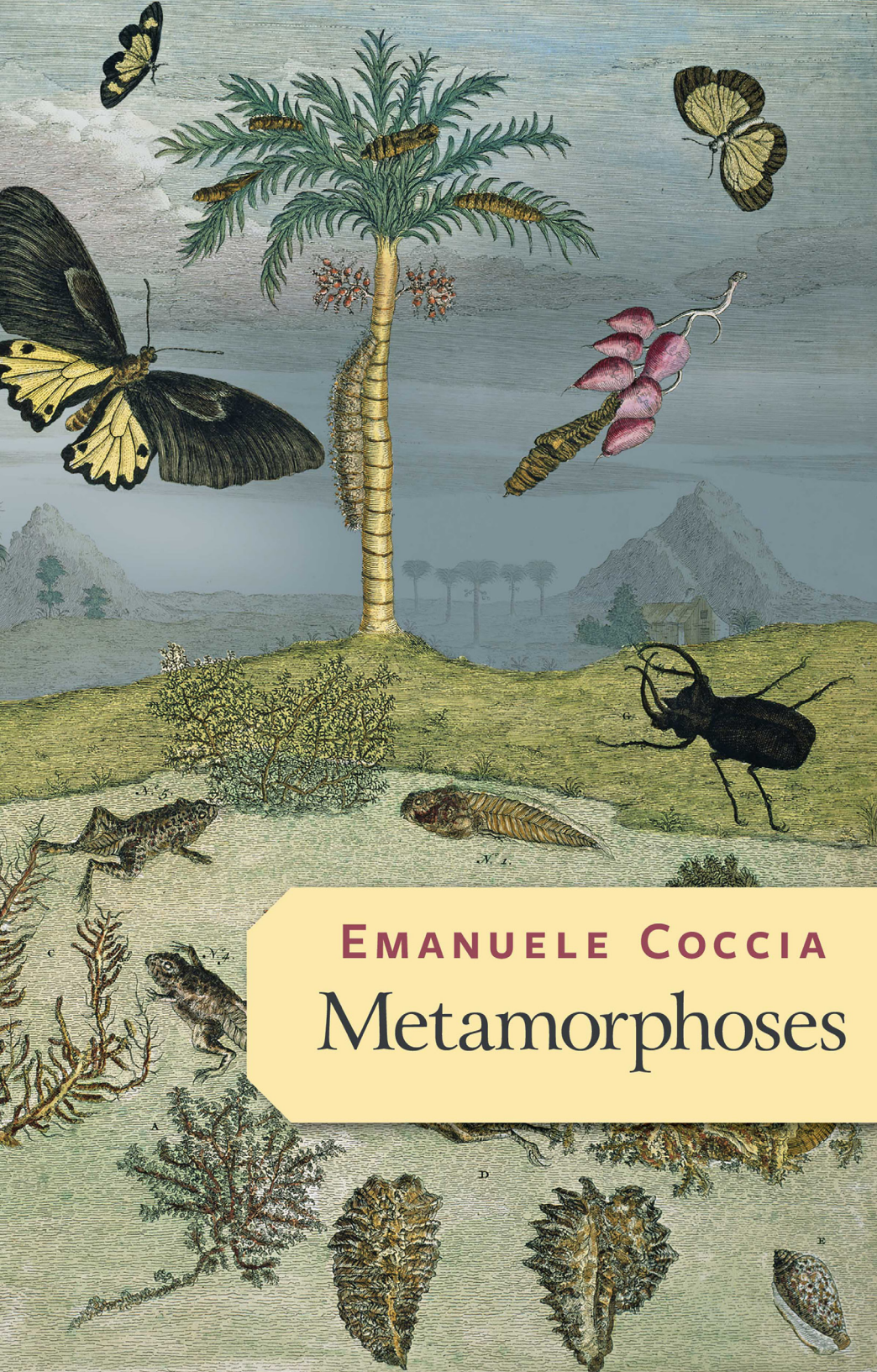


EMANUELE COCCIA

Metamorphoses

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Emanuele Coccia

Translated by Robin Mackay

polity

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Metamorphosis as Destiny

Once we are born, we no longer have any choice. Birth makes metamorphosis our destiny. We are in the world only because we are born. And vice versa, being born means that we are a part of this world: we formally and materially coincide with Gaia, with her body, her flesh, her life force. This coincidence involves something stranger and more complex than a simple topological inclusion of the Earth within our body. We are certainly a part of this world, but a part whose shape we had to alter. We are a handful of atoms and bodies all of which were already there, upon which we sought to, were able to, and indeed had to impose a new direction, a new destiny, a new form of life. We are a metamorphosis of this planet, every one of us; and it is only through metamorphosis that we have been able to come into contact with ourselves and all other bodies. We changed the piece of matter that sheltered us so as to enter into the world. We appropriated the bodies and the lives of our parents and modified their course: their DNA, their selves, their smile, their voice, and their accent were all hijacked, inebriated in our body.

Our life began with the act of metamorphosing the life

of the other. This is what being daughters or sons (i.e., being born) means above all: being obliged to become agents of the metamorphosis of others' bodies – our parents', the world's. And this does not end with pregnancy and birth: the metamorphosis is never-ending. The self is always a differential.

We continue to live only by extending this same gesture. The metamorphosis never stops. It is not just a birthmark, it is a destiny. It is not a past event now unavailable to us, it is every living body's mode of life. It does not describe a form of passivity, it is the infinite space of the activity of the living being in relation to itself and to the world.

Metamorphosis is adhesion to and coincidence with another body – the body of another that we adopt, and which gradually domesticates us. Undergoing metamorphosis means being able to say 'I' in the body of the other. Every metamorphic being – every being that is born – is composed and inhabited by this otherness, which can never be erased. Even when we construct something far removed from what we started with (i.e., what is called heredity), the other remains within us. Indeed, the concept of heredity perfectly expresses this aspect of things: what is most intimate and deepest in us, our genetic identity, comes from others, has been concocted by others. We can never say that we 'are' our form, but only that it is something we have, a habitus. We can never integrate it entirely, it always remains a mark of otherness within us. But this otherness has been passed on to us and is now subject to change. Heredity expresses the possibility of appropriating and modifying what once belonged to others.

