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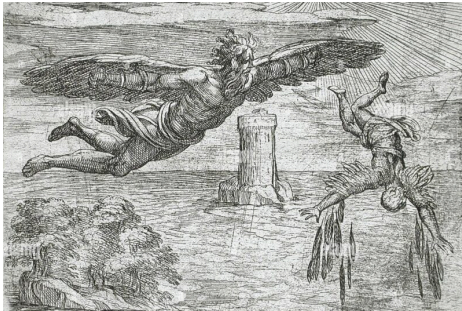


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Ovid's Metamorphoses and the End of the Anthropocene¹

By Pietro Li Causi (University of Siena)

The End of the Anthropocene?

The term 'Anthropocene' was coined by Paul Crutzen, Nobel Prize laureate for his contributions to atmospheric chemistry, during an IGBP (International Geosphere-Biosphere Programme) conference in 2000. On that occasion, Crutzen surprised the attendees with a speech later published in *Nature* in 2002. In his thesis, he posited that the Holocene epoch had concluded and given way to a new geological era inaugurated by the advent of the Industrial Revolution. In his opinion, this new era was characterized by a significant acceleration in the Earth's transformations, largely due to human activities after the end of the last ice age².

Initially considered controversial, the Anthropocene hypothesis has gradually gained ground within the Earth science scholarly community, evolving into an almost universally accepted concept. It has influenced contemporary political and philosophical debates on climate change, ecological crises, the sixth mass extinction and broader environmental concerns³. The debate on the Anthropocene has also guided the contemporary imagination, fuelling catastrophic narratives and encouraging the

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Anthropocene⁴.
End of the story?

In the Wake of a Fading Anthropocene

As Matteo Meschiari pointed out in a recent contribution on *Doppiozero*, the Anthropocene has been a product of the colonial imagination, birthed by white Western males for the use of other white Western males who had begun to mourn – rather badly, moreover – the loss of the Earth.⁵ This debate generated a hybrid monster, somewhere between dystopian nightmare and anthropocentric delusion of omnipotence. Anthropologists like Meschiari on the other hand have long embarked on the path of de-colonisation and ‘indigenisation’ of the Anthropocene. In Meschiari’s words, «indigenising the Anthropocene means reflecting on and learning to think in alternative terms, beginning with indigenous interpretations of climate change, environmental collapse, and the dramatic losses already occurring in the peripheral zones of the planet. In the first instance, we notice that a Native of Alaska, the Amazon, or Australia does not experience the Anthropocene as a new, vertical, and completely unprecedented event; the Anthropocene is just the latest declination of their colonial past and present. In other words, after two hundred years of local dystopia, Natives do not experience the dire prophecies of the Anthropocene with our same paralysing fear. In the second instance, this same resistance and survival to disaster makes Natives both more adaptable to, and already engaged in, seeking pragmatic solutions. In short, less talk and zero melancholy» (my translation).

However, the fact that a commission of geologists

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the most... than good peace of mind of the climate change deniers – still pervades us.

Ovid and the Fragility of Human Beings

But what is the connection between Ovid and the still warm corpse of the Anthropocene? There seems to be hardly any, actually. Indeed, Ovid's perspective in the *Metamorphoses* appears markedly distinct and diametrically opposed to the narratives predominant in Anthropocene discourse.

In the world of the *Metamorphoses*, humans do not reign supreme over the Earth; rather, they are depicted as fragile and susceptible beings, subject to the caprices of gods who, akin to the emperors Augustus and Tiberius – whose authority Ovid had experienced firsthand – whimsically and arbitrarily exert their control over the cosmos. In this context, in the introductory essay to the edition edited by Alessandro Barchiesi for the Fondazione Lorenzo Valla, Charles Segal (2005, 17) reflects that «*Metamorphoses* is a poem about bodies: bodies that, in an uncertain world, are imperilled by sudden assaults of physical or carnal violence, and bodies whose transformations, whether just or unjust, unveil something about the gods or the human character beneath the physical façade; and it is from desires stemming from the attraction between bodies that all manner of destruction arises, from sexual violence to homicide» (my translation).

In Ovid's work, the human is depicted as a figure on the edge, lacking a fixed form and position in the universe. It is portrayed as closely connected to the numerous other living (and non living) forms into which it can transform. In this connection, Italo Calvino (1991, 36 ff.) pointed out that the entire poem is permeated by the idea of a universal

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...gaper e perennare di seccim. met. 11.33-35,,
or into a flower (as in the tales of Hyacinth and
Narcissus: respectively *Met.* 10.162-219 and 3.339-
510); and a woman can change into a spider (as in
the punishment
inflicted on Arachne: *Met.* 6.1-145).

