sup> so perhaps he maintains a slight aversion to visibly earned and recently acquired wealth – or rather knows, from his British background, how to conjure up the expression of such a sentiment.<sup>30</sup> The contrast between old (inherited) and recently-acquired wealth is still a point of social class conflict. However, it must be made a point of distinction that Erisychthon's hard work is not being criticised –

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Adams says, the American Dream is “a difficult dream for the European upper classes to interpret adequately” ([1932] 404). Their lifestyle of traditional elegant decadence contrasts with the gaudy, tasteless gift Rex lavishes upon Julia for Christmas (a diamond-encrusted live tortoise [190]), to whom he is ultimately a disappointment. Whilst they are nowhere near impoverishment, the Marchmain family are slipping into a lot of debt as the twentieth century develops, and they “[...] *just let their money sit quiet* [...]” (201), according to the frustrated Rex, who loves to make his money ‘work’ by gambling and investing it. Rex is actually Canadian, rather than American, but the same principal is in operation.

*Brideshead Revisited*, a richly-described feast in itself, is “*infused with a kind of gluttony, for food and wine, for the splendours of the recent past*” (“Preface”, 9-10) by its author's own later admission – so as well as being an example of a distinctive sort of class consciousness, it shows nostalgia for an English Golden Age of careless plenty (that being the summery youth of Charles Ryder and Sebastian Flyte, who meet at Oxford, as recollected by Charles, in the army during World War II twenty years later, after Sebastian's descent into alcoholism).

Brooks in turn attempts to find the historical origin behind the stereotype of the bold, vulgar, but ever-friendly, generous and hard-working American businessman (all traits that Erisychthon either possesses or wishes to seem as if he possesses) in his chapter on “Consumption” (54-102) in *Bobos in Paradise* (2000) – well-established post-pioneers looked for points by which to distinguish themselves from others who were still struggling: “The American elites may have been guided by European styles and manners, but they were not European aristocrats. Like their middle-class counterparts across the Atlantic, they were merchants, not lords. When courtly etiquette books were adopted by the merchant classes, some of the aristocratic theatrics were dropped, and wholesome manners came into the fore” (63). Without venturing too much further into a trans-Atlantic discussion of class, one could make a counter-claim against Brooks here, for many of the English aristocracy-indicators were *less* convoluted than those of the successful colonials – for example, the un-self-conscious pleasure taken in actively farming the English countryside (perhaps this has something to do with value in scarcity – America has far more rural land area, and a significant incidence of rural poverty upon it), and the famous disdain for association with financial matters, as if money were an embarrassment to be hidden. American manners may be the product of both choice based on association of certain behaviours with certain statuses, *and* a reaction to some of the stuffier customs of the Old World.

<sup>29</sup> Hofmann & Lasdun (1994) “Biographical Notes” 295.

<sup>30</sup> For example, the painful awareness of British class snobbery – “*the codes of speech and behaviour by which each caste of that overcrowded island policed its boundaries*” – that the protagonist in Lasdun's *The Horned Man* (2002) carries (67). His widowed mother is a social-climber who becomes secretary – and then, as the cliché goes, new partner – to a man of established wealth, but this new stepfather's friends and family are never comfortable with this woman and her son. The protagonist, now grown up and sitting in front of his American therapist in America, thinks, “*It seemed a waste of time to broach the subject.*” (67).

‘making it’ to wealth is not a sin – it is his deceitful character and the physical manifestations of his work that are appalling. Besides, in this instance, the rich man gets others to do his work<sup>31</sup>.

From here we move into a description of his family home, if it can be called so. He lives with one daughter, unnamed, but obviously a ‘Mestra’ character. In Ovid she is “undeserving such a father” (*Met.* 8.847), and Lasdun tells us that she is “a shy girl/ Who doted on him in a perverse/ Return for his neglect, abuse, or worse” (1.36-38). What is worse than abuse, we wonder – sexual abuse? Sexual exploitation is certainly in store for her later (3.126-132). They appear to be a household of two. Neither a partner nor co-parent is mentioned, but it is not hard to believe that one would not linger in the dwelling of the brutish Erysichthon. The unfortunate ‘Mestra’ character is perpetually motherless throughout the available versions of the Erysichthon story.<sup>32</sup> There is never anyone close and caring to save her<sup>33</sup> from paternal oppression but the dubious

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<sup>31</sup> Erysichthon has a crew of workers (1:41-42, 2:39-40).

<sup>32</sup> Except for the ambiguous possibility that Mestra lives with both parents in the *Catalogue of Women* (Hesiod fr. 43a 34 MW), as we briefly discussed in the chapter on original sources. Of course, many sources (both old ancient and modern) do not explicitly exclude the possibility of there being a mother at home, but if she is there, she remains silent and invisible in the text.

<sup>33</sup> However, in the Coan folktale that is a potential survivor from antiquity, “Myrmidonia and Pharaonia”, the hunger-stricken prince has both a son and a daughter. When reduced to nothing but his family, the prince manages for a few days on the proceeds of selling his son. Then he tries unsuccessfully to sell his daughter, and attempts to eat her, but her brother is somehow on hand to save her: “he snatched her away from him and they ran off, and so the poor girl escaped” (Hadzi-Yavrouda trans. Dawkins [1950] as cited in Hollis [1970] 157). This is the most exceptionally positive situation ‘Mestra’ has even been in by the end of any Erysichthon story. Through the eyes of a twenty-first century person living in a place where gender dictates destiny less than it might have in other times and places, if ‘Mestra’ has escaped being eaten, sold or coercively married off, yet she also does not have to survive alone (because she has her physically-protective, so perhaps loving, brother), then she has transcended the mutually exclusive “two main courses of female existence” – “celibacy”, or “involvement with males and (inevitably) childbearing” – that Mary Lefkowitz states for the fate of *Women in Greek Myth* ([2007] 42). The ‘Mestra’ of the Coan folktale has this blood-bound male ‘partner’ in her life who protects her from other males (one thus far – their father – but we are forecasting with what we know from this tiny passage) but she (hopefully) has fewer unequal obligations to him than to a ‘master’, and (perhaps) may have more choices in her coming life. As Lefkowitz points out, we know very little about what ancient Greek female people thought, because the writing we have is mostly from male people, but we do know that everyone knew the myths (42).



sea god Neptune of the *Metamorphoses*, whose character does not appear in Lasdun's "Erisychthon". She never runs away.<sup>34</sup>

Father and daughter live in disarray despite Erisychthon's presumably plentiful cash flow. Theirs is a "*ramshackle gothic pile*" (1.39), which, although it has "*its own pool and grounds*" (1.40), is badly-constructed and falling apart at every seam (1.39-50). The pipes that burst every winter (1.48-49) support the New England geographical location suggested earlier, and well as giving us a minute foreshadowing of Erisychthon's final fate (3.164-172). It seems bizarre that he would not be living the luxurious life he sells, but, "*just as he cheated friends,/ So he'd managed to cheat himself*" (1.42-43). Maybe Erisychthon does not particularly care, and is not even familiar with building techniques of quality – his home of warping "*Cheap timbers*" and "*shoddy brickwork*" (1.44) was "*Planned by himself, put up/ By his own men*" (1.41-42). Maybe a nice living space eludes him because his chief compulsion is to destroy rather than to create (even if he destroys under the guise of creator [1.94-140]), and, as we will see again later (3.141-150), he cannot escape his own tendencies to move in this direction. Perhaps it is a case of his false-forward-thinking leading to living in a backwards condition, as if his ripping off others prevents him from ever establishing a personal integrity that would show in his home. Americans who persevere with honest hard work get to be in a better place – a better home. The incomplete dis-quality of Erisychthon's house also brings to mind two other ideas.

## Ruins and Renovations

First, there is the Romantic artistic movement and the ruins adored by it. Although the con-man Erisychthon is no lofty intellectual, the perpetually

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<sup>34</sup> Unless we are to interpret the brief references to marriage (or potential marriage) in the ancient sources as 'running away', something which they do not appear to be for 'Mestra'. (Also see the footnote previous to this one.)

unfinished, under-utilised state of his house recalls the similar state of ancient Greek architecture admired by poets such as Byron, as he scrawled his name into the toppling marble columns on the Attic promontory at Sounion, where the remains of the temple to ('Mestra's' Ovidian rapist and saviour), Poseidon/Neptune, lie. Sometimes ancient monuments are incomplete because they have been broken at some point or points in history since their construction began (or finished), and sometimes they were truly never completed – either way, they often spend most of their time in existence (by now) being 'incomplete' and eventually we begin to recognise and associate a lossless beauty with this state. They are almost static in time to us – we, the people of now – like Keats' "Grecian Urn".<sup>35</sup>

Rising majestically above Athens, the 2, 450-year old, battle-torn Parthenon itself remains in a constant state of renovation, wearing scaffolding in a spindly wrap like a spare colonnade, or the skeletal ghosts of its absent parts. Even if it were left alone, it would still be missing such major chunks as the Parthenon marbles. However, looking down from the Acropolis, we notice the second thing that reminds us of Erysichthon's house: an abundance of unfinished construction in the city, as if the Romantic movement persisted and its aesthetic were deliberately, artificially created like the aqua-green paint used to synthesise the look of copper verdigris<sup>36</sup> on decorative items in idealising countries, such as America, where things are not always old enough to have decayed organically in time for the fashion. Houses in Greece with an abandoned extra half-floor on the roof are not created to appeal to the imagination of tourists expecting shepherds piping to their flocks beside crumbling columns – the mysterious in-progress-ness of many Greek

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<sup>35</sup> Keats (1820) "Ode on a Grecian Urn".

<sup>36</sup> 'Verdigris' itself comes from an adoption of Anglo-French and Old-French *vert de Grece* and similar terms that literally translate as 'green of Greece' (OED Online "verdigris" Etymology in The Oxford English Dictionary 2nd ed. [1989]).

structures is apparently something to do with evading the taxes charged on finished ones!<sup>37</sup>

In America, Erisychthon's house has another unfinished quality to it: "*A yearning, an almost palpable/ Dream of grandeur and splendour, of epic scale*" (1.51-52) hangs over it – and perhaps over this re-telling, too, for Lasdun has made Ovid's 150 line passage into something more epic in scope: it may not have armies traversing time and geography like Greek and Roman epic, but this lengthiest-available re-telling of the Erysichthon story does share the following elements of the *Iliad*, the *Odyssey*, and the *Aeneid*: a charismatic 'hero'<sup>38</sup> (cared about by a long-suffering 'female' character usually left behind for the action scenes<sup>39</sup>), whose 'army' of workers do quasi-'battle' against their enemies (2.38-105). Regardless of the perhaps-imagined touch of epic literary style, Erisychthon's home has a strong, unfulfilled potential for "*epic scale*" (1.52) – imagined luxury products fill the property in Lasdun's description, including "*Barbecues big enough/ For hogs and oxes on the tilting acreage*" (1.55-56).

Many things seem to be foreshadowing Erisychthon's downfall – his estate is already "*tilting*" (1.56), a small word which, if noticed, somehow lends a feeling here of sliding down rather than up, perhaps with the

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<sup>37</sup> Here is a mention of the phenomenon on the travel blog:

Driving around Greece, one cannot help but notice the plethora of unfinished buildings that dot the landscape. At first I thought they were parking garages, or perhaps some kind of weird modern art, but it turns out that they're tax reduction scheme!! In Greece, partially constructed buildings somehow allow for a tax deduction and depreciation over time. This tax break goes away when the building is actually completed! Sounds like the kind of insane incentive structure that would exist in the USA, dreamed up by Geihtner [sic] and Bernake [sic] and co..

Pandurangan (2009).

<sup>38</sup> Erisychthon is twice referred to as "*our hero*" (1.23 and 2.7). Lasdun's tone is ironic. Nevertheless 'hero' indicates the main character of the story, the one who we follow on his journey of big deeds, as well as being a classical allusive term – the traditional sense of which provides the irony.

<sup>39</sup> Surprisingly, Lasdun's 'Mestra' character is involved in less drama than her ancient, shape-changing counterparts.

weight of all the possessions that are piled upon his estate; the dream is one of “*pure appetite*” (1.57); the large animals on his imagined barbecue are ones that he will later eat in a frenzy (“*hogs*” [1.56] carrying the connotation of the greed of swine, which, along with “*oxes*” [1.56] happen to have been animals used in ancient Greek sacrifice to the gods, an activity with which the goddess-offending character of Erysichthon in any version of the story would ironically be unlikely to feel compelled to take part in); “*hunch*” (1.122) rhyming with “*lunch*” (1.121) in the speech to come at the end of the first section (looking towards the continuous oversized one Erysichthon will consume later on [3.80-150]); and finally for now, even his own large size (1.30-34), as if it were to be filled: “*like a vat*” (1.33).

Returning to the things that do not yet exist, or perhaps have never existed on Erysichthon’s property, we are seeing more of the future-centredness of the American Dream. In *On Paradise Drive* Brooks makes the observation that “Americans – seemingly bland, ordinary Americans – often have a remarkably tenuous grip on reality.”<sup>40</sup> He says this in the context of examining the fact that they “live so much of their lives in the imagined land of the future.” This fantasy is what Brooks calls the “Paradise Spell: the capacity to see the *present* from the vantage point of the *future*.”<sup>41</sup> Erysichthon’s home is a demonstration of the Paradise Spell. When it is viewed, an illusion occurs: “*briefly by a strange/ Hypnotism you transformed the sight/ Into its own ideal,*” (1.59-61) despite the fact that the house is junk in a sorry state of disrepair. (Note the type of “*sight*” [1.60] Lasdun uses – the vision – rather than ‘site’ as in the ‘building site’ which Erysichthon’s house probably resembles.)

It is implied that the readers/viewers are unable to resist the dream themselves and that secretly, perhaps shamefully, they contain a little of the greed of Erysichthon within themselves, for we are invited into the

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<sup>40</sup> Brooks (2004b) 248.

<sup>41</sup> Brooks (2004b) 263.

experience in the poem by pronoun, and it is “*As if he’d tripped you up on some hidden zeal/ You yourself harboured for excess...*” (1.63-64). One of the many puns Lasdun throws into the poem occurs between these two verses – the “*ideal*” (1.61) (imagined) version of Erisychthon’s home is “*Pinnaced and shimmering,*” and the nautical image is carried on when we are told that when this happens it’s as if “*You yourself harboured*” (1.64) an attraction to such an overindulgence as a boat-for-window-dressing. Tying us further into the story, the idea of the reader/viewer having a hungry “*zeal*” (1.63) inside brings him/her uncomfortably close to being like the Erisychthon of the third section!

## Taming the Wilderness

However, the fruition myth<sup>42</sup> is even more apparent in Erisychthon’s business dealings, where he employs the same “*secret; to sell his clients/ On their own luck-rich dreams*” (1.65-66). The space in which these deceptions occur began to be created centuries ago. Consider, for a moment (these details will carry us back to the American future shortly), the difficult and dangerous wilderness-taming lives of the first European settlers: the first immigrant Americans. Of course, when Columbus’ fleet and various other expeditions from elsewhere in the rest of the globe were discovering the New World at the end of the fifteenth century and even many centuries before,<sup>43</sup> there were over a quarter of a million<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Brooks (2004b) 125, 268.

<sup>43</sup> In relation to early explorers, the idea of the presence of gods in modern America is explored in the novel *American Gods* by Neil Gaiman (2005), who, like Lasdun, is English but (predominantly) lives in America [author’s biographical note, first page of book]. The story is peopled (or rather, godded) with mythological beings who walk amongst the modern Americans. Some of these were brought from other places by immigrants – “[...] *We rode here in their minds [...]*” (150), but they are finding themselves abandoned in favour of the newer gods of the things to which Americans are transferring their faith. (Czernobog, a Slavic death-god, wistfully smokes a cigarette, musing that his kind enjoy smoking because it reminds them of the offerings that were once burnt for them [137].) The old gods plan to band together against these “[...] *gods of credit card and freeway, of internet and telephone, of radio and hospital and television, gods of plastic and of beeper and of neon. Proud gods, fat and foolish creatures, puffed up with their own newness and importance.*[’]” (150-151). One of the

indigenous people already inhabiting the space that became ‘America’ and ‘Canada’. But immigrants tended to see it as ‘empty’<sup>45</sup> and available to be colonised<sup>46</sup> (almost as if America were a voracious, empty stomach itself). This attitude started the first of a seemingly endless series of successive waves of immigrants being resented by some of the people who had/have already settled in America – it seems sometimes the Dream is too precious to share.<sup>47</sup> Intolerance for specific groups of people is a sentiment that is hardly unique to America. However, the differing incidences of acceptance and prejudice which occur there continuously provide material for American stories – it is from these narratives after all that we have cowboys-and-Indians Western cinema, and the Negro Spiritual music of oppressed African-American slaves – told and widely spread through film, music and books, including James Fenimore Cooper’s series of historical novels, the *Leatherstocking Tales*, one of which is *The Pioneers, or The Sources of the Susquehanna : a Descriptive Tale*.

This book was published in 1823, but is set beginning in 1793, so it is an early example of an ecologically-conscious American story that involves

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“Coming to America” interludes in the book (75-78), tells of Vikings sailing to North America in 813 CE, accompanied by their Norse gods. The Viking settlers sacrificed a scraeling [sic] (77), and were subsequently all killed by the indigenous people, but their gods remained until the next believers arrived – “*They were waiting*” (78). In another passage, a character observes the face of Libertas, the Roman goddess whose statue greets immigrants to New York, on a silver dollar: “*‘Lady Liberty,’ said Wednesday. ‘Like so many of the gods that Americans hold dear, a foreigner [...]’*” (116). Wednesday is actually Odin, head of the known Norse pantheon (Lindow [2002] 247), whose name derives from the reconstructed Proto-Germanic theonym *Wōdanaz*, with which the week day is homologous. On American identity, Wednesday says that “*‘Nobody’s American,’ [...] ‘Not originally [...]’*” (117), and that “*‘This is the only country in the world,’ [...] ‘that worries about what it is.’*” – the other countries “*‘[...] know what they are [...]’*” (128). America’s unique immigration history has produced this state.

<sup>44</sup> This statistic is from Brooks (2004b) (251). Other estimates run much higher: an American history school textbook quotes up to ten million (Cayton, Perry & Winkler [1998] 14), and a review of a “definitive work on pre-contact demography” illustrates how difficult it is to give a number at all (Snipp [1993] 568).

<sup>45</sup> For one early example, “The belief that America was vacant soil also served as a convenient justification for the Puritans’ claim to the Indian lands” (Carroll [1969] 14).

<sup>46</sup> Brooks (2004b) 251.

<sup>47</sup> However, in an even more prevalent stereotype, America is welcoming and inclusive.

both American Indians and pioneers.<sup>48</sup> It features another land developer with the pioneering spirit that Erisychthon is trying to display to his buyers, and the same imaginative rhetoric of the future that we will see in Erisychthon (1.64-73, 94-140; 2.51-53). Richard Jones, in persuasion mode, is speaking of the future.<sup>49</sup> He happens upon his cousin Elizabeth Temple one winter morning, and proudly leads her to “[...] *the improvements [...]*” made to the area in which they live, “[...] *which no one can explain so well as I, who planned them all [...]*”<sup>50</sup> Further along, Elizabeth asks where they will see these improvements, to which Richard replies, “*Where? Why everywhere. Here I have laid out some new streets; and when they are all built up, will they not make a fine town? [...]*”<sup>51</sup>. But they do not yet exist, and Elizabeth responds, “*I see no streets [...] unless you call the short avenues through these pine bushes by that name [...]*”<sup>52</sup>, and she can hardly believe he wants to build houses in “[...] *those swamps.*”<sup>53</sup>. To the comment on the unsuitability of the land for development, Richard responds resoundingly: “*We must run our streets by the compass, coz, and disregard trees, hills, ponds, stumps, or, in fact, anything but posterity [...]*”<sup>54</sup> Certainly transplanting a map of a city in the Old World has been a popular, perhaps cheering

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<sup>48</sup> Fred Erisman’s (1977) article “Western Fiction as an Ecological Parable” in the *Environmental Review* opens with the statement “No other literary genre so depends upon the environment as does the Western” (15), and goes on to offer an interesting demonstration of the human-environment relationship in this field of literature where plenty leads to wastefulness, and civilisation threatens wilderness. One of Erisman’s examples is *The Pioneers*, in which “the products of the physical world are fair game” for settlers, and “any thing [sic] of nature can – and should – be turned to the benefit of man”, so they enjoy their “unthinking consumption of the bounty of American nature” (15), whilst Indians observe their detrimental effects upon the landscape and wildlife (16-18).

<sup>49</sup> The scene is mentioned in Brooks (2004b) 262, as an example of the Paradise Spell (263).

<sup>50</sup> Cooper (1964/1823) 171.

<sup>51</sup> Cooper (1964/1823) 174.

<sup>52</sup> Cooper (1964/1823) 174.

<sup>53</sup> Cooper (1964/1823) 174.

<sup>54</sup> Cooper (1964/1823) 174. Like so many who produce popular commentary on America, historian Simon Schama is English but now lives in America (as a professor at Columbia University). His book *The American Future : A History* (2008) is ultimately optimistic about its subject, and on this particular aspect of it he echoes Richard’s speech when describing the attitude of Americans: “Natural limits – mountains, rivers – have been there to be wondered at and then, in short order, crossed, forded, mapped, left behind” (Schama [2008] 304).

method of colonial town-planning (leading to some absurdly steep streets in Dunedin, New Zealand, which was planned as a duplication of the flat city of Edinburgh, Scotland, right down to transplanted street names<sup>55</sup>).

Cooper's novel is set in Otsego County, New York (Otsego Lake is the "Source-" of the titular Susquehanna River),<sup>56</sup> a fact which offers the strange possibility that the characters of Richard and Erisychthon are literarily treading in each other's footsteps, 200 years apart. Upstate New York also seems to have been Lasdun's address around the time of the publication of "Erisychthon": Lewis Hollow, Woodstock<sup>57</sup> is not as far inland as Otsego, but the areas are around the same latitude, so perhaps Lasdun's own geographical familiarities helped shape his relocation of the Erysichthon story.

## **Destruction and Creation**

Richard's refusal to let anything (including trees) get in the way of his plans (no matter how life-affirming and forward-thinking they are coming from his character), also carries sinister echoes of Erisychthonesque environmentally destructive industry, which we need to discuss before we move to Erisychthon's most Richard-Jones-like town-planning speech. It seems to be the attitude of, for the sake of one contemporary example, Appalachian mountaintop removal mining businesses a little further South

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<sup>55</sup> According to *The Encyclopaedia of New Zealand*, "The plan for Dunedin was drawn up by the surveyor, Charles Kettle, and the place names of the main streets and suburbs commemorate the close association between the 'New' and the 'Old' Edinburgh". The name of the settlement was changed from "New Edinburgh" to the Gaelic form of Edinburgh, Dunedin. When the Free Church of Scotland came about with the disruption of the Established Church of Scotland in the 1840s, its leaders were motivated to organise the journey to the South Island of New Zealand by the desire to establish their own settlement and enjoy a higher standard of living than that of poverty-ridden Scotland at the time (McLintock [ed.] [1966]). A parallel can be drawn between this journey from Scotland, and the (earlier) travels of the English Pilgrims coming to America – both groups of people were seeking a fresh space of religious freedom and were willing to take a long journey to unfamiliar lands in the hope that they would be better off there.

<sup>56</sup> Cooper (1964/1823) "Author's Introduction" v.

<sup>57</sup> Lasdun (1995) 15.



in the continent from Richard and Erisychthon, when they are asked why the tree-populated lids of 500<sup>58</sup> mountains must be flipped off as if they were cookie jars. This bares previously unexposed elements of the earth that are toxic to many life forms when brought into contact with the outside environment.<sup>59</sup> The coal seams under the mountaintops are taken by “corporate interests based outside of the region”<sup>60</sup> who have acquired most of the coalfields, and the local people are poisoned and displaced when the mountaintops are thrown into the ‘hollers’, summarises Dr. Shirley Stewart Burns, who calls the West Virginia coalfields home.<sup>61</sup>

Ironically, the isolated, mountain-dwelling people are amongst the poorest in the whole of America, whilst their home terrain is some of the most minerally wealthy – hence, their rivers crying toxic sludge, they feel exploited.<sup>62</sup> These people are known for the music of Anglo-Scottish heritage (amongst others) which developed in the area, but oft-stereotyped<sup>63</sup> as frighteningly backward, and perhaps a little mysterious – as we know from Ovid, magic happens in the woods. Perhaps people are still wary of the beings who live so closely to the trees, whether they are our fellow human-like ape populations that evolutionary theory calls our close relatives, reminding us of natural plans or lack thereof – and even questions of the future – which can put us outside of our comfort zone (sometimes making humans feel like a subset of animals, exalted only by our clever dominance); typecast banjo-strummers<sup>64</sup>; the dancing nymphs of Ceres in the *Metamorphoses* (8.746); or the latest “*sisterhood of Ceres*” (2.28) in “Erisychthon”.

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<sup>58</sup> Geredien (2009) 2.

<sup>59</sup> Barton (for Ceres) (2010) 75.

<sup>60</sup> Burns (2009).

<sup>61</sup> Burns (2009).

<sup>62</sup> Burns (2009).

<sup>63</sup> One significant example of the stereotyping of Appalachia is the grisly time the civilised-men-from-the-city (Atlanta, GA), have when they encounter inbred hillbilly sociopaths on their canoeing adventure in James Dickey and John Boorman’s *Deliverance* (1972). Once again, for the starry-eyed American journey-makers, there are *already* people, other Americans, living in this ‘undiscovered’ territory that the men feel compelled to explore.

<sup>64</sup> Like the mountain men in *Deliverance* (Dickey & Boorman [1972]).

