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New Bodies in an Ecological Crisis: The Unforeseeable Future in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*

Frank van den Boom

In recent decades, Ovid's *Metamorphoses* has received a surge of newfound interest. The Latin epic still proves to be relevant to some fundamental problems of the present. One such problem is the ecological crisis, and the *Metamorphoses* are garnering more and more attention by ecocritics and environmental theorists alike.[1] In a crisis induced by human's destructive behavior toward the nonhuman in a relationship based on capitalist exploitation, a literary work that blurs the lines between human and nonhuman embodiment is a useful instrument for rethinking human's relation to the environment. On another level, Ovid's presentation of the world as a collection of perpetually changing bodies has provoked comparisons to modern conceptualizations of history and future.[2] Thinking through these comparisons is of urgent importance in a time when the uncertain future of humanity looms ominously over our heads. Furthermore, in the various stories of Ovid's epic, metamorphosis often comes as a response to critical and violent situations, which can invite us to reconsider how we approach our own crises. With this in mind, Francesca Martelli writes, "the manifold ways in which the *Metamorphoses* answers to different areas of contemporary environmental discourse make this a text that speaks to some of the most pressing existential concerns of our own time."[3] I will propose here a line of interpretation that elucidates the work's contribution to a frame of mind conducive to a cogent and viable response to the ecological crisis.

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[1] There have been quite some studies that have focused on landscape and "nature" in the *Metamorphoses*. Some of the more recent ones that have proved essential in providing a basis for ecocritical research include Segal, *Landscape in Ovid's* Metamorphoses; and Hinds, "Landscape with Figures." Studies that have approached the *Metamorphoses* from an ecocritical or environmentalist perspective include Hallett, "Mortal and Immortal"; Gowers, "Talking Trees"; Da Silva, "Ecocriticism and Myth"; Lada-Richards, "Closing up on Animal Metamorphosis,"; and Sissa, "Apples and Poplars, Nuts and Bulls". A concise overview of the contingencies between the *Metamorphoses* and environmentalist discourse is provided by Martelli, *Ovid*.

[2] Time has been an important subject of study in the discourse on the *Metamorphoses*. The fact that Ovid presents his work as a history of the world through transformations, as well as a *carmen perpetuum* ("infinite song," 1.4), has incited many studies in Ovid's rendition of time, see for example Steiner, "Ovid's *Carmen Perpetuum*"; or Cole, *Ovidius Mythistoricus*. The rendition of time in the *Metamorphoses* is specifically related to the ecological crisis by Markley, "Time, History and Sustainability."

In the plethora of stories which make up Ovid's epic, there is one space that appears frequently, figuring as the stage for many metamorphoses: the *locus amoenus*, or pleasant place. This space is characterized by woods, creeks, shadows, groves, pastures, springs and grottoes, which have informed many of the idyllic, pastoral landscapes that occur in classical literature.[4] The rhetorical function of the *locus amoenus* as the ideal location for composing poetry is often noted, and can be recognized in many classical poems.[5] Because the description of the *locus amoenus* is very formulaic, it is often treated as a literary device that highlights its own fabrication.[6] These spaces, presenting a high level of self-referentiality, lend themselves to being read meta-poetically: the constructed landscape reflects on its state of being constructed. In its performance of

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[3] Martelli, *Ovid*, 36.

[4] Most of the contemporary conceptions of the classical *locus amoenus* stem from Curtius, *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*, 195. For a more precise detailing of the constituents of the *locus amoenus* in the *Metamorphoses,* see Segal, *Landscape in Ovid's* Metamorphoses; or Bernstein, "Locus Amoenus and Locus Horridus in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*," 67-98. For a study on the *locus amoenus* in Roman poetry, which also includes a chapter on the *Metamorphoses,* see Newlands, "The Transformation of the 'Locus Amoenus' in Roman Poetry," 76-108.

[5] Some exemplary poems for *loci amoeni* that display this function come from the pastoral genre: Theocritus' *Idylls* and Vergil's *Eclogues* are often taken as bywords for the *locus amoenus*. But the formulaic space appears in other poetic genres as well, such as epic (e.g. the meeting between Odysseus and Nausicaa in Homer's *Odyssey*, see Haller, "Landscape Description in Homer's *Odyssey*", 60) or elegy (e.g. Propertius 1.18, see. Grant, "Propertius 1.18," 48-54).

[6] Hinds, "Landscape with Figures," 122.

"wilderness," the *locus amoenus* also demonstrates that "wilderness" itself — and by consequence the distinction between nature and culture — is a construct. Martelli makes a pertinent observation on the relevance of Ovid's *loci amoeni* in a time of ecological crisis:

> [T]he "wilderness" understood by environmental discourse is likewise a highly cultural, artificial construction. Unsurprisingly, perhaps, it shares a number of features with the *locus amoenus*. Attending to the formulaic components of the *locus amoenus* allows us to map Ovid's wilderness discourse quite precisely onto that of modern environmental criticism.[7]

The spatial configurations of the *locus amoenus* in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, and the ways in which it demonstrates the artificiality of the opposition of culture and nature, can allow us to rethink the position of human in the ecological crisis.

The French philosopher and environmental theorist Bruno Latour has taken important steps toward undoing the binary oppositions which distinguish culture from nature and the human from the nonhuman. In the second lecture of his book *Facing Gaia* (2017), called "How not to (de-)animate nature," Latour discusses the concept of agency, arguing that it cannot be employed as a criterion by which to define the human body. Arguing against the exploitative relationship between human and nonhuman — a relationship which functions to deny the agency of nonhuman bodies — Latour shows that both human and nonhuman embodiments share a common repertory of agency. In place of a configuration in which human and nonhuman embodiments are dichotomized such that the former are attributed agency and the latter are not, Latour proposes that differences in embodiment are not constituted on the basis of a disparity in levels of agency, but rather constituted by the *form* of agency active in any particular embodiment.[8] Latour's proposal that human and nonhuman embodiments have different forms of agency opens up space for a spectrum of different embodiments that are to be defined on the basis of their interactions with each other.[9] Because these interactions vary by occasion, the definitions of bodies vary procedurally as well. As a result, fixed definitions of particular bodies, including the human body, become unstable.[10] The position of human in the world, or that of any embodiment for that matter, is never definitive. There is always space for a new transaction between bodies to redefine their configurations. Latour calls this space of transaction and reconfiguration the "metamorphic zone."[11] As I read the Ovidian *locus amoenus* as a space to map out current issues in environmentalist discourse, it will prove fruitful to explore the collision between the *locus amoenus* and the metamorphic zone.

