



EMANUELE COCCIA
Metamorphoses

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Dedication

To Colette,
queen of metamorphoses

Metamorphoses

Emanuele Coccia

Translated by Robin Mackay

polity

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Acknowledgements

I have often been told that the second birth is far less painful than the first. The mother's body has learned from its past experience and can perform the necessary movements more easily and quickly. I have also often been told that writing a book is a kind of childbirth. My body does not have, and never will have, the ability to carry a child, so I cannot comment on the legitimacy of this comparison or on the second birth. What I do know is that writing a book has always been a painful and unpredictable experience for me. In writing, no accumulation of experience is possible: no knowhow, no mastery. Faced with the book, any book, I am, and always have been, a clumsy dilettante, and I have always felt like a child facing an unknown object with a magical allure, who doesn't really understand how it works. Faced with this, the closeness of friends with whom I can chat and spend time is the only form of epidural anaesthesia. Frédérique Aït-Touati reread several versions of the book and generously discussed many of the ideas contained herein: my dialogue with her and with her work has been essential, and I want to thank her with all my heart. My dialogue with Bruno Latour has enabled me to progress on many points: I am extremely grateful to him.

This book affirms the unity of all living beings present, future, and past, and the unity of the living being with the matter of the world: this is what has often been called pantheism. Discussions over time with Giorgio Agamben have left a deep impression upon me. Emanuele Dattilo is writing a book on this hidden tradition and its repressed history.

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I dedicate this book to my daughter Colette. She arrived barely five years ago and she has changed everything around her, and around me: she has lit up the worlds through which she has travelled with a joy and grace I had never before encountered. She knows all the secrets of metamorphosis – and she has revealed a few of them to me.

I am everything because I am only the stream of life, free of accident. I am immortal because all deaths converge in me, from that of the fish to that of Zeus; gathered in me they once again become life, not individual and particular but belonging to nature and thus free.

Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa

INTRODUCTION

The Continuity of Life

In the beginning we were all the same living creature, sharing the same body and the same experience. And things haven't changed so much since then. New forms and new modes of existence have proliferated. But even today, we are all still the same life. For millions of years this life has been transmitted from body to body, from individual to individual, from species to species, from kingdom to kingdom. Of course it shifts, it transforms. But the life of each living being does not begin with its own birth: it is far older than that.

Take our own existence. Our life, what we imagine to be the most intimate and incommunicable part of ourselves, does not come from us, and there is nothing exclusive or personal about it: it was transmitted to us by others, it has animated other bodies, chunks of matter different from the one in which we are currently harboured. For nine months, the fact that the life that animates and awakens us has no one name or owner was an obvious physical, material fact. We were the same body, the same humours, the same atoms as our mother. And we are that life, shared with the body of another, carried on and taken elsewhere.

It is the breath of another that is continued in ours, the blood of another that flows through our veins; it is the DNA we have received from another that sculpts and shapes our body. Just as our life begins long before we are born, it does not end until well after our death. The breath of life will not expire in our corpse: it will go on to feed those for whom we will become a festive Last Supper.

Nor is our humanity something originary and autonomous. The human, also, is but a continuation and metamorphosis of a life that came before it. More precisely, it is an invention which primates, another life form, drew out of their own bodies – from their life force, their DNA, their way of life – so as to enable the life that inhabited and animated them to exist in a different form. They transmitted this form to us and, through the human life form, they continue to live within us. And even the primates themselves are just an experiment, a wager on the part of yet other species, yet other life forms. Evolution is a masquerade that takes place in time rather than in space. A masquerade that allows each species, from one era to the next, to don a new mask, different from the one that engendered it; that allows sons and daughters to pass unrecognized by and to no longer recognize their parents. And yet, despite this changing of masks, mother-species and daughter-species are metamorphoses of the self-same life. Each species is a patchwork of parts taken from other species. We, the living species, have continually exchanged parts, lineages, organs; what each of us is, what we call our ‘species’, is only a set of techniques that each living being has borrowed from others. It is because of this continuity-in-transformation that every species shares infinitely many traits with hundreds of other species. The fact that we have eyes, ears, lungs, noses, warm blood – this is something we have in common with millions of other individuals, thousands of other species – and in all of these traits we are only ever partly human. Every species is the metamorphosis of all those that preceded it. One and the same life, cobbling together a new body, a new form, in order to exist differently.

This is the deepest meaning of the Darwinian theory of evolution, the one that biology and pop science don’t want to think about: species are not substances or real entities.

They are 'life games' (in the same sense as 'language games'): unstable and necessarily ephemeral configurations of a life that likes to transit and circulate from one form to another. We have not yet grasped the full consequences of Darwin's intuition: to say that species are connected by a genetic relationship does not simply mean that living creatures make up one vast family or clan. Above all, it means realizing that the identity of each species is entirely relative: primates may be the parents and humans their children, but we are human only through and in relation to those early primates, just as each of us is not a daughter or son in an absolute sense, but only in relation to our mother and father. Any species identity only describes a particular configuration of continuity (and metamorphosis) with other species.

All of the above also applies to living creatures taken as a whole. There is no opposition between the living and the non-living. Not only is every living creature continuous with the non-living, it is its extension, metamorphosis, and most extreme expression.

Life is always the reincarnation of that which is not alive, a cobbling together of mineral elements, a carnival of the telluric substance of a planet - Gaia, the Earth - which continually presents new faces and creates new modes of being out of even the smallest particle of its disparate, heteroclite body. Every self is a vehicle for the Earth, a vessel that allows the planet to travel without moving.

The Forms within Us

It was long before the era of social networks. Photos of oneself were few and far between; they saved rare moments from oblivion, absorbing into themselves the colour and light of the life that they incarnated. They were kept in large, bound albums with white pages that were

rarely flipped through and even less frequently shown to others – as if they were sacred tomes that could only be revealed to the initiated. These albums didn't usually contain any writing, but they presupposed long oral explanations. For plunging into their pages meant each time rediscovering the evidence of a past that one would rather forget.

Upon these pages, life took the form of a long parade of autonomous silhouettes separated by great halos of darkness. In spite of the dissimilarity of the forms, it was not difficult to recognize oneself in this strange parade of exuviae from our past. And yet a certain frisson accompanied this succession of characters ready to say 'I' in our place. Apparently cancelling out all difference in time, the album seemed to exhibit these images as in a polyptych of a large extended family: with a strange dissociative effect, it transformed them into almost identical twins who seemed to be leading parallel lives. So that our existence began to seem like a titanic effort to pass from one life to another, from one form to another – a journey of reincarnation through bodies and situations far removed from one another, as the cockroach is from Gregor Samsa's human body. But then at other times, on the contrary, the magic worked in the opposite direction: to leaf through the album was to experience the intoxication of a perfect equivalence between the most disparate forms. Without being completely identical, our current self revealed itself to be exactly the same one as when we were only one metre tall, barely able to peer above the stalks in a cornfield; or when we were a teenager with bad hair and an acne-riddled face. The differences were enormous, and yet each of these forms expressed the same life with the same force. Such albums are the most accurate representation of the coincidence between life and metamorphosis.