Who are we, we are pushed to ask, and why do the trees, which cast us off, or frightened us away towards ‘civilisation’ so that we sat at the edge of their realm telling Grimm’s Fairy Tales (about being lost, and found, in the woods) and the like, seem to perpetually whisper to us to return? If the bear-braving hikers who come to experience the journey of the Appalachian Trail catch sight of the spreading ringworm-like patches of razed landscape, they will wonder how many more people will be able to view this, “one of the most ecologically biodiverse regions in the world”<sup>65</sup> before it becomes a Martian desert, devoid of the always vaguely anthropomorphic figures of the trees. Again ironically, when mountaintop removal took hold in the 1990s (previously it was usually the terrain of angry gods in mythology, or gradual erosion), it was because the low-sulphur coal it yielded relatively quickly (as compared with the more labour-intensive – but local-employment providing – traditional mining methods) satisfied the new emissions laws for the protection of the American air quality – thereby came the huge demand for Appalachian coal by power companies.<sup>66</sup>

Indeed, there is a lot of opposition to environmentally destructive industry in America, at least nominally. An American network founded as a result of a prominent American environmental disaster, the *Exxon Valdez* oil spill of 1989 (the effects of which continue today,<sup>67</sup> as we can see in the 20<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Report of the *Exxon Valdez* Oil Spill Trustee Council<sup>68</sup>), and named after the very goddess of agriculture and fertility who cautioned and punished Erysichthon for destroying the sacred tree in the *Metamorphoses* (*Met.* 8.777-878), the mission of Ceres – Investors and Environmentalists for Sustainable Prosperity – is “Integrating sustainability into capital markets for the health of the planet and its

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<sup>65</sup> Burns (2009).

<sup>66</sup> Burns (2009) and the Clean Air Act (Amendments of 1990) S.1630.

<sup>67</sup> The event also appears to be *repeating* for America today, with the massive BP oil spill of 2010, following the fatal explosion of the *Deepwater Horizon* oil rig in the Gulf of Mexico.

<sup>68</sup> *Exxon Valdez* Oil Spill Trustee Council (2009) 10-16, 34-35.

people.”<sup>69</sup> More Americans are starting to realise that they don’t just have to avoid *being* an Erisychthon to avoid environmental destruction – they also have to avoid *supporting* anything allied with his activities, and that could be something as far removed as profiting from shares in a company that buys houses from him, for example. Investors may as well hold chainsaws themselves. Founder Joan Bavaria said, “The Ceres Project was founded on the belief that considering financial profits alone, when investing in savings for our future, can blind us to social and environmental costs that may in fact rob us of our ability to have a future.”<sup>70</sup>

Despite pressure from numerous environmental and social groups (who cite the work of scientists), such as iLoveMountains.org (created by the Appalachian Voices advocacy organisation), mountaintop removal mining still has not been banned, but a report from Ceres mentions that a few steps have been taken by the Obama administration to curb the use of this technique in Central Appalachia (it happens principally in West Virginia, Kentucky and Virginia, with some in Tennessee too<sup>71</sup>), to protect water quality in the area.<sup>72</sup> What happens next is uncertain, but the movement against this type of mining is gathering speed and popularity, so perhaps it will bring about change like the protestors of the 1960s, and many other grassroots<sup>73</sup> movements since, have managed to do. There is even a page on iLoveMountains.org where Americans can type in their zip code and find out how the electricity supply to their home or business is connected to mountaintop removal.<sup>74</sup> In the second section of Lasdun’s poem Erisychthon will clash his own environmentalist opponents, up in the woods (2.36-105).

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<sup>69</sup> Ceres (organisation) (2010) ‘About Us’ on [ceres.org](http://ceres.org).

<sup>70</sup> Bavaria (2009/1989).

<sup>71</sup> Burns (2009).

<sup>72</sup> Barton (for Ceres) (2010) 77.

<sup>73</sup> ‘Grassroots’ may now only be the appropriate word for the *origins* of some of the organisations – clearly there are many wealthy and politically influential people involved now, who have helped spread the Appalachian voices in ways money can.

<sup>74</sup> iLoveMountains.org “What’s My Connection to Mountaintop Removal?” page.

The people who control the corporations that wreak environmental havoc seem to greedily over-emphasise the “*me*” element in Woody Guthrie’s gently-played social-protest folk song lyrics celebrating the geography and people of America, “*This land was made for you and me*”<sup>75</sup> – both Ovid’s Erysichthon and Lasdun’s Erisychthon share this attitude. Woody Guthrie penned the song in 1940 with rather more “inclusive” sentiments, and it is so well loved that it has achieved the status of being “one of the most widely-sung songs in the United States,” and it is sometimes regarded as an alternative national anthem.<sup>76</sup> We cannot tell how many people take Erisychthonesque justification for destruction<sup>77</sup> out of their enjoyment of this particular peaceful song, but it is easy to imagine some doing so from similar words as they forge ahead with ‘progress’. The powerful companies who remove mountain tops sometimes justify their actions by pointing to the job opportunities they generate (which average only 89 positions per site, over a decade, and create divided loyalties amongst local employees<sup>78</sup>), or to the usable flat land created by valley-filling.<sup>79</sup> Over a million acres of Central Appalachia have been surface

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<sup>75</sup> Guthrie (written 1940) “This Land is Your Land”.

<sup>76</sup> Logsdon & Place (annotators) (1997) “Notes On The Songs” 10.

<sup>77</sup> Another place that Judeo-Christian Americans may find justification for environmental destruction is by interpreting the biblical account (or accounts) of creation in favour of whatever activity they are imposing upon the environment. The passage of *Genesis* 1.26-30 has God giving humans “*dominion over*” all the other life on earth (1.26, 28), telling them to “*replenish the earth, and subdue it*” (1.28), and even specifying, “*Behold, I have given you every herb bearing seed, which is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree, in the [sic] which is the fruit of a tree yielding seed; to you it shall be for meat*” (1.29). These commands could appear to mean ‘it’s a free-for-all, come and get it’ if the implied element of guardianship and sustainability is ignored. In *Genesis* 2, God makes a man and places him in the Garden of Eden (2.7-8), “*to dress it and to keep it*” (2.15). Adam gets to name all the animals himself (2.19-20). All of this divinely-bestowed power over other life on earth, bolstered by the particular advancements in knowledge, communication and technology humans have made, is broadly reflected in Judeo-Christian attitudes towards using and conserving the environment. Some err more towards being charged with using and dominating, rather than looking after the world. Theological questions merge with environmental questions when one is discussing how much responsibility the Judeo-Christian God intended humans to have for the world, and how much humans can be expected to consider other humans, ones who they have never met, and ones who are yet to be born.

<sup>78</sup> Burns (2009).

<sup>79</sup> iLoveMountains.org “Reclamation FAIL” page.

mined, often using the mountaintop removal method.<sup>80</sup> Perhaps the Appalachians will soon boast the biggest parking lots in America.

Prospering – mining, planning a city in the 1790s or going to one in the 1960s – at the same time as loving and protecting the environment, seems to be a tremendously paradoxical drive within the American Dream. The dramatic wonders of the continuing mining problem are becoming tangible in new ways using contemporary technology. We can view their geographical manifestations for ourselves, using many types of media. One simple way is to zoom down upon Earth using Google Maps technology on the internet, set to ‘Satellite’ view. Not a far mouse-scroll from a prosperous city – not necessarily near the Appalachians this time – the flourishing Salt Lake City, Utah, for example, and its increasing south-westerly exurbs (fringed by the skeletons, bases, or just plots of even newer houses, with Real Estate signs already standing of course), we may come across a gaping pit where valuable natural resources are helping to generate wealth, and where the grand-scale link between destruction and creation can be made by looking at aerial photographs.<sup>81</sup> Magnificent and tragic, these are hell-holes of concentric lines in a literal relief map (so the pit looks like a life-sized model of itself), circling through the spectrum of the colours of the American ‘Fall’, grainy little Tonka-toy vehicles spiralling along the ridges for their next load of the earth’s soul, brilliant turquoise pools of poison at the depths of the excavation. It is very easy to see the effects extractive industry has on the land – any American with access to the internet can take a look,<sup>82</sup> if s/he has not

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<sup>80</sup> Geredien (2009) 2.

<sup>81</sup> Google Maps reference

[http://maps.google.com/?ie=UTF8&ll=40.643136,-](http://maps.google.com/?ie=UTF8&ll=40.643136,-112.0578&spn=0.787771,1.781158&t=h&z=10)

[112.0578&spn=0.787771,1.781158&t=h&z=10](http://maps.google.com/?ie=UTF8&ll=40.643136,-112.0578&spn=0.787771,1.781158&t=h&z=10) (accessed 13<sup>th</sup> May 2010). The hue of the (current) aerial photographs of the pit changes down a central line when zoomed in upon: suddenly the wrinkles of the land are lined with snow, showing that such a large-scale project as photographically mapping the world could not be achieved in one single moment, reminding us that no matter how fast we dig and build, the weather, as if it were a god, still has the power to change the environment instantly.

<sup>82</sup> When curious people use the monopolistically-popular search engine offered by Google (who have been implicated in many privacy compromises), merely glancing down the list of popular search terms that pop up after typing in “Bingham Canyon” (the name of the mine near Salt Lake City) tells us things we were expecting about the mine

seen it happening in her/his ‘back yard’ (as is the case for Appalachian villagers, or citizens of Salt Lake City who wander westward to see what is over there).

So, there is a long-standing dichotomy in place. When the Americans move forward with their Dream and prosper, they need new things – you cannot build a city without materials and money. But resources and profit do not just materialise out of nothing, and the effects of the Dream-machine are also destructive. But the idea of conservation is, perhaps hopelessly, outweighed by an individual and collective desire to live the best life possible, right now.

### ***Sophrosyne* and Supersizing**

The ancient Greeks were aware of this dichotomy between using the environment moderately and harmoniously, and abusing and destroying it. It is well-expressed in the worship of Artemis, the virgin huntress, who was also guardian of the forest and mistress of its wild beasts: *potnia therôn*. The hunting/protecting goddess is illustrated in fierce retaliatory mode by Ovid in the *Metamorphoses* – Erysichthon’s is not the only story in the eighth book to feature an enraged goddess. We have already detailed the story of Meleager and the Calydonian Boar (*Met.* 8.260-444) in our chapter on the *Metamorphoses* – Diana (into whom the Romans assimilated Artemis) cries, “*This shall not pass/ Unpunished. No!*” (*Met.* 8.279-280) when her alters are neglected, and she takes the (slightly ironic) step of setting a destructive boar upon the land (*Met.* 8.282 ff.).

The paradoxical dual role of hunting and protecting for the Artemis/Diana deity lays bare a single concept encompassing them: moderation. The ancient Greeks may perhaps be said in a sense to have had it; it is

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– its existence, size (“bingham canyon [sic – lowercase letters] mine from space”), and business (“bingham canyon copper mine”).

perhaps a different story with the modern Americans.<sup>83</sup> This is the immoderately generalised sense we get from our two distant and distinct renderings of Erysichthon, at any rate. Lasdun's Erysichthon, like Ovid's Erysichthon, is punished for his greedy actions, but by then we have seen that he is not an immoderate man in a moderate place, like Ovid's Erysichthon, but an immoderate man prospering in an immoderate place. As Classical scholarship maintains some popularity, and America forges ahead getting "Harder, Better, Faster, Stronger"<sup>84</sup>, the comparison between ancient times and modern becomes increasingly obvious – moderation was an acknowledged Greek goal to aspire to, but the concept is merely a novelty in America, a country notorious for consumption, where even diets are 'extreme'.

Richard Seaford recently elaborated on the comparison between Greek moderation and modern excess in the Presidential Address, entitled "The Ancient Greeks and Global Warming", which he delivered to the Classical Association Annual Conference 2009 in Glasgow.<sup>85</sup> Attendees saw him make this entertaining pop-classics speech without notes, but fortunately he wrote up a version of what he said, for *The Times Literary Supplement*, in which (ancient versions of) the Erysichthon story itself, amongst other examples, serve to illustrate various points about the phenomenon of money, particularly three unique aspects of it.<sup>86</sup> One is the isolating quality of the quest for money (which leads to the collapse of previous traditions and bonds, such as "reciprocity" and "kinship"), and how this flavoured tragedy (which followed coinage closely into the Athenian polis); another the limitlessness of the wanting and the gaining

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<sup>83</sup> Of course, it is not completely absent from America, merely a long way down the list of words with which America is associated. John C. Shields' book, *The American Aeneas : Classical Origins of the American Self* (2001), an unusual and detailed study of classical traditions in early American literature, even discusses the exaltation of (and Christian take on) the golden mean in the myth of Daedalus and Icarus (41) by Edward Taylor, classically allusive colonial pastor and poet (40).

<sup>84</sup> de Homem-Christo & Bangalter (as the duo Daft Punk) (2001) "Harder, Better, Faster, Stronger", sampled in Kanye West's very popular 2007 American hip hop song "Stronger".

<sup>85</sup> Classical Association (2009) *Annual Conference 2009* programme.

<sup>86</sup> Seaford (2009).

of money (which is distinct from the things one could previously accumulate, like food, which you can get enough of – unless you are Erysichthon in the throes of punishment); and finally the “homogenising effect” money has because “everything happens for its sake” (which, in today’s world,<sup>87</sup> has homogenised things like travel experiences – Seaford offers the identical experiences of staying at a Holiday Inn anywhere in the world as a case in point – the “limits articulating cultural space” have been “deregulated”).<sup>88</sup> In regard to the ancient-to-modern times comparison, Seaford says that “most academics” emphasise both “how different and simultaneously how similar” the Greeks and Romans were to “us” (Seaford’s “us” could refer to the current inhabitants of the world, or, more narrowly, Classical academia, or perhaps a population in between – the wording of his opening paragraph accidentally creates this amusing uncertainty).<sup>89</sup>

So we have been given one reason why moderation – *sophrosyne* – became a popular concept for the Greeks, at least from the seventh century BCE (when coinage arose): they were anxious about its unlimitedness, “and this anxiety contributed to their explicit privileging of limit over the unlimited”.<sup>90</sup> The extent to which this official stance – significant enough that we may still pick up on it today – protected the Greeks from the negative aspects of the new monetary economy is debatable. We also cannot state that the Greeks were moderate people, for the very fact that they worried about the effects of a boundless asset like money on society indicates they knew they were capable of behaviour that would make their lives the “solitary, poore [sic], nasty, brutish, and short” ones a pessimistic Hobbes described in his seventeenth century philosophy/book, *Leviathan*, to show that human

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<sup>87</sup> It should be noted that money is not the be-all and end-all in itself in America. As Brooks uses Santayana to explain, the money America is famous for accumulating is not the heart of its spiritual yearning, it is still symbolic of ““success, intelligence and power”” (Brooks [2004b] 115, quoting Santayana [1924] *Character and Opinion in the United States* 185).

<sup>88</sup> Seaford (2009).

<sup>89</sup> Seaford (2009).

<sup>90</sup> Seaford (2009).



nature requires disciplining or humans will go feral.<sup>91</sup> We are saying that the Greeks recognised and prized moderation fairly highly according to the evidence we have<sup>92</sup> – not that they always behaved accordingly. When they did not, it was sometimes story-worthy, hence Erysichthon, and his environmental destruction. Lasdun was inspired to write of Erysichthon the businessman's "*unlimited*" confidence (1.72), which lured clients in a "*potent, invisible/ Spume*" (1.71-72), rather like a greasy substance escaping the dark ocean of his nature and polluting the earth. (However, Lasdun compares the large and dominant Erysichthon's confidence to the "*hormones*" animals release to force other animals into submission [1.73-76].)

Contrary to the popular conception that 'the environment' was 'invented' some time last century – perhaps the 1960s, when environmentalism became widely fashionable and dutifully incorporated into legislation – J. Donald Hughes works on the premise that people were aware of the environment, and problems with it, in Graeco-Roman times in his book, *Pans Travail : Environmental Problems of the Ancient Greeks and Romans*.<sup>93</sup> He concentrates on "the treatment of nature by human beings and their technologies."<sup>94</sup> We are provided with abundant examples of deliberately environmentally protective behaviour. In early times the actions often had gods-fearing motivations, which dwindled into custom, making way for Classical rationality, but reason could not triumph over a

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<sup>91</sup> Hobbes (1968/1651) 186.

<sup>92</sup> Another original source of the Erysichthon story also provides some evidence for our generalisations about money and moderation: Mestra's story in Palaephatus' *Peri Apistōn* (*On Unbelievable Tales*) tells us that Erysichthon let his daughter be wooed with gifts of animals – not money (*Peri Apistōn* 23 trans. Stern). Palaephatus "imagines a distant rustic past" before the time of money and coinage, "in which, it seems, humanity was not yet corrupted by familiar amenities" (Stern [1996] 21). However, if Palaephatus is indeed setting his myth rationalisations in such a Golden Age, then a translation that tells us that Erysichthon "*squandered his money*" (*Peri Apistōn* 23) does not align with it completely. Unless "*money*" simply means 'wealth', the text suggests that money existed, but non-monetary gifts were used, perhaps more tastefully, for wooing purposes "*in those days*" (*Peri Apistōn* 23). Either way, we can detect Greek negative associations with money, as well as the inclination to look back at better times past.

<sup>93</sup> Hughes (1994) xi.

<sup>94</sup> Hughes (1994) xii.

deficiency in knowledge of natural process.<sup>95</sup> Hughes concludes that many of the motivations of the Greeks and Romans were selfish, to a degree that they failed to “maintain a viable balance with the environment”<sup>96</sup>. So the *Travail* that Pan, a whole-environment personified, endures in the title refers to “the depletion of the natural environment through everything it suffered at the hands of the Greeks and Romans”!<sup>97</sup> He ominously places partial blame on this phenomenon for their decline (though he makes the distinction that they were probably “unwitting” as well as “unwise”), and for the difficulties encountered by subsequent civilisations.<sup>98</sup>

The solitary reference to the story of Erysichthon in Hughes’ book (pointing out how fitting a divine retribution hunger is for “a crime against the land”, as an example amongst others<sup>99</sup>) falls in the chapter entitled “Groves and Gardens, Parks and Paradises”.<sup>100</sup> This single placement, citing only Ovid as a source,<sup>101</sup> is probably more significant for statistically indicating to the reader (via omission everywhere else) that plenty of other stories deal with this dichotomy, than for its also happening to show that the story of Erysichthon is not amongst the more well-known of Greek myths, despite being such a perfect example of Hughes’ theme.

## Pollution in the Enchanted Forest; Actaeon Goes to Town

In modern America, Erysichthon’s electrolyte chemical plant now leaches into the local water and allegedly causes deformities in local animals – “*Web-footed mice, snakes with fur in patches*” (1.87) – more minor or semi-metamorphoses in the story, appropriate ornamentation for a tale

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<sup>95</sup> Hughes (1994) 195, citing Protagoras (Plato *Theaetetus* 152A) and Aristotle (*Politics* 1259a9, 1254b) on human reason justifying human superiority.

<sup>96</sup> Hughes (1994) 194.

<sup>97</sup> Hughes (1994) 48.

<sup>98</sup> Hughes (1994) 199.

<sup>99</sup> Hughes (1994) 174.

<sup>100</sup> Hughes (1994) 169-180.

<sup>101</sup> Hughes (1994) 174 n.25.

told “*After Ovid*”. Lasdun seems to have a fascination with polluted American environments such as this. In his novel *The Horned Man*, the protagonist looks out a train window at a stream that has differing colours of ice, “*depending [...] on which gland of which deceased chemical plant or paint factory happened to have just ruptured and spilt its bilious juices into the groundwater.*”<sup>102</sup>

In the landscape of “Erisychthon”, when hunters at twilight (in the liminal time between light and darkness, when magic seems possible) see an “*unearthly/ Fluorescence in the reeds*” (1.84-85) Lasdun seems to be conjuring the feeling of venturing back into the enchanted forests of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, where goddesses loiter, ready to punish acts of offence. In this way, Lasdun may be working with what we already know, using setting to neatly appropriate a mood already described by Ovid. In an example of forest magic from the third book, we have Diana’s revenge on the hunter Actaeon, who accidentally sees the chaste goddess bathing naked with her nymphs.<sup>103</sup> In an extravagant and gruesome overreaction, she likely exceeds the revenge fantasies of anyone whose privacy has been intruded upon whilst soaking in an insufficiently secured bathroom, or, in her case, skinny-dipping in a forest pool. After giving him a thorough splashing, Diana metamorphoses him into a terrified stag, to be chased and torn apart by his own dogs (*Met.* 3.138-252),<sup>104</sup> as his

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<sup>102</sup> Lasdun (2002) 186.

<sup>103</sup> Also see “Appendix A : Bodies of Water” for further discussion of such scenes.

<sup>104</sup> A goddess (this time Athena) being disturbed at her bathing is the subject of Callimachus’ 5<sup>th</sup> Hymn, *On the Bath of Pallas*, which mentions the story of Actaeon. (*Hymns* trans. Mair [5.107-116] – Mair [1921] has been selected for elegance in the particular instances quoted here, over the more recent translations of Nisetich [2001] and Smith [2004].) Athena blinds a young Tiresias (also out hunting) for his accidental glimpse of her, and when his mother (Athena’s nymph Chariclo, wife of Eueres) asks for a reconsideration, she explains them’s-the-rules, and recites: “*the laws of Cronus order thus: Whosoever shall behold any of the immortals, when the god himself chooses not, at a heavy price shall he behold*” (5.100-102). Then she points out that Tiresias got off lightly compared with Actaeon, and besides, she will give him a host of special gifts to make up for his disability, such as prophecy – “*I will make him a seer to be sung of men hereafter, yea, more excellent far than any other*” (5.121-122) – a long life, and the continued use of his mind even once he is dead down in Hades (5.119-130). This Hymn is worth mentioning because it both immediately precedes and carries some of the offended-goddess theme of Callimachus’ 6<sup>th</sup> Hymn to *Demeter* (Hopkinson’s 1984

companions wonder where he is whilst *“In ignorant zeal they/ encouraged the wild pack/ on with the usual halloos”*.<sup>105</sup> If we know this story, it will surely float somewhere to the surface of our consciousness when we are reading a re-writing of Ovid and hear of hunters at twilight seeing strange things at a pool in the woods. Also, Actaeon’s visceral fate, brought about by an upset goddess and ending in shreds of flesh, is very similar to that of Erysichthon, and his story is another example of punishment beneath trees.

The East-side American writer John Cheever re-tells the story of Actaeon as the first of the I - IV “Metamorphoses” published in his short story collection from the 1950s and early 1960s, *The Brigadier and the Golf Widow*.<sup>106</sup> The first line tells us that Larry Actaeon is physically *“built along classical lines”* (l.77), assuaging any doubts we had that, with such a name, his tale would be built along classical storylines – Cheever’s use of the third-person in his “Metamorphoses” even lends a mythological fable-like quality to the stories. Actaeon breeds dogs in a wealthy suburb and is a partner at an investment banking firm in New York City (l.77). When he accidentally walks in on the only female partner partnering with a colleague, and is haunted by her uncommonly *“luminous”* (l.78) nakedness and her *“powerful and collected stare”* (l.79), he is aware that *“He had beheld something that he should not have seen”* – rather like Callimachus’ bathing Pallas tells Chariclo – and has an uneasy feeling that revenge could be in store for him (l.78-79). When he gets home that night, he sees his dogs are out, and the last thing he hears is his wife calling out *“[...] Larry, please come quickly, the dogs are out and I think they’re after someone!”* (l.84).

Cheever’s stories are often rich in classical allusion, and the connection with Ovid has not gone unnoticed. When he was featured on the cover of

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translation of this individual Hymn is used where we discuss it), which tells the Erysichthon story.

<sup>105</sup> Translation by Raeburn (2004) *Met.* 3.242-243, a more appealing version in this instance than that by Melville.

<sup>106</sup> Cheever (1964) 77-105.

*Time* in 1964, the magazine ran articles entitled “Ovid in Ossining”<sup>107</sup> (the village in Westchester County, New York, where he lived as an exurbanite) and “The Metamorphoses of John Cheever”<sup>108</sup>. A recent biography review in *The New York Times* calls him “Our Ovid of Suburbia”.<sup>109</sup>

### John Cheever’s *Paradise*

In a work published just before Cheever’s death in 1982, *Oh What a Paradise it Seems*,<sup>110</sup> we find an abundance of coincidences with the Erysichthon story and Lasdun’s “Erisychthon”. Cheever’s 100-page novel readily incorporates themes of greed, pollution and environmental preservation, via avenues too numerous to list, but we will mention some significant points. The town of Janice in this story has been luckier than Erisychthon’s town thus far – there are “no fast-food franchises of any sort” (*Paradise* 4)<sup>111</sup> – till an aging man, Lemuel Sears who lives in a New York apartment on East 78<sup>th</sup> Street, goes out to Beardsley’s Pond to ice-skate, only to find his Paradise has started to be used as a rubbish dump (*Paradise* 9). He connects the abhorrent sight with the prevailing ideals of the American Dream that we have identified:

Here was the discharge of a society that was inclined to nomadism without having lessened its passion for portables. Most wandering people evolve a culture of tents and saddles and migratory herds, but here was a wandering people with a passion for gigantic bedsteads and massive refrigerators. It was a clash between their mobility – their

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<sup>107</sup> *Time* (27<sup>th</sup> March 1964) “Novelists: Ovid in Ossining”.

<sup>108</sup> *Time* (27<sup>th</sup> March 1964) “Books: The Metamorphoses of John Cheever”.

<sup>109</sup> Johnston (27<sup>th</sup> March [coincidentally] 2009) “Our Ovid of Suburbia, Reconsidered”.

<sup>110</sup> Cheever (1982).

<sup>111</sup> Cf. Lasdun (1994) 1.4.

driftingness – and their love of permanence that had discharged its chaos into Beardsley's Pond.

