Looking for centaurs

…the animal is not the ancestral past, the stone guest, the mute enigma, but the future of man: it is a place, and a threshold, from which man can only be stimulated in view of a more complex and open elaboration of his humanitas

—Roberto Esposito

The human, as a concept of being human, emerged in Ionia. Human practice and reflections similar to those taking place in Ionia emerged elsewhere. But the human was a fragile and fluid entity and there were different levels and classifications of humanness. Some humans were combined with gods, some were classified as subhuman slaves, some were simply not citizens of a specific city-state, still others were cast out into the marginal territories between states. Their bodies became marginal. Other bodies were cast by sculptors or witches into stone and sustained their material existence in marble. Others became objects in other ways. As Page duBois has said of the classical body — ‘This understanding of human being is somehow imperceptibly inscribed into enduring ways of thinking — about politics, about others, about our own bodies, about

material existence’.

The female Bacchae, the Maenads, confused the boundaries of gods and humans, madness and order, as they performed the rites of Dionysus. Other humans shaded into combination and assemblage with other creatures. Some became half animal in spirit and body, hybrids who fought with and loved humans and animals. Others wanted to dissolve themselves into the being they loved. The human body and its human nature was inherently one of instability.

Roberto Calasso, in his imaginative reworking of classical mythology, has argued that the proliferation of beings is designed to construct an audience for the activities of the gods. The development of species is the beginning at the first attempts at the social, the collectivity. For Calasso,

In the solitude of the primordial world, the affairs of the gods took place on an empty stage, with no watching eyes to mirror them. There was a rustling, but no clamor of voices. Then, from a certain point on (but at what point? And why?), the backdrop began to flicker, the air was invaded by a golden sprinkling of new beings, the shrill, high-pitched cry of scores of raised voices. Dactyls, Curetes, Corybants, Telchines, Silens, Cabiri, Satyrs, Maenads, Bacchants, Lenaean, Thyiads, Bassarides, Mimallones, Naiads, Nymphs, Titires: who were all these beings? To evoke one of their names is to evoke them all. They are the helpers, ministers, guardians, nurses, tutors, and spectators of the gods. The

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3 Charles Freeman, The Greek Achievement: The Foundation of the Western World (Harmondsworth: Allen Lane, 1999), 261.
metamorphic vortex is placated; once surrounded by this noisy and devoted crowd, the gods agree to settle down into their familiar forms. Sometimes that crowd will appear as a pack of murderers, sometimes as an assembly of craftsmen, sometimes as a dance troupe, sometimes as a herd of beasts. That worshipping crowd was the first community, the first group, the first entity in which one name was used for everybody. We don’t even know whether they are gods, *daímones*, or human beings. But what is it that unites them, what makes them a single group, even when different and distant from one another? They are the initiated, the ones who have seen.⁴

Judith Barringer has argued that materiality and visuality was central to Greek classical civilisation.⁵ The manifestation of the hybrid being of the Centaur, perhaps as a cultural import from the near east,⁶ was an explicit visualisation of a crisis in the nature of the human being. What Barringer calls the ‘ubiquitous Centauromachy’ is a display of multiple meanings and collisions.⁷ The most famous Centauromachy visualisations are the Parthenon and the temple of Zeus at Olympia but there are others, largely depicting the war between the Centaurs and their human enemies the Lapiths. The Centauromachy is situated mythologically in the rioting Centaur tribes of Thessaly. The Centaurs are depicted as accurately as the human beings

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in the relief sculptures. The ‘half-human/half-equine’⁸ are represented architecturally in the Parthenon and at Olympia, but Barringer argues for a complex and nuanced understanding of their function — ‘What is striking is the malleability of these myths and their meanings, especially the Centauromachy, and their depictions in a great variety of places and contexts’.⁹ The very fluidity of the myth replicates the fluidity of the human/equine bodies that are its source. The fact that the Centauromachy becomes one of the central defining features of Olympia and the Parthenon, far beyond its localised and provincial (even barbaric) Thessalian origin, denotes its significance for the classical world and the buildings they made. The archaic origins of the Centaur motifs were undefined, but the motifs were sustained all the way through into late antiquity and the medieval world. Their replication across generations may have been the consequence of seeing other Centaur motifs, in the flesh as it were (in stone in reality), but more likely they were the productions of a specific sense of textuality — people either read about them in a text, or heard about them through oral transmission. The surprising element here is their very specificity and detail. The ornamental and complex elaborations of the hybrid being were profoundly detailed as if they were taken from a real being.

