Teresa Carson

Metamorphoses, Book XVI

Italian translation by Alessandro Di Mauro
Metamorphoses, Book XVI

Book II in The Argument of Time
Also by Teresa Carson

Elegy for the Floater (2008)

The Congress of Human Oddities (chapbook, 2012)

My Crooked House (2014)


Visit to an Extinct City (2021)
Metamorphoses, Book XVI

Book II in The Argument of Time

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Italian translation by Alessandro Di Mauro
For Joan Hynes Lamphier and Claudiae Arriae

A Joan Hynes Lamphier e Claudiae Arriae
AUTHOR’S NOTE

During one of my many visits to the Greek and Roman galleries in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, I realized that the Endymion sarcophagus, one of the most beautiful and best-preserved artifacts in Gallery 162, had been found at Ostia in 1825. I immediately knew this sarcophagus would be at the center of Metamorphoses, Book XVI. But then I read Verity Platt’s scholarly yet compassionate essay, “Framing the Dead on Roman Sarcophagi,” which opened my eyes to the transformation that funereal objects undergo when they become art objects and are displayed with little or no mention of their original function, their earlier “lives.” During my earlier visits to Gallery 162, I had never given much thought to the people who were connected to the objects. Now, intrigued by how the change from function to art requires an erasure of the object’s original emotional and physical contexts, I wanted to recapture, as much as possible, those contexts through a conversation with the Endymion sarcophagus. Over time this conversation would come to include the “shades” of Claudiae Arriae, its original occupant; her daughter, Aninia Hilara, who had purchased the sarcophagus; and the persons associated with many of the other funereal artifacts displayed in Gallery 162. Although carved-in-stone concise memorials were all that remained of their lives, I grew emotionally attached to them and viewed their displacements from their domus aeterna as a kind of exile—not only from their burial spots but also from commemorative ceremonies. My wish to honor those exiled dead, as if they were my ancestors, sparked Metamorphoses, Book XVI. On my visits to Gallery 162 I will always remember that many of the objects once held human remains.

TRANSLATOR’S NOTE

My hope is that this ‘shade,’ this translation, may be as beautiful and compelling as Teresa’s original. I’d like it to be not only a literal translation, but one that also captures at least a bit of the peculiar beauty found on every page.
parva petunt manes, pietas pro divite grata est
munere: non avidos Styx habet ima deos.

The shades ask little: piety rather than rich gifts gladdens them;
there are no greedy gods in the depth of the Styx.

Le ombre chiedono poco: pietà anziché ricchi doni le allieta;
non ci sono dei bramosi in fondo allo Stige.

(Ovid, Fasti)
Oh CL ARRIAE, come sei finita qui? A quattromila miglia dal posto presso Ostia dove, secondo chi lo scavò, diciotto secoli fa, questa cassa, con la tua salma dentro, fu deposta, dopo i riti opportuni, in un tumulo?

La targhetta mi dice poco più della raffigurazione sulla tomba.

Chi eri, CL ARRIAE?
Perché questo mito per il tuo sepolcro?
Per evocare quali significati? O quali ricordi?
Alcuno sopravvive alla sua metamorfosi—Da domus aeterna a “opera d’arte”?

La punta delle mie dita è a un soffio dalle tue labbra quando il custode sempre guardingo mi brontola contro, “Troppo vicino.”

1 New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art, Galleria 162.
2 V. nota più estesa: PROVENIENZA INCERTA.
3 Casa eterna.
O CL ARRIAE, how did you end up here?  
Four thousand miles from that spot near Ostia  
where, per the excavator, two thousand years ago,  
this coffin, with your corpse inside, was laid to rest,  
after the proper rites, in a chamber-tomb?

   Its object label tells me little more  
      than who's who on the panel scenes.

Who were you, CL ARRIAE?  
Why this myth picked for your monument?  
To tell what meanings? Or what memories?  
Did any survive its metamorphosis—  
domus aeterna into “work of art”?  

   My fingertip’s a hair’s breadth from your lips  
      when the ever watchful guard growls, “You’re too close.”