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[7] Martelli, *Ovid*, 45.

[8] Latour, *Facing Gaia*, 49-54.

In order to explore this collision, I will analyze the *loci amoeni* in two stories from the *Metamorphoses*: one that presents a human-nonhuman relationship that *denies* the possibility of metamorphosis (the story of Orpheus, 10.1-11.66), and one that presents a human-nonhuman relationship that *enables* this possibility (the story of Cyparissus, 10.106-142).[12] The open-ended, negotiated configuration between human and nonhuman active in the story of Cyparissus is further highlighted, I will argue, by the work's force as a *carmen perpetuum* ("perpetual song," 1.4). Studying the passages of Orpheus and Cyparissus, I intend to show that the *Metamorphoses* exemplifies Latour's concept of the metamorphic zone in that it makes open-ended configurations of human and nonhuman embodiments highly tangible. Ovid's text, I will propose, offers an effective conceptual framework for responding to the contemporary ecological crisis.

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[9] *Id.*, 55-58.

[10] *Id.*, 57.

[11] *Id.*, 58.

[12] There are more stories that one could discuss in order to trace environmentalist discourse, as there are pluriform *loci amoeni* throughout the *Metamorphoses* that function in different ways. Such analyses have been done for the stories of e.g. Philemon and Baucis, and Erysichthon, amongst others by Gowers, "Talking Trees"; Da Silva, "Ecocriticism and Myth"; and Martelli, *Ovid*, 35-36. These contrasting stories may be comparable to the "positive" of Cyparissus and the "negative" of Orpheus, and there are more stories that can be read in a similar manner, but the particular stories of Cyparissus and Orpheus show aspects that will prove to be fundamental for my argument.

Sustainable Orpheus

The character of Orpheus in the *Metamorphoses* has features that can be recognized in certain contemporary ecological practices. His relationship to the *locus amoenus* typifies the prevailing understanding of the relationship between human and nonhuman bodies in today's capitalist society. The contemporary tendency to privilege the human above the nonhuman — a tendency which has caused the ecological crisis we now face — can also be seen in Orpheus. Orpheus' story presents a situation that not only prefigures the human-nonhuman hierarchy of the modern era, but also points to the inefficacy of the modern era's current response to the ecological crisis — a response that involves practices associated with the term "sustainability." It has been argued that the ideological underpinnings of sustainability serve to reinforce the hierarchical configuration that privileges human over nonhuman.[13] Orpheus pointedly demonstrates the consequences of such hierarchization as taken to the extreme, and the passage can thus provide today's readers with a framework for understanding the implications of contemporary sustainable practices.

Let us delve into the Orpheus story, and specifically, its *locus amoenus*. The tenth book of the *Metamorphoses* opens with the famous story of Orpheus and Eurydice (10.1-85). Orpheus travels to the underworld to recover his recently deceased fiancée on the condition that he does not look back at her when they climb back to the overworld. But Orpheus cannot resist to look back at Eurydice, causing her to relapse into the underworld and die for a second time. Orpheus experiences extreme grief, rejects new female suitors, and decides to retreat to a hill to play the lyre and console himself with song. But before Orpheus puts his vocal chords in action, he starts plucking on his strings. As he plays, he exercises his power of musical telekinesis, luring trees, animals, plants, vines and rocks. This power is part of a long mythological tradition surrounding the figure of the bard.[14] A large number of trees come to envelop Orpheus, and they are each identified in an extensive literary catalogue. We will come to see later that the transformed Cyparissus is actually one of these trees. This summoned throng of trees becomes the *locus amoenus* in which Orpheus can begin singing. He sings stories of metamorphosis, which appear as direct speech, making him the embedded narrator of the remainder of book ten. After he stops singing, Orpheus' story comes to an end, but not with the resolving metamorphosis we are used to from Ovid's other stories. Rather than transforming into a new body, Orpheus dies. He is violently ripped apart by a group of Maenads, Thracian priestesses of Dionysus, who are angry at him for his turn away from women.

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[13] For arguments against sustainability or discourse related to it, see for example Crist, "Beyond the Climate Crisis," 29-55; Dale, "Sustaining What?"; or Jacobsson, "In the Name of (Un)Sustainability," 19-37.

In order to investigate Orpheus' relationship with the nonhuman actors in the story, it is fruitful to take a closer look at the construction of the *locus amoenus* (10.86-91):

> *Collis erat collemque super planissima campi*
> *area, quam viridem faciebant graminis herbae.*
> *umbra loco deerat; qua postquam parte resedit*
> *dis genitus vates et fila sonantia movit,*
> *umbra loco venit. non Chaonis abfuit arbor,*
> *non nemus Heliadum, non frondibus aesculus altis*
> *nec ...*
>
> There was a hill, and on that hill an entirely flat field which showed green with shrubs of grass. The place was devoid of shadows. After the bard, born from gods, sat in that place and moved his resounding strings, the place was full of shadows. The tree of Chaon was not absent, nor the Heliad woods, nor the Italian oak with high loaf, nor...[15]

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[14] For an overview of the mythical traditions surrounding Orpheus, see Robbins, "Famous Orpheus"; and Lee, *Virgil as Orpheus*, 1-10.

[15] All translations are my own.