*Oh What a Paradise It Seems* (9)

We can see that because of the Paradise Spell<sup>112</sup> ('Paradise' being handily visible in the words of the book's title!), and commercially planned obsolescence of the sort criticised by Vance Packard in his 1960 book *The Waste Makers*,<sup>113</sup> a lot of waste has been produced from things consumed<sup>114</sup> (which either break or go out of fashion), and someone has made a bad decision about where to put it – inevitably connected with making a profit. Sears is upset, but, possessing an attitude of entitlement and having both time and money on his hands, he decides to get to the bottom of this environmental crime, hiring a lawyer to investigate, who is murdered after ascertaining that Beazley's Pond has been very Erisychthonesquely "*rezoned*" (*Paradise* 23) by the local Planning Board (*Paradise* 23). Sears is then helped by an environmentalist, Horace Chisholm, who is in turn murdered (*Paradise* 92).

At one stage, Chisholm is driving home from a town planning board meeting, "*where a zoning change would involve paving a half square mile for a shopping center while poisoning and corrupting some wetlands that fed two brooks that in turn fed sources of drinking water*" (*Paradise* 75). This is the same situation that Erisychthon produces in his town when he paves the way for his "*shopping malls*" and other developments (1.3, 14-22). Chisholm is disappointed that the vote was in favour of this plan, and that this happened because the people believed that they would be living elsewhere by the time the water was undrinkable, so it would not be their problem (*Paradise* 75). Again we see an example of the American

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<sup>112</sup> Brooks (2004b) 263.

<sup>113</sup> Packard (1961/1960) dedicated the book to his parents, "*who have never confused the possession of goods with the good life*".

<sup>114</sup> In Packard's (1961/1960) tradition, later books have given labels to this phenomenon of frenzied, wasteful consumption – an Australian book (much of which can be applied to American consumerism also) pseudo-medicalises it into "*affluenza*" – the Erisychthonesque symptom of which is "an insatiable appetite for more things" (Hamilton & Denniss [2005] *Affluenza : When Too Much is Never Enough* 100).

people's tendency to move on, their "*dependence on acceleration*" (*Paradise* 75) as Chisholm identifies the trend. He realises that "*a hermetic society had comparable limitations*" and with a consciousness of the potential positive effect of moderation he is out of place in a society where even his wife left him – she found him "*immobile*" (despite the fact that she remained in their house and he had to leave – which is an example of the spiritual need to be moving; in this case it did not equate to a physical shift because for Chisholm's family, staying put enabled the change) (*Paradise* 75). Just as Richard Seaford expressed the idea of an ancient Greek society troubled by the idea of limitlessness,<sup>115</sup> Chisholm the environmental scientist has realised that some of the problems America has caused its environment would not have come about so easily without this limit-free aspect of the American Dream urging them forward (*Paradise* 75).

Peculiarly, we are at one point treated to a classically-allusive description of Sear's past visit to a blind oracle in Eastern Europe, Gallia, who is frequented by rich American businessmen seeking advice from her in her "*extinct volcano, not far from where one of the most famous oracles of the ancient world had lived*" (*Paradise* 56). Sometimes, Cheever's tale seems surreal, as if it were a dream of a remote future by someone living in the classical past, as written by an author from that future. Other hints of a classical world alive just beneath the surface of the narrative include Sears' thoughts whilst driving away on a fishing trip (where he finds the aquatic life lacking because the lakes have become acidic [*Paradise* 68-69]) with his lover Eduardo. (His self-surprising same-gender love affair is one of the lively subplots of the book.) They travel north through countryside that was once made up of small dairy farms, but is now a garishly commercial strip of road. "*Here were the most fleeting commitments and the most massive household gods*", Sears muses as they pass a pornographic drive-in and two stores selling huge items of furniture (*Paradise* 65). He feels that people have "*lost the sense of a*

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<sup>115</sup> Seaford (2009).

*harvest*<sup>116</sup> – he does not mention Demeter/Ceres, but it feels as if she has been replaced by a shadowy deity of consumption and more rapid, artificial renewal than the slow and regular march of the seasons, an aspect of nature with which the people are out of touch. At this end of his life, Cheever would have seen the area developing through decades and be able to make such judgements on changes in the landscape. Lasdun, too, may have been on the East side of America long enough to see a fraction of the environmental change Cheever had, and express his thoughts about it as a writer and academic (but it would be easy for him to become informed about it in other ways; or imagine what the land looked like before he first saw it). As a deliberate immigrant himself,<sup>117</sup> when Lasdun followed in the Pilgrims' tracks from England to America he was probably pursuing his own hopes for a positive life change (he was not sold as a slave, and people do not usually move to deliberately make their lives worse!) and thereby sharing – to an unknown extent – in the American Dream, which he is also able to critique as an outsider.

When Cheever's Sears finally sees the environment beginning to heal, thanks in part to his efforts, he appreciates it in this way: *"The illusion of eternal purity the stream possessed, its music and the greenery of its banks, reminded Sears of pictures he had seen of paradise"* (Paradise 84). Just as the water follows *"gravity through the woods to some destination of its own"* (Paradise 84), Sears appears to be filtering what his senses bring him through the netted pathways of thousands of years of other minds' thought. Even though *"The sacred grove"* (an ingredient we find in the Erysichthon story and "Erisychthon", and in a sense,

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<sup>116</sup> Environmental artist Agnes Denes expresses a similar feeling in her 1982 work, *Wheatfield – A Confrontation*, for which she hand-sowed the grains that grew into a golden field of wheat on the two acre landfill created during the construction of the World Trade Center in Manhattan. (Unfortunately, due to pollution, the harvest was not safe to consume as food.) The much-admired work helped to "demonstrate the estrangement of city-dwellers from agricultural production" (Lailach [2007] 40). The location was significant in several ways: in the distance, "one could see the Statue of Liberty like a hopeful promise. Additionally, the field was located in the immediate neighbourhood of Wall Street, where world trade determines the prices for food" (Lailach [2007] 40).

<sup>117</sup> Hofmann & Lasdun (1994) "Biographical Notes" 295.



anywhere where meaningful trees are threatened, for example, Appalachia) *“is no legitimate part of his thinking [...] the serenity of the pools he saw corresponded to a memory as deep as any he possessed”* (*Paradise* 84). (This begs the continuing question of aesthetic relativity: can something be beautiful without being relative to something else beautiful? It may be thousands of years too late for us to be able to answer this.)

Eventually we uncover the trail of local body corruption to the pond-polluting culprits of *Oh What a Paradise It Seems*, but whatever their punishment is, it is deliberately left out of the story (whereas it is the gory drawing-card of the Erysichthon story), which finishes on an uplifting note (in typical American optimistic manner, we could even go so far as to say). Sears proudly guides visiting engineers around Beasley’s Pond so they can learn about the state-of-the-art scientific cleansing system in process. The landscape has reverted (at least some of the way) back to being nice to look at, providing more opportunity for biblical and classical allusion: *“it could, a century earlier, have served as a background for Eden or even the fields of Eleusis [sic] if you added some naked goddesses and satyrs”* (*Paradise* 97), and we are told of the *“resurrected”* pond (*Paradise* 97).<sup>118</sup> Admiring the restoration of order, Sears crushes a mint leaf between his fingers and recalls waking up with his other lover, Renée, and the thought of would-be morning stars giving him, *“that most powerful sense of how singular, in the vastness of creation, is the richness of our opportunity”* (*Paradise* 99-100). As distinctively American as the character of Sears is, he also displays ancient Greek male stereotypes: he looks back to a Golden Age (of skating on Beasley’s Pond [*Paradise* 5-9, 91] for one example, but he also has a nostalgic historical memory of *“marching into one of the capital cities of the Holy Roman Empire”* as a soldier [*Paradise* 5-6]), and his male lover is secondary to his female – as if he ought to have grown out of him (Eduardo is, perhaps symbolically, the elevator operator in Renée’s

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<sup>118</sup> See “Appendix A : Bodies of Water” for further discussion of the association between water and re-birth.

apartment building – a man to be met on the way to – or perhaps from, when the order is subverted as it is – a woman).

Sears could easily be a spin-off character from Lasdun's "Erisychthon" – the (unmentioned) person who is the catalyst for getting Erisychthon's polluting chemical plant shut down. It spills "PCBs" (1.80) (polychlorinated biphenyls) into Lasdun's "Spring-fed pool" (1.83), and Chisholm names this same persistent organic pollutant amongst those he finds present in Beasley's Pond (*Paradise* 84). However, PCBs' toxicity is widely recognised, and the legal production of PCBs in America ended in 1979.<sup>119</sup> For Lasdun's poem, published in 1994, to be historically accurate it would have to be set at least as far back as the 1970s. Since the chemical plant operated before the main story about tree-destruction, it is possible it was meant to be set during the last days of PCB manufacture in the late 1970s. Otherwise, Erisychthon was making (or using) illegal PCBs. This would be easy to concede. If neither of these is so, the mention of this chemical appears to be a slight anachronism – perhaps Lasdun picked PCBs over lesser-known chemicals that would not be recognised by readers and associated with danger. But perhaps he is aware that their use continues in some exceptional ways. He is correct in linking them with electrical equipment such as "capacitors" (1.67) – it was one of their primary uses.<sup>120</sup> Since Cheever's *Oh What a Paradise It seems* was published in 1982, it is easy to link his mention of PCBs to environmental events of the recent past.

Cheever's Sears is also similar to the character of the goddess Ceres in the Erysichthon myth in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* – he feels personally wounded by this slight on nature and performs the equivalent rejective gesture of dispatching a nymph to fetch hunger when he calls his law firm and writes to the newspaper (*Paradise* 9). Another Ceres-like force in the novel is Betsy Logan, a mother whose accidentally-left-behind baby is coincidentally found by Chisholm on the side of the highway (*Paradise*

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<sup>119</sup> Koppe & Keys (2002) 70.

<sup>120</sup> Koppe & Keys (2002) 64.

77). Wanting to bring about change after Chisholm is murdered, Mrs Logan poisons some sauce (and threatens further poisoning) in her local Buy Brite supermarket as an anonymous act of protest, and when the news media get hold of this the rubbish dumping in Beasley's Pond ceases (*Paradise* 93-96). She managed to pollute something that would be consumed, and even though consumption of sauce was not the point, she threw a spanner of success into the deep end of the works of consumption.

## Farewells and Fashion

Earlier we spoke of Americans moving on, but here in various polluted wastelands (courtesy of Lasdun and Cheever) we are seeing the sorts of things that remain in their wake when their dreams take them elsewhere (of course, Erisychthon is the bad side of this dream coin). The "*hulk of a disused chemical plant*" (1.7) was introduced in the first stanza of "Erisychthon" – since the beginning, Erisychthon has been moving on, discarding this past. David Brooks succinctly identifies this flaw (or this freedom) in the pioneering spirit in the following rather transcendent statement based on an observation by George Santayana: "Americans don't solve problems; they leave them behind."<sup>121</sup> In regard to the pioneers, this is how many came to be Americans in the first place, but the statement also conjures up cinematic images of cowboys spurring into a canter as they escape town in a cloud of dust and broken hearts; bankrupt farmers becoming migrants, picking up and saying goodbye to the dust bowl forever; or teenagers waiting in the sun with a duffle bag, for the dusty Greyhound bus to take them to the idea of the big city that they crave.

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<sup>121</sup> Brooks (2004) 47. Brooks does not identify which particular work of Santayana's this observation comes from, but it is possible it is a broad sense gathered from *Character and Opinion in the United States* (1920 [the 1924 impression is used in this work]) as this work is mentioned elsewhere in *On Paradise Drive* (115, 123) when the American spirit is discussed.

Once the dust settles, any environmental manifestation of the ‘problem’ remains, just as the eerie *“Dropped antlers with a bluish mineral tinge”* (1.88) linger in the pollution caused by Erisychthon’s chemical plant. But Erisychthon has moved on. After he is temporarily *“banned from the trade”* (1.90-91) and goes through his legally enforced *“retreat”* (1.92), he decides to cash in on the eco-trend, which leads to the ultimate hypocritical act of tree-chopping later, in the second section.<sup>122</sup> First, he expertly pitches his epiphany, a vision for a new *“green”* (1.101) development project, to the zoning board of his town (bribing the members with trips to *“choice resorts abroad”* [1.119]). His setting is a clearing in a *“radiant, flower-filled wood”* (1.96) (this is reminiscent of Richard Jones’ fantasies about developing the local wooded land in Cooper’s *The Pioneers*), where he imagines *“Luxury homes”* (1.99) powered by *“[...] Windmills and solar panels [...]”* (1.108) in keeping with sustainable energy trends. However, some scientists believe wind power does nothing worthwhile to help the environment – it is just for show, to make corporations seem eco-friendly,<sup>123</sup> which is exactly the sort of ploy Erisychthon would stage. Of course, he will also print the prospectuses on recycled paper (1.108-109). It is interesting to consider that recycling is a type of metamorphosis itself, and whilst it is an expected feature of greening, it is also another small metamorphosis in Lasdun’s story, appropriately leading up to the final one (3.164-172).

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<sup>122</sup> Lasdun (1994) 2.96 is the climactic moment of sacred-tree-destroying action, but Erisychthon spends much of the second section building up to it.

<sup>123</sup> Despite being in the ‘renewable’ category of energy sources, and looking impressive and wholesome at the right distance, wind turbines are enormous structures requiring carbon-intensive manufacture and maintenance, including the laying of new roads for all the vehicles involved in wind farming. In a 2008 report from the think-tank for Congress, the Congressional Research Service, we see that wind power is increasingly becoming more mainstream and less ‘alternative’ amongst the power sources in America (Logan & Kaplan [2008] “Summary”). Problems with wind power can include the deaths of birds and bats, aesthetic unpleasantness, and the fact that the wind does not know how much electricity people need, and when – it blows inconsistently (Logan & Kaplan [2008] 5-6).

Whether wind farms eventually ‘pay back’ their environmental debt enough to make them a worthwhile source of sustainable energy is an unsettled matter.

Erisychthon is selling “[...] *Not houses but ideals* [...]” (1.110), but at “[...] *a million bucks apiece* [...]” (1.113) he’s still doing it out of greed. Seeing such common advertising gimmicks working in the commercial sphere, we can conclude that consumers love knowing they are saving the earth (or have been sold the idea that they will feel good doing this)<sup>124</sup> – even with something as tiny as, for example, a drugstore cosmetic compact. The Almay Pure Blends product line, decorated in soft florals and leafy green straightforward fonts on a white background, encourages Americans to save “146” trees and “60, 183” gallons of water (per million units of the product) by buying its eye shadow that is produced using recycled packaging, and even more trees and water from the reduction in overall packaging.<sup>125</sup> According to some critics, Green consumerism “perpetuates the illusion that we can maintain affluent lifestyles without harming the environment”, when what consumers really need to adjust about the way they live is their level of consumption.<sup>126</sup>

Erisychthon attempts to overcome the paradox of prospering as well as protecting the environment, with his eco-friendly plans sold via the American Dream of future “*ideals*” (1.110). This is a familiar campaign. Rio Tinto Group, owner of the Bingham Canyon open pit copper mine explored earlier in Utah, states:

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<sup>124</sup> Household-name transnational corporations using the same branding on their products worldwide will often market them “using images and discourse of globalization” to make consumers feel that they are connected to a global culture by buying into it (Holloway & Hubbard [2001] 18). When they do this, advertisers often use “Western ideals of environmental concern, respect for cultural difference and (perhaps paradoxically) the celebration of conspicuous consumption” (Holloway & Hubbard [2001] 18). This United Colours of Benetton-type strategy may now be going out of fashion to some extent, as corporate advertising moves to work on responses to concerns about food-miles, carbon footprints and ethical production (which are partially nurtured by industries that can make money out of fostering such concerns, so in a sense, consumers are told what sort of consumption to worry about, and then offered things to consume to fix it!).

<sup>125</sup> Almay Pure Blends (2010) “Packaging” information.

<sup>126</sup> Schreurs & Papadakis (2007) “Green Consumerism” 120.

Wherever possible we prevent, or otherwise minimise, mitigate and remediate, harmful effects of the Group's operations on the environment.

Excellence in environmental performance is essential to our business success.

Rio Tinto (2010) "Environment Policy" (1)

On the contrary, we could not possibly list all the controversy surrounding Rio Tinto's global operations. (Rio Tinto is named after the Spanish river<sup>127</sup> that is so named because it has been flowing red with mining pollution since the Copper and Bronze Ages. Columbus set off on voyages of discovery from its estuary from 1492.<sup>128</sup>) For one example, Rio Tinto's conduct was "grossly unethical" enough for the Government of Norway to strike their holdings in it out of their significantly-sized Pension Fund in 2008, because they do not wish to contribute to the "severe environmental damage" that Rio Tinto is causing at the Grasberg mine in Indonesia.<sup>129</sup>

Thus far, no protestation of that sort has blocked Erisychthon, and he holds a boardroom lunch (here we have him offering food to others, but in a move that will lead to his own consumption frenzy) for the savings and loan association, *"To pitch for funds"* (1.122). The tradition of selling a dream for the future that Richard Jones employed in *The Pioneers*<sup>130</sup> is used by Erisychthon to sell his project, *Cascade* (there is a chance Lasdun chose this word because of the way Erisychthon's circumstances really do 'cascade' – downwards – in the third section of the poem), but it has remained afloat through those years via a strong rhetorical tradition. When Erisychthon proclaims *"My friends I have a hunch/ That one day on our children's lips Cascade' [...] 'Will be a word for hope [...]"* (1.122-

<sup>127</sup> Rio Tinto (2010) "Timeline" under "Who We are" section of the mining company's website.

<sup>128</sup> Davis et al. (2000) 1107, 1110-1111, 1112 (Fig. 5).

<sup>129</sup> Government of Norway, Ministry of Finance press release (9<sup>th</sup> September 2008) "The Government Pension Fund divests its holdings in mining company".

<sup>130</sup> Cooper (1964/1823) 171, 174.

125)<sup>131</sup> he is emulating Martin Luther King's anaphoric "I Have A Dream..." speech delivered to America at the Lincoln Memorial<sup>132</sup> in Washington DC, 1963, particularly the line, "*I have a dream that my four little children will one day [...]*".<sup>133</sup> Appropriating the rhetoric of the African-American Civil Rights Movement to sell an upmarket housing development is an underhand tactic, but it works. Erisychthon stirs a generous handful of the fruition myth into his American Dreamy speech, referring to "[...] the *true/ Spirit of enterprise, get-up-and-go, can-do [...]*" (1.128-129). His hope that *Cascade* will become "[...] A word for how we *didn't self-destruct [...]*" (1.126) is ironic given that he *does* self-destruct – Lasdun's poem is a forest full of foreshadowing. But the phrase is part of a crafted parallel construction of 'a word–' sentences, which finish with "[...] A word for courage, for the best/ In our great nation under God [...]" (1.127-128) when again he copies Southern Baptist minister King's style, evoking a spirit of Christian togetherness. He invites the audience to be sceptical about him, saying, "[...] *Call me a bleeding heart, an idealist,/ Call me a renegade/ Liberal [...]*" (1.130-132), and turns his initial "[...] I have a hunch [...]" (1.122) into anaphora by repeating it twice in the speech: "[...] I have a hunch that history wants *Cascade–/ I have a hunch that one day we/ Who built it will have built a paradise [...]*" (1.133-135). The "*paradise*" he speaks of is still all in his (vibrant, un-original and voracious) imagination, so it nicely embodies the Paradise Spell of

<sup>131</sup> His audience must be unaware of how badly hypocritical this statement is given his hopeless treatment of his own child!

<sup>132</sup> Some of King's style and inspiration is drawn from Abraham Lincoln's own speeches. James Truslow Adams heavily identifies Lincoln with the American Dream: "Lincoln was not great because he was born in a log cabin, but because he got out of it" ([1932] 411). President Obama's Inaugural Address (20<sup>th</sup> January 2009) was also influenced by Lincoln (and would not have been possible without King) – his theme, 'A New Birth of Freedom', borrows its title from the end of Lincoln's Gettysburg Address of 1863. Readers who wish to consume Obama's speech privately can rest assured by the back page of the Penguin edition that it is "composed of thirty percent recycled postconsumer waste and is manufactured using clean renewable wind energy" and is as green as possible. This befits a Democratic President, no doubt in the manner that climate change publiciser Al Gore's speech would have been printed, had he made President instead of the (infamously rhetorically un-gifted) George W. Bush in the 2000 elections.

<sup>133</sup> King (28<sup>th</sup> August 1963) 232. King proclaimed that his dream was "deeply rooted in the American dream" (232).

Brooks' *On Paradise Drive*.<sup>134</sup> He has gained the weeping boardroom directors' support by the final line of the section: "*We're in, they cried, 'we're green, we really are'*" (1.140) they chant ecstatically, echoing his earlier proclamations<sup>135</sup> like a televangelised audience.

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<sup>134</sup> Brooks (2004b) 263.

<sup>135</sup> Lasdun (1994) 1.105 – "*Tears to his eyes; 'I'm green, I really am'*".



## SECOND SECTION

### **Cascade**

The second section of Lasdun's poem begins with a torrent of idyllic classical allusion, after which the environmental themes of the first section develop, and the action resembles that of Ovid's Erysichthon passage more clearly. The scene, now a wood above Erysichthon's town (first mentioned at 1.6), could be the same as one in antiquity. Its naturally preserved purity seems to suggest vulnerability and imminent harm: this grove has never been logged (2.1).<sup>136</sup> Lasdun has not substituted anything new for Ceres' sacred grove: we have another magical-sounding place of trees, to which Lasdun adds waterfalls.<sup>137</sup> Apart from being the obvious inspiration behind Erysichthon's name for his development (*Cascade*) these produce "*a mist like pile-driven/ Marble dust*" (2.3-4), as if nature were creating a Grecian temple to itself, at which the trees are rising slowly in nourished worship, "*Fanned out from a crease in the mountain*" (2.2). A rainbow's presence (2.5) may be a waveringly hopeful sign (perhaps indicating that thus far the transgressions against the land elsewhere may be forgiven), but the "*sparkling quarry cloud*" (2.4) of water droplets is faintly suggestive of another cloud – Nephele – the one Jupiter uses to trick Ixion when he illicitly desires Juno.<sup>138</sup> In a sense, Erysichthon has been creating a

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<sup>136</sup> If the grove is "*first-growth wood*" (2.1) then neither has it been *planted*, in all likelihood – it must have grown wild, independent of human cultivation. Therefore it is in-keeping with the known features of an ancient sacred grove – gods preferred their trees to be "*unsown by mortal hand*" (Virgil *Georgics* 1.21-22, as mentioned in Hughes [1994] 170).

<sup>137</sup> See "Appendix A : Bodies of Water" for an elaboration on the symbolic purity of water in a landscape (and elsewhere).

<sup>138</sup> Ixion and his punishment for the attempted crime are referred to several times in the *Metamorphoses*, including when Juno glares at him on his wheel during a visit to Hades

‘cloud’ for himself, so that he can ‘rape’ the land. His clever corruption and well-practised environmental rhetoric obscure the fact that he is committing violence on a territory – one which is guarded by females, as it turns out. The words “*waterfalls*”, “*pile-driven*” (2.3) and “*Cascade*” (2.7) all lend another firm undertow to this first stanza, and the second begins our introduction to Erisychthon’s opponents, his upcoming clash with whom seals his eventual fate and begins his direct descent towards it.

Erisychthon’s new space, *Cascade*, has more historically and reverently been known as the *White and Blue*,<sup>139</sup> like the bountiful flora adorning it, and just as in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, it is sacred to “a sisterhood of Ceres” (2.28) – a direct reference to the goddess of Ovid’s version. They are described, rather non-specifically, in several of the common terms for people with such a philosophy today: “*White witches mostly – assorted/ Healers, herbalists and hierophants/ Of Wicca*” (2.29-31). These people (Lasdun does not yet specify that they are all female, though the vocabulary is that of an exclusively female cult, and later a group of them are indeed called “*women*” [2.89]) go up to the *White and Blue* every month (at the full moon, one imagines) to collect plants for magical and medicinal use. They also rush there when they find out about Erisychthon’s development plans. Lasdun says they “*flew*” on hearing the rumour, a witch-like verb evocative of the movement of *fama* herself. The warning against tree-felling they give him is again very much like that of Ceres’ nymph in Ovid (“*I [...] Ceres’ most favourite nymph,/ [...] prophesy/ That punishment is nigh for what you do [...]*” [Met. 8.771-773]): “*Sacred to our goddess: touch it/ And our curse be on your heads*”

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in the fourth book (4.464-465), and in the Battle of the Lapiths and the Centaurs in the twelfth book (12.504-506).

<sup>139</sup> The contemporary Greek flag also features these two colours, and is known as the *Κυανόλευκη* (Kianolefki) – ‘Blue-and-white’. The nine horizontal stripes are said to stand for the nine syllables of the words *Ελευθερία ή Θάνατος* (Eleutheria ê Thanatos) – ‘Freedom or Death’. This is similar to the motto of the New England state of New Hampshire, “LIVE FREE OR DIE” (visible on the reverse of the state’s commemorative quarter). It is not certain that Lasdun intended us to make these connections – perhaps they are mere coincidence.

(2.43-44), they cry. Like the “*Dryads*” (Met. 8.746) who in peaceful shade circle the sacred tree in Ovid, “*often hand in hand*” (Met. 8.747) the members of Lasdun’s hippie cult are now “*hand in hand*” (2.58), but in a defensive gesture, “*Circling a central stand*” (2.41).

