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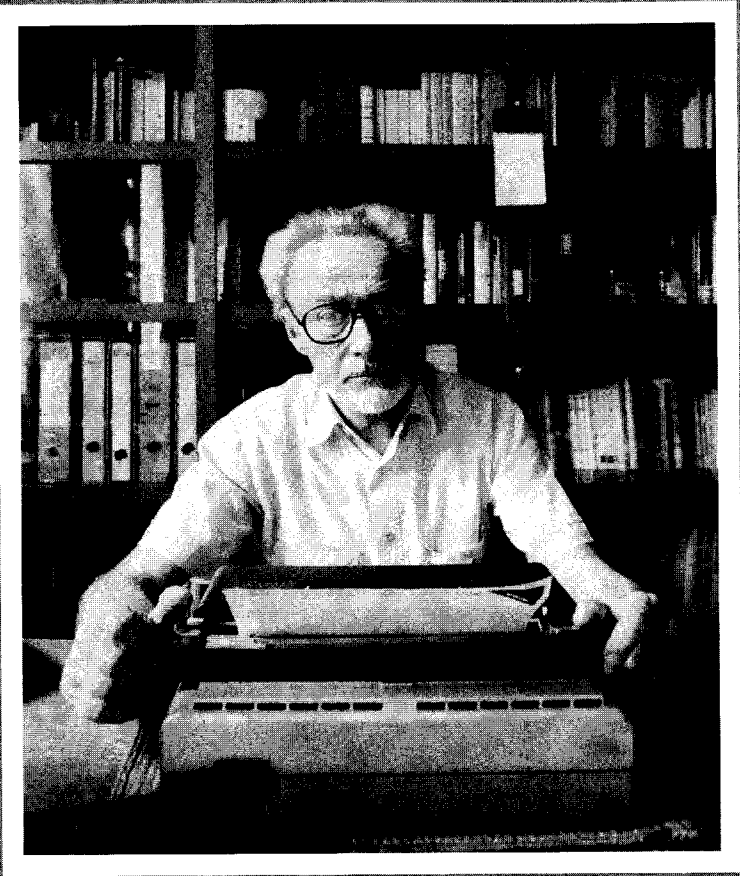
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The Complete Works of  
Primo Levi

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*Quaestio de Centauris*

*et quae sit iis potandi, comedendi et nubendi ratio. Et fuit debatuta per X hebdomadas inter vesanum auctorem et ejusdem sodales perpetuos G.L. et L.N.*

My father kept him in a stall, because he didn't know where else to keep him. He had been given to him by a friend, a sea captain, who said he had bought him in Salonika: I, however, learned from him directly that he was born in Colophon.

They had strictly forbidden me to go anywhere near him because, they said, he was easily angered and would kick. But from my direct experience I can confirm that this was an old superstition; so from adolescence I never paid much attention to the prohibition and, actually, especially in the winter, I spent many memorable hours with him, and other wonderful times in the summer, when Trachi (this was his name) with his own hands put me on his back and took off at a mad gallop toward the woods on the hills.

He had learned our language fairly easily, but retained a slight Levantine accent. Despite his two hundred and sixty years, his appearance was youthful, both in his human aspects and in those equine. What I will relate here is the fruit of our long conversations.

. . .

The centaurs' origins are legendary; but the legends that they pass down among themselves are very different from those we consider to be classic.

Remarkably, their traditions also begin with a highly intelligent man, a Noah-like inventor and saviour, whom they call Cutnofeset. But there were no centaurs on Cutnofeset's ark. Nor, by the way, were there "seven pairs of every species of clean beast, and a pair of every species of the beasts that are not clean." The centaurian tradition is more rational than the Biblical, recounting that only the archetypal animals, the key species, were saved: man but not the monkey; the horse but not the donkey or the wild ass; the rooster and the crow but not the vulture or the hoopoe or the gyrfalcon.

How, then, did these species come about? Immediately afterward, legend says. When the waters retreated, a deep layer of warm mud covered the earth. Now, this mud, which harbored in its decay all the enzymes from what had perished in the flood, was extraordinarily fertile: as soon as it was touched by the sun, it was immediately covered in shoots from which grasses and plants of every type sprang forth; and even more, within its soft and moist bosom, it was host to the marriages of all the species saved in the ark. It was a time, never again to be repeated, of wild, ecstatic fecundity in which the entire universe felt love, so much so that it nearly returned to chaos.