The Lapiths and the Centaurs went to war not because they were strangers to one another but because of their affinities and relatedness. The Centauromachy displays a wedding that they were invited to together until the rioting on the part of the Centaurs began. The Lapiths themselves were certainly a recognised Achaean people for Homer having sent forty manned

ships to the siege of Troy. The remarkable necropolis of Hellenistic Sidon, now in the Istanbul Archaeology Museum, displays the submission of Lapith to the warring Centaurs, their kindred species.

Klaus Junker has noted that any understanding of classical myth has to engage with the fragmentary nature of images and texts and their relation in a ‘discourse of images’.\(^\text{10}\) Junker argues for a deeper understanding of the pictorial representations of the Chiron and Achilles myth and the Centauromachy. With recent understandings of photography we have come to think of a visual form as a ‘reproduced’ image of a specific reality or moment.\(^\text{11}\) The image of the Centaur is specific but not a concrete manifestation or direct representation of a real object, unless that real object was the prior sculptural or textual rendition of the entity. Both Junker and Barringer note that originally the Centaurs might have been mistaken versions of a ‘remembered reality’ of Persians on horseback with the Lapiths representing the Ionians.\(^\text{12}\) But the Centauromachy says more about the Ionians than Persians. For Junker,

To see mythological images as instruments for reflection, literally ‘mirroring’, is by contrast to understand them as stimuli for one’s own intellectual processes and not as confirmation of already existing attitudes. To stay with the example just used: do not the wild centaurs, it has

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\(^{12}\) Junker, *Interpreting the Images*, 188–89.
been asked, in the final analysis represent the impulsive and uncontrollable element that is also part of human nature? The portrayal of the Centauromachy cannot then be reduced to the simple equation, ‘We against you’ or ‘The standard and good against the non-standard and bad.’ Rather, it appears as an allegory of characteristics that all form part of the viewers themselves and present them with a mirror—a mirror, admittedly, that does not reflect the surface of things, but makes visible the deeper levels.13

The mirror of the Centauromachy, then, reflects not the concrete, specific reality of an origin but mirrors ourselves indirectly. But this is a mirror of what Steiner has called our ‘inward lives’, reflecting not the actuality and empirical surface of our bodies but the contested, hybrid elements struggling to submerge others or desire others within our psyche. *Hybris*, the improper transgression of boundaries, is the theme of the Centauromachy—an ideological device to delineate the borders of the human and the animal and associate the rioting Centaurs with disorder and lawlessness.14 Understanding the borderlands of chaos has come to be part not of aesthetic sculptural renditions that somehow materialise the workings of the inner world and the deepest stratified level, but of converse and explication through the analysis of ‘psyche’. As if we can find rioting Centaurs there.

But this is if we consider the Centauromachy as a metaphor carrying over meaning about us. But what if the fragmentary remnants of the Centaur are metonymic—with the fragments

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representing their own beings rather than the turmoil of our inwardness? How far could we track those fragments and signs strewn across Olympia in order to understand Centaurs? Are there ways of methodologically measuring and describing Centaurs as if they were real beasts? They are indeed half-human so at least half of our methods might be appropriate.

Carlo Ginzburg has argued for a historical practice that can reconstruct beings through the tiniest fragments they have left behind—earlobes, fingernails, shapes of fingers and toes. The reconstruction is like the semiotic operations of hunters. As Ginzburg notes,

Man has been a hunter for thousands of years. In the course of countless chases he learned to reconstruct the shapes and movements of his invisible prey from tracks on the ground, broken branches, excrement, tufts of hair, entangled feathers, stagnating odors. He learned to sniff out, record, interpret, and classify such infinitesimal traces as trails of spittle. He learned how to execute complex mental operations with lightning speed, in the depth of a forest or in a prairie with its hidden dangers.

