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**REVIVAL AND METAMORPHOSES OF THE GODS
IN NINETEENTH CENTURY ART AND LITERATURE**

by

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LECTURE III

THE AWAKENING OF THE CENTAUR

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My main purpose to-day is to introduce you to a text which is considered – quite rightly – as one of the most beautiful in French prose: Maurice de Guérin's *LE CENTAURE*.

We must first go back to the origin of the Centaur's legend; we must also make a rapid survey of the fortune of these mythological beings in art.

The father of the first centaur was Ixion, who had been bold enough to try and seduce Hera, the wife of the great Zeus himself; upon which the indignant Zeus modeled a cloud in the shape of Hera. Ixion then made love to the cloud, thinking that he was embracing the goddess. The result of this strange copulation was a creature half human, half animal: the centaur, who was really born of an illusion.

His posterity as a whole became notorious for its brutal behaviour. [*Seznec introduces exceptions: notably Chiron.*]

Some centaurs were invited to a wedding – the wedding of Pirithous, King of the Lapiths, with Hippodamia. They made trouble. Intoxicated with wine, they tried to rape all the women, including the bride. Hence a fierce battle between them and the Lapiths, who finally drove them away. • Episodes of the battle appear on the metopes of the Parthenon. Keats, who went to see the Elgin marbles with Haydon in March 1817, describes some of these metopes. "... that divine form, grappling his enemy by the throat, preparing to annihilate him; ... • the one who presses forward, while he dashes back his opponent with tendinous vigour, as if lightning flashed

through his frame; ... ● the one in all the loosened relaxation of death under the legs of the Centaur, who prances in triumph.”

● If you now want to get a general view of the battle, or rather of the *mêlée*, have a look at Piero di Cosimo’s almost facetious picture. ● This is the wounded Centaur, by Filippino Lippi – but he has not been wounded in the battle: he was struck by the arrow of Love, who was hiding in a grotto.

The centaurs, as you already know, were keen at ravishing women. ● Here, on another of the Parthenon metopes, is a female Lapith being carried away. It is a Centaur, Nessus, who abducted Hercules’ own wife Deianira. ● Here she is, with her abductor, this time in a medieval sculpture: mythological figures keep reappearing during the middle ages in the most unexpected places. This centaur and his victim are to be found on a colonnette decorating one of the portals of the Chartres Cathedral.

● Here they are once more, in a more impetuous style, in a painting by Guido Reni.

● We now come to a somewhat mysterious picture: *Pallas and the Centaur*, by Botticelli in the Uffizi gallery. It was once interpreted, wrongly, as a political allegory – an allusion to the conspiracy of the Pazzi, and to the defeat of their plot. Pallas’ attitude is strange; so is the Centaur’s suffering expression – the sad gaze he turns upon the goddess. The key to the picture is to be found in Poliziano, who defines in these terms the position of man between the animal and God: Pallas was born from the exalted head of Jupiter. How can we, men, ever attain the summits where she dwells? We can do it only after having mounted to the head of the soul, the *intellect*, leaving behind us the lower regions. Now the centaur, like man, partakes of both natures. Through his animal urges he is a *bestia* (his bow and arrows are emblems of these urges); but Pallas, the embodiment of divine mission takes him gently by the head, in a gesture of domination, to still his fretful emotion, and lead him on his way – and he does not resist: he abandons himself to her guidance. No struggle, no strife – except within the monster himself: a divided creature like man – divided between the sensual and the rational parts of his soul. In its lower part the soul is still wedded to the body: no mortal mind can leave matter behind without divine assistance from above.

Now is the time to look at the *female* centaurs, the Centaurelles.

● One dream of Renaissance artists was to deal with subjects which had been treated by the most famous painters of Antiquity, Apelles and Zeuxis. Their pictures are lost, but they have been described in detail by writers who had seen them, such as Philostrates and Lucian. Renaissance artists, therefore, could hope to *reconstruct* these masterpieces. A well known example is Botticelli’s recreation of an allegorical painting by Apelles: Calumny, preceded by Envy, Intrigue and Deception, and followed by Repentance and Truth, drags her victim before a man with large ears, attended by Ignorance and Superstition.

This comes straight from Lucian, who, in a text entitled: *Slander, A Warning*, describes the pictures in the minutest detail.

- Of special interest for us are the reliefs that decorate the judge's pedestal – for this is where the centaresses appear. Botticelli borrowed them not from Apelles' picture, but from a picture by Zeuxis, also described by Lucian.

- Here it is, in a book which appeared in Paris in 1615: *Les Images ou Tableaux de platte peinture des deux Philostrates, représentées en taille-douce par Antoine Caron, gravées par Léonard Gaultier*. You will see how closely the XVIIth century illustrator has followed the text of Lucian.