Those were the days in which the earth itself fornicated with the sky, in which everything germinated and everything was fruitful. Not only every marriage but every union, every contact, every encounter, even fleeting, even between different species, even between beasts and stones, even between plants and stones, was fertile, and produced offspring not in a few months but in a few days. The sea of warm mud, which concealed the cold and prudish face of the earth, was a single immense nuptial bed, boiling over with desire in all its recesses, and teeming with jubilant germs.

This second creation was the true Creation; because, according to what is passed down among the centaurs, there is no other way to explain certain analogies, certain convergences observed by all. Why is

the dolphin similar to the fish, and yet gives birth and nurses its offspring? Because it's the child of a tuna fish and a cow. Where do the delicate colors of butterflies and their ability to fly come from? They are the children of a flower and a fly. And tortoises are the children of a frog and a rock. And bats of an owl and a mouse. And conchs of a snail and a polished pebble. And hippopotami of a horse and a river. And vultures of a worm and an owl. And the big whales, the leviathans, how else to explain their immense mass? Their wooden bones, their black and oily skin, and their fiery breath are living testimony to a venerable union in which this same primordial mud got greedy hold of the ark's feminine keel, made of gopher wood and covered inside and out with shiny pitch, when the end of all flesh had been decreed.

Such was the origin of every form, whether living today or extinct: dragons and chameleons, chimeras and harpies, crocodiles and minotaurs, elephants and giants, whose petrified bones are still found today, to our amazement, in the heart of the mountains. And so it was for the centaurs themselves, since in this festival of origins, in this panspermia, the few survivors of the human family had also taken part.

Notably, Cam, the profligate son, took part: the first generation of centaurs originated in his wild passion for a Thessalian horse. From the beginning, their progeny were noble and strong, preserving the best of both human nature and equine. They were at once wise and courageous, generous and shrewd, good at hunting and at singing, at waging war and at observing the heavens. It seemed, in fact, as happens with the most felicitous unions, that the virtues of the parents were magnified in their progeny, since, at least in the beginning, they were more powerful and faster racers than their Thessalian mothers, and a good deal wiser and more cunning than black Cam and their other human fathers. This would also explain, according to some, their longevity; though others have instead attributed this to their eating habits, which I will come to in a moment. Or it could simply be a projection across time of their great vitality, and this I, too, believe resolutely (and the story I am about to tell attests to it): that in hereditary terms the herbivore power of the horse does not count as much as the red blindness of the bloody and forbidden spasm, the moment of human-feral fullness in which they were conceived.

Whatever we may think of this, anyone who has carefully considered the centaurs' classical traditions cannot help noticing that centaresses are never mentioned. As I learned from Trachi, they do not in fact exist.

The man-mare union, today, moreover, fertile only in rare cases, produces and only ever has produced male centaurs, for which there must be a fundamental reason, though at present it eludes us. As for the inverse of the unions, between stallions and women, these occur very rarely at any point in time, and furthermore come about through the solicitation of dissolute women, who by nature are not particularly inclined to procreate.

In the exceptional cases in which fertilization is successful in these very rare unions, a female bi-part offspring is produced: her two natures, however, inversely assembled. The creatures have the head, neck, and front feet of a horse, but their back and stomach are those of a human female, and the hind legs are human.

During his long life Trachi encountered very few of them, and he assured me that he felt no attraction to these squalid monsters. They are not "proud and nimble," but insufficiently vital; they are infertile, idle, and transient; they do not become familiar with man or learn to obey his commands, but live miserably in the densest forests, not in herds but in rural solitude. They feed on grass and berries, and when they are surprised by a man they have the curious habit of always presenting themselves to him headfirst, as if embarrassed by their human half.

Trachi was born in Colophon of a secret union between a man and one of the numerous Thessalian horses that are still wild on the island. I am afraid that among the readers of these notes some may refuse to believe these assertions, since official science, permeated as it is still today with Aristotelianism, denies the possibility of a fertile union between different species. But official science often lacks humility: such unions are, indeed, generally infertile; but how often has evidence been sought? Not more than a few dozen times. And has it been sought among all the innumerable possible couplings? Certainly not. Since I have no reason to doubt what Trachi has told me about himself, I

must therefore encourage the incredulous to consider that there are more things in heaven and on earth than are dreamed of in our philosophy.