We know that the fragments of Centaurs are a constantly recurring feature of cultural history—so how can we track and hunt them across history? There are no fossil records of Centaurs, no archaeological stratification that reveals their ‘once-existent’ status. Two visual pieces by Bill Willers, emeritus professor of biology at University of Wisconsin-Oshkosh, display this status

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of non-existence. Both the ‘Centaur of Tymfi’ and the ‘Excavation at Volos’ are faked archaeological specimens—hybrid bone-structures of horse and human being which display the liminal, transitional moment between species. Beauvais Lyons even notes that an exhibition guide told stories that the Volos Centaur was captured by a group of ‘Centaur hunting’ students in the 1920s.\footnote{Beauvais Lyons, ‘Subversive Public Art: The Centaur Excavations at Volos’, \textit{Number} 64 (2009): 8–9, 8.} It is the biological specificity and materiality of these structures that point to the fact that these classical repetitions are profoundly detailed and are presented as if they are ‘real’ beings. But it might be the case that we can understand the specificity of the Centaur as if it were metaphorically rather than literally an archaeological specimen. In that case we would have to consider the human mind and cultures as akin to strata in which we can excavate forms and beings.

In the same manner Erich Kissing’s Centaur cycle of paintings (1993–2014) have the same hyper-real aspect—detailed, realistic depictions of the Centaur and groups of Centaurs embedded in contexts of conversation or play. They are quite the opposite of an opaque, aesthetic expressionism. These are literally humans and horses combined into something new. Classical depictions of the Centaur revel in this detail. The visualisation of the non-existent is so specific precisely because it is possible to draw a being from nature because of its status as an assembled or composite entity. We could begin to call these reproductions corporealism—the resurrection and detailed reconstruction of precise corporeal entities (albeit ones which never existed in actuality). The detail and precision of corporealist phantasms is often because we understand their being by filling it out with the detail of us but also because they are
conjured up as if they were real to us time and time again. They look like real but impossible bodies.

The Old Centaur and the Young Centaur collectively known as the marble Furietti were found at the villa of Hadrian at Tivoli in the eighteenth century. They are copies of earlier Greek bronze statues from the second century BC and reside in the Capitoline museum with copies in other museums throughout Europe. The copy of the Old Centaur in the Louvre still has a teasing Cupid upon its back. The centaurs have constantly delighted and bemused scholars specifically around the emotions indicated by the Centaurs themselves.18

The other great statue in the Capitoline is the equestrian statue of Marcus Aurelius which once stood in the Piazza del Campidoglio. It shows the emperor astride his horse bestowing peace upon his people and displays a relationship between man and horse in combination, affinity and mutuality. Why is one a visual production of an existent, the other of a non-existent? Both Aurelius and Centaur have a material specificity, both are replicated from earlier versions, both are enshrined in textual as much as sculptural production. There are testaments to the existence of the Centaur just as there are to Marcus Aurelius but one exists only in imagination, the other in ‘actual history’. Further, what kinds of texts and images furnished the workplaces of those sculptors if the sculpture was not taken from life? The dead and the monstrous and the machine can be thought of as appendices to those things that ‘live’. They are a counter-archive of our history of real beings, displaying and distorting our needs, our existential horror about who we are,

our compulsions to desire monstrous things. But who are the Centaur remnants archiving against and why do they emerge time and time again? Does the danger of mixed and hybrid beings in the border countries of chaos threaten the very stability of civilisations and states and peoples? Is Faerie and the Never land the recourse of rebels against civilisation and for chaos?

At one and the same time the mixed being is about suppression and production. Its remnants have been scattered in thought and texts across the multiple strata of human culture. But they emerge from the wreckage all of the time. This imaginary as a social-historical production has produced material entities which themselves refer to a non-existent ontology of mixed beings. Cornelius Castoriadis locates the Centaur in thought and in the essentially productive rather than destructive capacity of the human imaginary:

‘Centaur’ is a word that refers to an imaginary being distinct from this word, a being that can be ‘defined’ by words (by this trait it resembles a pseudo-concept) or represented by images (by this trait it resembles a pseudo-object of perception). But even this easy and superficial example (the imaginary Centaur is only a recombination of pieces taken from real beings) is not exhausted by these considerations, because, for the culture that experienced the mythological reality of the Centaurs, their being was something other than the verbal description or the sculpted representation that could