The warning is issued just as Erisychthon’s workers are “*unloading chainsaws*” (2.40). These machines are the modern day “*axe*” (Met. 8.741 *securis*) and quite appropriate for figuratively (or worse) sawing through the *chain* of tree-huggers. Lasdun seems particularly haunted by the vulnerability of an environment in the face of the menacing chainsaw: a volume of his poetry, the cover decorated with the collage of a simplified American flag, is entitled *Landscape with Chainsaw*.<sup>140</sup> Within this, a chainsaw salesman pragmatically advises a hesitant British-American on cutting back the trees on his property: “*Problem is, if you don’t clear your woods,/ they’ll sure as hell clear you. That’s how it is/ here is America.*”<sup>141</sup> This statement carries with it a taste of Erisychthon – the chainsaw can be used arrogantly, by someone with no patience for, nor understanding of any benefit to be gained from considering the wider implications of such habits, and who may even foster an wilderness-encroachment fearing attitude in order to justify its destruction. This is a sort of them-or-us simplification of a relationship with the environment. But, it must be conceded that it is also realistic guidance – plants can engulf a space with astounding speed (their branches tapping on telephone lines and their roots exploring pipes as if looking for their due), and a chainsaw is a tool for taming the wilderness when there is a ‘human versus nature’ model operating, as in American pioneering situations (or even refined versions such as chopping back creeper from the walls of a house – otherwise it will eventually take over, ‘Sleeping Beauty’-style), including those in which Lasdun, as an immigrant to America who has chosen to reside (at least at one time) in a rural wooded area, may find himself.

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<sup>140</sup> Lasdun (2001).

<sup>141</sup> Lasdun (2001) “Returning the Gift” page 12 (italic script used in poem).

Consequently, when removing some trees becomes necessary (simply for a home and meadow, or, for Erisychthonesque profiteering<sup>142</sup>) a human may be torn between the immediate goal and an ideal of nature preservation. After all, the landscape of the space may well be a reason why it was chosen to live upon – Puritans were enticed to New England by advertising that was promoting the area as so lush that it was like a “terrestrial paradise”, a campaign which “excited the imagination” of settlers<sup>143</sup> and held them thoroughly under the Paradise Spell,<sup>144</sup> so beginning a tradition of its evocation leading all the way to Erisychthon. But, like Ovid’s Erysichthon, he is not at all torn by the environmental decision facing him.

However, Erisychthon’s men are having doubts. When the women call out their warning of a curse, the men pause (2.45). Lasdun puts this down to “*At least a vague belief/ In most things spiritual –/ Curses, auras, Atlantis, an afterlife/ On other planets*” (2.47-50). Although their halt comes more out of a fear of consequence than a wish for self-fulfilment, the existence of the spiritual beliefs that caused it can be placed within

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<sup>142</sup> Another popular reason for tree-removal is terminal disease in wood, which may spread to other trees, and pose danger and cause property damage when their rotted bodies finally topple. In *The Virgin Suicides* (Coppola [1999] based on Eugenides’ novel) the Lisbon sisters of mid-1970s American suburbia are seen linking hands around a dying elm in their front yard, as workers are trying to remove it. Also, in flashbacks or hallucinations, Cecilia, the first of the five over-protected girls to kill herself in this story, is seen draped over the tree’s limbs in a pose of languid possessiveness and perhaps oneness. The relationship is private and sacred. Both scenes are very reminiscent of the behaviour of Ceres’ nymphs, and are no doubt informed by the wider mythological association between nymphs and trees (the film pairs pagan ritual and Catholic imagery together throughout), evidenced particularly by the portrayal of the girls’ youth, gender, and the flowing drapery of their nightgowns as the chainsaws roar around them.

<sup>143</sup> Carroll (1969) 9. Harking back to one of the original pioneering situations, that of the pilgrims, a brief look at historian Peter N. Carroll’s book *Puritanism and the Wilderness : The Intellectual Significance of the New England Frontier, 1629-1700* (its cover appropriately featuring some people in Puritan dress viewed through the knothole of a tree) confirms some of the historical sense of America we have been receiving from the texts discussed. Though hardly alone or recent as a book specialising in Puritan immigration, the book is interesting in the context of “Erisychthon” because it posits that “The dialogue between the American environment and the European mind can be analyzed in the context of the Puritan attitudes and responses to the wilderness” (inside front cover). (Their attitude was of course “optimistic” [14], which is what we would expect from immigrants dreaming the American Dream.)

<sup>144</sup> As coined by Brooks (2004b) 263.

the context of living in pursuit of the American Dream. Despite America's reputation for bland shopaholicism, "what is truly striking about the country is how material things are shot through with enchantment".<sup>145</sup> Buying, consuming, or creating things (including improved – metamorphosed – versions of oneself) is a form of worship for the American Dream. Brooks excuses the mindless consumption of his country: "Under the seeming superficiality of suburban American life, there is an imaginative fire that animates Americans and propels us to work so hard, move so much and leap so wantonly".<sup>146</sup> Corroborating what Lasdun and Brooks have said, we can conclude that a tendency to gullibly believe in things that may seem unreasonable to a non-believer (such as alien abductions or the idea that a few minutes a day on a celebrity-endorsed exercise machine could instantly transform your life for the better – or sometimes merely that the *purchase* of it will facilitate this happening) has contributed to Erysichthon's crew's catch-all smattering of spirituality – it is related to a tendency to be attracted to anything that sounds like future self-fulfilment. But the "*almost messianic*" (2.52)<sup>147</sup> enthusiasm of Erysichthon causes him to take the un-director-like step of driving his truck up to the project site ("*barrelling up*" [2.57] there – an amusing correlation with his current – and perhaps future – shape), where this Jesus-likened figure trumps their hazy Neopagan- and science-fiction induced superstitions.

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<sup>145</sup> Brooks (2004b) 248.

<sup>146</sup> Brooks (2004a).

<sup>147</sup> Callimachus' Erysichthon says to Demeter (disguised as her own public priestess, Nicippe), "*These trees will roof over my hall*" (*Hymn to Demeter* 54). The planned building is a banquet hall, but it is almost as if Erysichthon is about to build it in his own honour, like a vanity-megachurch, imagining this future place of consumption. Trees are widely used to construct buildings for civilised purposes, but here, the motivation is greedy and barbaric. Lasdun may have familiarised himself with Callimachus' version of the Erysichthon story, as well as Ovid's, when he took on this project, so it is possible the juvenile 'mine!' antics in that version of the story influenced him in portraying Erysichthon as impulsively selfish.

## The Chainsaw Massacre

Erisychthon furiously orders “*his men*” (2.59) to proceed against “*the women hand in hand*” (2.58) surrounding the trees, choreographing a clash of two of the most widely-recognised and explored traditional gender roles in both ancient Greek and modern American society (the male as active destroyer and maker, the female as passive nurturer and protector). His threat is written similarly to the way it was 2000 years ago – in a way that indicates a readiness to do violence to limbs as well as branches – and he takes in his hands the tool with which to commit the threatened act:

when he saw [his woodsmen] slow  
To obey he seized the axe himself, and cried  
“Be this the tree the goddess loves, be this  
The goddess’ very self, its leafy crown  
Shall touch the ground today”  
*Met.* (8.753-756)

he bellowed: “This is my land,  
Let me get at those trees or you’re as good  
As lumber yourselves. I paid” –  
(Grabbing a chainsaw here)  
– “My money, now I’ve come to build Cascade.”  
“Erisychthon” (2.59-63)

Erisychthon’s words “*paid*” and “*Cascade*”, as if ending a persuasive sonnet,<sup>148</sup> but this one would only sicken the reader with the hubris of the

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<sup>148</sup> A note on the form of Lasdun’s poem:

Metre and stress in the poem is not strict, but varies freely and often, within a scheme. The number of syllables per line generally runs approximately thus: 8, 9, 10, 9, 6, 6, 11. Variations appear, depending on how one counts the triple time that sometimes enters the rhythm to support the number of syllables in longer lines. The six-syllable fifth and sixth lines often have simple iambic feet, but even in this case, after some pick-up syllables, for example the unstressed “*Of*” in, “*Of dogwood and hawthorn trees*” (2.12), they begin lines that lead to subdivision of the rhythm, in this case into - / - - / - / : *Of*

idea that a commercial transaction can buy the right to any sort of violation of what is purchased. His speeches about going green make him sound like the sort of businessperson who would simply buy carbon credits to make up for any number of atrocities against nature. It is ironic that a “green” (1.101) project is set in motion by chopping down trees, and is being protested by people with much greener principles.

Gendenwitha,<sup>149</sup> an Iroquois<sup>150</sup> woman, steps forward to graciously enlighten Erisychthon about her ancestors who worshipped at this place (2.70-71), and tell him about the souls of the trees (2.71-73), but he cuts through her words, starting his large chainsaw (2.73-78). A global scenario is being played out in miniature in this story. Erisychthon’s chainsaw silences the words of gentle protest just like corporations can silence individual or smaller groups of voices with their power over (or simply ownership of) the news media. Many human-caused environmental and social disasters have been at least initially underreported due to hush-up public relations moves by the perpetrators.<sup>151</sup>

Irritated into a fury by Gendenwitha’s words, Erisychthon launches into a tree-destroying frenzy, chopping up the woods species by species – “He

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*`dog-wood-and `haw-thorn `trees* – a pick-up, triplet, double and final single, stressed word. In fact the fifth and sixth lines of Lasdun’s septets are a trove of ways to stress-pattern sets of six syllables.

The rhyming scheme in the stanzas is *abbacdc*, like the 5<sup>th</sup>-11<sup>th</sup> lines of some Petrarchan sonnets. The rhyming is often subtly approximate, affording the words, completely misguidingly, the feeling of a fairly loyal translation that is clever enough to have incorporated rhyme also, when, in fact, the poem is Lasdun’s, and there are plenty of other words (re-writing, re-telling, re-interpretation, metamorphosis) we would use before we ever called it any sort of actual ‘translation’.

<sup>149</sup> Gendenwitha is the name of a woman who became the “*Day Star*” (2.68) (Venus, the planet) in Iroquois mythology (Dixon-Kennedy [1998] 97-98, as “Glendenwitha”).

<sup>150</sup> The Iroquois are indigenous to the Northeast of America, where we have established that “Erisychthon” seems to be set. Cooper tells us about the First Nations people of the area in *The Pioneers* (1964/1823): “*Before the Europeans, or, to use a more significant term, the Christians, dispossessed the original owners of the soil, all that section of country which contains the New England States and those of the Middle which lie east of the mountains was occupied by two great nations of Indians, from whom have descended numberless tribes*” (78). One of these two were the Iroquois (79).

<sup>151</sup> Some relevant examples are given in “Appendix B : What Disaster?”.

*cut through an iron-hard hornbeam, lopped each limb*" (2.80), the 'h' and 'l' alliteration marking a sort of one-two cross-cross chainsaw blade cutting technique – as the women run frantically "*from tree to tree*" (2.90). He is now "*Their enemy*" (2.92), and he "*slashed out a clump/ Of hazels that leapt like soldiers/ Blown from a trench*" (2.84-86). The imagery of battle is used to describe Erisychthon's assault on the land. As with previous world economic superpowers that feared being toppled, the American 'empire' is recognised for expressing this through over-zealous use of military resources, and increasingly stringent security measures. These state and corporate actions also serve to make Americans feel safer, but can achieve the opposite effect, motivating media-fuelled panic. Many 'security threats' and even domestic dangers, whether genuine or exaggerated beyond reality, become massive opportunities for the frenzied consumption of safety-related products and the destruction of anything perceived or named as a threat. Here we may be seeing Erisychthon as a metaphor for his country's foreign policy.

## Globalisation and War

Fact-happy globalisation proponents may have once been able to claim that no two countries fitted out with McDonald's restaurants have ever warred,<sup>152</sup> but this is no longer a fact.<sup>153</sup> Besides, it seems unlikely that a particular brand of burgers and fries alone (which Erisychthon appropriately consumes later [3.98]), nor even the globalisation they hitch-hiked in on, could lull a nation into a state of sated pacifism. We have mentioned that Brooks suggested that the size of American car parks was such that you could "recreate the Battle of Gettysburg in the middle and nobody would notice at the stores on either end"<sup>154</sup> in his essay, "Our Sprawling, Supersize Utopia". In the corresponding book, *On*

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<sup>152</sup> This thought is called 'The Golden Arches Theory of Conflict Prevention' – Thomas L. Friedman travelled frequently and widely, and made this "uncanny" realisation, which he writes about in his book *The Lexus and the Olive Tree* ([2000] 248).

<sup>153</sup> Many technical problems existed with this theory even before the first blast against it!

<sup>154</sup> Brooks (2004a).



*Paradise Drive*, he uses a different military example: “you could set off a nuclear device in the center and nobody would notice in the stores on either end”.<sup>155</sup> It has been common to imagine (particularly during the Cold War), and prepare for, what would happen in the event of nuclear war. In John Cheever’s story, “The Brigadier and the Golf Widow”<sup>156</sup> a characteristically paranoid American family has a luxurious bomb shelter on their property, but it does not make them happy, nor safe from their own emotional, social and financial disasters. But for all their worry about arms races and nuclear warfare, when America bombed the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki at the end of World War II, it was the first, and remains the only country to have deployed nuclear weapons against another (excluding the side-effects of nuclear testing). But there is still plenty of reason for people to feel paranoid – “Thousands of Americans were killed on September 11, 2001, simply because they were American or worked in America”,<sup>157</sup> says Brooks. The statement probably still applies no matter how far-out conspiracy theories become, too – some force, somewhere, conspired to kill Americans, and Americans know that much. Erisychthon – who immediately kills what he perceives to be in his way – stands for one of the worst of the widely-recognised American stereotypes, and Lasdun has shown this without even placing a gun in his hands.

Often military intervention seems to have different public and private purposes. Brooks says, “Whether it is Osama bin Laden or Saddam Hussein or the anti-globalisation protesters or politicians in places as diverse as France, Israel, North Korea, and China, everybody is trying to do something to the United States,”<sup>158</sup> whether that be positive or negative.<sup>159</sup> But opponents of the Gulf and Iraq Wars and the War in Afghanistan often point to the seemingly more self-serving economic purposes of the fight (the lucrative trade in military supplies and contracts,

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<sup>155</sup> Brooks (2004b) 58.

<sup>156</sup> Cheever (1964) 1-22.

<sup>157</sup> Brooks (2004b) 82.

<sup>158</sup> Brooks (2004b) 81.

<sup>159</sup> Brooks (2004b) 81-82.

and access to cheap oil, for example), not the intended resulting global spread of freedom, democracy, peace and other international relations keywords that have become associated with piles of dead bodies. The wealthy and fashionably eco-friendly future purchasers of property in *Cascade*, and the directors moved to tears by Erisychthon's green speech, would be shocked to see behind the scenes at this point: angry Erisychthon amongst piles of slain trees, and "*a sour smell/ Of sap*" (2.87-88) rising into the air. Richard Seaford talks about a radio broadcast Professor Gilbert Murray made, after World War II, in which he spoke of the civilised peace and unity of Ancient Greece as inspiration for the future of the world, even describing America as a potential site in which Hellenistic ideals could flourish.<sup>160</sup> Then Seaford points out what was happening in the world at the same time as Murray was speaking those "lofty" words:

This was broadcast in 1953, the year in which British and American secret services – well below Murray's radar – replaced the democratically elected government of Iran by a dictatorship that, though savage, was favourable to the British and American oil interest, thereby initiating a new world order. This was called "Operation Ajax", a name not alas symptomatic of true Hellenic life but inspired by the household cleansing liquid.

Seaford (2009)

## Sacred Groves and Trees

From modern wars to ancient heroes and Classically-allusive domestic cleaning products, we return to Erisychthon's destruction of the sacred grove, which we have now cursorily placed in the context of other destruction of and by America. *Hieron temenos* to the Greeks, and

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<sup>160</sup> Seaford (2009).

*templum* to the Romans, the sacred precinct usually contained a grove sacred to a god or goddess.<sup>161</sup> The sacred grove was a significant feature of the landscape of ancient Greece and Rome (and the idea of setting aside sacred land, separate from regular-use land and somehow enchanted, has remained in various forms amongst various cultures up to the present time). It was known where these spots existed because the character of the location itself suggested it was so – Ovid provides an example of this happening in *Fasti*:

Under the Aventine there lay a grove black with the shade  
of holm-oaks;  
at sight of it you could say, "There is a spirit here."  
A sword was in the midst, and, veiled by green moss,  
there trickled from a rock a rill of never-failing water.

*Fasti* (3.295-298)<sup>162</sup>

Lasdun's depiction of a sacred grove in modern America follows suit, even adding the water element (2.3) that is not present in the Erysichthon scene in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*.

Commonly, in the sacred groves of antiquity, it was forbidden to cut into trees, burn them, take away tree-material, construct (non-temple) buildings, hunt, fish, catch birds, herd domestic animals, or cultivate crops – legal and divine punishment could be expected for those who did so<sup>163</sup> outside of the many special exceptions.<sup>164</sup> Non-deforestation was one of the positive environmental consequences of keeping sacred groves – Hughes names them as "probably the greatest single means of conservation in the ancient world".<sup>165</sup> Since the trees within were allowed

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<sup>161</sup> Hughes (1994) 169.

<sup>162</sup> Trans. Frazer. Lines 295-296 are used to support the same point in Hughes (1994) 170.

<sup>163</sup> Hughes (1994) 172-173. Many sources for these rules, often from Pausanias, are provided by Hughes (172-173 n.17-24).

<sup>164</sup> Hughes (1994) 174-176.

<sup>165</sup> Hughes (1994) 179.

to grow until they died of natural causes, they often became huge.<sup>166</sup> Both the sacred oak in Ovid (which is hundreds of years old [*Met.* 8.743] and fifty feet in circumference [*Met.* 8.748-749 – the measurement has been modernised]), and the “*great blossoming tree, a dogwood*” (2.94) Lasdun offers are of noteworthy size.

When Erisychthon reaches and begins to attack this tree, it surprises him by pouring forth red blood-like sap, “*A scarlet banner unfurling/ Into the White and Blue*” (2.99-100). The colours of the landscape have changed from those of the Kianolefki to those of the stars and stripes of the American flag, and the tree seems to have metamorphosed into, or revealed itself to be, something with human characteristics.

Trees are already to some degree anthropomorphous – even before poetry is applied, their shape and some of the words we use to name their parts are shared with humans. Trees have foot-like roots on which they ‘stand’, a huggable trunk, an upper mass like a head of hair or even a brain, and ‘limbs’. They help to support fellow trees (but also compete with them for resources), they ‘breathe’, they ‘bleed’ when cut, and their lifespan can encompass (and vastly eclipse) that of humans. It is no wonder trees are often given touches of human-like agency in human stories.<sup>167</sup> Both Ovid and Lasdun present trees that display human characteristics as they fall, since the sacred trees are said to “*house the wood’s own spirit*” (2.95), which, in ancient sanctuaries, dies if the tree is

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<sup>166</sup> Hughes (1994) 171.

<sup>167</sup> In Cooper’s *The Pioneers* (1964/1823), we find ‘Indian John’ Mohegan of the Delaware nation unwilling to escape a forest fire with his companions because he believes it is his time to die: “*The Great Spirit says, come*” (396). It happens that it is not quite time – his friend picks him up and carries him to safety – but a burnt tree falls on the place where they had been, “*and filled the air with its cinders*” (396). Perhaps it is coincidence or pathetic fallacy, but it is as if the tree were complicit with the feelings of the old man, who, being Indian, is portrayed as being closer to nature than the settlers. The unsettling mystery of how trees chose their moments to fall is discussed earlier in the book when a party are riding through a forest and a tree falls amongst them (228-229) – an unusual occurrence on a calm day – followed by an unresolved conversation amongst these lucky survivors about the nature of such events: “[...] *how is one to guard against the danger?*[...]” (230). The trees seem to become a metaphor for fate itself.

cut down, meaning the associated deity may depart the grove also.<sup>168</sup> The “*tall/ Glittering dome*” (2.100-101) makes this tree seem more like a cathedral or palace collapsing (it is in blossom [2.94] – perhaps there is dew or frost lingering, if this is a cold spring morning in New England), but the trunk splinters “*like a bone*” (2.103) and the audible “*groan*” (2.105) it makes as it crashes is echoed by the environment (2.104-105), like a chorus of human voices. At its moment of death, nature seems to have suddenly come alive.

If we described trees as feeling pain, it would be another human characteristic. Plants that felt pain (not just destruction and death) would also pose a dilemma for humans who eat a vegan diet for ethical reasons: if plants, as well as animals, feel pain when they are killed for consumption (and perhaps even during mass-production), then what is the person who does not want to hurt anything to eat? Interestingly, in the context of discussing the Erysichthon story, the only nutritious and ethical thing left for such considerate humans to eat would be the meat of their own bodies. Fortunately, the relationship between the plant and the animal kingdoms is more symbiotic, and plants are often deliberately delicious. However, plant biologists do add more human-associated verbs to our earlier list: “Plants ‘forage’ for resources [...] and ‘anticipate’ rough spots and opportunities”, they ‘analyze’ light so as to grow into the clearest space, they ‘talk’ through chemical signals and have the equivalent of an ‘immune system response’ against unwanted parasites – sometimes even releasing specific chemicals to attract predators towards those parasites.<sup>169</sup> There we have a scientific basis for the groan of the sacred tree, and additional features (that we are gradually discovering) that make plants mysterious to humans.

Of course, in the Erysichthon story, it is the dryad within a tree that animates it so – without it, the sacred oak (Ovid) or dogwood (Lasdun) is just another tree. But trees hold a special place in human ritual. Minds

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<sup>168</sup> Hughes (1994) 172.

<sup>169</sup> Angier (2009) D2, referencing the work of many scientists.

all over the world are planted with ideas about various important trees, including mythological or symbolic ones, such as the biblical Tree of Life, and Tree of Knowledge (*Genesis* 2.9). When the deity, God, instructs Adam not to consume the fruit of the latter (*Genesis* 2.17), but an inhabitant of the Tree (not a wood nymph but a serpent) leads Eve to eat of its fruit and share it with Adam, they are banished from the Garden of Eden, with their newfound shame, obligation to toil, and mortality (*Genesis* 3) – so, in a sense, they are self-destructive – therefore it is worth mentioning that this widely-known story of interference with a sacred tree, and punishment, has parallels<sup>170</sup> with the more obscure Erysichthon myth. As for the Tree of Life, it may be represented by the European-originated Christmas trees erected throughout Erysichthon's America in religious, secular or commercial celebration of Christmas. This is also one of the annual events associated with the gathering of people from the wider 'branches' of the 'family tree', expressions which emphasise trees as symbols for the interconnectedness of humans – so to break such a tree<sup>171</sup> would be to symbolically sever the bonds of

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<sup>170</sup> Another parallel is the part consumption has to play in the stories – Adam and Eve consume something forbidden, and Erysichthon's punishment makes him consume something taboo: himself. We could read a certain anxiety about eating the wrong thing or the wrong quantity of things into these stories, as the Christian mental health resource, *Biblical Stories for Psychotherapy and Counseling* [sic] : *A Sourcebook* (Schwartz & Kaplan [2004]) does, when it contrasts the story of Adam and Eve with the Greek myth of Erysichthon in its section entitled "Overcoming Eating Disorders: Adam and Eve versus Erysichthon" (106-108). Erysichthon is the more disordered and less deserving party – "Adam and Eve were not angry and hostile" like the tree-chopping Erysichthon, and the biblical couple are helped by their deity during their punishment, unlike Erysichthon (106). The ancient Greek way of life in general is conveniently presented by the authors as a contrasting and damaging alternative to the cultivation of Christian values – the disapproving comments in the next section, on "Drunkenness and Disrespect", and the "obscene acts on drinking vessels" (109) confirm this, and leave it to other (previous) psychoanalysts to utilise Classical stories as the foundation of their theories and therapy.

<sup>171</sup> In an interesting parallel with (and deviation from) some elements of the Erysichthon story (and also the Bible), John Steinbeck's novel *To a God Unknown* (2000/1933) tells the tale of Joseph, who has a close relationship with the large tree growing beside the house on his California homestead (he talks to it and feels that it contains the spirit of his dead father – but the whole book examines the relationship between humans and their natural environment). This oak tree, just like the oak in Ovid, is killed, and the loss brings about distress (118-123). In this instance of tree-destruction, the oak is secretly girdled by a pious brother (Burton) who has become concerned with the seemingly 'pagan' ritual that is associated with it (116) – he believes Joseph has come to worship the tree instead of God. Burton's behaviour may produce the same result – a dead tree

community and undo what is generally regarded as human growth and progress: the continuation of human life. (Basic biographical details of the generations of a bible-owning family are, or have been in the past, often noted inside their bible – in this way, families recorded their ‘tree’ on what was once part of a tree, and is now a sacred object.)

The inverse of the tree-related punishment narrative is also true. Even immediately before the tale of Erysichthon in the *Metamorphoses*, we see Philemon and Baucis, temple guardians, become trees as a final reward for their hospitality towards disguised gods:<sup>172</sup> “*To them who worship gave is worship given.*” (*Met.* 8.724). The respect Philemon and Baucis have shown for the sacred is promptly reversed in the character of Erysichthon when he displays the opposite behaviour and hacks into a sacred tree. Hence he must be punished rather than rewarded. The same will go for Lasdun’s Erysichthon.

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mourned – but his motive is quite the opposite of the “*impious*” axe-stroke of Erysichthon in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* (8.761).

<sup>172</sup> As previously discussed in the section on Ovid.

## THIRD SECTION

### Spiritual Directions

The third section opens on Gendenwitha, kneeling at the waterfall that was described at the start of the second. She is praying to a goddess under a number of names, covering some of the bases that the earlier description of the diverse multi-tradition sect would suggest: “*Demeter*” (3.3) the Greek goddess of fertility, “*Ishtar*” (3.3), who shares aspects of Demeter in Babylonian myth, “*Ceres*” (3.3), Demeter’s Roman appropriation, and “*Papothkwe*” (3.4), usually known as ‘Our Grandmother’, the Shawnee creator goddess<sup>173</sup>. These mother-goddesses are the “[...] *Life force of every plant [...]*” (3.5).

One reviewer of “Erisychthon” says that the poem “does little more than trivialize its subject” and that Gendenwitha’s prayers to “*Demeter, Ishtar, Ceres [...]*” (3.3) are one of the “inaneities” within.<sup>174</sup> It would be easy to forget that whilst worshipping combined deities from multiple cultures may sound peculiar, and indeed trivial and inane to life-long devotees of monotheism (who may not take this different phenomenon seriously, partially due to its ‘hippy-dippy’ associations), Lasdun is merely realistically exhibiting a trend found in modern America: popular New Age spirituality picks from the ‘supermarket of religion’<sup>175</sup> as it pleases.