When Orpheus situates himself upon a hill after his loss of Eurydice, it is not yet a *locus amoenus*. The space lacks the unmistakable characteristics that make a site a *locus amoenus*: a lovely forest, an idyllic spring, a cooling shade, etc. In this passage, shadows play an essential role in constituting the *locus amoenus*.[16] The transformation of the plain hill to an idyllic space is a transition from a state of absence to presence of *umbra* ("shadow"). The parallelism of *umbra loco deerat* ("the place lacked shadows," 88) and *umbra loco venit* ("the place was full of shadows," 90) highlights this contrast. Significantly, the verse in between these lines shows that it is Orpheus himself who summons trees to bring him shadow. Orpheus thus forges his own space: he is the creator of this *locus amoenus*. It is clear that Orpheus brings about this spatial transformation because he deems it a necessary condition for song. In this, one can recognize the traditional function of the *locus amoenus* as a space that engenders poetical inspiration.[17] But this *locus amoenus* diverges from the model in that it does not emerge autonomously: its existence is a result of Orpheus' will.[18]

This fact has important implications for the relationship between human Orpheus and nonhuman *locus amoenus*.[19] In the traditional model of the *locus amoenus*, the space has an agency: it is capable of acting upon a human by granting poetic inspiration. Its agency can be described as a capacity to give impetus for song. While in this story the *locus amoenus* retains its inspiratory function, this function is subordinated to Orpheus' will. Whereas traditionally the agency of the poet to write poetry and the agency of the *locus amoenus* to offer poetic material are equally present, the agency of the *locus amoenus* in this instance is subdued by Orpheus' ability to summon his poetic inspiration by himself: the *locus amoenus* is deprived of its agency and Orpheus elevates his own. This entails that Orpheus relates very differently to the poetic material that the *locus amoenus* grants him than is traditional. The discrete roles of subject and object are reinforced: the human poet is highlighted as the subject with agency, while the nonhuman de-animated *locus amoenus* merely functions as the background to which Orpheus' narrative unfolds. Orpheus' subjectivization and the objectivization of the *locus amoenus* are emphasized further by the fact that Orpheus is an embedded narrator. His installment as a narrator gives him the power to tell the story the way he wants to. Although with regards to the level of embedded narratives – Orpheus sings his own stories, and Ovid narrates the story of Orpheus – the fact that Orpheus is in control of forcing his own surroundings vis à vis his poetic inspiration, suggests that he is the master of his own story as well.[20] In this manner, he becomes the ultimate meta-poetic

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[16] Shadow is more widely considered to be an important constituent of the *locus amoenus* (Hinds, "Landscape with Figures," 127): it takes a prompt position in such exemplary *loci amoeni* as in Vergil's *Eclogues* 1.1-5.

[17] The *locus amoenus*, or the woods more generally, were often considered the ideal space for composing song. Especially in Roman poetry, the image of a forest that gives poetic inspiration is used regularly and stems from the widely appropriated poetry of the Hellenistic poet Callimachus: see Hunter, *The Shadow of Callimachus*, 7-41.

[18] Many *loci amoeni*, just as many "settings" within literature, are often read like they are just there. Space is not regularly thought of as a literary component that needs causal justification: there is an existent world, and that is that. This is visible even in the beginning of the quote above in line 86. Whereas the *locus amoenus* needs to be constructed, the hill is introduced by just being there: *collis erat* ("there was a hill"). For Orpheus' influence on the construction of the *locus amoenus*, see Bernstein, "Locus Amoenus and Locus Horridus," 75-76.

[19] There have been earlier studies concerning Orpheus' relation to "nature." Horace, in his *Ars poetica*, prompts an interpretation of Orpheus that resounded in modern discourse as well: "Orpheus, the priest and interpreter of the gods, deterred the savage race of men from slaughters and inhuman diet; hence said to tame tigers and furious lions" (Hor. *Ars* 391-393). Orpheus epitomises the human's turn away from "nature" towards "civilization." This reading of the

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character is to be seen in e.g. Robbins, "Famous Orpheus," 3-6. Another turn of interpretation has incorporated the upsurge of ecocritical idioms, which problematises this simple transference from nature to civilization. However, in these readings, Orpheus is often taken as the emblem for the musical harmony between human and nature (see e.g. Jung, "The Orphic Voice and Ecology," 329-340; or Pittaway, "Broadening the Context of the Ecological Crisis," who calls this relationship to nature an "Orphic attitude"), which puts the character in a more ecologically positive position. This line of argumentation opposes my own problematisation of the way Orpheus relates to his poetic inspiration and shows a forceful human-nonhuman hierarchy.

[20] Orpheus is often considered the perfect bard, to whom poets often parallel themselves. Orpheus often carries some meta-poetical or programmatic force, as poets who use Orpheus as a metaphor for themselves, can signify their own program through Orpheus (see for example Mader, "Amphion and Orpheus" and Schultz, "*Latet Anguis in Herba*". Equating Orpheus to Ovid is thus not

subject, both narratee and narrator, and by controlling his own story he is able to reify his own subjectivization. The passive role of the nonhuman as mere backdrop is thus also reinforced by Orpheus, who makes it the lifeless audience of his song.[21]

Rendering everything nonhuman inanimate – considering the nonhuman to be an *environment* of the human in the etymological sense of this word – is a mode of anthropocentrism.[22] Later I will consider this anthropocentrism in relation to Latour's process of "de-animation." Within ecocritical discourse, it is often acknowledged that the anthropocentric views that have developed over the centuries are at the roots of the ecological crisis.[23] This crisis is a result of humanity's scant apprehension to use every little bit of the planet as a resource to be exploited for profit. The continual commodification of nonhuman bodies, which has led to the human population explosion, has become a familiar story. Within the history of the human civilization, there was a turning point when anthropocentrism prompted a response from the objectivized world in the form of climate change, or in other words, when the human system started to be of dominant geological impact. This period is now identified as the beginning of the Anthropocene. A lot of ink has been spilled on the question of when this turning point occurred, as well as on the question of whether naming an era after human's

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difficult, which makes Orpheus' self-induced subjectivization as narrator even more apparent.

[21] See Wheeler, *A Discourse of Wonders*); or Johnson, *Ovid Before Exile*, 96-116. They both interpret Orpheus' tales in light of this arboreal audience. There is a striking contrast: such studies have often read these trees as possessing agency (for they can move), while in my argument, Orpheus' subjectivization utterly rids them of their agency.