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1 Gallery 162, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.  
2 See longer note: QUESTIONABLE PROVENIENCE.  
3 House of Eternity.
38.27
Altare funerario, marmo
Ca. 90–100 d.C.

Comina Tyche
Casta e devotissima moglie
di Lucius Annius Festus.
Vissuta 27 anni,
11 mesi, 28 giorni.

L.2007.7
Stele funeraria, marmo
69–80 d.C.

Gaius Vibius Felix
Morto all’età di quarantanove anni.
Datazione sulla base dell’acconciatura raffigurata.

L.2007.8.9
Stele funeraria, marmo
69–80 d.C.

Gaius Vibius Severus
Morto all’età di ventitré anni.
Datazione imprecisa sulla base
dell’acconciatura, che era stata alla
moda almeno dieci anni prima.

1997.271
Coperchio di cassa cineraria, marmo
Fine del I secolo d.C.

L.2007.8.10a, b
Urna cineraria, marmo
69–80 d.C.

Sextus Flavius Pancarpus
Vissuto 67 anni.
Resti della moglie
potrebbero essere stati in questa cassa.

Gaius Vibius Herostratus
Vibia Haeresis
Relazione ignota.

X.248. 11a, b
Ossuario con coperchio, calcare
I–III secolo d.C.

Philetarios e Annios
Ebrei ellenizzati?
38.27
Marble funerary altar
Ca. A.D. 90–100

Comina Tyche
_Most chaste and loving wife_
of Lucius Annius Festus.
Lived 27 years,
11 months, 28 days.

L2007.7
Marble funerary stele
A.D. 69–80

Gaius Vibius Felix
Died aged forty-nine.
Object dated by hairstyle of portrait.

L.2007.8.9
Marble funerary stele
A.D. 69–80

Gaius Vibius Severus
Died aged twenty-three.
Date range, based on hairstyle,
which was fashionable at least ten
years earlier, may be incorrect.

1997.271
Marble lid of cinerary chest
Late 1st century A. D.

Sextus Flavius Pancarpus
Lived 67 years.
Remains of his wife may have
also been in this chest.

L.2007.8.10a, b
Marble cinerary urn
A.D. 69–80

Gaius Vibius Herostratus
Vibia Haeresis
Relationship not known.

X.248. 11a, b
Limestone ossuary with lid
1st–3rd century A.D.

Philetarios and Annios
Hellenized Jews?
L.1992.8  
Cassa cineraria con coperchio, marmo  
Metà del I secolo d.C.

Vicanus  
Vissuto un anno, cinque mesi, diciotto giorni.  
Figlio di Nedimus (padre)  
e Sintyche (madre).

L.1993.47.2  
Urna cineraria con coperchio, marmo  
Ca. 54–68 d.C.  
27.122.2a, b  
Cassa cineraria con coperchio, marmo  
Ca. 90–110 d.C.

P. Quinctilius Moeris  
Nessun’altra informazione disponibile.  
M. Domitius Primigenius  
Contenente anche liberti e  
liberte del defunto, coi loro discendenti.

L.2013.89  
Cippo iscritto, marmo  
Seconda metà del I secolo d.C.

Saturninus  
Esattore delle tasse di successione.  
Al tempo il cippo aveva un coperchio.

L.2007.31.2  
Altare funerario, marmo  
Prima metà del I secolo d.C.

Anthus  
Affettuosisimo figlio di Lucius Iulius Gamus.  
Il rilievo mostra Anthus col suo cane.
L.1992.8
Marble cinerary chest with lid
Mid-1st century A.D.

Vicanus
Lived one year, five months, eighteen days. Son of Nedimus (father) and Sintyche (mother).

L.1993.47.2
Marble cinerary urn with lid
Ca. A.D. 54–68

27.122.2a, b
Marble cinerary chest with lid
Ca. A.D. 90–110

P. Quinctilius Moeris
No other info available about occupant. M. Domitius Primigenius
Also contains his freedmen and freedwomen, and their descendants.

L.2013.89
Marble inscribed cippus
Second half of 1st century A.D.

Saturninus
He was an official who collected inheritance taxes.
The cippus once had a lid.