Chaos, the Cosmos and the *fabricator mundi*.

In Ovid's perspective, chaos precedes the origin of all creation. Indeed, the very first metamorphosis in the annals of the universe involves chaos transmuting into 'cosmos' through the agency of an unspecified demiurge, the *fabricator mundi*. The actions of this enigmatic figure are described as follows: «Scarce had he thus parted off all things within their determined bounds, when the stars, which had long been lying hid crushed down beneath the darkness, began to gleam throughout the sky. And, that no region might be without its own forms of animate life, the stars and divine forms occupied the floor of heaven, the sea fell to the shining fishes for their home, earth received the beasts, and the mobile air the birds» (*Met.* 1.69-75; Engl. tr. by MILLER 1916).

The Ovidian demiurge operates either akin to a *fabricator*, laying brick upon brick himself, or to an architect who furnishes the world and its spaces by positioning objects within it, or to a land surveyor who delimits and divides the universe through something similar to a *centuriatio*. This process mirrors the Roman method of subdividing agricultural land using orthogonal grids of roads, canals, and plots assigned to settlers. The imposition of boundaries by the demiurge, resulting in separation and distinction, forms the foundation for the emergence of species. Once elements are partitioned and differentiated from one another,

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Chaos remains the magma-like and enduring legacy of the 'universal contiguity' governing the world. Despite their apparent stability, forms are mutable beneath the surface. Nature itself remains fundamentally unified, with its elements dangerously prone to metamorphosis: earth blends with air, water, and fire, each element capable of transforming into the other. In essence, everything is in a state of flux.

An Anti-Progressionist Vision: Humans as 'Garments' of the Cosmos

An important event in Ovid's narrative of the cosmos is the emergence of the human species. Ovid draws upon several tropes of ancient anthropocentrism: it is suggested that humans were fashioned to assert their dominance over the world; that they were created in the likeness of the gods; and that unlike all other animals who are forced to direct their gaze towards the ground due to their quadrupedal stance, humans are unique because they can cast their eyes towards heaven and the stars (*Met.* 1.78 ff.).

However, each of these widely held beliefs is contradicted by the unfolding stories. The notion of a life form destined to rule over the world is repeatedly challenged and replaced through more or less chaotic and arbitrary tales about the origin of humans. Initially, the human species is said to have been created by Prometheus (*Met.* 1.76 ff.), only to perish and be reborn following a global deluge with Deucalion and Pyrrha (*Met.* 1.244 ff.). Humans are also said to emerge from the stones cast behind by the two characters, thus originating from what was considered the lowest element in the natural hierarchy.⁶

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...the history of the earth is characterised by the emergence of increasingly complex and specialised structures, purportedly the result of a divine design.⁷

However, while divine intervention certainly plays an important role in the Ovidian worldview, it does not seem to follow any discernible intelligent design. If the gods intervene in worldly affairs, in fact, this is often because they are driven by their capricious or all-too-human emotions, such as anger, lust, or jealousy.

Moreover, little suggests that Ovid views humans as the pinnacle of successive mutations in nature. In fact, their origins seem to unfold haphazardly, in a trial-and-error dynamic more than in a carefully orchestrated progression. As to humans looking up to heaven, we must recall and contrast this aspiration with the scene where Juno violently grabs Callisto by the hair and throws her to the ground before transforming her into a bear (*Met.* 2.476-481). Similarly, the transformation of Lycaon into a wolf (*Met.* 1.232-239) is strikingly in conflict with the idea of human supremacy over nature.

One of the metaphors used to account for the emergence of the human species is particularly intriguing: «So, then, the earth, which had but lately been a rough and formless thing [in Latin, *sine imagine*], was changed and clothed itself [*induit*] with forms of men before unknown» (1.87 f.; Engl.tr. by MILLER 1916).

Here, the use of the verb *induo* ('to wear') invites us to imagine human forms as garments that embellish the Earth. This metaphor undoubtedly evokes a major theme in ancient civilisation (and beyond): the idea that the invention of clothing marks the transition from a primal, semi-feral human condition akin to beasts towards a more elevated state. In this

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and bring order to the cosmos by creating the earth's 'cosmetics' and adornment. The 'human clothes of the Earth', while also embodying various anthropocentric clichés, provide merely a façade that can revert or change. Below the external surface, the fundamental substance of the universe continues to be shapeless and disguise its formless nature – without fixed and precise boundaries it is concealed by the flimsy veil of the bodies. This idea is restated in Pythagoras' enigmatic discourse to Numa in Book 15 (*Met.* 15.60- 507): by asserting the perpetual flux of everything, he suggests that while mythical narratives have led us to perceive the metamorphoses of mythical narratives as definitive and irreversible, they may be much less so. The underpinning idea may be that the state of the world is not permanent and that what lies behind humanity is only the raw nakedness of matter and, ultimately, the indistinctness of Chaos. In essence, Ovid's world never truly transitions from Chaos to Cosmos.

