



EMANUELE COCCIA
Metamorphoses

Metamorphoses

To Colette,
queen of metamorphoses

Metamorphoses

Emanuele Coccia

Translated by Robin Mackay

polity

Originally published in French as *Métamorphoses* © 2020, Éditions Payot & Rivages

This English translation © 2021, Polity Press

Polity Press
65 Bridge Street
Cambridge CB2 1UR, UK

Polity Press
101 Station Landing
Suite 300
Medford, MA 02155, USA

All rights reserved. Except for the quotation of short passages for the purpose of criticism and review, no part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of the publisher.

ISBN-13: 978-1-5095-4566-7
ISBN-13: 978-1-5095-4567-4 (paperback)

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Coccia, Emanuele, author. | Mackay, Robin (Philosopher), translator.

Title: *Metamorphoses* / Emanuele Coccia ; translated by Robin Mackay.

Other titles: *Métamorphoses*. English

Description: Cambridge, UK ; Medford, MA, USA : Polity Press, 2021. |

Translation of: *Métamorphoses*. | Includes bibliographical references. |

Summary: "A brilliant reflection on the interconnectedness of all life"-- Provided by publisher.

Identifiers: LCCN 2020055364 (print) | LCCN 2020055365 (ebook) | ISBN 9781509545667 (hardback) | ISBN 9781509545674 (paperback) | ISBN 9781509545681 (epub) | ISBN 9781509547685 (pdf)

Subjects: LCSH: Transmigration. | Life. | Ecology.

Classification: LCC BD426 .C6313 2021 (print) | LCC BD426 (ebook) | DDC 129--dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2020055364>

LC ebook record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2020055365>

Typeset in 11 on 14 pt Sabon by
Servis Filmsetting Ltd, Stockport, Cheshire
Printed and bound in Great Britain by TJ Books Ltd, Padstow, Cornwall

The publisher has used its best endeavours to ensure that the URLs for external websites referred to in this book are correct and active at the time of going to press. However, the publisher has no responsibility for the websites and can make no guarantee that a site will remain live or that the content is or will remain appropriate.

Every effort has been made to trace all copyright holders, but if any have been overlooked the publisher will be pleased to include any necessary credits in any subsequent reprint or edition.

For further information on Polity, visit our website: politybooks.com

Contents

<i>Acknowledgements</i>	vii
Introduction	I
The Continuity of Life	3
The Forms within Us	7
1 Births	11
Every Self is a Forgetting	13
One and the Same Life	16
Birth and Nature	19
Cosmic Twins	22
Giving Birth, or the Migration of Life	25
Carnival of the Gods	30
The Speech of the Earth	34
Metamorphosis as Destiny	37
Mirror of the World	40
2 Cocoons	43
Transformations	45
Insects	50
Every Living Being is a Chimera	55
A Postnatal Egg	61

Contents

Rejuvenations	66
A New Idea of Technics	71
The Metamorphosis of Plants	74
The Cocoon of the World	80
3 Reincarnations	85
Eating and Metamorphosis	87
Being Eaten	95
Reincarnation and the Transmigration of the Self	99
Genetics and Reincarnation	105
The Shadow of the Species	108
4 Migrations	113
Planetary Migration	115
Vehicle Theory	120
The Great Ark	124
Everybody in the House	129
The Domestic Life of Non-Humans	134
Invasions	141
5 Associations	145
The Multispecies City	147
Interspecies Architecture	153
Our Mind is Always in the Bodies of Other Species	157
The End of Wilderness	162
Contemporary Nature	168
Conclusion	171
Planetary Knowledge	173
Future	177
<i>Bibliography</i>	181
<i>Notes</i>	192

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 Ait-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

Acknowledgements

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.

The book could not have been born without all that I was able to learn from conversations woven across time with Adel Abdessemed, Léonore Bancilhon, Marcello Barison, Rocio Berenguer Soldan, Stefano Boeri, Bianca Bondi, Chiara Bottici, Giovanni Careri, Barbara Carnevali, Lucien Castaing-Taylor, Dorothee Charles, Emanuele Clarizio, Gilles Clément, Michela Coccia, Veronica Dari, Laetitia Dosch, Simone Farresin, Donatien Grau, Sabine Guermouche, Camille Henrot, Noreen Khawaja, Sophie Kurkdjian Nadia Yala Kisuki, Mathilde Laurent, Alice Leroy, Fabian Ludueña Romandini, Filippo Mignini, Jeremy Narby, Ernesto Neto, Hans Ulrich Obrist, Verena Paravel, Philippe Parreno, Éric Philippe, Christine Rebet, Massimo Scolari, Bas Smets, Michele Spanò, Andrea Trimarchi, Éloïse van der Heyden, Chiara Vecchiarelli, Marie Vic, Barbara Vinken, Caterina Zanfi, and Luis Zerbini.