[22] The word "environment" stems from the French adverb *environ* ("around") or *environner* ("to surround"). The word "surroundings" is a close synonym, which implies that there is something in the middle to surround. To call the nonhuman bodies the "environment," points to the human body as the centre of that environment, which can in itself be considered as an anthropocentric way of envisioning the world.

[23] See for example (amongst many others) Buell, "The Ecocritical Insurgency"; Crist, "Beyond the Climate Crisis"; Iovino, "Ecocriticism and a Non-Anthropocentric Humanism"; Adamson, "Environmental Justice", 170-171; and Grober, "The Discovery of Sustainability," 14.

disastrous behavior is anthropocentric in itself.[24] It is a matter of envisioning the past, writing an historical narrative in which a chapter called the Anthropocene might leave little room for other nonhuman actors to take the stage. The term potentially entails that within the Earth's recent ecological history, human action is central, with nonhuman entities left in the margins, despite the fact that the term comes about in order to highlight human's systematic foreclosure of other forms of embodiment.

Orpheus' subjectivization of his own character sharply points to the manner in which humans have been able to center themselves in the narrative of world history. Historiography has a predilection for human's agency as an unstoppable force that propels the narrative forward.[25] But whenever the events of the past are said to follow some certain historical narrative, that narrative is necessarily imposed by the present. Installing the human as the main character of a grand historical narrative does not affect the past, but affects the way we think about ourselves today, and the way we will exert our agency tomorrow. The story of Orpheus presents this tension quite explicitly: he endows himself with the status of ultimate subject right before he starts singing his narrative. What the future narrative entails for Orpheus is very much dependent on this moment in which he divides the roles of subject and object and authors his relationship with the nonhuman.

Today we live in a time when, like Orpheus, our actions of today can have detrimental consequences for the future, hence the widespread use of the term "crisis" to designate this moment. In response to the ecological crisis, a framework of "sustainable" practices has come about. An examination of the framework of sustainability will show that it fails to address the problem at the root of the ecological crisis: the hierarchy of human over nonhuman.

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[24] For a clear overview of the Anthropocene debate, see Chernilo, "The Question of the Human." Chernilo makes some remarks about the anthropocentrism of the term Anthropocene as well (page 47): "[T]here is a fundamentally anthropocentric core to the idea of the Anthropocene: it is another realization, as it were, of how powerful human action actually is."

[25] The famous opening of the *Historiae* by the father of historiography, Herodotus, comes to mind: "This is the display of the inquiry of Herodotus of Halicarnassus, so that things done by man not be forgotten in time ..." (Hdt. 1.1.0).

Rather, just as Orpheus installs himself as ultimate subject, the framework of sustainability continues to centralize human as the unalterable main character in the future of the objectivized world.

The framework of sustainability presupposes that we must keep something as it is. The word derives from the Latin *sustinere*, which means "to maintain" or "to uphold," and this sense of the word is still very much apparent in the English derivative.[26] Sustainability asks that we *sustain*. But the term itself does not specify what is to be sustained.[27] The transitive verb requires an object to be sustained, but specifying this object is not straightforward, especially because the act of sustaining something comes as a response to a *crisis*, a *critical* situation that requires change and adaptation.[28] But the level of counteraction that a crisis necessitates inherently opposes the idea that matters can continue the way they have. Yet, sustainability does presume continuity for some matters, which means that the framework requires a careful consideration of which matters need to change and which need to stay the same.

One of the most relevant answers to this question comes from the UN Brundtland Commission, which the United Nations initiated in 1987 after the deterioration of the Earth's climate began to receive more attention. In its attempt to formulate a suitable response to this deterioration, the Brundtland Commission coupled the notion of sustainability with another key notion: development.

> Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.[29]

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[26] Lewis and Short, *A Latin Dictionary*, *ad sustineo*.

[27] Markley, "Time, History and Sustainability," 44-45.

[28] The word "crisis" (as well as "critical") comes from the Greek κρίσις, which means "decision" or "judgement." Used to describe a situation, crisis thus takes on the meaning of "a situation upon which one has to make a choice," which entails inherent change. See Liddell, Scott and Jones, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, *ad* κρίσις.

[29] World Commission on Environment and Development, *Our Common Future*, 47.

The most striking claim made in this definition, which functions as an answer to the question of what is to be sustained by sustainability, is that sustainable development involves "meeting needs." In this approach to the ecological crisis, the ability to meet needs is the matter to be sustained. It is that which both current and future generations should be able to do.[30] However, this intended continuity between present and future contains a paradox, which is important for understanding the notion of "sustainable development."

The definition presumes that the continuity of being able to meet needs both in present and in future is in danger of being compromised. It acknowledges that the way in which present humans meet their needs has been very "unsustainable." Over the course of modern history, generation after generation has become more and more accustomed to the capitalist order that seeks perpetual growth. Such processes of normalization have reified wants and desires into needs. Human thinking is thus pervaded by the "need" for economic growth:[31] throughout the last centuries, there has been so little apprehension to continually fulfil the desire to capitalize on nonhuman bodies, that humans easily deem it a necessity. Meeting the "needs" of the present by exploiting the nonhuman puts future generations in jeopardy, and the definition of sustainable development recognizes this. But it simultaneously reinforces the idea that this desire to exploit the nonhuman is a true "need." Sustainable development thus becomes a practice of satisfying present needs, ensuring that they can continue to be met in the future, and paradoxically acknowledging that present needs also jeopardize that future. It advocates a response to crisis that holds the human species accountable for the ecologically destructive nature of their supposed needs, but simultaneously refuses to abolish these needs. In this, sustainable development undermines its own effectiveness.

This paradox manifests itself in sustainability's conceptualization of the future. Sustainability seeks to propose a response to the ecological crisis that already takes into account what future generations deem necessary. It enables itself to know what the future will need because its intended continuation of present needs entails that present and future are the same. In this conceptualization, the future is then already fully disclosed: future humans will have the same needs as humans do nowadays. But of course, we do not know the future. Thinking present and future to be continuous denies the fact that futurity encompasses uncertainty, changeability and alterability. Positing that future generations will hold the same needs as the present, reinforces the idea that present humans will not alter their needs and change their destructive ways. If sustainability did not project present needs into the future, the future would appear as uncertain as it actually is. By *disclosing* the future, the framework of sustainable development *closes* the future as well. If sustainability proposes to keep in place the harmful structures that privilege the human over the nonhuman, it precludes the changes necessary to counter the ecological crisis. We reach a dead-end when there is no possibility of a future different from the present.

