Centaurs, Rioting in Thessaly: Memory and the Classical World

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Centaurs, human and non-human

On the third of January 1889 the erstwhile classical philologist and philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche ran to a horse on the Piazza Carlo Alberto in Turin that was being whipped. Protecting and embracing the horse this episode signalled what would be the final break in his sanity. Beginning to describe himself as Dionysus, as a god walking amongst humans in a world in which he had already scented the divine decomposition, Nietzsche began his final descent into the realm of inwardness, ultimately surrendering any relation to the world beyond him.¹ The vision of this curious Turin Horse comprised of man and beast becoming Dionysus also hints at those ferocious followers of that god: the Maenads. Likened by Euripides to fillies or wild horses, the Maenad women tear humans apart like the monstrous horses of the classical world. One of the defining questions that Roberto Calasso has asked is about this sense of inwardness — ‘What went on inside the Maenad?’²

Yet if humans can become gods in the metamorphosis between the human and equine, or in the heart of the labyrinth or in

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the machines that they extend themselves with, it also means that the earth that was built by the gods for their ‘raids, whims, intrigues, experiments’\(^3\) is now surveyable by humans as the place of their own raids, whims, intrigues, experiments. If the humans can make gods, make themselves gods, even depose gods, the earth itself becomes their labyrinth, made by a man as Castoriadis is intent upon saying. This entails both the destruction and the perpetuation of the Olympian cosmology, but in the emergence and the proliferation of species and their merging, their *hubris*, we also see the emergence of the human social world, collectivities, and the capacity to survey it, bit by bit. The persistence of the classical detritus, its remnants and fragments, is still central to our self-understanding. That world is still with us, in our many forms of inwardness, but also in our self-institution of the world we now make around us.

Understanding the social weight of ghosts and phantasms, of Centaurs, Labyrinths, and Automata entails a description of their quantities, qualities, and properties as they re-emerge in new locations. Understanding the entity means demarcating between different properties and the caesura between them, a caesura that is both a border and a seam. The caesura is then at once a break or an interruption between elements but also a junction and a suture. There may be fractures, fissures, abysses between those elements but this is not a closure, or an irredeemable gap. The seam is both a wall and a conjuncture. Further, in a different sense the seam is also a line within strata, a layer which can be excavated or mined not just to understand the existence or non-existence of entities within those strata but also to examine the strata interior to being.

\(^3\) Calasso, *Marriage*, 89.
For Giorgio Agamben the comprehensibility of the human is only made possible by understanding the borders and seams between the human and non-human, the properties they share and those they do not. This leads not to division and difference, but to the ultimate reconciliation between the animal and the human. The question then lies in the metamorphosis of its individual parts, their separation and their proximity, into the ultimate and definitive annihilation of the human element or the destruction of the animal element. Even before we reach that moment we still have, however, problems of defining the border, the caesura, between its components. For Agamben, in his reflections on Kojève reading Hegel,

man is not a biologically defined species, nor is he a substance given once and for all; he is, rather, a field of dialectical tensions always already cut by internal caesurae that every time separate—at least virtually—‘anthropophorous’ animality and the humanity which takes bodily form in it. Man exists historically only in this tension; he can be human only to the degree that he transcends and transforms the anthropophorous animal which supports him, and only because, through the action of negation, he is capable of mastering and, eventually, destroying his own animality.

7 Agamben, *Open*, 12.
The coalescence of forces, entangled conglomerations of beings, make the question of the interior and inwardness as important as the external, visual properties of the entity. The human has mobile and metamorphosing borders within. Humans are the locations for these metamorphoses and the result of what Agamben calls the ‘ceaseless divisions and caesurae?’ The idea of the caesura holds within biological entities but equally also for those beings which are hybrids of biology and mechanics — what Bernard Stiegler calls ‘technical beings’ as a ‘complex of heterogenous forces’. These entities are complexes of machine and organism but also of outwardness and inwardness, what Stiegler calls the exterior milieu of nature and the interior milieu of social memory, collective historical memory and culture. The relations between the human and their external worlds resulted in the aspirational technical capacity of humans to augment themselves in a ‘movement of planetary extension’. But Stiegler also thinks deeply about the origins of these human beings in classical Greece and the accidental and necessary predicates of what being human means as a species.

If the human, for Steigler is invented, who or what invents that human? For Stiegler — ‘We are considering a passage: the passage to what is called the human. Its “birth,” if there is one. Why should we question the “birth” of the human?

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8 Agamben, Open, 15.
9 Agamben, Open, 16.
11 Stiegler, Technics, 57.
12 Stiegler, Technics, 90.
14 Stiegler, Technics, 134.
First of all because we have unceasingly, since Hegel, questioned its end.\textsuperscript{15}

The reflexive self-making and alteration of humans is the very designation and definition of the human — it only becomes human through ‘technics’ and the mastery of nature at the same time as technics becomes the master of human beings as themselves part of nature.\textsuperscript{16} The dialectic between the physical and the biological creates the grounds for the emergence of the technical object — the organized and distributed ‘inorganic being’ which is itself not simply material or animal but the product of both.\textsuperscript{17} As Stiegler says,

\begin{quote}

The problem arising here is that the evolution of this essentially technical being that the human is exceeds the biological, although this dimension is an essential part of the technical phenomenon itself, something like its enigma. The evolution of the “prosthesis,” not itself living, by which the human is nonetheless defined as a living being, constitutes the reality of the human’s evolution, as if, with it, the history of life were to continue by means other than life: this is the paradox of a living being characterized in its forms of life by the nonliving — or by the traces that its life leaves in the nonliving.\textsuperscript{18}
\end{quote}

The question of the origins of the human as Stiegler notes is therefore a question of its end. This means not just the mechanical and biological seams and borders within entities, but the

\textsuperscript{15} Stiegler, \textit{Technics}, 135.
\textsuperscript{17} Stiegler, \textit{Technics}, 26.
\textsuperscript{18} Stiegler, \textit{Technics}, 50.
properties of the living and the non-living in beings, the mesh of and the permeability between the animal and the human. As we build our biological (if mythical) beings like Centaurs, as we engineer our technical objects like labyrinths, as we create purely non-sentient machines like automata, as we augment and combine biology and machine, we are at both the birth and the extinction of humanity. If the making animal of the classical world has to come to an end, it will engineer its extinction itself in its very act of humanness. The properties of the animal or of the machine that are present within those human complexes of interiority and exteriority may subsume its human components, albeit in different ways.

The Centaurs, even if they emerged from the Thessalian darkness, did not emerge without ancestries, lineages, continuities, and monstrous couplings. If they are invented just as much as the human, then we have to ask who or what made them and who or what made the Maenads, the gods, the Furies. But in describing that birth we also describe their own ends and endings and map their own lineages and continuities and couplings into our own worlds; enduring, creating, metamorphosing.
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