In an article entitled ‘Myth and Philosophy in the Metamorphoses’,1 Charles Segal has argued that the speech of Pythagoras in Met. 15 contains a strong note of irony. His argument rests on three propositions: first, that ironic intent is implied by the mere theme of Pythagoreanism, which was, in Segal’s view, a butt for ridicule in the first century B.C.; second, that the main point of the speech is vegetarianism, and that too is a theme with ridiculous implications; and third, that the speech itself is longwinded and repetitious. Behind the irony lies, he believes, a covert anti-Augustanism of the poet.

None of these propositions will stand examination. The status of Pythagoreanism in the late republic was by no means as low as Segal’s argument requires. According to A.D. Nock, ‘From around 100 B.C., the name of Pythagoras counted for a good deal’.2 After Varro, the Pythagorean Nigidius Figulus was regarded as the most learned Roman of his day. Cicero calls him a ‘keen and tireless investigator of the abstruse secrets of nature’, and declares that he was born ‘to revive the Pythagorean school’.3 Figulus’ work influenced that of Varro, whose own Pythagoreanism seems to have been more than a theoretical stance: at least, he had himself buried Pythagorio modo, in the Pythagorean style.4 Varro ‘did much to popularize’5 Pythagorean beliefs, and none of the evidence cited by Segal amounts to anything like proof that his work was done in a climate of intellectual hostility. Cicero’s frequent references to Pythagoras suggest the opposite; his attitude is one of considerable respect. He describes the philosopher as a man praestanti sapientia et nobilitate, and says that earlier generations had considered him the teacher of Numa because ‘they believed that any man who excelled in wisdom had been a pupil of Pythagoras’.6 In his prosecution of Vatinius, he calls Pythagoras homo doctissimus, whose good name has been besmirched by the depravity of the self-styled Pythagorean Vatinius.7 This laudatory remark, made in a forensic address, should tell us something about contemporary attitudes. Cicero was not disposed to prejudice his cases by offending the susceptibilities of the jury. Horace might poke fun at

2.  ‘Sarcophagi and Symbolism’, *AJA* 50,1946,152. This article is cited by Segal 281 n.56.
4.  Pliny *NH* 35.160.
the Pythagoreans’ abstinence from beans, but Seneca the Younger provides us with a different view of the impact which vegetarianism, the most vulnerable of Pythagorean doctrines, might make on a thoughtful Roman: ‘I will not hesitate to admit’, he says, ‘what love I felt for Pythagoras’. As a young man, he continues, he had heard Sotion of Alexandria expounding the Pythagorean doctrines of metempsychosis and vegetarianism, and had found them so impressive that he had become vegetarian himself: his (sc. with Sotion’s exhortations) instinctus abstinere animalibus coepi, et anno peracto non tantum faciles erat mihi consuetudo, sed dulcis.

I suggest, in sum, that it would be unwise to write off Ovid’s Pythagoras as a caricature because of alleged general unpopularity of the sect. As for the vegetarianism in his speech – it is not, as Segal claims, the main point. Ovid confines it to one fifth of the whole, and his emphasis in that fifth is not on the eating of vegetables, but on abstention from flesh. Nor is the case based only, or even primarily, on the dictates of esoteric dogma. This Pythagoras does not care over-much about violence to the indwelling soul. For him, it is wrong to eat meat for the simple reason that it involves the distasteful business of taking animal life. Such killing is slaughter (caedes, 82), a form of egotism:

\[\text{nec, nisi perdideris alium, placare voracis}
\text{et male morati poteris ieiunia ventris? (94-95)}\]

When the butchered animal is one of those, like the sheep and the ox, who serve mankind, the killing becomes ingratitude, impietas. It is a violation of a natural and necessary bond of loyalty which should exist between those whose lives are intertwined by mutual dependence and the simple fact of day-by-day companionship. The question raised here may not be profound, but it is not comic either, and Ovid was not so lacking in sensitivity as to think that it was. As L.P. Wilkinson has put it, Ovid ‘may not have been a vegetarian himself, but he was a born advocate who in this case had at least a strong sympathy with his brief’.

When Segal calls the speech longwinded and repetitious, he begs two questions: whether it would have seemed so to contemporary Romans, and, if so, whether Ovid produced this effect deliberately. In the scale of the Met., the speech of Pythagoras, although it is one of the longest episodes in the poem, is still not long. It is four hundred lines out of twelve thousand, and when we read the poem continuously, we take it in our stride. We may or may not find its pseudo-scientific material interesting, but we can be fairly sure that Ovid and his readers did. In Rome, didactic poetry was still a vital tradition. There was no