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[30] See especially Markley, "Time, History and Sustainability," 44, who investigates sustainability as a "function of particular ways of conceiving time."

[31] See for example Crist, "Beyond the Climate Crisis"; and Grober, "The Discovery of Sustainability," 14.

Now, I will not invoke the story of Orpheus and his death at the end of the narrative as a means of saying that if the human species continues to privilege themselves over the nonhuman like Orpheus did, they will be ripped apart as well (although I am not denying that this a possibility either). The parallel between the sustainability framework and the Orpheus story, is the inability to change. In an epic work like the *Metamorphoses*, that deserves its title because of the plethora of metamorphosis stories it contains, it is surprising that the character of Orpheus does not metamorphose whatsoever. As the process of metamorphosis constitutes a change in embodiment from human to nonhuman, it perhaps makes sense that a character who installs himself as the ultimate subject, superior to the nonhuman, does not undergo such a transformation. Orpheus manages to maintain his superior position into the future, but that does mean that when he is presented with the critical attack of the Maenads, he is not able to adapt to the new situation by means of a metamorphosis. The hierarchy of human over nonhuman that Orpheus reinforced denies him the ability to rethink this relationship, and so any possibilities for his future to be different than his present become closed. Orpheus becomes "sustainable" in the sense that what he sustains rids the future of its potentiality to be different, at the expense of his ability to change when the world around him presents him with a crisis.

Cyparissus and Bruno Latour

Responding to the ecological crisis, or perhaps any crisis, very much becomes a matter of thinking the future: the willingness to change is a matter of envisioning a tomorrow that is different from today. Sustainable Orpheus resists this: by presenting the future as disclosed, the possibility of change is denied. It is precisely the uncertainty of the future that creates an impetus to change. Whereas in the Orphean sustainability framework the future entails a continuation of the exploitative relationship of the human to the nonhuman, many other stories within the *Metamorphoses* dismantle the boundaries between human and nonhuman, such as the story of Cyparissus (10.106-142). In this story, one can see an instability of human and nonhuman embodiments that paves the way for an open, undisclosed bodily configuration. Whereas Orpheus managed to enforce a schema of human subjectivization and nonhuman objectivization, the Cyparissus story shows the boundaries between one and another embodiment, both in present and in future, to remain blurred. The French philosopher Bruno Latour argues that such configurations take place in what he calls "metamorphic zones."[32] The story of Cyparissus will present a *locus amoenus* that is an agent rather than, as in the Orpheus story, merely an object acted upon by a human agent. This *locus amoenus*, I will show, engenders a metamorphic zone.

Let us take a closer look at the story of Cyparissus and its portrayal of the *locus amoenus*.[33] The young boy Cyparissus befriends a giant sacred deer that dwells on Cyparissus' home island, Ceos. The two spend much time together, the boy tending to the deer's hunger and thirst and occasionally going for a ride on its back. Then, a new space comes to the fore: on a hot summer day, the deer decides to take rest in the soft grass and the cool shadows of a grove. Right after this *locus amoenus* has come into play, Cyparissus accidentally pierces the deer with his spear and kills it. The boy is stricken by such sorrow that he wishes to die, and the god Apollo, who cannot console Cyparissus, grants him a metamorphosis into a cypress tree.[34] The story is connected to the larger cycle of Orpheus. As mentioned above, the cypress tree is part of the throng of trees that Orpheus summoned with music as his *locus amoenus*. Later on, it will become highly important that Cyparissus thus metamorphoses into a *locus amoenus* himself.

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[32] Latour, *Facing Gaia*, 58.

[33] See Connors, "Seeing Cypresses in Virgil," 1-17. The role of the *locus amoenus* in Cyparissus' story is briefly discussed by Bernstein, "Locus Amoenus and Locus Horridus," 76.

In order to understand the way the Cyparissus story denies a binary opposition between human and nonhuman, it is important to examine which constituents of the story show what form of agency. We can find in the Cyparissus story a configuration of bodies in which agency is not solely the preserve of the human, but also a capacity other bodies can have. The story allows us to see that different bodies have different forms of agency, the interactions of which form dynamic and unpredictable agential ensembles. In our usual reading practices, Latour explains, there is a tendency "to contrast human and nonhuman actors, for example, as subjects and objects."[35] The Orpheus story is a prime example of these acts of subjectivization and objectivization, which Latour calls processes of animating and de-animating actors. Orpheus' character epitomized these usual reading practices: as the narrator of his own story, he centralized a human actor, himself, in the scene, and decentralized the nonhuman actor, the *locus amoenus*, as the objectivized setting that simply surrounds the subject human. Although this manner of reading might seem normal, Latour argues that subjectivization and objectivization are actually "secondary and derivative operations."[36] Animation is not something that exists in language *a priori*, but is a conscious operation that can be altered through the way we use language. A primary function of language is representing agency in and of itself. Language constitutes a "common repertory" of agency shared by all actors, both human and nonhuman.[37] The story of Cyparissus shows such a common repertory of agency, which negates a hard dichotomy between the subjectivized human and the objectivized surroundings.

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[34] On the aetiology of this tree, see Anderson, *Ovid's Metamorphoses Books 6-10*, 482, 486; and Connors, "Seeing Cypresses in Virgil".