“I want to give you an example from a painter. Zeuxis, that pre-eminent artist, avoided painting popular and hackneyed themes as far as he could (I mean heroes, gods, wars); he was always aiming at novelty, and whenever he thought up something unheard-of and strange he showed the precision of his craftsmanship by depicting it. Among the bold innovations of this Zeuxis was his painting of a female Hippocentaur, one moreover that was feeding twin Hippocentaur children, no more than babies. There is a copy of this picture now at Athens made with strict accuracy from the original. Sulla, the Roman commander, was said to have sent off the original with his other trophies to Italy, but I suppose the ship then sank off Malta with the loss of all its cargo, including the painting. However that may be, I saw the copy of the painting and will describe it to you as far as I can, though I am certainly no artist. I remember it quite well, as I saw it not long ago in the house of a painter in Athens. The intense admiration I felt at the time for the craftsmanship will perhaps help me in my endeavour to give you a full description.

The Centaur herself is depicted lying on fresh young grass with all the horse part of her on the ground. Her feet are stretched behind her. The human part is slightly raised up on her elbows. Her fore-feet are not now stretched out, as you might expect with one lying on her side; one foot is bent with the hoof drawn under her like one who kneels, while the other, on the other hand, is beginning to straighten and is taking a grip on the ground, as is the case with horses striving to spring up. She holds one of her offspring aloft in her arms, giving it the breast in human fashion; the other she suckles from her mare's teat like an animal. Towards the top of the picture, apparently on some vantage point, is a Hippocentaur, clearly the husband of her who is feeding her children in two ways. He is leaning down and laughing. He is not completely visible, but only to a point halfway down his horse body. He holds aloft in his right hand a lion's whelp, suspending it above his head to frighten the children in his fun.” [Loeb ed.]

The female centaurs were to survive in art well into the XIXth century. • In 1868, Eugène Fromentin, the critic and novelist, the author of *Les maîtres d'autrefois* and of *Dominique*, who was also a painter, exhibited at the Salon *Centaures et Centaresses tirant de l'arc*. The critics were surprised, and wondered about the acceptability of such subjects in the modern world.

- After galloping through the centuries, the centaur's feet were worn; he had to go to the shoeing-smith. This is what he does in this picture by Boecklin, much to the surprise of the people of the village.

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But other XIXth century artists had already given him back his youthful robustness. ● This drawing by Géricault is a case in point; ● so in Barye's *Theseus and the Centaur*. (Theseus was one of the fighters on the side of the Lapiths in the famous battle.) This superb bronze is almost worthy of being compared with the Parthenon's metopes.

● The most striking example is perhaps Delacroix's *Centaur*, which appears in one of the decorative frescoes in the Senate Library, illustrating the birth of civilization. The Centaur has ventured out of his native forest. He is now on the edge of the woods, and for the first time he faces the world of men. He hesitates: is he coming into that world, or should he go back to the wilderness? His perplexity is powerfully expressed by his sudden halting.

Now at last we come to the posthumous work of a young man, who died – almost unknown – in 1839 – he was then 29 years old: Maurice de Guérin.

In 1840, *Le Centaure* was published (by George Sand) in *La Revue des deux mondes*. A few pages only – but, as Sainte-Beuve wrote, “nothing is so powerful as this dream of a few pages; nothing is more perfect and more classical in execution.” Ever since, *Le Centaure* has not ceased to excite an admiration which echoes through French literature from Sainte-Beuve to Rimbaud, Mallarmé, Valéry, Claudel, Mauriac ..., and not only through French literature. Matthew Arnold, in his *Essays on Criticism*, Rainer Maria Rilke have hailed it as a supreme masterpiece.

This is how Matthew Arnold, who translated it, presented it to the British readers:

“The beauty of Guérin's *Centaur* is extraordinary; in its whole conception and expression, this piece has at a wonderful degree a natural magic, and the rhythm has a charm which bewitches even a foreigner.”

In the meantime scholars and exegetes have piled up, on these few pages, an entire library.

Le Centaure should help us to answer the question which I raised yesterday, at the end of the lecture: Can the gods be revived by learning? Can they be conjured up by archaeology?

Guérin's *Centaur* certainly is throbbing with life. But where does that story come from – the simple story of an old centaur, on his mountain, relating to Melampus, a human questioner, the life of his youth?

Some critics, searching everywhere for the sources, both plastic and literary, of the text, have taken the view that it is a learned work – almost a work of erudition.