L.2007.31.2
Marble funerary altar
1st half of 1st century A.D.

Anthus
Sweetest son of Lucius Iulius Gamus.
Relief shows Anthus with his pet dog.
190–210  Scolpito⁴
1825    Estratto⁵
1826    Acquistato⁶
1871    Perduto⁷
1913    Venduto⁸
1947    Acquisito⁹

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4 Datazione sulla base del ritratto scolpito della defunta.
   V. nota più estesa: DATARE UN OGGETTO SECONDO L’ACCONCIATURA.
5 Estratto Rubato da una tomba a camera dall’altrimenti ignoto signor Cartoni.
   V. nota più estesa: NORME & TABÙ A TUTELA DEI LOCI RELIGIOSI.
6 Acquistato da Lord Western che lo mise nel suo museo privato a Felix Hall, Essex.
7 Dato per distrutto in un incendio a Warwick Castle.
8 Messo all’asta da Christie, Manson & Woods il 3 luglio 1913.
9 Acquisito dal Metropolitan Museum of Art per mezzo del Rogers Fund.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Event</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>190–210</td>
<td>Carved&lt;sup&gt;4&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1825</td>
<td>Excavated&lt;sup&gt;5&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1826</td>
<td>Purchased&lt;sup&gt;6&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1871</td>
<td>Lost&lt;sup&gt;7&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1913</td>
<td>Sold&lt;sup&gt;8&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1947</td>
<td>Acquired&lt;sup&gt;9&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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<sup>4</sup> Dated based on carved portrait of the deceased. See longer note: DATING AN OBJECT BASED ON A HAIRSTYLE.

<sup>5</sup> Excavated: Looted from a chamber tomb by the otherwise unknown Signor Cartoni. See longer note: LAWS & TABOOS AGAINST DISTURBING LOCI RELIGIOSI.

<sup>6</sup> Purchased by Lord Western who placed it in his private museum at Felix Hall, Essex.

<sup>7</sup> Thought to have been destroyed in a fire at Warwick Castle.

<sup>8</sup> Auctioned at Christie, Manson & Woods on July 3, 1913.

<sup>9</sup> Acquired by the Metropolitan Museum of Art through the Rogers Fund.
La parola deriva dal greco eppure la prima citazione nell’Oxford proviene da un’opera romana:

In Asso, presso Troia, le venature nei sarcofagi di pietra ne rendono possibile la rottura. È stato osservato che i corpi dei defunti in essi deposti si dissolvono nel giro di quaranta giorni, tranne i denti.11

La descrizione di Plinio mi fa chiedere che cosa Cartoni abbia trovato rompendo il coperchio di questo sarcofago nel 1825,

ma invece di rimanere con quel pensiero chiedo, “Che tipo di pietra era?”
Secondo fonti risalenti al 1892: calcare.

Il che porta a “Perché il calcare accelera le cose?”
Un’amica rivolge la domanda a un’appassionata geologa,12 Cui ciò suona nuovo ma dà una ragione per cui:

Il calcare è una roccia relativamente porosa, specialmente quel tipo fossifero a grana grossa (ricco di gusci) comunemente usato per i sarcofagi. Tale porosità permette a ossigeno e umidità di penetrare nei sarcofagi e favorire l’attività biologica e il processo di decomposizione.

(Nota: inoltre, per quanto questo sia marmo, non calcare, quella ragione tiene dal momento che:

Il marmo è una roccia formata per metamorfismo del calcare dovuto a temperatura e pressione elevate. Questo processo comporta cambiamenti nella consistenza ma NON nella composizione.)

Alla luce di questo, devo chiedere,
“Decompostasi rapidamente la materia organica (cioè la carne), ne sarebbe rimasto alcunché nel 1825?”

L’effetto di neutralizzazione nel calcare avrebbe favorito la conservazione del materiale minerale (cioè le ossa).