From this point of view, metamorphosis is the condition that obliges us to nurture the other within ourselves, without ever being able either to be entirely ourselves or

to merge or fuse completely with the other. This is what it means to be born: to be impure, to not be ourselves, to have within us something that comes from elsewhere, something foreign that impels us over and over again to become strangers to ourselves. We carry within us our parents, our grandparents, their parents, prehuman apes, fish, bacteria, all the way down to the smallest atoms of carbon, hydrogen, oxygen, nitrogen, etc. We will never be homogeneous, transparent, or perfectly recognizable.

Metamorphosis is not simply the succession of two differences, it is the impossibility of replacing the other, the paradoxical coexistence of the most distant possibilities in one and the same life.

Transformations

I've often dreamt of it. Shutting myself up in a cocoon, it doesn't matter which: a room in my apartment, a country house in some faraway land, a submarine at the bottom of the ocean. Cutting off all relations with the world and giving myself over entirely to the transformative workings of matter. Feeling my soul carving itself out and knitting itself together anew, in a new form. Sensing a force that sculpts it, changing it through and through. Awakening to find nothing of what I thought belonged to me, what was me. Awakening and realizing that even the world around me has been irreversibly altered – in texture, in intensity, in luminosity.

I've often dreamt of it. Shrouding myself in silk until I'm cut off from the world for days on end. Building myself a soft, simple egg inside which I can allow my body to work, going through a change so radical that the world itself will no longer be the same. No longer being able to see in the same way. No longer being able to hear in the same way. No longer being able to live the same way. Becoming unrecognizable. Living in a world that has itself become unrecognizable.

I've often dreamt of it. Wielding the power of the

caterpillar. Seeing wings sprouting from my worm-body. Flying instead of crawling, borne by the air instead of the ground. Going from one existence to another without needing to die and be reborn, in doing so turning the world upside down without even touching it. The most dangerous form of magic. The life that is closest to death. Metamorphosis.

I have long wondered why it was only a dream. Why I never experience it in the waking state. First of all, there is a certain discomfort regarding change.