Ovid as Antidote Against the Risks of the Anthropogenic Narratives

With the advent of Darwin and Copernicus, a new narrative emerged: humanity was no longer at the centre of a universe crafted providentially and purposefully by a benevolent God. Instead, humans were perceived as evolving creatures among many others, inhabiting a planet similar to countless

others orbiting one of the numerous stars scattered throughout the cosmos. Over the past 24 years, the Anthropocene hypothesis has significantly altered the narrative, reinstating humanity – for better or for worse – as the primary influencer of Earth: humanity was viewed as capable of disrupting the Earth's climate by profoundly impacting on nitrogen and

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compelled us to accept our responsibilities and make a serious effort to contain the catastrophic consequences of our actions on the planet.

Conversely, this renewed sense of prominence has fostered a new form of anthropocentric and technocratic arrogance that could lead humans to succumb to the temptation of believing they possess the ability to manipulate everything according to their own desires and plans.

A profound reading of Ovid's Metamorphoses could serve as an antidote to avoid a similar drift: the poet from Sulmona dared to envision humanity as an unstable realm of intersections, while also portraying Earth itself as a mosaic of transformed consciousnesses and a network of interconnected entities. In essence, preceding the post-humanist thinkers, Ovid had already crafted a fictional universe wherein ecological equilibriums were inherently disrupted and subject to continuous – and often violent – flux. Within this universe, humans are not isolated from other species; while species serve as mechanisms for separation and distinction humans remain precarious, interstitial entities akin to garments, fur, or hair that are donned, discarded, or turned inside out. Ultimately, humans are symbionts of the species they will eventually become, and non-human species, in turn, encapsulate human past and present consciousnesses.

This implies that the transition from one nature to another is never absolute. Sometimes, we remain in a state of transition, becoming an ethological 'hybrid' (as the metamorphosed characters, who change bodies while retaining their essence); at other times, the nature of all beings turns out to be contiguous and co-existent.

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the capricious, lustful, temperamental, and vindictive whims of the gods.

Within this framework, the human condition mirrors the universal fragility experienced by everything that falls prey to the whims of the gods: if everything is interconnected, it means that we are affected not only as human beings but also as living beings entwined within the biosphere, rather than standing outside it. The anguish of Actaeon, transformed into a stag and torn apart by his own hounds (*Met.* 3.138-259), which inevitably prompts us to empathise with hunted animals is more compelling than Pythagoras' ambiguous advocacy for vegetarianism in Book 15 (*Met.* 15.60-507). Similarly, in Book 10, we cannot help empathising with the plight of Myrrha, who metamorphosed into a plant before giving birth (*Met.* 10.298-502): she reminds us that plants possess perception and consciousness.

In essence, whereas the anthropocenic narratives have appointed us as arbiters, guardians, and gods of the planet we inhabit, Ovid urges us to experience firsthand the agony of a wounded plant, or the anguish of a deer dismembered by dogs. The gods remain indifferent to such suffering; sometimes they actually seem to derive pleasure from it. This ultimately underscores the peril of anthropocentric technocracy, which risks transforming us into something similar to Ovidian gods: indifferent and callous, they shape the world according to their whims, heedless of the suffering inflicted upon the matter they manipulate. While typically perceived as alien, this matter, as Ovid reminds us, is intimately connected to us.

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ecologist MERMELSTAMER just to mention a few examples, and biologist WILSON 2016 coined the name 'Eremocene' ('Age of Solitude') to denote an era of destruction in which all species are directly dependent on humans and every living thing – including humans – has domestication as its only destiny if it is to survive; ecologist Andreas Malm, geographer Jason Moore and anthropologist Alf Hornborg proposed the term 'Capitalocene', pointing to capitalism as the main cause of the radical transformations that is sweeping our planet: see ELLIS 2018, 128 f. GHOSH 2017, 149 ff. espoused the 'Capitalocene' thesis but highlighted the intertwining of capitalism and Anglo-American imperialism.

4. See <https://tinyurl.com/antropocenesend>.
5. See MESCHIARI 2024 (<https://www.doppiozero.com/perdere-lantropocene>).
6. As for the stones in the ancient world, see, e. g., MACRÌ 2009.
7. As for the progressionist perspectives in the reading of human evolutionary history (and subsequent changes in perspective within palaeontology), see, e.g., PIEVANI 2018.

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