According to friend of Guérin, Trébutien, a learned antiquarian, the idea of his composition came to him in the course of their visits to the Museum of Antiquities in the Louvre. Following this lead, abbé Decahors has tried to identify the reliefs, the statues, the sarcophagi which might have served as models to Guérin. He has also listed the Greek and Latin authors read by Guérin, particularly Pausanias, but also Apollodorus, Homer, Hesiod, Plutarch, Lucretius, Ovid.

In short, the text of *Le Centaure*, according to Decahors, is a sort of mosaic, composed of many fragments so skillfully pieced together as to make erudition invisible.

Another critic, Bernard d'Harcourt, completely disagrees; the true sources, he claims, are neither literary nor plastic: they are in Guérin's own soul. *Le Centaure* is really a sort of transfigured autobiography – or even a confession. D'Harcourt's view is supported by Guérin's intimate diaries.

In other words, Guérin has appropriated the myth: he has made it his own. The accent of the poem is indeed unmistakable. What you perceive in it is quivering, a pulsation, as if one could hear Guérin breathing – this accounts, in fact, for the alternate rhythm of his prose. [Note: *Seznec, retranscribing the text with a view to publication wrote: One may also perceive, in that rhythm, an alternation of moods from the dreamy to the sensuous. The Centaur himself reminds us of his dual nature: he was generated by an audacious man in the womb of a cloud in the shape of a goddess, "engendré par un mortel audacieux dans le sein d'une vapeur semblable à une déesse."*]

The best thing for me to do in conclusion, perhaps, is to offer you a few samples from the text. Matthew Arnold claimed that it was untranslatable – yet, his own translation has retained something of its magic. I will read you two passages of it – then, the original French.

"The course of my youth was rapid and full of agitation. Movement was my life.... and I, wandering along at my own will like the rivers, feeling wherever I went the presence of Cybele, whether in the bed of the valleys, or on the height of the mountains, I bounded whither I would, like a blind and chainless life. But when Night, filled with the charm of the gods, overtook me on the slopes of the mountain, she guided me to the mouth of the caverns, and there tranquilised me as she tranquilises the billows of the sea. Stretched across the threshold of my retreat, my flanks hidden within the cave, and my head under the open sky, I watched the spectacle of the dark. The sea-gods, it is said, quit during the hours of darkness their palaces under the deep; they seat themselves on the promontories, and their eyes wander over the expanse of the waves. Even so I kept watch, having at my feet an expanse of life like the hushed sea. My regards had free range, and traveled to the most distant points. Like sea-beaches which never lose their wetness, the line of mountains to the west retained the imprint of gleams not perfectly wiped out by the shadows. In that quarter still survived, in pale clearness, mountain-summits naked and pure. There I beheld at one time the god Pan descend, ever solitary; at another, the choir of the mystic divinities; or I saw pass some mountain nymph charm-struck by the night. Sometimes the eagles of Mount Olympus traversed the upper sky, and were lost to view among the far-off constellations, or in the shade of the dreaming forests." [Arnold, 117–18]

La jeunesse est semblable aux forêts verdoyantes tourmentées par les vents : elle agite de tous côtés les riches présents de la vie ... Vivant avec l'abandon des fleuves, respirant sans cesse Cybèle, soit dans le lit des vallées, soit à la cime des montagnes, je bondissais partout comme une vie aveugle et déchaînée. Mais lorsque la nuit, remplie du calme des dieux, me trouvait sur le penchant des monts, elle me conduisait à l'entrée des cavernes et m'y apaisait comme elle apaise les vagues de la mer, laissant survivre en moi de légères ondulations qui écartaient le sommeil sans altérer mon repos. Couché sur le seuil de ma retraite, les flancs cachés dans

l'ancre et la tête sous le ciel, je suivais le spectacle des ombres... On dit que les dieux marins quittent durant les ombres leurs palais profonds et, s'asseyant sur les promontoires, étendent leurs regards sur les flots. Ainsi je veillais ayant à mes pieds une étendue de vie semblable à la mer assoupie.... Mes regards couraient librement et gagnaient les points les plus éloignés. Comme des rivages toujours humides le cours des montagnes du couchant demeurait empreint de lueurs mal essuyées par les ombres. Là survivaient, dans les clartés pâles, des sommets nus et purs. Là je voyais descendre tantôt le dieu Pan, toujours solitaire, tantôt le chœur des divinités secrètes, ou passer quelque nymphe des montagnes enivrée par la nuit. Quelquefois les aigles du mont Olympe traversaient le haut du ciel et s'évanouissaient dans les constellations reculées ou sous les bois inspirés. [Guérin, 28–30, 33–35]

The Centaur, as I am sure you realize, has been resurrected through personal feeling, pantheistic emotion.

Next time we shall witness another pagan resurrection, achieved through other means – that of the goddess Isis.