[35] Latour, *Facing Gaia*, 50

[36] *Ibid.*

If we were to employ the conventional reading strategy, we could easily recognize Cyparissus and Apollo to be actors in this story. Their varying forms of agency interact with each other in particular ways to push the narrative forward. The story already denies this reading practice with the character of the nonhuman deer, who evidently shows to have agency as well. The transactions between the holy deer and the young boy create a unique friendship that seems to emerge from a mutual act of caring for each other. A conflict arises when the relationship between the two suddenly becomes one of hunter and hunted, a moment in which their agencies diverge.[38] Out of this conflict emerges Apollo to act as Cyparissus' consoler, putting an end to his misery by transforming him into a cypress tree and changing his form of agency altogether. Although these three actors differ with respect to their forms of agency, they do share the common characteristic of *having* agency. But the story compels us to acknowledge another nonhuman actor too, one that would conventionally be read as the object in the background on which the narrative is staged: the *locus amoenus* and its constituents. The form of agency exhibited by the *locus amoenus* becomes evident when we study the following passage (10.126-132):

> *Aestus erat mediusque dies, solisque vapore*
> *concava litorei fervebant bracchia Cancri;*
> *fessus in herbosa posuit sua corpora terra*
> *cervus et arborea frigus ducebat ad umbra.*
> *hunc puer imprudens iaculo Cyparissus acuto*
> *fixit et, ut saevo morientem vulnere vidit,*
> *velle mori statuit.*
>
> It was summer, in the middle of the day, and the hollow arms of coastal Cancer burned in the heat of

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[37] *Ibid.*

[38] See Anderson, *Ovid's Metamorphoses Books 6-10*, 485-486 on how the deer is made "victim".

> the sun; the exhausted deer laid his body on the grass and drew the cold from the tree's shade. Him the boy Cyparissus unforeseen pierced with his sharp spear, and when he saw him dying from his severe wound, he wanted nothing but to die himself.

Right after the story portrays transactions of friendship between Cyparissus and the deer, the new *locus amoenus* is introduced. It comes as a new element in the story, only right at the moment before Cyparissus kills his friend. A direct cause for this misfortunate event is not given, except for the new designation of Cyparissus as *imprudens*, "not foreseeing" or "unaware". It is this unexpected unawareness (*imprudentia*) that leads to the deer's death. Where this *imprudentia* comes from is not immediately clear to the reader: the only thing that has changed is the emergence of the *locus amoenus.* This leads one to conclude that the physical environment has an active role in changing Cyparissus' heedfulness to heedlessness. Because the *locus amoenus* is able to activate this volta, it proves to have as much influence on the narrative as any of the other actors in the story.[39] The space interacts and transacts with Cyparissus and the deer: it actively changes Cyparissus from *prudens* ("heedful") to *imprudens*, and transforms his relationship with the deer from one of friendship to one of violence. When we acknowledge this form of agency belonging to the *locus amoenus*, we can reformulate the central conflict of the story as follows: Cyparissus and the deer were closely befriended, and the boy acted *prudens* with his spear. The *locus amoenus* influences the story by changing the boy's *prudentia* ('heedfulness') into *imprudentia*, a change which results in the boy's loss of his friend.

The confrontation of the two different agencies — Cyparissus on the one hand and the *locus amoenus* on the other — has significant implications for the configuration between human and nonhuman. The story shows that the subjectivization of the human and the objectivization of the nonhuman are not pregiven, but are rather secondary acts of animation and de-animation. Both the human Cyparissus and the nonhuman *locus amoenus* primarily share a common repertory of agency; it is the *form* of agency that differs between them. The story demonstrates that possession of agency itself cannot be used as a criterion to distinguish the human from the nonhuman. Furthermore, it calls all possibility of ever making such a distinction into question. When the binary opposition between the human and the nonhuman is dismantled, there is no use in defining bodies as nonhuman. When the concept of the human body itself is made unstable, the term nonhuman becomes equally devoid of meaning. In place of human bodies and nonhuman bodies, we find in Ovid a spectrum of different embodiments with different agencies that interact with each other.

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[39] Anderson, *Ovid's Metamorphoses Books 6-10*, 485 notes that this location marks the volta from restful to violent action, but the active role of the *locus amoenus* is not mentioned.

Latour argues it is circumstantial interactions between different embodiments that momentarily define what these embodiments are: "it is the tension that makes the actor."[40] To designate this manner of unstable embodiment, Latour introduces the term "morphism." A morphism, according to Latour, is a body that can be specified as a certain type of body, without presuming that this specification is an immutable definition. In Latour's terminology, such a specification can be made by adding a prefix to the word "morph." Like in a lot of the jargon in contemporary theory, these prefixes are based upon the ancient Greek roots of a word. Latour thus designates the human body as an "anthropo-morph" (from Greek ἄνθρωπος). In the same way, a body of water becomes a hydro-morph, a forest becomes a hylomorph, a sea a pelagomorph and an island a nesomorph, etc.[41] For Latour the "-morph" suffix denotes agency. The varying prefixes (anthropo-, hydro-, hylo-, and so on) specify that these morphisms have specific *forms* of agency. Because Latour poses these designations without a set of definitions, a morphism's form of agency cannot be defined on its own. This is rather based on the circumstantial transactions that occur between them, which means that embodiment is a dynamic process rather than a once-and-for-all imposition of unchanging order.

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[40] Latour, *Facing Gaia*, 53.

[41] Similarly to the word anthropomorph, these examples all take the Greek prefixes to designate what kind of body they are: ὕδωρ (hudor) means water, ὕλη (hule) means forest, πέλαγος (pelagos) means sea and νῆσος (nèsos) means island. One could infinitely expand this list to specify different kinds of embodiment.

This very much highlights how configurations between bodies popularly assumed to be natural — such as the privileging of the human over the nonhuman or culture over nature — are socially constructed. Recognizing the "constructedness" of bodily configurations and the circumstantiality of transactions between agencies also paves the way for possible reconfiguration. Latour identifies a space for this open-ended and undisclosed configuration of embodiment which he calls a metamorphic zone. Metamorphic zones, Latour writes, facilitate "the exchange of forms of action through the transactions between agencies of multiple origins and forms."[42]

Let us trace a metamorphic zone in the story of Cyparissus. Now that we have identified a common repertory between both human and nonhuman actors in the narrative, we can apply the concept of procedural embodiment to the different actors. The actors we have recognized so far are two anthropomorphs (Cyparissus and Apollo), a cervomorph (the deer) and a hylomorph (the woods, being the *locus amoenus*).[43] Naming the characters in this manner, acknowledges that they have a common repertory of agency, but that they are different from each other. Their differences, in some yet to be disclosed manner, are to be constructed through their interactions with each other. In the beginning of the story, the interaction between the anthropomorph and cervomorph is constructed differently than in the common way of thinking which privileges human over animal. Their agencies are in tune and do not oppose each other to arouse conflict. However, once the hylomorph comes into the equation, it redefines the relationship between the anthropomorph and the cervomorph, changing their relationship into the more traditional hunter subject and hunted object. The form of agency that the *locus amoenus* displays points to the constructedness of human's relationship with animal, and to the artificiality of configurations between different morphisms in general. By reconfiguring the transaction of agencies between the human and the deer — making close friends become subject and object — the *locus amoenus* shows how these bodies can rightly be called anthropomorph and cervomorph, with procedural and alterable definitions that are reconstituted by their transactions at any particular occasion. In other words, the *locus amoenus* engenders a metamorphic zone: a space that opens up the possibility of reconfiguring the relationships between different types of bodies.