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<sup>173</sup> Callender [1978] 628. It seems confusing to have the Iroquois Gendenwitha saying that Papothkwe is the name her people use for the goddess (3.4) when it comes from the Shawnee, but perhaps Papothkwe is not an exclusive deity, n/or Gendenwitha an exclusive Iroquois.

<sup>174</sup> Ratner (1997) 103. These comments are from a *Library Journal* review of a later collection of Lasdun’s poetry, *Woman Police Officer in Elevator* (Lasdun, 1997) in which “Erisychthon” also appeared.

<sup>175</sup> Or the “spiritual buffet table”, as Brooks (2000) (242) describes the array of religions from which Americans may select what they want in the quantity they want it.



Again, we have Americans moving on as it suits them.<sup>176</sup> Belief becomes less about serving the higher power and more about placing faith in how the associated ritual can serve the self, since, as we discussed much earlier, the drive for self-improvement<sup>177</sup> is an expression of pursuit of the American Dream. It is hardly Lasdun's fault that this is such a significant mode of belief in America. The sprinkling of traditions, detached from their original contexts and purposes, amongst the sect at Cascade, could be happening because, as our primary social commentator on the American Dream says of the American spiritual impulse, "What is most absolute is not truth and falsehood, virtue and vice; what matters most absolutely is the advancing self"<sup>178</sup>. That is not to say these followers do not truly believe in their environmental cause – merely that their attraction to the group is also an example of a trend in their society. Unsurprisingly, the production of Neopagan<sup>179</sup> paraphernalia, such as magic crystals, is

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<sup>176</sup> The overall trend of religion-switching can be seen in the results of the *American Religious Identification Survey 2001* by Kosmin, Mayer & Keysar (2001) (23-25). About 16% of American adults have changed their religious identification. The report does not show how long ago, how many times, nor why they switched (or cancelled), but it suggests that recent changes could have been made because of immigration and economic boom, and changes made in the more distant past of Americans' lives could be put down to spiritual searching by the young baby boomers (23).

Furthermore, the survey identifies the rise in religious identification as Native American – beliefs referenced in "Erisychthon" (2.67-73, 3.4) – New Age, and Wiccan ("Erisychthon" 2.31). *ARIS 2001* also marks the inclusion of Druid, Pagan and Spiritualist, in a 1990-2001 comparison chart (13). Presumably these became new categories through the sheer number of people who volunteered these as their choices, since respondents to the *ARIS* are not given a list of suggestions ([2001] 7, [2009] 2). Lasdun's "Erisychthon" was published in 1994, during the time of these increases. 'New Religious Movements', a category which includes the above non-Christian religions, including (the somewhat 'old', to some) 'Indian Religion' (23), have continued their rise according to the *ARIS 2008* by Kosmin & Keysar (2009): "The 2008 survey revealed marked increase in preferences for personalized and idiosyncratic responses as well as increases in the Neo-Pagan groups" (7).

<sup>177</sup> As described by Brooks (2004b) 122-123, for one example.

<sup>178</sup> Brooks (2004b) 276. The statement is paraphrased in various ways throughout the page.

<sup>179</sup> Amusingly, in the context of the Classically-informed example of Neopaganism we find in "Erisychthon", the first printed example of the use of the word 'neopagan' is found in the following sentence, from William James (1868): "*The very persons who would most writhe and wail at their surroundings if transported back into early Greece, would, I think, be the neo-pagans and Hellas worshipers [sic] of today*" (sourced from OED Online "neopagan" in The Oxford English Dictionary draft revision [September 2009]).

also a commercial industry – with a purchase dangling the hope of self-fulfillment, making spirituality a consumable product.

Gendenwitha and her followers may be living under the Paradise Spell themselves. But Gendenwitha also functions as a manifestation of the Demeter/Ceres goddess character, particularly suggested by her leadership of the women (2.65-73) and her claim of indigenous connection to the land (2.70-71). The agronomic drive encouraging the widespread planting of corn crops in America makes the corn goddess even more apt to be drawn on, but the products manufactured out of this corn are a great deal more varied than breakfast cereal – it is made into stock feed, ethanol biofuel, and the ubiquitous and controversial ‘corn syrup’ ingredient in processed food and beverages, for example – often appearing in a form that has undergone patented genetic metamorphoses at the hands of Monsanto, an America-based multinational biotechnology corporation that has emerged as somewhat of a new deity of crops, but to some may actually bear more resemblance to Hunger.<sup>180</sup> Whether or not

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<sup>180</sup> The ‘worship’ demanded by what can be seen as the Demeter-Ceresesque Monsanto ‘goddess’ requires farmer customers to re-purchase seeds every year (rather than saving seeds and replanting) because Monsanto owns the genetic traits in these life forms and needs to be paid every time they are grown (Monsanto Company [2010] “Why Does Monsanto Sue Farmers Who Save Seeds?” on company website). Regulating and monopolising plant life for profit in this way seems ultimately un-Demeter/Ceresesque. Sometimes Monsanto seeds are grown unintentionally – they naturally spread, knowing not the bounds of fences and agreements, and pollen will travel long distances – causing legal problems for farmers who accidentally grow crops with Monsanto-patented genetic traits (as detailed in the *Monsanto vs. U.S. Farmers* report by the Center for Food Safety, an American non-profit health and environmental organisation that takes a pro-organic, anti-GE stance [2004] 13). Some of the perceived dangers and difficulties in the business are engagingly highlighted in popular works of documentary, such as the controversial film *Food, Inc.* (Kenner [2008]), showing there is a growing audience wanting to receive alternative versions of ‘the truth’ about the American agriculture industry.

Despite the fact that their agricultural innovations are now supposed to help in “reducing agriculture's impact on our environment” (homepage of Monsanto [2010]), the company, rather Erisychthonesquely, have been known to dump PCBs (cf. “Erisychthon” 1.80) and try to keep it a secret – decades later their confirmed liability was splashed across the front page of *The Washington Post* (Grunwald [2002]).

Again Erisychthonesquely, the company tries to foster a public relations image as fashionably and future-mindedly sustainable, with the leafy-green and corn-gold propaganda of *Grown for the Future*, the *Monsanto Company 2008-2009 Corporate Responsibility and Sustainability Report* (2009) in which, they say, “We demonstrate our commitment to corporate responsibility in social, economic, environmental and

the population is fully aware of Demeter/Ceres' origins, the positive environmental associations, particularly the agricultural aspects of the goddess, are extensively commercially referenced in modern America. The names 'Demeter' and 'Ceres' are widely appropriated by American companies. For example, there is Demeter, the grain storage company; Demeter, the fragrance company that includes "Dirt", "Rain", "Thunderstorm", "Grass", "Wet Garden", and "Sawdust", as well as a host of fruits and other foods, amongst their evocative collection<sup>181</sup>; and Demeter, the name of a robotics project developing an automated hay harvester at Carnegie Mellon<sup>182</sup>. The uses of 'Ceres' include the aforementioned Ceres network (Investors and Environmentalists for Sustainable Prosperity)<sup>183</sup> – initiating the fundamental environmental message of Ceres, sans mysteries, into the policy and process of the potentially Erisychthonesque entities of the world; Ceres, a biotechnology company growing plants that can be converted to fuel<sup>184</sup>; and Ceres Living (a subsidiary of Promethean Corp), a company peddling bottles of a blood-like elixir of youth that will "optimize your own stem cells" and "repair and protect your DNA"<sup>185</sup>.

Gendenwitha's role is part Ceres, but also part hunger-fetching nymph. When she prays to the mother goddess, who has presumably been invisible to the followers until now – "' [...] if/ Our love can't bring you into being/ Then let this man's brutality.'" (3.8-10) – Gendenwitha is rewarded by the sight of the "*bright/ Voluptuous shimmering figure of the goddess*" (3.13-14), just as she would appear in a glittery Neopagan fantasy illustration. Gendenwitha, "*Trembling, dazzled*" (3.15) hears a voice like one of nature's elements – "*a rush of wind*" (3.16) – whisper her a

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governance spheres" (from the contents page), detailing their ethical practices in "The Monsanto Pledge" (4), displaying photographs of conservation projects in which they are knee-deep, and pleading the starving-children argument for genetic modification: "We discover and deliver innovative products that support the farmers who feed, fuel and clothe our growing world" (2). Monsanto's activities remain extremely divisive.

<sup>181</sup> Demeter Fragrance Library (2010).

<sup>182</sup> Bares (2010).

<sup>183</sup> Ceres (organisation) (2010).

<sup>184</sup> Ceres "the energy crop company" (2010).

<sup>185</sup> Ceres Living (2010).

message of instruction in reply. Addressing Gendenwitha as “*Daughter*” (3.17), she directs her to follow the stream from the waterfall to the House of Hunger (3.17-19). She is asked very simply to “[...] *Go inside,/ Tell Hunger to visit/ Erisychthon.*” (3.19-21). By sending Gendenwitha, the goddess distances herself from hunger implicitly, in the way Ceres does the same thing explicitly (*Met.* 8.784-787), by sending a nymph to do as she bids. Again the two mythical beings are polar opposites – abundance and void cannot be reconciled, and must communicate via an intermediary.

### Gendenwitha’s Journey

The “*vision*” (3.21) fades, without offering the dragon-led chariot that appears in Ovid’s version (*Met.* 8.794-795), and so Gendenwitha walks (3.22). This is a long journey that takes her through many familiar examples of the modern American problematic environmental situations that have been discussed (ones which induce the reader to hope she did not make this journey barefoot), and which also recalls the description of the home of Hunger Ovid has Ceres give. The major difference is that Ovid’s descriptions are supposedly a natural feature of the landscape and environment, whereas Lasdun’s all point to environmental destruction due to human causes, and pave the journey, not just the destination.

The blood from the sacred tree has stained the “*pure waters*” of the stream with the “*tint of blood*” (3.24), rather like the polluted Rio Tinto.<sup>186</sup> Industry has spread across the land – there are “*fields*” (3.26), but the rest of the features are human constructions with known environmental consequences to their existence: “*quarries,/ Cities, suburbs, thruways,/ Stockyards and junkyards, strip-mines, foundries, factories*” (3.26-28). Lasdun links the things that can be associated with positive growth, goal-

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<sup>186</sup> Davis et al. (2000) 1107, 1110-1111, 1112 (Fig. 5).

fulfillment and the American Dream – the metropolis, the suburbs<sup>187</sup> and the roads to travel between them – with the means of production inevitably required to sustain them. Commentators such as Brooks show us the glorious, and Lasdun here shows the ghastly side of the glory/ghastly Necker Cube that is American industrial construction. These things also pollute the stream and change its hues through a rainbow of “*spilt oil,/ Solvents, pesticides, slurries, lead*” (3.30-31), recalling the examples of environmental disasters previously mentioned, such as the *Exxon Valdez* spill, the use of DDT, and Appalachian mountaintop removal mining.

All these environmental (con)tributaries are joining the main body of water as it flows on, but instead of becoming a raging torrent, the stream eventually dwindles to “*a thin/ Ooze of mud-coloured sludge*” (3.33-34), even though it appears not to be at the coastal point of becoming an estuary (a place also particularly vulnerable to an accumulation of pollutants). Gendenwitha follows it over an unearthly landscape, one that is almost unrecognizable, as what is left of the stream “*crawled across a desolate moonlike plain*” (3.35). The reference to the alien terrain of this planet’s natural satellite may prompt images of NASA’s Apollo Moon Landings – and the only ones thus far – at the end of that decade of change and exploration, the 1960s.<sup>188</sup> The nearest chunk of space-matter to us also displays how easily a spinning, orbiting sphere that can

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<sup>187</sup> In the “Urban myths” (119-130) subsection of the chapter entitled “Imagining places” (116-142) in the book *People and place : the extraordinary geographies of everyday life* (Holloway & Hubbard, [2001]), people who dwell in the suburbs are said to be appreciative of the advantages despite the ‘myths’ of the boring stereotypical suburban family whose patriarch makes the daily commute to work: “suburbia developed as a reaction to the squalor and chaos of inner-city residential and industrial area. Slum conditions and pollution drove those who could afford it to the margins of cities, in an attempt to find healthier and more spacious lifestyles” (126). So Suburbia resulted from a “drive to escape the negative aspects of urban life, without withdrawing wholly from an urban system which provides work, money and material goods” (126), and can be an expression of the pursuit of the American Dream.

<sup>188</sup> Also from this era, the photos of Earth itself that were taken from outer space offered another new perspective: they “underscored the ecologists’ message that the earth is small, fragile, and precious – a single, interrelated community: Spaceship Earth”, as Roderick Nash says when he ‘zooms out’ in *Wilderness and the American Mind* ([1973] 252).

thrive with a myriad of life can also be a lifeless, cratered lunar wasteland (as far as the necessities for life as Earth-kind knows it are concerned), trodden briefly and poked with the stick of the stars and stripes which garishly (or gloriously) proclaim first dibs by a country that, according to Lasdun's description, is heading that way anyway. Zooming out from Earth and bringing the surface of the Moon into the picture has given us the reality of a possible and *existent* alternative celestial body to contemplate, but with a perspective that cannot be separated from the fact that space exploration is a symbolic triumph of the American Dream – the illuminated darkness of the images making it seem like a dream in the night anyway – and perhaps the farthest extension of the American road trip story<sup>189</sup> thus far.

Then come some particularly Ceres-related symbols of agriculture, damaged and unproductive. The land has been “*exhausted*” (3.36) of its resources. The “*barren,/ Skeletal orchards*” (3.36-37) show trees that have wasted with hunger, to look like the personification of Hunger we are coming towards, and as we have seen, suffering trees are a bad omen. Lasdun doesn't specify cold climactic conditions as Ovid does (*Met* 8.778, 770), but his description is noticeably similar to Ovid's “*land of gloom*” and “*Sad barren soil with never crop nor tree*” (*Met.* 8.789). Lasdun's “*rusting silos*” (3.37) need no Classically-allusive grain companies to manage their contents, and the “*Dry irrigation pipes*” (3.38), the artificial veins of the land, do not have the water of life flowing through them.<sup>190</sup> The same sense of distress pervading this description of the landscape hung above Cheever's description of Sears' fishing road trip in *Oh What a Paradise It Seems* – villages and farmland have here been replaced by establishments of more immediate commercial consumption, and “[Route] *Seven seventy-four was now a length of that highway of merchandising that reaches across the continent.*”<sup>191</sup>

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<sup>189</sup> To be discussed shortly.

<sup>190</sup> See “Appendix A : Bodies of Water” for more discussion of the association between water and life.

<sup>191</sup> Cheever (1982) 65.

Lasdun's environment is now bereft of even shops, but like Cheever (*Paradise*, 65), he, too, also uses the states of symbols of domestic civilization to show dilapidation. There is a "warren/ Of crooked-chimneyed huts" (3.39-40), as if the humans who live, or lived, here were as detrimental as a plague of rabbits upon the land, and even the rooftop mechanisms for discharging the polluting smoke from their own fires are imperfect. Everything is depressed – "Slumped trailers" (3.41) – perhaps mobile homes, perhaps joined to the "old cars" (3.41) that are sinking into the "mud out front" (3.42), as if the earth, forsaken by a life force, has decided to cease production, cut its losses and begin sucking its disappointing surface into a vortex and start again. Naturally, as with many scenes of domestic decay, there are hungry domesticated animals, here, "starving mutts" (3.42), and there are "trashcans" (3.43) ironically placed in a landscape where there must be more rubbish (pollution) outside of them than inside.

Journeying to this place, Gendenwitha has subverted the usual story of the 'great American road trip' – apart from not being in an automobile bonding with, for example, college friends, she is going somewhere that means neither her journey nor its destination are fun, and the circumstances are a shade too dark and solitary even to be akin to a Southern Gothic genre road trip.<sup>192</sup> The road trip is a popular interlude

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<sup>192</sup> For example, the 1980s crime-tinged road trip – see also Arthur Penn's film about Depression-era robbers *Bonny and Clyde* (1967) – of *Wild at Heart* by David Lynch (1990). This film heavily references *The Wizard of Oz* (Baum [1997/1900] and Fleming et al. [1939]), which is also a (Yellow Brick) road trip film. The lovers on the run in *Wild at Heart*, Sailor and Lula, open-top drive from the Carolinas, to New Orleans, and on to Texas. They both express aspects of the American Dream, which sometimes appears to recede from them like a rainbow – girl-in-trouble Lula wishes they could be "over that rainbow" (happily and safely married) – and Sailor repeatedly describes his beloved snake skin jacket as a "symbol of my individuality and my belief in personal freedom" (Lynch [1990]).

Not all road trips require this type of 'road' to travel down: *The Best American Nonrequired Reading of 2009* includes Matthew Power's crime-tinged Southern-direction American road trip along a body of water, entitled "Mississippi Drift". Power cannot resist joining his anarchist friend and the 'boat punk' crew of a raft made of stolen and found materials when the charismatic pirate-like leader attempts to reach New Orleans by river, starting in Minneapolis. Their feelings about the journey are informed

(sometimes forming the entire plot<sup>193</sup>) in American stories. As a favourite, perhaps it can be linked back to ancient Epic (whilst waging war is not a usual objective of the American road trip – although the politics behind the supply of fuel burned on the road may ignite wars – the trip is often a homecoming, or made in order to obtain something or right a situation) and even the invention of the wheel. Indeed, progress is often an element of the trip – going away is a form of moving on and leaving the past behind (these expeditions may or may not return to their starting point) and the road trip story is often told with a self-fulfilling conclusion. So Gendenwitha's journey is not the ultimate anti-road trip, because the most important aspect – not the vehicle nor the destination<sup>194</sup> but the American Dream – is still alive in this road trip interlude. Gendenwitha has carried it with her.<sup>195</sup> The images of “*dust*” (3.39, 46) in the area she

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by previous American water-road trips. Like the characters in the works of Mark Twain, “They would commune with the national mythos. They would be twenty-first century incarnations of the river rats, hoboes, and drifters of the Mississippi’s history” (Power [2009] 326). Knowing of such journeys, it would be folly to confine the American Dream to conventional ideas of consumption – it is a syndrome of drives, and the desire for a white picket fence is only one of the symptoms, all of which will not be present together, and some of which are mutually exclusive. For some, chasing the Dream involves consuming and discarding as much as possible; for others (or even at other times in the same life), it involves dumpster-diving for as much as possible, and living off-the-grid.

<sup>193</sup> For example, Neil Gaiman’s *American Gods* (2005), mentioned in an earlier footnote, is, amongst other things, a road trip novel.

<sup>194</sup> As a teenage Londoner, Simon Schama was entranced by the freedoms of the characters of Jack Kerouac’s 1957 American road trip novel *On the Road* (despite a certain degree of obnoxiousness, we must concede that Kerouac’s story, too, carries the spirit), in which a pair of hitchhikers say “[...] *Who cares?*” (23) when asked what they are going to do when they reach their intended destination of Los Angeles (Schama [2008] 303). To describe the American state of mind in a single word, Schama chooses “boundless” – particularly relative to the conditions in the Old World (303-304).

<sup>195</sup> In a similar way, the nameless Man and Boy in the near-future post-apocalyptic eco-dystopian film *The Road* (Hillcoat [2009]) are “*carrying the fire*”, convincing themselves that life still has meaning and that they are “*the good guys*”, as they make their way South following crumbling highways in an almost lifeless America (after a non-descript disaster that has caused ash particles to produce a perpetually overcast sky over the earth), seeking the ocean, by weary foot, starving and ill, in one of the bleakest American road trips ever imagined and widely-shared. The shopping cart the pair push like homeless people (except there no society that will be symbiotic with their lifestyle, nor to which they may try to escape their situation) grimly maintains its role as the tool of today’s hunter-gatherer (whether in physical or online commercial spaces). They trundle through the aisles of dead and falling trees, which, in other stories such as Erysichthon/Erisychthon’s, signal bad news for humans (and if humans initiated the disaster in *The Road* then the same punishment formula is in place – people destroy



has reached may recall the ecological, agricultural and economic catastrophe of the Dust Bowl of the 1930s Great Depression (which partially resulted from greed), away from which the Joad family in John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* migrated, abandoning their ruined farm in Oklahoma and driving along Route 66 to the false promise of prosperity in California<sup>196</sup>, in one of the most famous and serious American road trip stories ever told.<sup>197</sup> Here in the third section of "Erysichthon", we have talk of a journey, a path to be followed, and "*thruways*" (3.27) that must lead somewhere, but we are getting further and further away from healthy life – we are not improving. Perhaps Lasdun is taking us on a road trip through time.

Everything seems to be affected as we near the House of Hunger, as if she were an environmental disaster herself, irradiating the surrounding

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vegetation; people starve and die – it needs no intervening deity when told as a simple non-survival story – therefore such stories always have a touch of warning about them). When they arrive on the beach, it is no paradise. They have been re-enacting coming to America *from within* America, and in a subversion of the Dream, there is nothing particular more to happen (although signs of hope are provided). It seems, but for "*carrying the fire*", that the world really is ending, with both a non-descript bang and an extended whimper that fades to grey. The film is based on the 2006 novel by Cormac McCarthy, who also wrote the Texan novel *No Country for Old Men* (2005), on which the Coen brothers' 2007 film of the name is based. Again, a man speaks of carrying fire – this time he is describing a dream in which he sees his father riding ahead of him, and knows he is waiting for him. As well as this future-centred image, the film explores greed as a negative force (as with Erysichthon/Erisychthon – or *Aethon* – carrying too much fire will burn the holder), destroying positive scenarios that could have come about if characters had stopped seeking more material wealth. As does *There Will be Blood* (Anderson [2007]), another blockbuster, released in the same year, and set in the oil fields of the West Coast. It was partially-inspired by Upton Sinclair's novel *Oil!* (2008/1926), the end of which speaks of an "*evil Power*" that is "*luring the nations to destruction by visions of unearned wealth, and the opportunity to enslave and exploit labour*" (548). All of these works are showing the dark side of the American Dream. The film *There Will Be Blood*, a brooding, oily bloodbath, seems to be about the psychosis induced by the mad pursuit of wealth in oil (that great enabler of road trips). Like Erysichthon/Erisychthon, Daniel Plainview (the leading character) goes insane.

<sup>196</sup> If, in the history of American settlement, pioneer progress moved westward, as it did, then Los Angeles lies on the final frontier of the contiguous United States. This may be a factor in its legendary reputation as a factory for hoped-for personal and financial metamorphoses, fuelled by Hollywood, the engine of the city, churning out its special brand of cliché about the city offering opportunity to make the dreams of the lucky come true (Holloway & Hubbard [2001] 120) – it is certainly a significant place on the geographical map of the American Dream.

<sup>197</sup> Steinbeck (2002/1939). Later in his life, Steinbeck documented his own American road trip in *Travels with Charley in Search of America* (1997/1962).

land with her lethal fallout. It could be this way, or it could be the case that she dwells there *because* the land is like that, and she chose it as appropriate for her inhabitation – again a dark subversion of a common story Americans tell about themselves, this time that of the pioneering settler, seeker of plenty. Of course, the pioneering settler story could easily be the American road trip story in an early form. There are many metamorphoses of stories within Lasdun's own metamorphoses of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*.

When, “*at last*” (3.43) Gendenwitha reaches the doorless “*cinderblock shack*” (3.44-45) in which Hunger resides, the description bears many similarities to Ovid's Hunger. Lasdun's Hunger is inside a structure that has negative connotations of incompleteness, and is made of a material<sup>198</sup> with a name that brings to mind a (spent) fire (both notions associated with Erysichthon). But Ovid's Hunger is still in proximity to the harshness of stone, in a “*stubborn stony field*” (*Met.* 8.799). Physically, the two female personifications of Hunger have similarly grotesque descriptions of a sickly skeletal human creature (3.47-58, cf. *Met.* 8.801-808), although Ovid's is an adult, and Lasdun's Hunger is a child in rags (3.47-48), which makes her prominently-boned portrayal unavoidably evoke the shock-photographs of malnourished children in foreign famines gazing out of advertisements by organisations seeking aid.

Where Ovid's Hunger is grubbing for weeds (*Met.* 8.799-800), Lasdun's Hunger has a spoon dangling from her hand (3.55-56) (modern America's industrialized food supply means most people forage on the shelf, not the field), and “*a look of reproach,/ Ancient and unappeasable,/ Glistened in her eyes*” (3.56-58), as if to say that she is *still* hungry after all these centuries. Her gaze and actions are her communication – she does not speak in either version. Lasdun's Hunger follows Gendenwitha (of whom

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<sup>198</sup> Cinderblocks commonly have a hollow core into which iron reinforcements can be placed, and concrete poured. Perhaps the materials of Hunger's home are, like she is, empty of these fillings.

we hear no more) back up the stream, and goes to Erisychthon's house (3.59-62).

## Enter Hunger

It is night time, and Erisychthon, who has not yet shown in this section, is now sleeping and vulnerable, snoring in his bed: he does not hear the creak of his door as Hunger enters (3.63-65). Sitting on him, a little like a succubus, she maneuvers her long spoon once into his open mouth and has "*Emptied him out*" (3.66-70). Then, mouth-to-mouth (3.70), she completes the physical transaction by breathing herself "*into his blood/ Till famine blazed there*" (3.71-72), similarly to the way Ovid's Hunger physically fills Erysichthon with her breath upon his body (*Met.* 8.819-820). It is interesting to note that Eris, the Greek goddess of strife and discord, gave birth to Hunger (*Limos*),<sup>199</sup> who, in this story, approaches and enters the body of a person with a name made all the more similar to her mother's through Lasdun's choice of spelling. In addition, although Lasdun's Hunger is hardly explicitly seeking to return to the womb whence she came, she is a "*neglected*" (3.48) child, lacking maternal shelter, and she has a directable drive to become part of another body (whilst magically not losing any of herself). Erisychthon's strife begins before he wakes up: he has vivid dreams of strong-tasting meat, pastries and cheese (3.74-77). He grinds his teeth (3.78) like Ovid's Erysichthon (*Met.* 8.825-826). But when he wakes, his famished binge has a distinctly American flavour. He raids the fridge and tells his daughter to cook for him "*A breakfast of waffles,/ Homefries, bacon and eggs*" (3.82-83),<sup>200</sup>

<sup>199</sup> The birth of her litter of personified abstractions is documented in Hesiod, *Theogony* 226-232.