10 Oxford English Dictionary.
11 Plinio, Storia naturale, 36.27.131, traduzione di René de Nicolay.
12 Prof. Bosiljka Glumac, docente di scienze della Terra, Smith College.
The word comes from the Greeks yet first quotation in the OED\textsuperscript{10} comes from a Roman work:

In Assus, near Troy, veins run through sarcophagus stones and make it possible to break them. It has been observed that the bodies of the dead that are buried in them fade away within forty days, except for the teeth.\textsuperscript{11}

Pliny’s description makes me wonder what Cartoni found when he cracked the lid of this sarcophagus in 1825,

but instead of staying with that thought I ask, “What kind of stone was it?” Per sources going back to 1892: limestone.

Which leads to “Why would limestone speed things up?” A friend refers my question to a passionate geologist,\textsuperscript{12} who hasn’t heard of this before but gives a reason why:

Limestone is a relatively porous rock, especially the coarse-grained fossiliferous (shell-rich) type that was commonly used for sarcophagi. This porosity allows oxygen and moisture to penetrate into sarcophagi and enhance biological activity and organic matter breakdown.

(Note: furthermore, though this one’s marble, not limestone, that reason still holds true because:

Marble is a rock that forms by metamorphism of limestone under elevated temperature and pressure. This process results in textural changes but NOT in compositional changes.)

With that in mind, I have to ask, “If her organic matter (i.e. flesh) had quickly decomposed, would there have been anything left in 1825?”

The acid neutralization effect of limestone would work to enhance preservation of mineral material (i.e. bones).

\textsuperscript{10} Oxford English Dictionary. \\
\textsuperscript{11} Pliny, Natural History, 36.27.131, translated by René de Nicolay. \\
\textsuperscript{12} Dr. Bosiljka Glumac, professor of geosciences, Smith College.
Quindi nei sarcofagi le ossa potrebbero resistere migliaia di anni… il che vuol dire…

il che vuol dire… mi interrompo prestando attenzione a una raffica di questioni sollevate dalla suddetta geologa:

Se Plinio non lo menziona allora perché il calcare è associato alla definizione di sarcofago?
In effetti i sarcofagi di Asso erano fatti di calcare?
O “sarcofago” non era che un marchio?
Qualcosa, forse calce viva, aggiunta nella cassa?
Quale altra pietra poteva essere?

Nella sua ricerca di verità le email volano avanti e indietro

Calcare peraltro non comune ad Asso. Quei sarcofagi si facevano in realtà di andesite rocciosa vulcanica e non c’è evidenza archeologica dell’aggiunta di calcare. Le citazioni basate su interpretazioni errate di Plinio.

fra gli esperti, in Italia e Turchia, e lei.

Doveva trattarsi di sarcofagi provenienti da un’altra parte. Comunque, descriveva un materiale altamente reattivo che bruciava al contatto con la pelle— tali non sono né il calcare né l’andesite.

Nuove citazione ritrovate, nuove piste seguite, nuove ipotesi formulate.

Una “pietra” dei sarcofagi sarebbe bene l’alunite, che è stata usata sin dall’antichità nella conciatura.

Mi lascio beatamente avvincere finché, all’improvviso vedo quanto da CL ARRIA questa ricerca mi allontana, Ritorno al “che vuol dire” …

Vuol dire che almeno alcune sue ossa erano, molto probabilmente, ancora dentro quando fu scoperchiato.

Tuttavia, per quanto ne restasse dei suoi resti, non valendo granché
clandestinely performed, at that sarcophagus, a ritual to honor the dead?

Prof. Bosiljka Glumac, for turning my initial question about limestone into an adventure.

René de Nicolay, not only for guiding me through the Latin that I encountered but also for his translations of Latin to English and English to Latin.

Alessandro Di Mauro, for his fine translation that is both the same as and different from my original.

Special thanks to the three people who can never be thanked enough for their consistent and generous belief in me:

Jeff Haste, Dr. Rivka Greenberg, and, most of all, my husband, John.
Teresa Carson holds an MFA in poetry and an MFA in theater, both from Sarah Lawrence College. She is the author of four collections of poetry: *Elegy for a Floater* (CavanKerry Press, 2008); *My Crooked House* (CavanKerry Press, 2014), which was a finalist for the Paterson Poetry Prize; *The Congress of Human Oddities* (Deerbrook Editions, 2015); and *Visit to an Extinct City* (Deerbrook Editions, 2021). *Visit to an Extinct City* and *Metamorphoses, Book XVI* are the first and second books in her *The Argument of Time* series. She lives in Sarasota, Florida, where she co-curates two programs aimed at fostering cross-disciplinary collaborations and putting art into public settings: *The Unbroken Thread[s] Project* and *Art in Common Places*.