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be given of them. But how are we to get a hold of this final a-reality? In a certain sense, like the ‘thing-in-itself’, it offers itself only on the basis of its consequences, its results, its derivatives. How can we grasp God, as an imaginary signification, except on the basis of the shadows (Abschattungen) projected onto the effective social action of a people— but, at the same time, how could we overlook that, just like the thing perceived, he is the condition for the possibility of an inexhaustible series of such shadows, but, unlike the thing perceived, he is never given ‘in person’?²⁰

The ‘Abschattungen’ of social action describe the profound processes by which the derivative and the repetition are inscribed in the social practice of the human world, a ‘life-world’ which imagines entities that have and had no life at all except in the hybrid, composite imagination of those humans looking for some thing at the heart of the labyrinth, itself the imaginary derivative of other multiple mazes.²¹ The semantic human/animal frames of the Centaur change, they are unstable and mean different things in differing histories and locations.

The history of the visual form of the Centaur has then to understand the production of visual hybridity and its relation to the human, its visual precision and specificity, and its mode of repeated generation and function. A related question lies

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in the status of the Centaur as a humanly produced *Daedalian* artefact — those things made not by gods but by human beings themselves. In this sense Daedalus is the maker and creator of Labyrinths and automata. He does not himself produce the Daedalic sculptures of subsequent generations but he does, in mythology, produce his own structures, objects, and beings. Often this is hybrid, like the machinery he constructs for himself and Icarus, based on the observation of the flight of birds or the automata — constructions of both flesh and machine with which he populated his workshops.

The human social-historical production of the hybrid being is itself echoed by the constant attempt on behalf of humans to construct themselves repeatedly as hybrids — beginning with Daedalus and Icarus and their humanly engineered wings — and continued in the search for machine extensions and prosthetics which would exponentially develop their capacity for power and combination in new assemblages. For Tim Ingold, beings (as in existents) and the ‘organism’ (animal or human) should be understood not as a bounded entity surrounded by an environment but as an unbounded entanglement. For Ingold, the production of the imaginary entity is exactly that which is produced by lines where each being ‘is’ its story:

> Often the name of the creature is itself a condensed story, so that in its very utterance, the story is carried on. But it is carried on, too, in the calls or vocalizations of the creatures themselves — if they have a voice — as well as in their manifest, visible presence and activity. As a node or knot in a skein of depictions, stories, calls, sightings, and observations, none more ‘real’ than any other, every creature is not so much a living thing as
the instantiation of a certain way of being alive, each of which, to the medieval mind, would open up a pathway to the experience of God.\textsuperscript{22}

Imaginary beings, for Ingold, ‘are sequestered in a zone of apparitions and illusions that is rigorously partitioned from the domain of real life’.\textsuperscript{23} This was a zone prior to the visual taxonomies and classifications of the Enlightenment and one produced by the very concept of the story — ‘To track an animal in the book of nature was like following a line of text. But just as the introduction of word-spacing broke the line into segments, so also — in the book of nature — creatures began to appear as discrete, bounded entities rather than as ever-extending lines of becoming’.\textsuperscript{24} The replacement of the ‘becoming of lines’ by the fixed, bounded entity finally banishes the fictive beings from our world, as the ‘lived reality’ of them disappears. It also further creates a sense of the human as an entity whose self-compositions and self-composites become lived in engineering and not just imagination — the dreams of actual hybrid, composite structures move on from ‘a-reality’ and mythology.

Further, this very displacement of the lived mythological reality of the fictive being does not mean its diminishment. Its multiple productions continue — within the human being itself. As Marx has noted, the fictions, phantasms, and ghosts of the dead ‘seize the living’ — a process of ‘world-historical necromancy’ in which old, fictive forms inhabit human beings.\textsuperscript{25}

\textsuperscript{23} Ingold, ‘Dreaming’, 736.
\textsuperscript{24} Ingold, ‘Dreaming’, 743.
semantic productions of these beings in different circumstances of course make questionable the sense of origin and what these motifs did ‘actually’ mean. This is not our question, but it is still one which exercises detectives and scholars who try and excavate, both culturally and physically (as in Schliemann’s Troy), the Never lands of the classical past.