<sup>200</sup> The American relationship with fried food is mused upon in rather poetic tones by John Cheever in *Oh, What a Paradise It Seems* (1982). One night, while staying at an inn with his lover Eduardo, Sears wakes and notices the smell of fried food drifting in the window (66). It is hardly modern, he decides: "*He thought, but only for a moment, of fried food as a new aberration [...]. He hastily amended this random thought with the knowledge that fried food had been one of the first things to be smelled on the planet*" (67). (Another of Cheever's characters shares this thought in "The Brigadier and the

only to need an augmented repeat (“*And this time/ Don’t skimp on me [...]*” [3.86-87]) less than an hour later. The ‘Mestra’ character dutifully cooks her father’s requested feast of Americana (or perhaps *amāre-carne!*):

‘[...] Let’s see, we’ll start with a prime  
Rib of Black Angus, then a nice grilled  
Turkey and Swiss on rye,  
Then I think apple cake  
With maple whipped cream . . . No, make that pecan pie,

‘Or both in fact.’

(3.87-92)

The kitchen must be looking like a Paula Deen cooking show set by now, and Erisychthon’s appetite is beginning to seem abnormal, but we do not hear his daughter comment, and he departs to go to work with his men at the development site (3.93). Earlier the protesters there were described as “*Keepers of a certain mystic flame*” (2.9) – now, through their devotion to the things in which they have faith, a flame of burning hunger has been unleashed upon and within Erisychthon, who we have seen was also known in ancient sources as *Aethon* – the burner. (We don’t hear that any of the women are present at *Cascade* on this day – perhaps they are aware that Gendenwitha has dealt with the situation.) Erisychthon’s

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Golf Widow” [1964]. On entering his house, a man notices “*the noise and the smell of cooking*”, which triggers his supposing that “*these sounds and odors must have been one of the first signs of life on the planet, and might be one of the last*” [19].) So perhaps the appeal of fare such as “*Homefries*”(3.83) is primal for Erisychthon – fried food is called upon to feed an ancient hunger, and it is not unique to an oft-disparaged modern American fast-food trend, even though Sears (*Paradise*) also notes, “*It was barbarous – it disclaimed authority – and its magic was malnutrition, acne and grossness*” (67). He describes many moments and places in history at which fried food would have been consumed, from battlefields and sacrifices, to fairgrounds (67), and concludes that because of its portability it remains popular in this place: “*It was the food for spiritual vagrants*” (68). By having a character wake and consider the smell filling his nostrils, Cheever has effectively taken us on a scenic route to the phenomenon of the “*fast-food chains*” (1.4, 10), selling food which can be picked up somewhere and eaten whilst driving to another place, and the fried food, of Erisychthon’s world.

hunger attacks him again, “*with a pang that made/ His flesh pour sweat like wax/ From a melting candle*” (3.95-97), a simile that enhances the sense that hunger is burning him destructively. Lasdun may have lifted the image of melting wax from Callimachus, who has Erysichthon physically wasting away, like “*a wax doll in the sun*” (*Hymn to Demeter* 91), despite all the food he is consuming.

The cheese-steaks and Big Macs that Erisychthon has to go and pick up (leaving probable McMansion-building to consume McDonald’s<sup>201</sup>) were foreshadowed as early as the fourth line of the poem, when we are told of the “*fast-food chains*” (1.4) of the town, which he built himself (1.10) – another way in which he has contributed to his own downfall. Back home, his daughter is “*dumbstruck*” (3.100) by his gruffly impatient request for another American feast:

‘Something substantial. None of this diet crap.  
Give me some corned beef hash, some breaded  
Pork chops. I want meat loaf,  
Donuts and marshmallows,  
Bake me some shrimp . . . Don’t stand there gaping. Move!’  
(3.101-105)

We can see that the ‘Mestra’ character does have a reaction to Erisychthon’s behaviour here, but she remains very passive and obedient, and becomes his twenty-four-hour cook (3.106-107). When

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<sup>201</sup> Even the title of Brooks’ essay, “Our Sprawling, Supersize Utopia” (2004a), alludes to the fast-food chain that ‘Supersizes’ its food. In a coincidentally fitting McDonald’s advertising campaign for franchises open 24-hours in Wellington, New Zealand (launched December 2008), outdoor posters displayed on bus stops read “Hunger never sleeps”. This instantly recalls the insatiable hunger of Erisychthon. Furthermore, in public reaction to the campaign, some of the posters had a picture of a starving African child, squatting with upturned gaze, rather like Lasdun’s child Hunger (3.46-58), pasted beneath the text, and others had the word “Hunger” crossed out and replaced with “Money”. One of the billboards was on an Oriental Parade bus stop, in an area where the roots of a tree battle with the tarmac. This may have been found a long way from New England, but being all within the same frame of sight, it is a jumble of relevant images worthy of mentioning, showing just how contemporary the themes of “Erysichthon” are in the wider out-posts of globalisation.

feasting is carried out constantly, it is no longer the special event it is charged with being in American traditions such as Thanksgiving. But since that festival itself is celebrated by eating a lot of traditional food with the ones one loves, it has shades of Erisychthonesque gluttony, and is in fact casually linked to many of elements of the story.<sup>202</sup> Thanksgiving is an autumn harvest festival – the equivalent of honouring Ceres, we could say – originating from the celebrations of grateful colonial settlers around the seventeenth century. New England was the site of the most famous Thanksgiving, when in 1621 English *Mayflower* Pilgrims and Native Americans shared a three-day meal at Plymouth and gave thanks to God

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<sup>202</sup> An Italian who moves to Washington DC (as a servant to an American family) gives her perspective on Thanksgiving in John Cheever's story "Clementina" (1964). To her Catholicism, the event seems oddly pagan: "*There were strange festas in the new world – one with a turkey and no saints*" (143). She also notes that "*all the buildings were copies of the buildings of Imperial Rome*" (141) – the existence of Classical allusion (or straight copying) in American architecture, and indeed in politics and governance (which leads to speculation that American may follow the same route into history as those civilisations) is another whole wing of the American Dream, which will be confined to this footnote, with the geographically relevant thoughts of British American broadcaster, Alistair Cooke, speaking of the time of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, in which:

Americans conceived a passion for everything Greek. Believing that they had just successfully established the first genuine democracy since the Greeks and the grandest Republic since Rome, they took to naming their town with classical names. Hence Philadelphia, Annapolis, Laconia, Athens, Sparta, Seneca, Cicero, Troy. Thomas Jefferson built a home with a columned portico. And soon country courts, and inns, and farmhouses were doing the same. It may sound like a dubious fad, but Americans stuck to their preference for wooden houses, and today New England is glorified with hundreds of churches, houses, courthouses, the wood painted white, with pillared porticoes and graceful spires. In this small village in Vermont, the county courthouse is an exquisite symbol of what Americans did in wood with Greek forms.

Cooke (1949) "The Fall of New England" (38-39).

Sixty years later, more and more threatening modern America-ancient Rome comparisons are being explored, particularly in regard to the things that contribute to the ends of empires. For example, Cullen Murphy's inventive book, *The New Rome : the Fall of an Empire and the Fate of America* (2007) draws parallels between Hadrian's Wall and the US-Mexico border (in the chapter entitled "The Borders : Where the Present Meets the Future", 152-184), although the book ends on a hopeful (if very ambiguous) note: America may be making some of the same mistakes as Rome, but "The antidote is being American" (206).

for the abundance provided. They celebrated success with plenty,<sup>203</sup> but Erisychthon's socially unacceptable (or soon to be) level of overindulgence shifts the act of food consumption back into negative territory, for Erisychthonesque eating can dissolve a state of plenty and may be a cause or symptom of physical or mental trouble,<sup>204</sup> thereby potentially destroying a human. In this sense, Erisychthon is a magnified version of an everyday occurrence.

Even though the matter of obesity-related illness is well outside the brief time frame of this exceptional overeating event – we do not even hear of Erisychthon gaining more weight – it is a significant public health issue in America. (However, it is difficult to distinguish from the general social mania surrounding body shape and size, which spills far beyond the medical realm.) In Ted Hughes' *Tales from Ovid* (some of which first appeared in *After Ovid*), "*Food/ For a whole nation leaves him faint with hunger*",<sup>205</sup> which resonates with extra meaning when we consider the American nation of plenty, where people often remain spiritually and physically hungry (no matter how much they eat), whether through dissatisfaction, deliberate dieting (while the national pastime is satirised as eating, the national hobby may be dieting<sup>206</sup>), or poverty or lifestyle resulting in malnutrition. John Steinbeck was from Salinas, California, a

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<sup>203</sup> In the comical but informative book, *A Short History of the American Stomach* (2008), Frederick Kaufman hopes to "follow the winding road of the American intestine back to its famished origins" (xii) (a road trip in itself!) – this brings to mind Gendenwitha's journey to find Hunger (3.22-46). In doing this, Kaufman makes his own attempt to identify the American Dream: "Only here might we find the origins of the strange belief that anyone with enough savvy and discipline can satisfy his or her appetite, no matter how gigantic. A belief otherwise known as the American Dream" (xii). Early Puritan moralising about putting food into the body, thus purifying or polluting it (xiii-xiv) may have contributed to psychological eating disorders – "Like Pallas Athena, bulimarexia emerged fully formed from the New England mind" (35) – and the binary opposites of eating at one extreme or the other have a firm place in the nation: "the feast and the fast have always been American twins" (xi). New England provides fertile soil for a re-sprouting of the Erysichthon story.

<sup>204</sup> For one medical example, chronic hunger (hyperphagia) is a symptom of Prader-Willi syndrome.

<sup>205</sup> Hughes, T. (1997) "Erisychthon", 91. In this first edition of the work, Hughes uses the same spelling – 'Erisychthon' – as Lasdun.

<sup>206</sup> Should this statement seem too sweeping, there is plenty of evidence for its truth in Kaufman's (2008) book, for example, the long-time "diet-book mania" noted as early as the "Preface" (xi), and an entire chapter entitled "Gorging on Diets" (117-150).

fertile region known as the ‘Salad Bowl of the Nation’, and yet he was destined to have to write a book in which Californian produce was left to rot, or otherwise destroyed, in order to keep up the price during the Great Depression.<sup>207</sup> He is disappointed in his nation: “*There is a failure here that topples all our success*”,<sup>208</sup> he says as he tells of oranges sprayed with kerosene and potatoes dumped into guarded rivers where starving people cannot reach them.<sup>209</sup> It is in this passage where the words of the book’s title appear in a description of the migrants’ state of mind: “*in the eyes of the hungry there is a growing wrath. In the souls of the people the grapes of wrath are filling and growing heavy, growing heavy for the vintage*”.<sup>210</sup> Even in Salinas today, where fields of bright green lettuce stretch as far as the eye can see, violent gangs shadow the urban area and homeless people wander the streets begging. Steinbeck’s bitter criticism of the greed and inequality in his wealthy country, his lament at the wastage that occurs so that profit can be made, does not seem at all dated – food for all is still an American Dream, even though there is more than enough food in America.<sup>211</sup>

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<sup>207</sup> Steinbeck (2002/1939) 348-349.

<sup>208</sup> Steinbeck (2002/1939) 349.

<sup>209</sup> Steinbeck (2002/1939) 348-349.

<sup>210</sup> Steinbeck (2002/1939) 349. The phrase, “*the grapes of wrath*” appears in Julia Ward Howe’s lyrics to “Battle Hymn of the Republic”, the abolitionist Civil War song: “*Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord:/ He is trampling out the vintage where the grapes of wrath are stored;/ He hath loosed the fateful lightning of His terrible swift sword:/ His truth is marching on*” (Howe [1862]), which refers to Revelation 14.19-20: “*And the angel thrust in his sickle into the earth, and gathered the vine of the earth, and cast it into the great winepress of the wrath of God. And the winepress was trodden without the city, and blood came out of the winepress, even unto the horse bridles, by the space of a thousand and six hundred furlongs*”.

<sup>211</sup> Similarly to what Jane Jacobs’ *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (1993/1961) said of the problems of American cities, the problems of the ‘widening socio-economic gap’ are so complicated and multi-faceted that they cannot simply be solved by a sweeping ‘freeway’ such as a new political regime (for example, Communism does not seem to stop people from being greedy). Perhaps it is the very future-centredness of America that pushes it to remain constantly dissatisfied, and also hoping and working towards improvements in the future (for example, to the health system), and has helped it get so far already. Arthur Golding’s 1567 translation of the *Metamorphoses* (which influenced the content of Elizabethan drama considerably) says of Erysichthon, “*The more his pampered paunch consumes, the more it maketh moan*” (*Met.* 8, line 1036 of Golding’s translation, edited by Forey [2002]), which is oddly apt when applied to the modern situation. Besides, as James Truslow Adams says, “There is no better omen of hope than the sane and sober criticism of those tendencies in our civilization which call for rigorous examination” ([1932] 412).



It is not food that has been particularly (supernaturally) limited nor removed as Erisychthon's punishment for greed, although this would have been simple and sufficiently logical. It is his ability to consume a satisfying quantity of it – this is the case in ancient sources also. Nothing is stopping Erisychthon from eating that would not stop another person. His punishment could have been ordinary starvation, a confiscation of the things he consumes – but, tellingly, it is not this.

Erisychthon's money and possessions dwindle to pay for his food, and so he is, "*like an upturned alchemist*" (3.113),<sup>212</sup> metamorphosing his wealth into excrement, which goes down "*the throne*"<sup>213</sup> (3.112), on which he sits, constantly, eating. Lasdun's use of the word "*gold*" (3.114) to stand for Erisychthon's wealth is probably an allusion to the Greek myth of the Thracian (and then Phrygian) King Midas, whose story carries similar themes of greed and punishment, and is told in the eleventh book of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (*Met.* 11.100-193). At first Midas shows hospitality to the elderly satyr Silenus who wanders drunkenly astray from Bacchus' party (*Met.* 11.90), but unlike Philemon and Baucis (*Met.* 8.618-724) of the story preceding Erysichthon, when offered a divine reward (by Bacchus) he chooses impulsively: "*Ordain/ That everything I touch shall turn to gold.*" (*Met.* 11.102-103). His wish is skewed into punishment in typical Greek mythological divine sadism – everything he touches does turn to gold, including things he needs in their non-metamorphosed state, such as food and drink (*Met.* 11.119-126). So in this sense, Erisychthon, eating on the toilet, metamorphosing all his "*gold*" (3.114), is an inverted Midas figure. When Midas finds "*No plenty can relieve his hunger*" (*Met.* 11.129), he is in a very similar situation to all versions of the insatiable Erysichthon. However, Midas' lesson learnt, Bacchus offers him a

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<sup>212</sup> Lasdun recycles the use of defecation as subverted alchemy in a passage in his first novel, *The Horned Man* (2002). After an academic leaves cash out on his desk for someone he suspects may be camping in his office at night (93), he is unpleasantly surprised: "*The money was gone: in its place, as if by some nightmarish reverse alchemy, a brown, pyramidal mound; raw and reeking*" (107).

<sup>213</sup> Likely to be an allusion to his status as King Erysichthon in original sources.

reprieve from starvation, instructing him to rid himself of the golden touch by plunging beneath the waves at the source of a river above Sardis in Lydia, which, according to Ovid, now runs gold-flecked (*Met.* 11.144-145).<sup>214</sup> After this ordeal he seems to be a born-again<sup>215</sup> man of rural simplicity: “*loathing riches, Midas gave his heart/ To fields and forests and the countryside*” (*Met.* 11.146-147). (One wonders whether or not Erysichthon would have lived out his life as such had he been offered a divine pardon in his frenzy.)

## The Daughter and her Departure

No such relief is offered Erysichthon, forsaken by all but his daughter. When they have lost their house and “*the last/ Dollar slid down the drain*” (3.116-117), they become unsuccessful homeless beggars (3.121-123). This is another trace of Callimachus’ Erysichthon, who, after he has exhausted his father’s wealth, “*sat at the crossroads begging for crusts and scraps thrown away from the feast*” (*Hymn to Demeter* 114-115), a feast which, in the context of this *Hymn*, is in honour of the goddess he has slighted. The few coins Erysichthon and his daughter receive are likened to water drops on the hell-fire of Erysichthon’s hunger (3.122-123), and we are again reminded that he is *Aethon*. Shortly, the pain of the “*flames of his appetite*” (3.123) prompt Erysichthon to pimp his daughter – a “*child*” (3.127) – on the street (3.128).<sup>216</sup> We do not meet

<sup>214</sup> This *aition*, connecting the gold of the region with Midas’ cleansing of his sin (turning gold into a pollutant!), is probably Ovid’s idea (Kenney [1986] commentary 438). The story brings to mind the (non-mythological) origin of the name of the Rio Tinto, the Spanish river that is also coloured by greed (Davis et al. [2000] 1107, 1110-1111, 1112 [Fig. 5]).

<sup>215</sup> Being changed by submergence in a body of water has obvious overtones of Christian baptism – also see “Appendix A : Bodies of Water”.

<sup>216</sup> One of America’s most famous accounts of fictional child sex, Vladimir Nabokov’s *Lolita* (2000/1955), a large part of which is also an American road trip, stokes the fire of hyperawareness and outrage against the sexualisation of children that exists – both the sexualisation and the hyperaware moral outrage (Greif [2007] 119) – in America. In an essay on the subject, which begins by bringing up the controversy over Nabokov’s novel (Greif [2007] 103), Mark Greif suggests an odd link between sexual fascination with young people and aspects of the ever-unfulfilled American Dream, which does involve a

the consumer, but if we are curious to know the street-value this father gives his daughter, the fee is “*ten bucks*” (3.127). This sum contrasts wildly with the “*million bucks*” (1.113) Erisychthon had been hoping to get per luxury home at *Cascade*. Prostitution is the same thing that happens in Ovid’s version (but no identified version of Erysichthon tries to sell *himself*<sup>217</sup>), and at this point Lasdun mentions his chief ancient source by name, in a parenthesised reference note in the middle of a verse of the poem: “(this touching detail/ Is taken straight from Ovid’s original,/ Just in case the reader thinks we’ve piled/ It in a bit too thick)” (3.128-131). However, the ‘Mestra’ character undergoes no known metamorphoses here – once she is sold, she vanishes from the poem,

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yearning for perpetual youth: “The lure of permanent childhood in America partly comes from the overwhelming feeling that one hasn’t yet achieved one’s true youth, because true youth would be defined by freedom so total that no one can attain it” (106-107). Complicated theories about consumerism and paedophilia aside, Nabokov expert Brian Boyd’s words on Humbert Humbert also prove this novel a relevant source on the American Dream:

Even more than other Nabokov characters, Humbert epitomizes the insatiable hunger of the human imagination, but – and this special twist *makes* the whole novel – his attractive urge to transcend the self decays at once into nothing more than its own foul parody, into the mere promotion of self. In writing *Lolita*, Humbert expresses so splendidly his yearning for something more than life allows that he seems at moments to speak for us all – until we recoil from such complicity. We see him attempt to escape the trap of time, and hope for a moment he may have found a way out for everyone; then we shudder, look again at the bars on his cage, and sigh with relief.

Boyd (1992) (227-228).

Erisychthon’s insatiable hunger, instead of for nymphets, is for food (or, more widely, if we see him as a sort of personification of greed, it is for consumable wealth and power). Both Ovid and Lasdun’s writing has been described as Nabokovian – for one example each, Ovid’s by Feeney ([2004] xxxi-xxxii); and Lasdun’s, in a review of his latest book of short stories, *It’s Beginning to Hurt* (2009) (Kelly [2009]).

<sup>217</sup> This is rather strange, since self-prostitution is a common, fast way of supporting various uncontrollable addictions amongst both female and male people, and Erisychthon is certainly portrayed as absolutely desperate (and not one to sit around considering the ethical implications of any of his behaviours thus far). Perhaps the portrayal of a man who sells himself sexually is even more taboo (in any of the contexts in which the Erysichthon myth is told) than the portrayal of greed, the pimping of a daughter, and autophagia! Of course, the omission of even the consideration of Erysichthon/Erisychthon as a prostitute is much louder in Lasdun’s context, where we expect gender to be less of a bar to such a twist in the story than in ancient sources, and we expect such twists. As a damning characterisation move, Erysichthon/Erisychthon’s selling of a daughter rather than himself certainly makes him look even worse than he might in the story.

leaving the rest of her story to the imagination of the reader. However, the phrase “*while the girl was gone*” (3.132) indicates she is to return after completing the commercial sexual transaction.

On the ancient versions of the Erysichthon myth, Richard Seaford notes that “The constant return of the daughter from marriage excludes progeny (the future).”<sup>218</sup> (Admitting ‘marriage’ to be one of the nicer versions of the commercial transaction that takes place in the stories, we may argue that technically her return does not completely exclude progeny at all, but we are to take it that her metamorphoses do preclude all reproductive possibilities in her life at the time.) We may then ask: what does it mean that the daughter is *not* returned in Lasdun’s modern American version of the myth? Because we do not know what happens to her once she is gone, we cannot be certain, but perhaps Lasdun’s version of ‘Mestra’ can be aligned with Noah’s thrice-released dove, which does not return to the ark from its final flight, but is able to live on the land from which The Flood has receded (*Genesis* 8.11). ‘Mestra’s’ disappearance could be a sign of hope. The future, after all, is the point of the American Dream. Even though we have the line, “*But while the girl was gone*” (3.132), Erysichthon’s daughter will shortly have nothing that we know of to which to return anyway – she will be starting a new life<sup>219</sup> (her own).

## Erysichthon Alone

Now we are left with Erysichthon, whose hunger stabs his belly, “*like a mule-kick*” (3.133). In Callimachus’ version, the animal could indeed have been kicking from the inside, for the servants had to unyoke mules to feed Erysichthon (*Hymn to Demeter* 107). In order to eat something immediately, he commits spontaneous shoplifting by “*Smashing a butcher’s window*” (3.136) – finally he is reduced from his ‘white collar’

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<sup>218</sup> Seaford (2009).

<sup>219</sup> Just as soon as Carol Ann Duffy or Margaret Atwood make this side-story into a new main plot for us.

property developer crime, hidden behind walls, paperwork, and money, to the front-window transparency of the literal and desperate act of grabbing an object in his own hands and fleeing with it in ‘honest’ theft (3.136-137).<sup>220</sup> That object is “*a tray/ Of sirloin slabs*” (3.136-137), from which he is “*Tearing off lumps of steak/ With his teeth*” as he runs (3.138-139). This scene, in the re-telling of a Greek myth, brings to mind the ecstatic rituals of early Dionysiac Mystery cults, involving *sparagmos* and *omophagia* – the tearing apart and eating of raw flesh (without sharing the liberating connotations of ecstasy – merely the hysterical ones). However, the Greek ritual is made even wilder when he becomes his own butcher.

But first, let us pause to consider the direction in which Erisychthon runs: “*Up out of town to the woods*” (3.140) – why the woods? There seems to be far more to this decision than the fact that, after stealing, seeking an isolated place in which to escape persecution and consume one’s loot is logical. For one who has become uncivilised, the woods are a safe haven, already inhabited (in story and substance) by other wild things: they are home. Instead of being in the way of his commercial progress, the woods are a welcoming prospect for Erisychthon: he needs them. Although we cannot rule out the possibility that he is travelling, almost blindly, in no particular chosen direction, it seems likely that he senses the trees, the well-being of which has been so sorely forsaken by him thus far, are ironically the only place left for him to go.

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<sup>220</sup> Illicit food-grabbing also features in Lasdun’s earlier short story “The Spoiling” (1985), which bears a few similarities with “Erisychthon” (1994), although it is set in London. Lasdun seems to delight in describing a solitary scene in the kitchen at a New Year’s Eve buffet party in a house in Kensington. Marty, a small boy in a mood of “*wilful petulance*” (135) after covertly downing a glass of champagne (133) (a particularly forbidden act of consumption, since his father is dead because of alcoholism – a foreboding sign of an inherited tendency to over-consume), wanders into the kitchen, takes a “*little taste*” (136) of the waiting delights, and then feasts to messy excess on them (138). When he is finally disturbed from his “*private orgy*” (138), which is “*a little manic*” (138) and includes “*beef from the bloodiest end of the dishful*” (136) (recalling the *omophagia* of ecstatic ritual, Erisychthon’s autophagia, Lasdun’s Erisychthon’s autophagia, but most of all, his steak-stealing), it is by the angry, “*metamorphosed version*” (139) of the party host. However, Marty is not destroyed by his frenzy of consumption. The story finishes with a victorious vomit (140), for the boy has successfully removed the threatening prospect of his mother’s marriage to the host.

Insanity, if not already present, descends upon him now:

like a shark

In a feeding frenzy, he lost  
 All distinction between what was food  
 And what was his living flesh: with a jagged  
 Blade of slate he hacked a plump red roast  
 From his own arm

(3.140-145)

In this feast he exposes his own bone (3.145-146), bringing about grisly self-inflicted justice by attacking himself just as he had attacked the trees in the area, with whom he shares anatomy labels: “*he mauled his own/ Limbs and trunk*” (*Met.* 3.147-148). Since the image of a tree resembles the brain and its ‘stem’, then perhaps to fell a tree, as Erysichthon has done, is symbolically cutting off the brain from the body, and producing madness – he is, after all, now eating himself.