We have made fetishes of movement and transformation. And yet we do everything possible to make movement impossible. We aspire to move, to change our position in society, to move to a new home, to pass from one state to another. But all of these changes are illusory: we merely move the same life into a new setting – a pleasant trompe-l'oeil that diverts attention from the cobwebs that remain intact on the old furniture of our souls. Globalization promised a mobility unprecedented in the history of humanity, but it has proved to be a global-scale variation on the same old wild-goose chase. There is feverish movement everywhere, but everyone remains as they were. The rich stay rich, and on arrival the poor are still poor, with no more opportunities than they had when they set off. Westerners remain Westerners wherever they are, Africans continue to be excluded and disciplined in the West. If world society or geography is altered by these movements, it is only in so far as they are two sides of the same Rubik's Cube: the nature and number of colours remain the same, only their positions change.

We proclaim our all-consuming love for the transformation of the world, for its progress and improvement, but any real change terrifies us. We advocate the replacement of the objects that surround us, but we secretly

hope that this will not alter our identity: we hate to lose all that we are attached to. We have transformed the world to its core and yet this change paralyses us: we hold back from accompanying it with a change in ourselves.

In each case the transformation is only a simulated one. Each time, the movement gets bogged down. Something holds us back, something distances us from metamorphosis.

We usually think about transformation and change according to two models: conversion and revolution. But metamorphosis is neither of these.

In conversion it is only the subject that changes: their opinions, their attitudes, their way of being are transformed, but the world remains, and must remain, the same. Only a world left untouched by conversion can testify to the transformation of the convert. Conversion is often the outcome of an inner journey, full of trials and revelations, long periods of abstinence and asceticism. Such change presupposes absolute and total self-mastery.

Nothing could be further from metamorphosis than a conversion.

Conversion is seductive, in that it exhibits and testifies to the omnipotence of the subject. The convert will be obliged to tell their friends *ego non sum ego*: 'I'm not the same person you once knew.' They will have to repudiate all of their memories and repress their former life or amputate a part of themselves. They will have to take on a new face and a new identity, change their garb along with their morals, and definitively leave behind their past, reduced to ashes in the fire of their will to change. They will always be able to convince themselves that this change comes from them, and from them alone. The new artificial identity, entirely produced by

this faceless 'I' hidden within it, is nothing but a daily celebration of this fully controlled power we seek to identify with so as to protect ourselves from all that is happening in the world.

In metamorphosis, the power that passes through us and transforms us is not a conscious and personal act of will. It comes from elsewhere, it is older than the body it shapes, and it operates outside any decision. Above all, there is no movement of repression, no negation of a past or a former identity. On the contrary, a metamorphic being is a being that has renounced all ambition to recognize themselves in one face alone. The life that passes through the caterpillar and the butterfly cannot be reduced to one or the other. It is a life capable of inhabiting and harbouring several forms simultaneously, and which draws its power from this amphibious character.

The second model, revolution, is better known and more widespread. In this case it is the world that changes; the subject, who causes this change and stands surety for the passage from one world to another, cannot themselves be transformed because they are the only witness to the transformation underway. Revolution is the form of change dearest to technology and politics, both of which seem to think of their relationship to the world exclusively in terms of its radical transformation. Technology is the very paradigm of a change that cannot and must not affect the subject: a technical instrument must not itself be altered when it transforms the object it affects – on the contrary, the effectiveness of a technology is gauged entirely by its externality to the changes it causes. This is why all technics is a practice of the exaltation of the technician, the subject of the practice, rather than a real process of improvement of the object to which it is applied. The same could be

said of any politics that takes revolution as its horizon and principal objective. For in the dream of a world entirely constituted by a definite act of will there is very little love for matter or for the world, very little interest in change, but only a great deal of narcissism and an attempt to turn reality into a mirror of oneself. Any revolution, in this sense, is far closer to conversion than might be imagined: in both, the subject contemplates their own power.

Revolution is as far removed from metamorphosis as conversion is. For over two centuries now we have thought of technologies as extensions of anatomical organs, in a double sense. In the first sense, the technical object is an out-of-body reproduction of the shape of one of the organs of which our body is composed: the hammer is an imitation of the forearm and fist, glasses an imitation of the crystalline lens of the eye, the computer of the nervous system. In the second sense, all technical objects are supposed to reproduce the subject and their will outside their body, thus making the world into an extension of the self. This is the exact opposite of what happens in metamorphosis. A cocoon is not an instrument for the projection of the self outside the limits of the anatomical body. On the contrary, it involves the construction of a threshold where all borders and identities – of self and world – are temporarily suspended. It is the chiasmus that makes the world into a laboratory of the genesis of the self, and makes the self into the most precious matter in the world, that which continually transforms it.