In addition to people, this book has been made possible thanks to the cities where I have had the chance to stay for various periods.

In Paris, during the final months of the writing process, I had the opportunity to collaborate in the organization of an exhibition about trees at the Fondation Cartier: the writing of the book came out of the experience completely transformed. I thank Hervé Chandes for this invitation and for the important

Acknowledgements

discussions I had with him, Pierre-Édouard Couton, Isabelle Gaudefroid, Adeline Pelletier, and Marie Perennes. A striking remark by Bruce Albers on the eighth floor of the Fondation was decisive: I especially thank him.

In Karlsruhe, invited by Bruno Latour to give a lecture, an advance version of the manuscript and three years of work melted in a few drops of coffee. It was one of the most radical and happy rejuvenative experiences of recent years: the book would certainly have been different without this involuntary metamorphosis.

In Monaco, the dialogues opened up with Charlotte Casiraghi, Joseph Cohen, Roger-Pol Droit, Laura Hugo, Robert Maggiori, and Raphael Zaguri-Orly have punctuated my intellectual life for the past three years: I would like to thank them for their generosity and their ability to bring thought everywhere.

In Brussels, Laurent van Eynde allowed me to present a first version of the book, and to discuss it with Natacha Pfeiffer and Maud Hagelstein.

In London, I was able to discuss a few pages of the book with Filipa Ramos, Lucia Pietroiusti, Martin Savranski, and John Tresch.

Many of the ideas in this book were born during a short stay in Wellington made possible by Stéphane Re: meeting him and Alizée Alexandre was very important.

In Curitiba, I was able to present and discuss in detail a first draft with Alexandre Nodari, Juliana Fausta, Juliàn Nowodvorski, Marco Antonio Valentim, and Flavia Cera.

In Rio de Janeiro, Anna Dantes, Madeleine Deschamps, Marcus Wagner, and the entire Selvagem team welcomed the ideas in the book with great generosity and passion.

In New York, Phillip Usher, Meriam Korichi, and

Acknowledgements

Omar Berrada helped me move forward with the writing of the book.

By a strange coincidence, I must have written a good part of the text in Weimar, a few hundred metres from the place where Goethe composed his writings on the metamorphosis of plants. I am profoundly grateful to Bernard Siegert and Lorenz Engell for welcoming me to the IKKM, and to Leander Scholz, Elena Vogmann, and Katarzyna Włoszczyńska for the discussions.

I would like to thank my editor, Lidia Breda, who always knows how to alternate between pressure and attentiveness with an art that is hers alone. Renaud Paquette was the first reader of the manuscript: his remarks and suggestions made it possible to considerably improve the text by carrying out the very last metamorphosis of the manuscript. I am extremely grateful to him.

Maria Assunta Tosoni and Michele Coccia, my mother and father, taught me from childhood not to be afraid of any kind of metamorphosis. I thank them for their courage, their freedom, their madness.

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.

Metamorphoses

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

The Continuity of Life

– 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

Metamorphoses

disparate, heteroclitite 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

Metamorphoses

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.

We are always struck by the form of the living being at the adult age. In the body at this stage we recognize a perfection and maturity that we deny to others. Everything that goes before is seen as mere preparation for this silhouette we were destined to inhabit, and all that follows is decadence and decline. Yet nothing could be further from the truth. Our adult life form is no more perfect, no more 'us', no more human, no more complete than that of the bicellular embryo that comes directly after the fertilization of the egg, or that of the old man on the verge of death. All life, in order to develop, must pass through an irreducible multiplicity of forms, a whole population of bodies that it dons and discards with the same ease as it changes outfits from one season to the next. Every living being is legion. Each one stitches together bodies and 'selves' like a seamstress, like a body artist constantly modifying their