Recently, Carlo Ginzburg has looked for a rational cause for the multiple cultural production of the Centaur. Noting that the motif may be of Scythian origin denoting humans on horseback, it also refers to equine and wolf-like hybrids as part of a system of periodic animal/human metamorphosis.\textsuperscript{26} Robert Graves has argued for an origin of the Centaur in a sacred form of the hobby-horse dance—the earliest Greek representation found on a Mycenaean gem from the Heraeum at Argos depicting two men joined at the waist to horse’s bodies and dancing. At the same time he also notes the vestiges of the Centaur as representative of a real or mythological people such as the Scythians or the pre-Hellenic Albanian population, as well as Persians in other accounts.\textsuperscript{27}

Cultural theorists such as René Girard have tried to understand the specificity of the horse and the man which has been entwined together in the ‘monstrous metamorphosis’ of the Centaur. This is important for understanding the historical presence and absence of the Centaur. Since it is an ‘imaginary’ beast in the sense that it is imagined and conjured up (from the remnants of a real being) rather than merely fictional (having never existed), there is no limit to its metamorphosis or its


resurrection. Within the ‘monstrous whole’ of the Centaur as a category, there is an infinity of individual monsters without stability as shapes. The icon’s very dissolution and dispersal are the premise upon which the infinitude of the icon across time and space is founded. The birth of monsters is made possible by its dissolving, hybrid status. Phenomenologically, it has neither existence as an entity already pre-existing in the soul, nor is it a reflection in the mind of a reality external to the mind. \(^{28}\) It is this ambivalent status of an existing, non-existing phenomena that George Steiner writes of when he notes that ‘A Centaur is a hyphen between manifest realities’. \(^{29}\) The manifest realities of human and horse become questioned in their combination and in the dissolution of the borders between them.

As Castoriadis notes on the precision of the visual representation — ‘There is an “essence” of the Centaur: two definite sets of possibilities and of impossibilities. This “essence” is “representable”: there is nothing imprecise about the “generic” physical appearance of the Centaur.’ \(^{30}\) Even in its moment of instability and dissolution the template of the Centaur still has some fixity — there is a limit to the manipulation of its component parts. The artefact of the Centaur is a sensual object that we come upon and recompose sensually, but can that observation delineate the ‘essence’ of the Centaur or just its necessary and defining qualities and properties that have to be present for it to be depicted?


\(^{29}\) George Steiner, Real Presences (London: Faber, 1989), 202.

The very materiality of the Centaur hints at those sculptural artefacts signifying a set of invisible properties for the cultures who live them, and in describing these properties we might be able to describe why these recursive moments are so compelling for human beings. For Castoriadis ‘A visible object may possess invisible properties; a stone or an animal may be a god; a child may be the reincarnation of an ancestor or this very ancestor in person. It may be that these attributes, properties, relations, forms of being are lived, spoken, thought and enacted in sincerity, duplicity or (in our eyes) utter confusion’. The search for the social relations invested in aesthetic form is always problematic. But the production and re-production of these visual formations and objects as part of the creation of the social-historical mean that they are profoundly social objects, and ones which problematize the very notion of a human science as the production of human beings. The idea that an object has within its entity invisible properties has two implications — whether those properties emerge from the observed being of an object (and whether this is possible) or whether those properties are imposed upon or associated with the object from without. If the stone has the invisible property of divinity — is this enshrined in the very being of the object or imposed from without? Or the child as carrier of another soul? The transmigratory and unstable character of souls in the classical world, invested in stone and wood and in other beings, might seem archaic but those very processes of investment and association still continue in our cultures and our imaginaries.

One of the ways of understanding the human entity is to think about its invisible properties and the kinds of mirrors

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that might reflect and refract the ‘inwardness’ of that being. The geological analogy of human beings with strata illustrates that sense of the invisible properties of the human in the same way as mechanistic modes of thinking associated living beings and brains with machines in the classical world, or humans as the products of elements, weather, vapours, and so on.