A New Idea of Technics

A cocoon is a postnatal egg which, we might say, is *fabricated* by the individual. It defines a sphere within which being and doing fuse into a third dimension. Above all, this obvious fact defines a characteristic of the phenomenon of metamorphosis that we have so far neglected: its purely technical nature. In all metamorphosis, the living being has to construct its own form, which is therefore not at all natural or spontaneous. As a result of this, the very nature of technics is profoundly transformed.

We usually understand technics as a consequence of the individual's biological shortcomings. Ever since Plato and his myth of Prometheus and Epimetheus, we have got used to thinking of technics not only as a purely human trait, but also as something that corresponds to a lack of biological development. If humans need technics, it is because their bodies are characterized by a biological and natural deficit of power and form in relation to other living beings. The myth tells of how Epimetheus, charged with providing all living creatures with suitable faculties, ran out of powers, having distributed them to all the other animals, thus leaving

man 'completely unequipped', 'naked, unshod, unbedded, and unarmed'.[39] This is how Prometheus ended up stealing fire from Vulcan and Minerva, and endowing mankind with technics. Alone among animals, humans possess the art of 'articulating speech and words'; they alone 'invented houses, clothes, shoes, and blankets, and were nourished by food from the earth'.[40]

In contrast to the story that this myth stages, in metamorphosis, technics becomes what allows every body to free itself from its development and to make this original indeterminacy not a problem to be solved, but the form of the global relationship of every living being to itself. Technics serves to dissolve our particularity, to return us to an earlier stage of development, to undo both individual and evolutionary history: it is a fountain of youth, a procedure of rejuvenation. Every technical object is an egg that steals youth from the world and implants it into our lives. We build technical objects in order to produce a shared childhood. And what is rejuvenative in them is always life, not the form that carries it into our bodies. Rejuvenation is always impersonal.

The cocoon as technical postnatal egg thus overturns the modern idea of technics as *Organsprojektion* developed by Ernst Kapp in the first modern book on the nature of technology, published in 1877 in Germany. According to Kapp, any technical object, any instrument, is merely the projection of an organic structure outside the body, in a perfectly isomorphic relationship. The extension of the organ, its projection out of the anatomical body, makes it possible to correct its defects (profoundly strengthening a human body that is so badly equipped compared to that of the other animals) but above all to humanize the world. Thanks to the organ-projection, thanks to technics, the world becomes an extension of the human body. McLuhan's thesis on

media as extensions of man is only a further gloss on this theory of Kapp's. From this perspective, technics, firstly, is something purely human (animals and other living beings cannot have technology), and secondly, is something that transforms whatever it affects into something human. The technical world anthropizes everything it touches. This 'extraflexion' of the anatomical form allows man to shape the world in his own image or likeness. In a sense, the same idea is implicit in the concept of the Anthropocene, where once again the technical development of humanity 'humanizes' the cosmos.

In the idea of technics embodied by the cocoon, on the contrary, the manipulation of the world becomes something that allows us to cast off of our own nature, to change it from within rather than to project it outward. Technics – the cocoon – is the relation that every living being maintains with itself and which leads it to radically modify its body and its identity. Any relationship with oneself is therefore technical in nature, its aim being to modify one's own form. Every relationship with oneself produces an egg, a postnatal cocoon, which makes the world into a space for rebirth and self-shaping. We should learn to see in every technical object a cocoon that enables this transmutation: a computer, a telephone, a hammer, or a bottle are not just extensions of the human body. On the contrary, they are ways of manipulating the world that render possible a change of personal identity, ethologically if not anatomically. Even a book is a cocoon that makes it possible to reformulate one's own mind.

Technics – the art of building cocoons – makes of the self at once the subject, the object, and the means of the act of transformation. It is not a force that opposes life or extends it outward, it is nothing but the most intimate expression of life, its original dynamism.