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[42] Latour, *Facing Gaia*, 58.

[43] I take the Latin word for "deer," *cervus*, in order to designate the deer's embodiment. Strictly speaking, according to Latour there is a major difference between saying "deer" or "cervomorph:" the former implies a set definition for the embodiment, the latter keeps the embodiment undefined and open to change. However, I will sometimes use them interchangeably in favor of readability.

The anthropomorph and the cervomorph are enmeshed in this metamorphic zone, but the *locus amoenus*, as a hylomorph, equally partakes in the space it engenders. The transactions between anthropomorph and hylomorph are equally circumstantial as the transactions between the anthropomorph and the cervomorph. In highlighting the artificiality of configurations between different types of bodies, the *locus amoenus* becomes self-referential, showing its own body and agency to be as constructed and open to reconstruction as the anthropomorph and the cervomorph. By partaking in the metamorphic zone, the meaning of the *locus amoenus* is as instable as is any other embodiment.

The uncertainty and unpredictability of possible bodily reconfigurations makes the volta from *prudentia* to *imprudentia* very significant. When Cyparissus enters the metamorphic zone conveyed by the *locus amoenus*, he goes from "aware" or "foreseeing" to "unaware" or "not foreseeing." Both translations of (*im*)*prudentia* are of relevance here: Cyparissus becomes "unaware" in the sense that he is simply not paying attention to his spear, thereby accidentally piercing his deer friend. But in my line of interpretation thus far, the act of "foreseeing" becomes striking too. The transaction between Cyparissus and the deer as close friends is constituted in the story as the initial continuous situation of normality, and in that sense becomes foreseeable.[44] It is only when Cyparissus enters the metamorphic zone that he is unable "to foresee" the ongoing stable transaction any longer, a situation which renders his future relationship with the deer uncertain. This reconfiguration is immediately consummated when Cyparissus accidentally kills the deer. His *imprudentia* thus prefigures the uncertainty in morphisms' possible future forms of agency, and marks the unpredictable changeability that the metamorphic zone implies. But not only does this capriciousness impose itself on the human and the deer. It also does so in the transactions between human and *locus amoenus*. The self-referentiality of the space will thus come into play, as the reconfiguration of the relation between anthropomorph and hylomorph is not merely presented as a possibility; we are at the point in the story where this reconfiguration will actually take place. Cyparissus is about to metamorphose and become one with the *locus amoenus*.

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[44] This is emphasized by the extreme prolongation of the use of the imperfect tense, which denotes an unchanged, unfinished situation. The perfect tense, on the other hand, signals a new action that drives the narrative forward. This perfect tense is kept out until the deer lies down in the *locus amoenus* (*posuit*, 128).

The altered transaction between Cyparissus and the deer, marked by Cyparissus' *imprudentia*, created conflict. The killing of the deer has put him in grave mourning, and Apollo gives him relief by transforming him into a cypress tree. Cyparissus' metamorphosis presents itself as the solution of the story: it is the end of the Cyparissus episode. Of course, as an agent, Apollo has obvious influence on the story. He executes the boy's transformation. But because it is the *locus amoenus* that engenders the metamorphic zone, the metamorphosis of the boy into a cypress tree — or in other words, his physical merge with the *locus amoenus* — is a kind of transaction between the boy and the *locus amoenus*. Whereas the anthropomorph and hylomorph initially confronted each other at the point of the anthropomorph's (*im*)*prudentia*, his physical transformation entails a complete reconstruction of their bodily configuration. The anthropomorph sheds its prefix and becomes a hylomorph, which emphasizes Latour's intention in coining the word "morphism:" the boundaries between one and another body are so instable that there is no difficulty for a body to altogether change into a new one, with a new form of agency that redefines it indefinitely. The anthropomorph becomes a hylomorph, inasmuch as the *locus amoenus* presents itself as a hylomorph. Their agencies become one and the same, and the change in transactions between Cyparissus and the *locus amoenus* is made possible by the metamorphic zone. From all the possibilities that emerged from the *imprudentia* within the metamorphic zone, the story of Cyparissus has materialized one possible transformation in transactions, and the metamorphic zone enabled this transformation.

(Im)prudentia in a *carmen perpetuum*

The stories of Orpheus and Cyparissus contrast starkly. Cyparissus' *imprudentia* is what renders his metamorphosis possible. His undisclosed position in the world and open-ended relationship with the *locus amoenus* enables him to let go of his human embodiment when he is stricken with grief after killing his friend. On the other hand, Orpheus' relationship with the *locus amoenus* privileges the human over the nonhuman. Asserting himself as the narrator of his own story, he (dis)closes the future. In this sense, "sustainable" Orpheus thus obtains full *prudentia*: by disclosing the future relationship between him and the nonhuman, he foresees the future. Whereas Cyparissus transacted with the *locus amoenus* to enter a metamorphic zone and gain *imprudentia*, which kept his future uncertain and open to metamorphosis, Orpheus is fully *prudens* by reinforcing the continuation of his own subjectivization, thereby negating his metamorphosis.