8. Sat. 2.6.63.
9. Epist. 108.17,22.
10. Lines 75-142, 459-478, i.e. 88 lines of a total of 404.
Greek poem which enjoyed greater popularity among Ovid's contemporaries than the *Phaenomena* of Aratus. It was translated by Cicero, Varro Atacinus and Germanicus, drawn on by Lucretius, Virgil and Manilius, and imitated by Ovid himself, not only in his own *Phaenomena*, but also in the *Fasti*. Modern critics have not shared this enthusiasm. The best that E.A. Barber can find to say about the *Phaenomena* is that 'the metre is fairly correct... while poetic colour is provided by digressions'. For Tarn and Griffith, 'The popularity of this dry astronomical work is a puzzle'. The conflict of opinion rests on nothing more mysterious than a difference in taste. The tolerance of the Romans for versified information was, simply, greater than ours, and they could see charms in Aratus' deadly catalogue which do not leap to the twentieth century eye. In this respect, Ovid was typically Roman. Didactic poetry appealed to him. In his early days he listened with admiring respect to Aemilius Macer of Verona while he declaimed in verse on noxious serpents and medicinal herbs, and when Ovid began to write himself, he indulged his taste creatively. I have mentioned his *Phaenomena*. The *Fasti* also claims to be didactic, and the claim is only partly belied by the content. To judge from what survives of them, *De Medicamine Faciei* and the *Halieutica* were, despite an Ovidian waywardness in the choice of subject, nothing more than instructive. The fact is that Ovid regarded as fit for treatment in his poetry matter which we would more naturally assign to the province of prose, and we have no reason to believe that an audience brought up on Aratus would find this surprising, distasteful, or suggestive of ulterior motive. On the contrary — Pythagoras' popular science was calculated to appeal to the readers of the *Met.*, and calculated to imply that the merit of the poem did not lie in diverting legend alone.

Ovid was, moreover, a poet who, if he cared about anything, cared about his art. In his youth, he tells us, he looked up to poets as to gods, and it was on his own poetry that he staked his hopes of immortality:

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parte tamen meliore mei super alta perennis
astra ferar, nomenque erit indealebile nostrum (M. 15.875-76).
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This claim recurs half a dozen times in his work. It is one thread of firm conviction which we can trace throughout his life. Given this conviction, it is intrinsically unlikely that he would have written, in the last book of his most ambitious poem, a speech that is of set purpose repetitious and longwinded. If it seems so to us, it is not because the poet meant it that way, but because his

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14. *Tr. 4.10.44*.
15. ibid. 42.
16. *Am. 1.15.5-6*, 35ff., 3.15.8,20, *A.A. 3.339-40*, *Tr. 3.7.49-52*, 4.10.129-30. Cf. Segal 289-90: 'It is in his fame as a poet that Ovid believes'.
inspiration has failed him. It is not evidence of subtle irony. A satirist in control of his art makes bores interesting, not boring.

We are not, however, bound to accept Segal’s disparaging opinion. George Sandys writes that in Book 15, Ovid’s ‘Muse flags not after so long a flight . . . but rather flies a more lofty pitch, both in matter and expression.” Dryden thought the speech of Pythagoras ‘the masterpiece of the Met.’ If this speech strikes us too as serious poetry, we will have to take it for what it appears to be, the exposition of a principle, which is certainly not inherently ridiculous, of universal and eternal change. In that case, Pythagoras’ reiteration of instance after instance, while it may be called ‘repetitious’ will not be ‘longwinded’. It will be a deliberate attempt to impress us, by the simple effect of accumulation, with the pervasive presence of a law which works in all nature, animate and inanimate, now and forever. There will still be room for disagreement as to the effectiveness of this attempt, and on the poetic level achieved in specific passages, but we will have to agree that the conception is not so grotesque that Ovid must have written badly on purpose.

In his search for irony, Segal has reduced the speech of Pythagoras to a malicious prelude to the eulogy of Augustus. In doing so, he distorts and obscures the character of what is one of the most widely significant passages in the Met. Ovid, in his prooemium, claims that he will write a continuous poem, perpetuum carmen. The concatenation of his two hundred and fifty myths, kaleidoscopic and often arbitrary, only imperfectly justifies his claim. With the speech of Pythagoras, he seems inclined to persuade us that the Met. has a fundamental unity after all. The variety, he assures us through the mouth of the philosopher, is only superficial, the fissures only in the poem’s outer surface. If we look more deeply into the nature of things, we will find that there is a link between these multifarious legends of transformation. All rest upon the universal law that everything changes and nothing remains the same:

cuncta fluunt, omnisque vagans formatur imago (15.178)

The stated theme of the Met. is shapes transformed, mutatas formas (1.1). There is nothing in this to suggest that the poet will confine himself to the transformations of myth. The Stoic cosmogony of Book I already indicates that he took a wider view of his scope. In the body of the poem, he recounts instance after instance of change from the world of myth. In the speech of Pythagoras, he extends his view once more to include change from the empirical world. It was a natural supplement to a poem which was truly universal, unlimited in space, and limited in time only by the age of the world itself. It satisfies, in a more complete sense than myth alone could have done, Ovid’s claim to write on

19. I will argue in a later paper against Segal’s view that this eulogy is ironic.
transformations. It is, in fact, only in the speech of Pythagoras that Ovid finally does justice to his theme. As expression of the law of impermanence which underlies the changes of things, the speculative philosophy of Pythagoras is part of that theme too. Ovid may well have thought it an essential part. The phenomena themselves remain incomplete, and discrete, if the laws which underlie them remain unknown.

Ovid did not take the Met. lightly. He staked on it a confident claim to a special immortality. He wrote it at epic length and in the epic metre, and of all his poems it was the only one that might admit him to those rare heights reserved by Roman canons for the epic poets. He makes pretensions also to epic unity and breadth, and it is in the speech of Pythagoras that these particular pretensions are most consciously satisfied. Ovid did not subvert them by entrusting them to a grotesque windbag. He did not jeopardize his larger aspirations as an artist for the sake of an obscure snicker at the emperor.*

* The original version of this paper was delivered at the annual conference of the American Philological Association held in St. Louis in December 1973. The views are my own, but in formulating them I benefitted greatly from the advice and criticism of Professor G.K. Galinsky of the University of Texas at Austin.