Erysichthon is in pain (3.149), but he keeps eating till “*half his body*” (3.150) has disappeared down his throat. This behaviour is medically<sup>221</sup> known as autophagia<sup>222</sup> – of which fingernail biting is a diminutive form,<sup>223</sup> often going under the label of a compulsive anxiety disorder in current psychiatry. Like any behaviour, autophagia can be considered to be a

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<sup>221</sup> The Erysichthon myth is even alluded to in the literature of the medical research community in the article “The Erysichthon Syndrome : Progression of Coronary Atherosclerosis and Dietary Hyperlipidemia” (Nash et al. [1977]) published by the American Heart Association. The myth is summarised in the first paragraph, and is used because “We can find a parallel today among individuals with accelerated vascular disease. They eat themselves to death because of diet-induced hyperlipidemia” (Nash et al. [1977] 363).

<sup>222</sup> Although ‘autophagy’ and ‘autophagia’ are often used interchangeably in reference to the Erysichthon story, ‘autophagy’ is the word commonly applied to the same self-destructive process at a cellular level (which is part of ordinary regeneration).

<sup>223</sup> We find a slight echo of this in Hadzi-Yavrouda’s folktale from Cos, when the punished prince dies of autophagia, with “*his very nails actually in his mouth*” (trans. Dawkins [1950] as cited in Hollis [1970] 157).

reaction to the environment that an organism is experiencing, and can be more likely to be triggered if there are certain pre-existing conditions.<sup>224</sup> Outside of America, but relevant to the urban context, autophagia is shown in a (Parisian) cityscape in the film *Dans ma Peau*, written and directed by, and starring, Marina de Van.<sup>225</sup> Her character Esther, a successful research analyst, accidentally gashes her leg on a dark building site, and the doctor she visits hours later is surprised she did not seek treatment sooner: “Does this leg really belong to you?”<sup>226</sup> he questions. She develops a fascination with her wound, and does not let it heal, and at the same time this becomes a catalyst for her rapid disassociation from her body. This ‘split’ from her body leads to her ironically stealing away from a business dinner to tear at her arm with her teeth, and later to her locking herself in hotel rooms and compulsively (and tenderly) poring over and eating little bits of her flesh. Esther “systematically fails” to protect her body as a whole, and it is as if “the

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<sup>224</sup> When examining the uncomfortable idea of autophagia, it is worth expanding the thought of eating oneself in an outwards direction. When this human-flesh-eating taboo is broken externally, directed away from the self, it is called anthropophagy, or cannibalism. In both the ancient and the modern culture in which our Erysichthon story is placed there exists a fairly unparalleled taboo on the human consumption of human flesh. (Simplistically, if taken a long way, there would be no more humans. Since wiping out our species has never been a widespread pan-human scenario goal – nor one of any species, judging by behaviour in the absence of knowing the conscious of other beings – it makes sense to have social rules forbidding behaviour that could bring us closer to such an end. Even beyond notions of avoidance of emotional and physical pain, there will always be something deviant about an act of destruction directed at human beings, even when it is also life-giving – it would be difficult for this heavy action to be carried out simply ‘for the taste’ like other eating can be.) So it is unsurprising that end-of-the-world scenarios are often the places where cannibalism is explored: when everything falls apart, the worst things happen, and fate’s free-for-all goes into free-fall. Indeed, in many artistic products of human imagination, cannibalism and the apocalypse go hand-in-hand as the last things to happen to humanity (The Man and his son in Hillcoat’s *The Road* [2009, based on McCarthy 2006] are constantly on the look-out for gangs of hungry – or sometimes sinisterly well-fed – cannibals). Unless the human to be eaten by another is already dead (in which case mere necro-cannibalism is practiced – and occasionally reaches the news in the stories of desperate non-bloodthirsty survivors of transport disasters in isolated areas, who are appropriately traumatised by their actions), the monumental taboo of cannibalism will likely be bundled with acts of murder, like autophagia could reasonably bring about suicide – so stories of such are *doubly* shocking to their audiences. It is likely that the half-eaten Erysichthon (3.150) would have died by his own jaws had metamorphosis (3.164-172) not ‘saved’ him from this type of magically-enforced suicide.

<sup>225</sup> de Van (2002), dialogue and commentary originally in French.

<sup>226</sup> de Van (2002).

body is compelled to escape her care”,<sup>227</sup> and although the stem of this motivation is complicated, the film’s split screens of the sterile commercial city and businesscape drive her in her progressive alienation to concentrate on smaller and smaller elements of her self.

If the autophagia of Erisychthon were simply a reaction to an environment of limitless plenty and constant encouragement to consume it, then the story of the goddess and Hunger and everything that is mythological seems like an aetiology that came after the fact! That is how appropriate it is in this environment – autophagia fits Erisychthon even when tried on backwards and inside out. There are numerous other interpretations of his actions possible. Groups of humans have been known to eat things in order to try to become them, or, to assume some of their qualities – this is part of “the logic of cannibalism”.<sup>228</sup> So if Erisychthon eats himself, is he trying to *become himself*, in a strange, Ouroboreal twist of American self-fulfilment? Note that he does not try to eat his daughter<sup>229</sup> (he would hardly wish to turn into an abused young girl), and he does not try to eat other people<sup>230</sup> (he has always concentrated on being Erisychthon).

Erisychthon is both chasing and being chased – “*both victim/ And pack of predators tearing at each limb*” (3.156-157). The language of hunting, and the gory wild-animal situations his own is likened to – “*blood-spattered like a bear/ Savaged by wolves*” (3.155-156) – recall the fate of Actaeon (*Met.* 3.138-252), as we mentioned when we discussed the hunter. Remembering that these are prominently – perhaps predominantly – stories of punishment, with the punishment being

<sup>227</sup> de Van (2002), from her own commentary track.

<sup>228</sup> Oakley (2007) 119, who offers the example of the Bimim-Kuskusmin of New Guinea.

<sup>229</sup> This applies to all the versions of the story discussed, except the Coan folktale, in which the prince does try to eat his daughter, but she is saved by her brother (Hadzi-Yavrouda in Hollis [1970] 154).

<sup>230</sup> However, he does eye the audience hungrily, to humorous effect, in a contemporary re-telling of his story. *Occasionally Ovid*, an English one-woman puppet show, tells the story of ‘Erisychthon’ amongst three others from Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* (Ainsworth & Mowat [2010]). In this version, the modest scenery of the stage is put to imaginative use when Erisychthon sells his daughter to various props, and eats his own tree-cutting saw, before committing autophagia.



particularly appropriately aligned in Erisychthon's case, what the powers that be have done by making Erisychthon, who has a will to consume too much, eat himself, is truly *"change/ Will into deed"* (1.58-59), just as the sight of Erisychthon's property does to the viewer in a psychological *trompe l'œil* that makes his junky house turn into a mirage of luxury (1.59-64).

When a human retreats to the woods, there may also be shades of the seeking of a biblical Eden in his or her action. Even in the midst of Mitchell's environmental and anti-war message in her song about the 1969 event of Woodstock, we find the American spirit of self – *"I don't know who I am/ But you know life is for learning"*<sup>231</sup> – walking *"down to Yasgur's farm"*<sup>232</sup> wanting to feel liberated and 'get back to nature', as the oft-expressed wish goes. Out in 'nature', the autophagic Erisychthon comes across *"A certain pool,/ Mentioned before"* (3.150-151), which lies *"quietly fuming"* (3.151) as if it is not just literally giving off toxic fumes, but continuing to harbour anger about the pollution Erisychthon has brought upon it – perhaps this water may be interested in revenge.<sup>233</sup> Here he pauses – he *"lapped the potent water"* (3.158), the verb indicating his reduction to an animal-like condition, for he must be on all-fours and without a vessel; and the adjective suggesting the properties of the water may have something to do with what happens after he drinks it. This is not the friendly 'nature' desired by hippies with guitars, but a primitive terror. Still, a *"stumbling instinct"* (3.160) draws him, limping, further up into the wilderness (3.159), *"Back to the scene of his desecration"* (3.161).

At this point, the parallel with the idea of returning to the Garden of Eden (here, *Cascade*), which is the location of the Original Sin (interfering with a sacred tree) is very clear (cf. *Genesis* 3). Perhaps, if he is able to think this clearly, Erisychthon now regrets his 'sins', and would like to go back

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<sup>231</sup> Mitchell (1970) "Woodstock" lyrics.

<sup>232</sup> Mitchell (1970) "Woodstock" lyrics.

<sup>233</sup> Also see "Appendix A : Bodies of Water" for more on water pollution.

to that pivotal moment and turn off his chainsaw, rather than to be met by his own polluted landscape when he runs out in his time of need. The drive to return to Eden, to our “golden” selves, away from the troubles of the Fallen world and its pollution – “*I have come here to lose the smog*”<sup>234</sup> – is present in Mitchell’s song:

We are stardust  
We are golden  
And we've got to get ourselves  
Back to the garden  
Mitchell “Woodstock”

While she uses biblical allusion, she is also incorporating the romance of the astrophysical history of the matter of the universe – the “stardust” that we are is “*billion year old carbon*”<sup>235</sup> that has been metamorphosing for longer than we know – but we still have somewhere we feel we need to be, because the parts that make us whole are still always moving and metamorphosing in and out of the forms of the universe: down to the content of our very atoms, we are on the move, and are part of something bigger than ourselves, like the individuals in the crowd at Woodstock.<sup>236</sup> In Lasdun’s *The Horned Man*, the protagonist finds something compelling about the polluted landscape he observes, “*a strange, fallen beauty*”,<sup>237</sup> as if his sense of peace is poised hopefully between knowing of the biblical Fall, and being at peace in the world he is in. Unfortunately for Erisychthon, getting “*Back to the garden*” is impossible because he destroyed it himself. Perhaps Mitchell is hopeful that Americans will not

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<sup>234</sup> Mitchell (1970) “Woodstock” lyrics.

<sup>235</sup> Mitchell (1970) “Woodstock” lyrics.

<sup>236</sup> Mitchell was acutely aware of this, since, on the advice of her manager, she took another gig instead, and regretfully experienced Woodstock only via the accounts of others and the news media!

<sup>237</sup> Lasdun (2002) 185. Lasdun is not the only one to admire the visually pleasing aspects of a disturbingly polluted American landscape. Two famous examples are the sunset of Los Angeles (which hangs onto the pollution in the air and produces beauty from ugliness by painting the sky, and the drivers – the artists – can admire it on their long commutes), and, as an example from film, the escaped or discarded suburban plastic bag that dances in the breeze in *American Beauty* (Mendes [1999]).

block their own routes *“Back to the garden”* – routes which they need to find for themselves. Adam and Eve do not try to clamber back into the Garden – it is in the past – but the modern American Paradise Spell relocates it to the future.

## The Final Metamorphosis

The future of Erisychthon is now the bottom of a *“sewage ditch”* (3.162) into which he has stumbled on his *“bulldozed/ Building site”* (3.162-163). Here, he undergoes a metamorphosis of Lasdun’s own invention. In the first section, the pollution from the chemical plant was described as *“Teratogenic/ (Lit.: ‘monster-breeding’)”* (1.79-80), and it has produced a monster – its producer – but he is changing: *“Mouth and rear end opening/ To two huge O’s”* (3.167-168), as the mouth of an observer of this happening would. His trunk is *“Hollowing out from rim to rim,/ Hardening as his limbs disappeared”* (3.169-170), until *“nothing was left of him but a yard/ Of concrete pipe”* (3.171-172). The body of Erisychthon has now turned *“Into its own double-orificed/ Essence of greed and waste”* (3.165.166) – things go in one end, and come out the other, which is what he had been reduced to in his final experiences of being human.

The metamorphosis into a pipe is very Ovidian, whilst not being from Ovid at all – “Transformations in the *Metamorphoses* are nearly always from the human state”.<sup>238</sup> There is even precedent for humans being turned into stone elsewhere in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*. For example the second book tells the stories of Battus and of Aglauros– both met a petrifactive fate, courtesy of Mercury (*Met.* 2.705-707 and 2.819-832). Even in the preamble to ‘Mestra’ and Erysichthon’s entrance into the poem, one of the things that Proteus is listed as having turned into is *“stone”* (*Met.* 8.735), (although that is an example of a self-initiated metamorphosis

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<sup>238</sup> Hollis (1970) “Introduction” xix.

rather than one imposed upon a person like the others). It is as if in Ovid Erysichthon is on the point of this, but instead the focus is on the transformations of his daughter, and the matter of what happens to Erysichthon's body is 'cleared up', as a dining table, rather rapidly. In Lasdun's version, the daughter goes and it is left for Erysichthon to undergo a grand finale metamorphosis.

The material into which he metamorphoses is the same as the one that he uses to let the environment down: it is a "*concrete*" (1.78) floor that cracks and lets the waste from his chemical plant pollute the landscape (1.77-88). Further weight is put on this suggestion of inevitability by the fact that even as a human, he was always the 'concrete' (that is to say, large and heavy [1.30-33]) that 'let' the pollution into the landscape through his greed and negligence, so his petricylindrification is fitting.

In Cheever's *Oh What a Paradise It Seems*,<sup>239</sup> Sears tells visitors to the area that, as part of the rehabilitation of Beasley's Pond (the water from which was, as its worst, "*poison*" (*Paradise* 98) after it was suddenly used to dump waste into) "*Our engineers developed a small-diameter plastic pipe with tiny apertures in a straight line*" for reducing the bubble size and thereby rise rate in the aeration (*Paradise* 98). 4, 500 feet of this piping is helping restore the water of Beasley's pond. Now Erysichthon is a pipe himself, although perhaps not such an outstandingly environmentally helpful one. His human environmentally destructive potential, at least, has been neutralised.

On Gendenwitha's journey to fetch Hunger, there were "*Dry irrigation pipes*" (3.38), useless without life-giving water, which may have foreshadowed Erysichthon's metamorphosis. Now that he is a pipe, Erysichthon's body may be able to nourish the land by transporting moisture and nutrients. Since he is a pipe in a "*sewage ditch*" (3.162), he may actually be a sewage pipe, but again, he is transporting those two

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<sup>239</sup> Cheever (1982).

goods, or otherwise (and perhaps as well), he may be removing polluting elements to a place where they can be dealt with healthily (unless the pipe runs straight into a body of water, which is not at all unlikely since this is Erisychthon's own development!). Another touch of foreshadowing in the first section described his home as "*Damp on the plastered insides, outside a murk*" (1.45) – just like he is now.

Throughout the story, it is almost as if he were already an object with agency, rather than a human being. Erisychthon is like an empty set – he has nothing inside – yet he has tried to fill himself with almost everything, including himself. He has a physical emptiness about him from the start – not just when his stomach becomes a bottomless pit – but because we never hear much about him physically except his movements and the fact of his largeness (1.30-33). Erisychthon is not given a heart. Even in the throes of autophagia (3.140-150, 155-157), Lasdun does not give him any words of regret. We wonder whether he suffered without even connecting his ordeal to its reason! We don't hear about his facial features and how they move, nor what he wears, nor any detail that may tell us he has a milder 'sensitive side' (except for the well-timed "*Tears*" [1.105] he manages to produce in order to convince people that *Cascade* is a good idea). We also do not get to hear the community's reaction to his selling up and eating up, which would have offered an insightful glimpse into his character.

Perhaps, for Erisychthon, being put under the spell of insatiable hunger is an escape from an even stronger one, which, to some extent it symbolises: the Paradise Spell, which compels Americans to consume more and more, whilst never reaching Paradise (a satiate state). If we conceive of Erisychthon the businessman as a real human being, he must be driven to exhaustion even before he takes in Hunger. Perhaps metamorphosis was a relief, and the closest thing possible to achieving the American Dream (in which personal metamorphoses feature anyway). Perhaps complete metamorphosis is the only way to be free of the American Dream (even though it is not usually considered something to

have to run from, so much as towards). When Fantham discusses the metamorphoses of human couples (specifically, Ceyx and Alcyone, Baucis and Philemon, and Cephalus and Procris), she suggests that Ovid portrays metamorphosis as the happiest of happy endings: “Certainly, Ovid shows by his treatment of these stories [...] that he could see no happier end than a shared transformation from human consciousness. There is no clearer proof that in its idealised form metamorphosis was seen as an escape from both life and death”<sup>240</sup> – in this way, Erisychthon has escaped also, just without the element of eternal togetherness granted the couples.

As a pipe, “*Soon to be delivered/ From his own emptiness/ Forever*” (3.173-175), it seems possible that the hunger of Erisychthon can be satisfied – that ‘he’ will be constantly fed; constantly consuming new things that will be flowing through ‘him’, and that this will be ‘his’ purpose. This will happen, “*at least until the wood/ Reclaims Cascade*” (3.175-176), at which point the pipe in the sewage ditch may cease its function and have stagnant contents, be empty, or, as will happen eventually, decay into earth.

## An Environmental End

It is on the environment that Lasdun concentrates for the remaining five stanzas of the poem (3.176-210), although it is unclear how much of the rest of the earth’s surface he is including when he says “*Meanwhile beyond*” (3.176) – it sounds like the general New England area. The landscape seems to become a symbol for the uncertain future: “*Much remains to be spoiled*” (3.177), and he describes its features throughout the seasons. During “*fall*” (3.177) – the American word for ‘autumn’ serving slightly directionally also – the “*Red and yellow mosaics*” (1.179) on the hillsides are “*unsaleable*” (3.178). This makes nature sound un-

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<sup>240</sup> Fantham (2004) 87.

commodifiable, and although we know from Erisychthon's property development and from companies such as Monsanto that it is not, there remains something of an incorruptible wilderness in the word: it sounds similar to 'unsulliable' (and it certainly cannot 'know' it is sold nor be complicit in commercial transactions). Alternatively, "*unsaleable*" may mean that nobody ever comes to live in the area around *Cascade*.

Humans are barely suggested in this landscape, except by the description that appeals to their sense of beauty, rather than their sense of environmental utility or exploitation. The bodies of water appear unpolluted, from this distance: "*on every pond/ Floats the same old mottled/ Surrealist carpet*" (3.179-181). The "*gold*" into which "*Globes of foliage dip themselves*" (3.182) is not reached for with Midas' greed – there is "*no discernible purpose*" (3.183) in the act. If this "*gold*" is the autumnal tint of the leaves (which is the case as indicated by the following lines), and not the sunlight nor sunlit pond water upon them, then perhaps the lack of "*discernible purpose*" presupposes a viewer who would be considering how to exploit this scene, and would see that the environment itself is clearly not acting according to any logic of commercial gain – it is not about to sell itself. Its activity is private and mysterious. Outside of the commercial sphere it cannot be comprehended by those within.

The colourful metamorphosis of the foliage follows, and when it leaves the deciduous trees they look like "*patches/ Of worn plush in a once/ Sumptuous court's faded/ Velvet upholstery*" (3.186-189). Again the human mind is imposing its own ideas of what faded glory is, upon a completely unknowing nature, which is governed by the cycle of the seasons rather than the rockier rise and fall of civilisations. That is, until they intervene – the "*crab-apples*" (3.190) are like gems on "*skeletons*" (3.189) – an image that brings to mind Damien Hirst's later diamond-encrusted memento mori skull<sup>241</sup> – reminding us of the man who

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<sup>241</sup> Hirst (2007) *For the Love of God*.

destroyed a tree and starved whilst eating himself to the bone in a blood-bath of plenty, and also of the biblical first human couple, and the fruit which they are popularly depicted as having stolen (*Genesis* 3.6), making them no longer innocent as the rest of nature is depicted in the closing of this poem. The crab-apples “*breathe a sour/ Musk of cider*” (3.190-191) as winter approaches.

This season is severe, bringing snow, which,

Fashions a scrupulous  
Translation of each tree  
Into a bright new language, and then blows

Its work to pieces, as doubtless  
Every translator should.

(3.194-198)

Perhaps this is a humble, self-deprecating gesture, after being ‘translator’ of such a great work as Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*. The idea of the snow temporarily metamorphosing the trees, like a flimsy costume, being similar to the translation of a work of literature, adds to the enormous pile of metamorphoses in the poem, and makes it ‘meta’ again (Ovid has already been mentioned (3.128-131)).

Next, the spring brings a “*Mint of glinting coinage – a billion dimes –*”, which “*Tumbles out of dry twigs*” (3.199-200) – this is still nature being miraculous and humans seeing this in human terms: a “*billion*” of something has been ‘produced’, seemingly out of nowhere (out of a state of outward dormancy that poets love to pretend to mistake for inner death). The trees do not outsource to other nations. The word “*superfluous*” (3.200) on the end of a line almost seems to belong to the new shoots, as if there are surely too many of them, but the semicolon separating it from that description indicates this is a “*superfluous/ Miracle we cherish*” (3.201). Perhaps we value spring’s renewal this highly



because it seems to function outside the spectrum of moderation and unlimitedness that the human commercial relationship with the environment is stuck within. But, it is cherished,

Each year more anxiously  
As if the very notion of a fresh

Beginning has begun to fray  
And seem implausible;

(3.202-205)

Are humans losing faith in the continual renewal the seasons provide? Is the slate so unclean from last time that it cannot be re-used? Lasdun goes on to finish:

as if

Against life's optimistic faith in life  
Too much evidence has come to weigh,  
And almost everything  
It liked about itself  
Suddenly seems autumnal, even spring.

(3.205-210)

The pessimism about optimism in this stanza seems to suggest a loss of whole-hearted belief in the American Dream – the golden future (which Lasdun may personally struggle with the notion of anyway, according to his creative output). We wonder if the things that are piling up against the idea of spring and the new life it entails are to do with environmental destruction – has the balance tipped too far in the unhealable direction? Finishing in the season of spring, but in a tone of warning, recalls Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*.<sup>242</sup> This is a season that is meant to be everything but silent, a time when the environment re-translates itself into new forms

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<sup>242</sup> Carson (1962).

of life, like an industry publishing new versions of Ovid year after year. By worrying about spring, Lasdun has placed metamorphosis newly atop the list of human concerns by showing how vital it is for the continuation of life. It is not just the (narrative) content of our stories; nor is it just the (lingual) reason we are able to share them widely through space and time: it is the process on which we are dependent to be able to be here and tell stories at all.

## CHAPTER FIVE

# CONCLUSION

In our discussion of ancient accounts of Erysichthon and Lasdun's "Erisychthon", we have found a wealth of differences and similarities, relations and reactions, achieved partially through acts of retaining and discarding, but most of all, through metamorphoses. Perhaps the biggest differences between the two most detailed ancient sources for the Erysichthon myth is that Ovid's Erysichthon is an independent adult, and eats himself, whereas Callimachus' Erysichthon is still of the younger generation in a family, and when he has exhausted his father's resources, he only begs for food. In fact, Ovid's Erysichthon is alone in his autophagia throughout all the available original sources, except the potentially-ancient Coan folktale, "Myrmidonia and Pharaonia". However, in re-tellings of the Erysichthon story, which, like Lasdun's, are often based on Ovid's version, Erysichthon's self-cannibalism is often a favourite aspect and a defining feature of the tale.

In Ovid, it is the 'Mestra' character who undergoes the kinds of metamorphosis most germane to Ovid's overall scheme; in Lasdun, Erisychthon himself experiences a single metamorphosis, albeit a rather Ovidian one. We don't see Ovid's Erysichthon promoting his latest real estate development with rhetoric swiped from the African American Civil Rights Movement, for reasons beyond the fact that it would be an impossible anachronism: Erisychthon's business tycoonery is Lasdun's contribution to the story. This and the keen sense of modern environmentalism in the poem are details which help bring the myth to life in its fresh context. But Ovid certainly succeeded in what Feeney describes as his aim in writing the *Metamorphoses*:

[Ovid] meant to construct a repository of myth that would accommodate every dimension of human experience, and that would make the Greek store of myth available for a completely different culture to work on as it saw fit. The staggering extent of his success is most evident in the impact that the *Metamorphoses* has had on other creative artists ever since it first appeared, an impact that show no sign of abating even in the contemporary world, where so few people know Latin.

Feeney (2004) xxxii.

Feeney lists some prominent post-Ovidian examples in art and literature which re-tell the *Metamorphoses*, and relates a story of a student reading the *Metamorphoses* for the first time in his class, who came back from a visit to the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York with the epiphany: “It’s all Ovid!”<sup>1</sup> At this point in Western literature, classical myth is rivalled only by the Bible (from which we have taken a handful of relevant stories too) as a source of literary allusion.

Whilst we have unfortunately not been able to examine every single re-telling of the Erysichthon story alongside Lasdun’s – we have skipped the whole of the Renaissance, many artworks, a few songs, and that particularly ‘scary’ page of classical mythology picture books, amongst other re-tellings – we have taken from Lasdun a wealth of information about the world of modern America. As Geoffrey Miles notes in his critical anthology of re-tellings of and allusions to three other classical myths, “To study the evolution of a single myth over time reveals not only the richness and adaptability of the myths, but also the characteristic themes and preoccupations of successive literary periods”.<sup>2</sup> Lasdun shows us that Americans can be obsessed with considering the environment, at the same time as exhausting it – and so can the rest of the world, who often copy, continue, benefit from or suffer because of

<sup>1</sup> Feeney (2004) “Introduction” xxxiii.

<sup>2</sup> Miles (1999) 4.

these American preoccupations. Contemporary America is a time and place that was ripe for a retelling of the Erysichthon myth, and continues to suit it. Some of the events mentioned whilst making points about environmental concerns or the American Dream, such as the post 9/11 security industry boom, the historically unprecedented inauguration of President Obama, and the BP Oil Spill, happened after the 1994 publication of Lasdun's poem, but they are a continuation of what had happened before, and was suggested within, "Erysichthon".