Suzi Adams argues that when Castoriadis sees the human being he sees it as a stratified entity — ‘one that creates itself in irregular, heterogeneous strata’. In this vein, the lines of continuity and discontinuity between anthropic and natural regions of being were redrawn, and, as part of that, a phenomenology of life emerges via his reactivation of ancient Greek images of the world, and his reconsideration of time and creation as they pertained to the living being and the physical world.\(^\text{32}\) Humans, like nature, are self-altered forms and strata.\(^\text{33}\) As forms of strata, Adams argues that Castoriadis elaborates upon ‘the lines of continuity between human and non-human Worlds’.\(^\text{34}\) We see the lines of continuity between the human and the non-human, at the same time as we see the breaks between them. Who could separate the equine and the human in the being of the Centaur — where is the seam between them? How do we separate the human as a product and self-product of nature and her social being?\(^\text{35}\) Certainly in the account of the Lapith war in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* the Centaur is noted as protecting both his human- and his horse-being in the fight. But the

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\(^{33}\) Adams, ‘*Post-Phenomonology*’, 393.

\(^{34}\) Adams, ‘*Post-Phenomonology*’, 399.

exact seams or differences between the human and equine elements were a source of some commentary in the medieval proliferation of Centaur accounts and visualisations, specifically around the incompatibility of its variant units. The meeting points of species undermine the idea of human difference, but also display the lines of contestation between human and non-human.\textsuperscript{36}

To continue the analogy of the strata; if we see the human as stratified where do we locate the Centaur within those strata? Further, to use an archaeological analogy as we talk about sedimentation and burial—how can we archaeologically excavate the Centaur out of those strata knowing that we will find only invented, fabricated, fictional phenomena? Mike Pearson and Michael Shanks have examined the idea of unearthing the strata in their work on theatre, the classical, and archaeology:

An artefact, as is accepted, is a multitude of data points, an infinity of possible attributes and measurements. Which ones are made and held to constitute its identity depends conventionally upon method and the questions being asked by the archaeologist. But we also hold that the artefact is itself a multiplicity. Its identity is multiple. It is not just one thing. The artefact does not only possess a multitude of data attributes, but is also itself multiplicity. We come to an object in relationships with

it, through using, perceiving it, referring to it, talking of it, feeling it as something.\textsuperscript{37}

The material artefact of the archaeological excavation is a multiplicity of data points. It is sensual even when the questions we ask of it do not mark the being of the object in itself or even elaborate what it is. It is like the questions asked by others of Odysseus—whatever they ask, we do not understand Odysseus as a multiplicity. Neither do we exhaust the possibility of the excavated object. The Centaur, locked in the mental strata (and their aesthetic productions) of the human being is itself a multiplicity of invisible and visible properties—neither dependent on what we ask of it nor independent of human creation.

But what do humans as strata mean for self-creation of human beings themselves? On the one hand we have the stratified human consciousness of individual human beings, on the other the stratified consciousness of peoples and civilisations, even of the whole of humanity. Each stratum laid upon the one below, the archaic vestiges of earlier versions of humanity perhaps accessible through excavation, method, surveying, and the questions we ask of it. But human beings are themselves strewn across stratified systems of geological time, immersed in rock and soil. They are also strewn across the strata of our imaginary histories and elaborations, each stratum providing the matrices, resources, and templates for further elaborations and repetitions of what has gone before. No wonder that as people excavated their history and who they were (and wanted to be), they found the collision and combination in the strata

\textsuperscript{37} Mike Pearson and Michael Shanks, \textit{Theatre/Archaeology} (London: Routledge, 2001), 99.
of different human types. Perhaps human beings melded with stone or animals, the seams between them unapparent or undetectable. Perhaps they were even born of stone or dust as in the creation myths of some peoples or like the folklore of swallows, locked in rock, and only emerging in spring. But there are also the places where human beings walked, the places they built.

The question of the animal as the future of the human, which Esposito notes, opens up a more generous and expansive concept of the human. This might be about the dissolution of boundaries or the displacement or de-centring of the human. But it might also be about extending human possibilities in a more radicalised humanism which combines, contests, conglomerates rather than dissolves the human, like a metamorphosis that submerges the human being into another entity or topples it from the lofty height of the classification of nature and its strata.