Alessandro Di Mauro’s lifelong passion for foreign languages has led him not only to teach, for more than a decade, his native Italian to speakers of other languages but also to achieve a high level of proficiency in English and French. He holds a law degree from his hometown institution, Catania University, and has also studied at Université Catholique de Louvain. In addition, he earned a master’s degree in international relations from the University of Kent. In 2011, Alessandro completed a course of study, through Siena University, in teaching Italian as a second language. In his weekly podcast, *Italiano Standard*, he enthusiastically helps students develop their Italian skills. His translating projects include (with co-translator John F. Coates) an Italian-to-English translation of Carmelo Asaro’s novel *Land Rediscovered* (Entasis Press, 2015) and English-to-Italian translations of poet Teresa Carson’s *Argument of Time* series. For more about Alessandro and his work, visit [http://italianostandard.com](http://italianostandard.com).
The Argument of Time Series

My formal education in ancient literature has amounted to little more than a smattering from Homer and Ovid, and my knowledge of ancient languages has been limited to brief responses that I learned when the Roman Catholic mass was still said in Latin. Nevertheless, in my fourth decade I found Ovid’s Metamorphoses and suddenly entered a genre of literature in which I felt completely at home: the epic poem. Ovid led me to Homer led me to Vergil led me to Dante... in short, I discovered my poetic family.

This deep connection to epic poetry makes sense because I am, above all else, interested in the why and how of the stories that we humans tell. Stories about ourselves, about others, about the world and the universe, about the past and the future. Stories. But epic poems offer more than mere narrative; the large scope of storytelling and the extended time in them give “Lovers of Poetry,” as John Keats wrote in defense of long poems, “a little Region to wander in.” As a reader and a writer, I love nothing more than to lose myself in a poetic, story-rich landscape.

For more than two decades I nursed an unexpressed wish to write a modern epic. Ostia Antica, an extinct city in the vicinity of Rome, transformed that wish into reality. During my first visit there in 2014, I had a profound experience—a sudden recognition that a landscape retains all of the stories that have happened in it. The structure of a series, now titled The Argument of Time, appeared, all at once, as if in a vision. From the beginning the series was conceived as a five-book epic poem. In addition, I saw each of the five books as an epyllion, a short epic poem. Therefore, the pieces in each book connect into one poem; the five books connect into one large poem.

The definition of epic in The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry & Poetics goes like this:

An epic is a long narrative poem of heroic action: “narrative,” in that it tells a story; “poem,” in that it is written in verse rather than prose; “heroic action,” while reinterpreted by each major epic poet, in that, broadly defined, it recounts deeds of great valor that bear consequence for the community to which the hero belongs. An epic plot is typically focused on the deeds of a single person or hero, mortal though exceptionally strong, intelligent, or brave, and often assisted or opposed by gods. Epic is set in a remote or legendary past represented as an age of greater heroism than the present. Its style is elevated and rhetorical.

On the surface The Argument of Time falls short of these requirements. While it tells a story and is written in verse, it does not seem to contain “heroic action,” an “epic plot,” or an “elevated and rhetorical” style. Worst of all, it takes place in historical rather than “legendary” time. But what if we question the traditional definition of an epic? What if we expand that definition to allow for the actions of the community in a specific place over a period of time that includes the distant past and the present? What if the “epic” or “heroic” deeds are the stories of everyday life? What if Time itself becomes the protagonist and our desire to conquer Time becomes the overarching theme? What if the style is colloquial? That series of questions led me toward writing an epic poem in which I explore, in a variety of ways, the past/present/future confluence of Time, Ostia Antica, and humans. Thus, under this revised definition, The Argument of Time is an epic.