Whilst both Ovid's Erysichthon and Lasdun's Erysichthon are autophagous, the differences in setting have produced stories that are almost endlessly comparable. New elements have sprung from Lasdun's re-telling, but they have still sprung from the same world. A reader's familiarity with Ovidian settings is rewarded when, in "Erysichthon", Lasdun subtly alludes to other aspects of the *Metamorphoses* – our discussion of ancient and modern versions of Actaeon showed this. However, despite the propensity for classicists to be reading classical material and adaptations of it, Lasdun's poem has enough appealing material within it for an entertaining and socially-relevant read for someone with no conscious knowledge of Ovid, because he has made it *of now*. In part, re-writing the classics is answering the question 'If this were written now instead of then, what would it be like?', but the task is not as clear cut as that. Ovid certainly did not pluck his myths out of thin air – 'original' sources are more difficult to determine than our convenient list in the first chapter would suggest: these are merely the given, written and available ones.

The constant renewal through reinterpretation that classical mythology receives is similar to what happens in the American Dream: the focus is forward, on to what happens next, not what just happened or happened a long time ago, but it may still be based on that past. This is nothing new: every age of literary civilisation has dealt with Ovid whether by ignoring, reviving, revering, rote-learning, re-writing, or otherwise reacting. Referring to the myth of Erysichthon, Richard Seaford says "The Greeks

had a myth for many of our central concerns, and here is one for global warming: exploitation of nature produces pathological insatiability, the unlimited need for a source of income that sacrifices the future, and self-destruction”.<sup>3</sup> Lasdun’s big, round, important Erisychthon even seems symbolic of the planet itself, his fiery hunger to consume causing his own personal global warming.

We have discussed some environmentally destructive, and even mountain-decapitating mining techniques of America. Digging up the earth, or not digging up the earth – these are two diametrically opposite things. Yet the screen on which these viewpoints are displayed requires electricity to light up, power that needs to be manufactured out of the environment and harnessed; and the paper written on to air both viewpoints comes from trees that had to be cut down – printed stories about the death of trees are written on the dead bodies of trees. Even as we critique environmentally destructive industry, we are fuelling it. A story’s distribution may be fuelled by the very things it opposes. It is only a clear voice in the ancient air, asking, “*Who is felling my lovely trees?*” (Demeter in Callimachus’ *Hymn to Demeter* 41), or Gendenwitha and her sisterhood’s peaceful verbal protest (2.42-44, 68-73), that uses none of nature up. Since the Erysichthon myth hasn’t reached the twenty-first century via oral tradition alone, a lot of trees have been sacrificed so that we can read about this single tree – it was the first domino in a long line. (However, given the modern book industry at least, some other story would have been published on the “Erisychthon”-covered slivers of wood-pulp had this one not been chosen.)

But it suits humans to continue to generate and share stories, and humans have a way of doing what they want to do. They install various protection mechanisms such as civic religion and law, and the very existence of some of these rules proves their necessity. If there were no threat to the environment, would the ancient Greeks and Romans have

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<sup>3</sup> Seaford (2009)

needed a goddess to protect it? Even with such contracts, there are always exceptions. In *Pan's Travail*, J. Donald Hughes offers the example of the “handy prayer advised by Cato for use whenever one wants to cut trees or cultivate ground in a sacred grove”<sup>4</sup> – this could be considered the equivalent of Erysichthon’s re-zoning of conservation land in order to profit from developing it. Like those of the Greeks and Romans, Erysichthon’s town’s self-placed environmental protection mechanisms (whether they be gods or local councils) “yielded too easily to economic expediency”.<sup>5</sup>

In other ways, Erysichthon does *not* develop much. He goes through no metamorphosis of thought. Even in Ovid, he never changes his mind. Perhaps, as we can see by collecting Erysichthon stories, this lack of flexibility is fatal. Adaptivity itself is one of the most important adaptations in humans. Erysichthon’s business model may have suited profit-making in his time and place, but ultimately he failed to *survive*. Just like the human in it, and the humans who tell it, the story has had to adapt – it has had to metamorphose in order to survive, and our discussion is proof that it has succeeded.

One critical point that we can make out of examining stories with similarities to Lasdun’s “Erysichthon” is that whether or not such stories were written with the myth of Erysichthon in mind – we can be certain that Lasdun’s example is; Cheever was familiar with Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* but Erysichthon is not explicit in the work of his that we have used – and whether or not the reader has even heard of the Greek myth of Erysichthon, the parallels that we see are showing us a sort of universal story syndrome of greed, pollution, destruction, opposition and punishment. Examining Ovid’s story of Erysichthon and then looking at Lasdun’s “Erysichthon” (or any American story, in any story-telling form, with any similarity) and saying ‘Look, patterns!’ is not enough, for we are performing more than statistics with this data. So, with every step, we

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<sup>4</sup> Hughes (1994) 195, citing Cato *De Agri Cultura* 139-140.

<sup>5</sup> Hughes (1994) 195.

must ask 'Why?', and that is where supporting examples from the rest of American culture have been very helpful – Lasdun's "Erysichthon" was not invented out of the blue; it was the next development in a long tradition, in which Cheever, and many other expressers of American culture share.

Why do these themes keep appearing? When we step back like this, some obvious answers to the question can look rather circular. People tell stories about what is happening, because that *is* what is happening, and we have everything we can collect that has already been produced as an example of ways of dealing with our thoughts in art. What this line of thought has not incorporated is the *plurality* of ways of thinking about (and, it follows, dealing artistically with) what happens in our environment. There could be; there are, other ways. We don't have to think about ancient mythology for our minds to conceive of modern environmental destruction. But we are drawn to these sorts of stories, expressing these elements. If this is because we are taking from the classical heritage, then we have joined up with the start of our circle again: What *was* happening *is still* happening, so we are re-whittling the same old tools for dealing with it.

It seems, from the ease we have in finding related stories, that this story wants to be told – it keeps coming through in what are meant to be 'other stories' with nothing to do with Erysichthon. If we say that the story 'wants to be told', what we must actually be saying is 'we want to tell the story', for it is us, printing it out on our thinly-rolled trees, or experiencing it through our fossil-fueled electric devices, telling and listening, over and over.

In ancient Greece the story was myth, but as Lasdun tells it, it is a story that *comes from* myth, but doesn't serve the purpose myth served in ancient times. But that does not mean it has nothing to do with belief: we have seen how extensively the American Dream is revealed in



“Erisychthon” (but again, we are not saying it is the equivalent of Greek myth – although it does influence some of the same aspects of life).

We have discussed the relatively little things that can be imbued with great meaning in American life, such as choices of what to consume and not consume. Just as a diet may be charged with the responsibility of what may seem to be unrelated life changes, it may also take on fashionable ethical responsibilities. For example, the rather extra-corporeal *World Peace Diet : Eating for Spiritual Health and Social Harmony*,<sup>6</sup> which hopes to empower and liberate its adherents: despite claiming to be about everybody else, the consumption of this book is still about the improvement of the self.

We come to a point that Galinsky makes about metamorphosis in the *Metamorphoses*: “One obvious characteristic of metamorphosis is that, by its very nature, it eliminates a true solution to the moral issues raised by the myths”.<sup>7</sup> This statement recalls Santayana’s comment from Brooks, about Americans leaving their problems behind rather than actually solving them.<sup>8</sup> As we have seen, environmental problems are particularly bad at solving (or dissolving) themselves when they are ignored. It isn’t possible to ‘move on’ from unsolved environmental problems within a limited environment – here is where evasion through metamorphosis ends and problem-solving begins. Even if the parts of our world are constantly metamorphosing into other things, it is all happening in the same biosphere.

This is a thesis about a man who eats himself, we stated at the beginning, but through James Lasdun’s modern American re-telling of the Erysichthon story, we have come to ask why, in a sense, we all eat ourselves. Lasdun’s poem ends on a sustained environmental note. Although one is a lot closer to being there, both Ovid and Lasdun have

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<sup>6</sup> Tuttle (2005).

<sup>7</sup> Galinsky (1975) 13.

<sup>8</sup> Brooks (2004) 47, from Santayana.

eerily foreshadowed the future (which is now the present). Again we can make a comparison with the way the American Dream functions, this time temporally: as Brooks says, “Time isn’t pushed from the remembered past to the felt present to the mysterious future. It is pulled by the vivid future from the unsatisfactory present and away from the dim past”.<sup>9</sup> The destabilisation of linear time that takes place in people’s minds can lead us to a thought experiment: what if we told Lasdun’s “Erisychthon” backwards, heading towards the past instead of the future?

When a human being ends up in mud (3.162-163), it paints inevitable parallels to a sort of backwards telling of the story of evolution (a tellable, Ovidian story if ever there was one, regardless of people’s beliefs about their origins): something is profoundly wrong, we are travelling in the wrong direction, getting further and further away from where we want to be. Instead of lifting ourselves up from slithering amphibiously in the slime (to continue the use of this particular ‘hierarchy of life’ model<sup>10</sup>), we are back there – through our own doing – in a profound failure of the hoped-for story. We are un-developing – regressing – why not fear this? If we fear it, why not entertain ourselves by exploring it in art?

If we had control of Lasdun’s narrative direction, we could flip the ‘reverse’ switch<sup>11</sup> as soon as Erisychthon is a pipe, and get another good story that begs to be told at every point – but here it is in brief:

*Erisychthon turns from stone to human, fills in the bleeding spaces of himself by regurgitating the missing bits to sit seamlessly in his body, rushes backwards through a landscape to buy his daughter out of*

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<sup>9</sup> Brooks (2004b) 263.

<sup>10</sup> It seems unfair to paint the life forms that do live down in the mud as lesser, but what we are saying is that we do other things now, and like any group, we feel more secure differentiating ourselves clearly from other life forms, and this is one of the ways in which we do it – by suggesting that dry and upright is superior to calling a ditch your home, even though many of the ways in which people are trying to conceive of the environment at this point in time refute such a hierarchy.

<sup>11</sup> The narrative technique of reversed chronology is explored by writers such as the American Kurt Vonnegut in *Slaughterhouse-Five* (1969) and British Martin Amis throughout *Time’s Arrow* (1991).

*prostitution, vomits up extravagant meals which she efficiently dismantles for him and puts in bags to return to a place that will distribute them back to the workers who produced them (a reversal of greed and waste).*

*All the materials of the property development are then returned to the earth by trucks and diggers, and of course, the chainsaw, which entices trees upright again then sews their limbs back with an eager growl.*

*Erisychthon swallows his own lies into non-existence, returns other people's money, and completely dismantles his chemical plant, leaving the woodland ecosystem in a healthy state. He scrapes away the car parks to reveal grass and flowers. (We could even extend the story to include the human spread over America dwindling through the centuries, till the continent is alone with those who we call 'native', apart from occasional visits from Viking and Chinese explorers, who take all their rubbish on their boats with them when they leave.)*

The purpose of this backwards re-telling? The story becomes ideal; Erisychthon is a hero rather than an anti-hero. So here we are at the beginning again – a man, whole, or the whole of humanity. But if the only place in which we can metamorphose time itself is in stories, then looking back at a more ideal past will not fix current problems – as the future-centred nation of America recognises. The Athenian claim of autochthony is not one most Americans can reasonably make, so instead of creation myths, the United States are founded on the fruition myth, as described by Brooks.<sup>12</sup> This, as it ties into the American Dream, may be what *unites* the States: it is a problematic task to make claims about a whole nation, full of individual people, but we have gathered plenty of evidence.

The Dream is even enshrined in the second sentence of the *Declaration of Independence*: “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men

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<sup>12</sup> Brooks (2004b) 125, 268.

are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness”.<sup>13</sup> Erisychthon’s pursuit causes him to experience a “*consuming/ Fury of hunger and pain*” (3.148-149), but perhaps it is just an exaggeration of everyday American lives. Many actions are self-consuming, whether they destroy the body of the consumer or the environment. People consume and consume, and eventually, they consume themselves. In Lasdun’s poem, we see that one possible outcome of the act of eating human flesh is metamorphosis – but as we do this, we are still consuming the story.

There is a scarcity-to-excess story of American immigrants, from the Pilgrims to other European waves to a global trend and the more local immigrants from southern North America and from South America – this story runs with the American Dream, and even for people generations into being American, it does not stop. The Dream is asymptotic to the Americans. We may conclude that the relevance of the Erysichthon story to the American Dream is so great that, considering all the themes of his work, it seems amazing is that Brooks does not mention it in his book! The conservative American journalist (although he has a strong liberal following) and the academic poet and novelist have certainly made good thesis-fellows.

Of the themes that have come out of Lasdun’s “Erysichthon”, that of eternal striving, of “always chasing the grapes of Tantalus”<sup>14</sup> – an insatiable hunger, a drive to live the American Dream via constant metamorphoses – is surely one of the most clear and significant. This is why it was so important to instigate a discussion of the American Dream early and thoroughly, and to make friends with Brooks, from whom we will take one final statement, the end of which rings with accidental significance in our context:

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<sup>13</sup> Jefferson et al., in Congress (4<sup>th</sup> July 1776).

<sup>14</sup> Brooks (2004b) 273.

The hopeful person dreams of being liberated from the future. She dreams of experiencing, just once, a world in which the future is not always right over the horizon, beckoning and luring. She dreams of arriving at that resting spot where time does not exist and all striving ceases. In fact, the American Dream is the dream of finding a place where one will feel liberated from the burden of the future, though that place is always in the future. The American Dream devours its own flesh.”

*On Paradise Drive*

Yet, unlike Erisychthon, the American Dream continues to live on. We could liken it to a virus, the spread of which does not require the host’s survival. But this would be wrong – Erisychthon is a casualty, but over three-hundred million Americans have not yet eaten themselves – and it would be denying a wealth that the Dream brings. For all we know, the American Dream brought us Lasdun’s poem. It has certainly brought us many of Cheever’s ideas, the last one of which we will use being the conclusion of the short story “Just One More Time”.<sup>15</sup> We are in New England, and the speaker is the father in an American family who hire a leaky catboat and are luckily rescued by a passing society couple, the Beers, who they know have previously suffered financial hardship, but now they have risen back up out of it. Safely on the cabin cruiser drinking Martinis with these old friends, he reflects:

The afternoon and the ocean, which seemed so menacing in the catboat, now spread out around us with miraculous tranquillity, and we settle back to enjoy our company, for the Beers are charming – they always were – and now they appear to be smart, for what else was it but smart of them to know that summertime would come again?

“Just One More Time” 220-221

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<sup>15</sup> Cheever (1964) 214-221.

This seems to be the American attitude – that hope is rewarded, and that out of the bleakest time, when one is, for example, nearly consumed by a body of water, one can end up on top again, as Erisychthon does when he gets out of prison. But F. Scott Fitzgerald reminds us that all of this depends on what has come before (without the past, we would have no Ovidian platform from which to launch other stories, no beginning from which to strive to meet an un-reachable end, and nothing with which to compare what we have now or may have in the future, whether that be in the realm of stories or other consumables) – “So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past”,<sup>16</sup> from which Lasdun’s “Erisychthon” suggests we learn, or we will soon find out the sound of a silent spring.

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<sup>16</sup> Fitzgerald (2007/1926) *The Great Gatsby* 184.

## APPENDIX A

# BODIES OF WATER

Several times, when we have been surrounded by talk of water, we could have, in the manner of Ovid, digressed slightly further to take a brief look at the pool – that Ovidian body of water that goddesses and nymphs may treacherously gather around, as we have seen them do in the story of Actaeon (*Met.* 3.138-252). Bodies of water (and the trees that like to grow nearby) are traditional sites of magic across many cultures, and have a special place as a theme in the works we are examining. Whilst Ovid’s Erysichthon was not linked with a pond, Lasdun’s Erisychthon does have an association with one, and the hunters at twilight in the same location (1.83-84) make this is a very Ovidian situation. A pool of water has even been used as the central part of the stage set for a theatrical version of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* by American dramatist Mary Zimmerman.<sup>1</sup> The Erysichthon myth is amongst those she chose to portray and the pool serves as the food Erysichthon consumes.<sup>2</sup> But as “the most protean [sic] of elements”<sup>3</sup> the water in the on-stage pond also plays many other roles including those of an ocean, the River Styx, a mirror, a laundry basin, and King Midas’ swimming pool.<sup>4</sup>

Pools are a widely-recognised symbol in modern America. The dense distribution of thousands of flecks of azure can be observed in many American neighbourhoods by flying overhead, or using a tool such as Google Maps. The clean Californian blue of a private pool is an instant status and lifestyle cue in the language of cinema.<sup>5</sup> Benjamin Braddock (played by Dustin Hoffman) lolls around the family pool in his post-graduation suburban ennui in *The Graduate*,<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Zimmerman (2002).

<sup>2</sup> Farrell (2002) 624.

<sup>3</sup> Farrell (2002) 624.

<sup>4</sup> Farrell (2002) 624, 626.

<sup>5</sup> Some of this effect is due to the conspicuous necessity of affording the never-ending consumption of products and services required to keep backyard pool water hygienic and free of debris. Ironically, trees become an enemy of this sort of body of water, and many methods of maintaining swimming pools produce environmental pollution.

<sup>6</sup> Nichols (dir.) (1967).

and countless teenagers lounge seductively beside pools in the most popular of American movies – their bodies narcissistically reflected in the water or nearby panels of glass. The girls may seem the opposite of Artemis/Diana (Callimachus' *Hymns* 5.107-116 and *Met* 3.138-252) or Athena (*Hymns* 5) in their exhibitionistic bathing habits – they position themselves in the sun and pool setting, deliberately gathering approving sexual gazes (and the woman Cheever's Actaeon lays eyes on when he bursts through an office door is engaged in a heterosexual scene, not bathing with other female beings at all<sup>7</sup>). But they are not un-goddess-like in their wish to control what happens to themselves and their bodies, as is shown in the reprimand and frown thrown the way of anyone who expresses the wrong thing or ventures too close. In an oft-accompanying Hollywood gender-role stereotype, male companions take revenge on other males who have afforded exposed women unwanted attention – the cause of many a fight scene, perhaps the modern equivalent of being torn apart by hounds or blinded for transgressions against bathing females.

Perhaps it is because bodies of water are such a significant recurring motif in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* that an action that pollutes one (as we have witnessed in Cheever's *Oh What a Paradise It Seems* and Lasdun's "Erysichthon") is the modern equivalent transgression of inadvertently stumbling upon a goddess bathing in one, and is a threat to the pool itself. The pool could symbolise the purity of ancient female goddesses, or our own bodies (which are indeed 'bodies of water' when we consider that the blood flowing around them is predominantly water), or the environment itself. If the source of water is spoiled, the source of life is spoiled. Even before birth, women hold babies swimming in a significantly aqueous solution till they are ready to meet the outside world and become another individual link in the same watercourse that has been running through the hydrosphere since long before our relatively recent 'ancient' times. The brain matter that holds our ideas about ancient myth is supported by the same water in which swam the first such ideas, when myth was young and had not even metamorphosed into myth as we currently know it.

The idea that we turn into people out of our watery beginnings may inform rituals of change-through-submergence, such as baptism, whether it be to turn a baby

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<sup>7</sup> Cheever (1964) "Metamorphoses" I.78.



into a child of God, or to save an adult sinner through facilitating ‘re-birth’ – a metamorphosis of the soul. The American film *Oh Brother, Where Art Thou?* immerses elements of Homer’s *Odyssey* into a story of Mississippi chain-gang escapees who are trying to reclaim some buried loot before a valley is flooded by an artificially-created body of water.<sup>8</sup> At one stage the trio encounter and participate in a mass baptism ceremony on the banks of a river (although Ulysses Everett McGill stands by sceptically as his companions splash towards the preacher). Another famous scene features them being captivated by three ‘Sirens’ singing and washing their clothes in a river.

We are fascinated by the idea of water as a metamorphosing agent: apart from our own bodies (through ritual, recreation, cleansing, or a mixture of these), we place objects into water and watch them change, stare impatiently at tadpoles awaiting their development into frogs, and delight in the sped-up versions of such processes available in fast-forwarded video or submersible foam substances. Before human flight technology, water made the only passage to other land masses, such as (for those not already there) America.

Perhaps John Cheever’s East-side American character Neddy Merrill is attempting to exercise his pioneer roots when he decides, one summer Sunday, to swim home via the “*quasi-subterranean stream*” of swimming pools in his county, a journey which forms the plot of “The Swimmer”, which is placed immediately before the I - IV “Metamorphoses” in *The Brigadier and the Golf Widow*.<sup>9</sup> At first, the sun is shining and his outlook is very positive, and aligned with the American Dream: “*Making his way home by an uncommon route gave him the feeling that he was a pilgrim, an explorer, a man with a destiny*”.<sup>10</sup> He also feels at home in the water: “*To be embraced and sustained by the light green water was less a pleasure, it seemed, than the resumption of a natural condition*”.<sup>11</sup> But over the day the season autumnifies, as do the attitudes of his hosts, and with this trick of time Cheever exposes us to the darker side of the

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<sup>8</sup> Coen brothers (2000). The film is therefore also a crime-tinged Southern road trip (with elements of Southern Gothic), a genre encountered in the discussion of the third section of Lasdun’s “Erisychthon”.

<sup>9</sup> Cheever (1964) 61-76.

<sup>10</sup> Cheever (1964) “The Swimmer” 63. Ned’s journey is also a Southern-directed (though not ‘Southern’) American (off-)road trip.

<sup>11</sup> Cheever (1964) “The Swimmer” 63.

American Dream – it appears to be dissolving in the water. Ned has to suffer the humiliation of crossing a highway on foot wearing only his swimming trunks.<sup>12</sup> Gradually the friends he visits hint at financial ruin and family collapse that he seems to be denying, and when he finally arrives home exhausted, his house is empty and shut down.<sup>13</sup>

In the chapter of *Silent Spring* entitled “Surface Waters and Underground Seas”, Rachel Carson writes that “Of all our natural resources water has become the most precious. By far the greatest part of the earth’s surface is covered by its enveloping seas, yet in the midst of this plenty we are in want”.<sup>14</sup> As well as the fact that the ocean is not made of drinking water,<sup>15</sup> this recalls the way Erysichthon/Erisychthon starves in a land of plenty, and because of acts of pollution too. Lasdun’s Erysichthon appears to be poisoned by the pool he polluted: like many aspects of nature, physical and personified, water will be part of death as well as life, whether through mythical retribution, thirst, natural disaster, drowning, or even the blood flowing out of Jay Gatsby’s body into his swimming pool, polluting the water with the failure of his elusive dream.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Cheever (1964) “The Swimmer” 68.

<sup>13</sup> Cheever (1964) “The Swimmer” 76.

<sup>14</sup> Carson (1962) 39.

<sup>15</sup> Carson (1962) 39.

<sup>16</sup> Fitzgerald (2007/1926) *The Great Gatsby* 163-164.

## APPENDIX B

# WHAT DISASTER?

In the second section of Lasdun's "Erisychthon", we have seen Gendenwitha calmly objecting to the deforestation Erisychthon is about to carry out in order to begin his new 'green' property development (2.65-73). Her speech is cut off by the sound of Erisychthon's chainsaw (2.73-74). Silencing protest and covering up damage is a common feature of human-caused environmental and social disasters. In a brief sweep of the globe in the last thirty years, a handful of the most prominent such disasters are: the Union Carbide gas leak at Bhopal, India (1984), listed, with conspicuous omission of the criminal charges against them, in the company's "History" timeline as: "1984 In December, a gas leak at a plant in Bhopal, India, caused by an act of sabotage, results in tragic loss of life"<sup>1</sup>; the Chernobyl, Ukraine nuclear power plant accident (1986), brought to world attention by baffled and concerned Swedes detecting the radiation in their country nearly three days later<sup>2</sup> (and the only event in this list with no particular direct American business connection); the *Exxon Valdez* oil spill in Alaska (1989); the Kadar Toy Factory fire in Thailand (1993), a similar industrial catastrophe to the much earlier Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire in New York (1911); and the BP oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico, America (2010).<sup>3</sup> Concealed or under-compensated disasters are also a feature of American films, such as the highly-praised film *Michael Clayton*<sup>4</sup> in which a 'fixer' attorney is representing an agrichemical conglomerate, 'U-North', who have knowingly exposed humans to toxins. As the hero, Clayton finishes up deciding to expose U-North to the law, subverting the unethical-lawyer film stereotype.

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<sup>1</sup> Union Carbide Corporation (2010) "History".

<sup>2</sup> Jensen and Lindhé (1986) 30.

<sup>3</sup> 'Natural' disasters like Hurricane Katrina hitting the Southern Atlantic United States (2005) could easily be listed too – just as in the examples offered, it was the inadequate human preparation and response that made the events such enormous 'disasters'.

<sup>4</sup> Gilroy (dir.) (2007).

The Kadar disaster inspired the song “Toy Factory Fire” by Auckland, New Zealand musician Don McGlashan. He writes from the point of view of a man high in a Manhattan office on the tenth anniversary of the disaster, looking at secret photographs of the heat-mangled toys which were being produced in the factory – *“Here's Bart Simpson, with his arms all melted and twisted”*<sup>5</sup> – particularly disquieting given that *The Simpsons* are an animated representation of a stereotypical average American family. The products are ordered by American companies because they are cheaper to produce in Asia, not least because of the lack of workplace safety. Then there are the dead workers, *“rows of young women, Wrapped up in bolts of white nylon, And the families from the countryside come to take their daughters back”*.<sup>6</sup> The man in the song reminisces with a proud capitalist smile as he puts the photographs away again, congratulating himself: *“Keeping them hidden was the best work I ever did”*.<sup>7</sup>

This is a well-imagined example of the scenes which must occur behind all the disaster cover-ups mentioned. A love affair with blaming ‘big corporations’ (who often claim ‘the greater good’ is being served) in instances of greed and hypocrisy means survivors and information-seekers can seldom lay certain blame on an individual, and the song gives us a glimpse behind the impersonal curtain of propaganda, just as Lasdun’s poem gives a human face to greed. These are stories humans wish they could know; stories which fill in the gaps of our knowledge about the world. The satisfied executive, like the post-chemical-plant Erisychthon, moves on to his next venture, and the damage he has caused to life on Earth has not killed off his all-important shareholders.

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<sup>5</sup> McGlashan (2006).

<sup>6</sup> McGlashan (2006).

<sup>7</sup> McGlashan (2006).

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