Prudentia and *imprudentia* become the fundamental point of difference between the story of Orpheus and the story of Cyparissus. Cyparissus' *imprudentia* acknowledges that the future is always uncertain, in the sense that it is "unforeseeable." It therefore also denies any guarantee of continuity from present to future: tomorrow everything could be different. The entire narrative of the *Metamorphoses* goes to great lengths to emphasize this. The Orpheus story, although it does not end in a metamorphosis, does not put a stop to the ongoing narrative of the *Metamorphoses*. Orpheus might be killed because he resists any kind of adaptation, but the world around him still continues after his death. Cyparissus finds himself in the same world, but his *imprudentia* has made him transform and take a new position in it as a different body: his existence is prolonged through his adaptation. The *Metamorphoses* presents a world that continues to develop, and *prudentia* and *imprudentia* rather become modes of self-positioning in relation to that metamorphosing world. Those bodies acknowledging the capriciousness of fate undergo metamorphosis and become constituents of this capriciousness themselves, while those denying it fail to adapt to it and are granted no future existence in the world. As Robert Markley puts it, the *Metamorphoses* constitutes a "climatological time — the sense of a natural world ... that marks the limits of narrative." This time, he argues, transcends the intradiegetic "embodied time" experienced by the text's particular characters.[45]

From the start, Ovid has made clear that this is what his work entailed. In the proem of the work, he programmatically states (1.1-4):

> *In nova fert animus mutatas dicere formas*
> *corpora; di, coeptis (nam vos mutastis et illa)*
> *aspirate meis primaque ab origine mundi*
> *ad mea perpetuum deducite tempora carmen.*
>
> I am prompted to tell of forms that have transformed into new bodies; gods, assist my undertakings (for you have changed those too) and lead my perpetual song from the beginning of the world to my own time.

Ovid asks of the gods to inspire him so that he can write his *carmen perpetuum* ("perpetual song") up until his own time.[46] That last verse seems to contain a contradiction: the *Metamorphoses* will continue at once perpetually and only up until Ovid's time. This highlights a tension between an intradiegetic embodied time, which does not reach further than Ovid's lived experience, and an extradiegetic climatological time in which the world perpetually continues its capricious course, also after Ovid's time. This shows the world's endless possible outcomes to be resistant to confinement within a narrative. Thus the *Metamorphoses* does not actually stop at a point in time; it embodies the continuation of its world, albeit extradiegetically. Because Ovid decides to put the narrative to a stop at the moment in time when he lives, he renders himself *imprudens* as well. He cannot foresee in what ways the world will continue to change, and does not vainly attempt to capture the future in his narrative. The only future that Ovid conveys with his work, is one of uncertainty, with which he highlights the constant possibility that the bodies of the world are reconfigured all anew.

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[45] Markley, "Time, History and Sustainability," 44.

[46] The *Metamorphoses* ends with the deification of Julius Caesar, who died in 44 BC. This preludes the emergence of Augustus and the Roman Empire, under whose power Ovid wrote his *Metamorphoses*.

The stories of Cyparissus and Orpheus show that it is the form of agency upon which human beings have to decide, and which positions them in relation to the other bodies of the world. Should one want to render oneself *prudens,* toil to reinforce a configuration with the world that ignores its agency and de-animates it completely, leading to an elimination out of the world altogether, like sustainable Orpheus? Or should one want to accept their *imprudentia,* establishing a human agency that acknowledges and transacts with the agency of the world, and maintaining the everlasting possibility that our transactions and bodily configurations will transform in the future, like Cyparissus? If one were to read any prescriptive force in the *Metamorphoses*, the stories of Orpheus and Cyparissus, and the work's instalkment of a world in perpetual transformation, show the latter to be the case.

Conclusion

Markley makes an interesting point about the *Metamorphoses* and climate change: Ovid's work, does not account for the anthropogenic nature of the Earth's transformations.[47] The world seems chaotic, its events driven by acts by gods and other capricious agencies unknown to puny and ignorant humans. But even though it looks as if the *Metamorphoses* presents this capriciousness as external from human action, it does show how transactions between anthropomorphs and the world relate to it. A transaction from human to nonhuman entails an equal reaction from nonhuman to human. The world responded to Orpheus' acts of violent subjectivization: he was expelled from it. Even though at the time of writing Ovid may not have had in mind human's geological impact on the planet, the *Metamorphoses* does show in what ways humans interact with the world, and how the world is able to respond in unforeseeable ways.

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[47] "For Ovid, the catastrophic changes that sever understanding from an inaccessible history of drowned cities and vanished passages are embedded within a belief in ceaseless change, including the transmigration of souls, rather than in the anthropogenic corruption of a prelapsarian Nature." Markley, "Time, History and Sustainability," 49.

In a world that is agent, human *prudentia* is impossible to uphold. The human system has been able to subjectivize itself so extensively, putting all nonhuman systems in the background, that it has been easy to think of the world as unanimated and inert. Humans were able to figure themselves *prudens*, until it became apparent that this planet we live on is not unresponsive at all: climate change is a reaction to human action. Persisting in the belief that humans can then still be *prudens* resists the possibility that the world might impose new and uncertain reconfigurations of bodies in which the human body is not given a place any longer. Trying to maintain a fixed position is an inability to adapt to such unforeseen changes.

Cyparissus showcases this ability to adapt through his *imprudentia*. His transactions with nonhuman morphisms render his position relative to these morphisms not superior at all. The configuration between Cyparissus and other morphisms is rather kept undisclosed, and as his position in the world becomes unforeseeable, he is given the possibility to adapt to a new bodily configuration. Therefore, *imprudentia* becomes a mode of thinking one can employ, an attitude towards the future that incorporates sudden change. Nowadays, the ecological crisis presents humans with a situation that has come as a response to the destructive growth of the human system, and that thus requires such change. The *Metamorphoses* beautifully shows that rendering ourselves *prudens* – making ourselves the poets of the human narrative without giving way to the agency of nonhuman systems – will lead to the gruesome expulsion of humans from the world, a world which now more than ever shows that it will change with or without us. Envisioning ourselves *imprudens* would contribute to an attitude towards nonhuman systems that incorporates the possibility of future changes in bodily configurations. The *Metamorphoses* reminds us that we are merely human. Our beings are unfixed and we are constantly liable to change. We must embrace our existence as morphisms and transact with the world accordingly.

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