He lived mostly in solitude, left to himself, which was the common destiny of all like him. He slept in the open, standing on all four hooves, with his head on his arms, which he would lean against a low branch or a rock. He grazed in the island's fields and glades, or gathered fruit from branches; on the hottest days he would go down to one of the deserted beaches, and there he would bathe, swimming like a horse, with his chest and head erect, and then would gallop for a long while, violently churning up the wet sand.

But the bulk of his time, in every season, was devoted to food: in fact, during the forays that Trachi frequently undertook in the vigor of his youth among the barren cliffs and gorges of his native island, he always, following an instinct for prudence, brought along, tucked under his arms, two large bundles of grass or foliage, gathered in times of rest.

Even if centaurs are limited to a strictly vegetarian diet by their predominantly equine constitution, it must be remembered that they have a torso and head like a man's: this structure obliges them to introduce through a small human mouth the considerable quantity of grass, straw, or grain necessary to the sustenance of their large bodies. These foods, notably of limited nutritional value, also require long mastication, since human teeth are badly adapted to the grinding of forage.

In conclusion, the centaurs' nourishment is a laborious process; by physical necessity, they are required to spend three-quarters of their time chewing. This fact is not lacking in authoritative testimonials, first and foremost that of Ucalegon of Samos (*Dig. Phil.*, XXIV, II-8 and XLIII *passim*), who attributes the centaurs' proverbial wisdom to their alimentary regimen, consisting of one continuous meal from dawn to dusk; this would deter them from other vain or baleful activities, such as avidity for riches or gossip, and would contribute to their usual self-restraint. Nor was this unknown to Bede, who mentions it in his *Historia ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum*.<sup>1</sup>

It is rather strange that the classical mythological tradition neglected

1. *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*.

this characteristic of centaurs. The truth of the fact, however, rests on reliable evidence, and moreover, as we have shown, it can be deduced by a simple consideration of natural philosophy.

To return to Trachi: his education was, by our criteria, strangely fragmentary. He learned Greek from the island's shepherds, whose company he sought out now and again, despite his taciturn and shy nature. From his own observations he also learned many subtle and intimate things about grasses, plants, forest animals, water, clouds, stars, and planets; and I myself noticed that, even after his capture and under a foreign sky, he could feel the approach of a gale or the imminence of a snowstorm many hours before it actually arrived. Though I couldn't describe how, nor could he do so himself, he also felt the grain growing in the fields, he felt the pulse of water in underground streams, and he sensed the erosion of flooded rivers. When De Simone's cow gave birth two hundred meters away from us, he felt a reflex in his own gut; the same thing happened when the tenant farmer's daughter gave birth. In fact, on a spring evening he indicated to me that a birth must be taking place and, more precisely, in a particular corner of the hayloft; we went there and found that a bat had just brought into the world six blind little monsters, and was feeding them minuscule portions of her milk.

All centaurs are made this way, he told me, feeling every germination, animal, human, or vegetable, as a wave of joy running through their veins. They also perceive, on a precordial level, and in the form of anxiety and tremulous tension, every desire and every sexual encounter that occurs in their vicinity; therefore, even though usually chaste, they enter into a state of vivid agitation during the season of love.

**W**e lived together for a long time: in some ways, it could be said that we grew up together. Despite his advanced age, he was actually a young creature in everything he said and did, and he learned things so easily that it seemed useless (not to mention awkward) to send him to school. I educated him myself, almost without realizing it or wanting to, passing on to him in turn the knowledge that I learned from my teachers day after day.

We kept him hidden as much as possible, owing, in part, to his own explicit desire and, in part, to a form of exclusive and jealous affection that we all felt for him, and, in yet another part, a combination of rationality and intuition that advised us to shield him from all unnecessary contact with our human world.

Naturally, his presence among us had leaked out among the neighbors. At first, they asked a lot of questions, some not very discreet, but then, as will happen, their curiosity diminished from lack of nourishment. A few of our intimate friends were admitted into his presence, the first of whom were the De Simones, and they swiftly became his friends, too. Only once, when a horsefly bite provoked a painful abscess in his rump, did we require the skill of a veterinarian; but he was an understanding and discreet man, who most scrupulously promised to keep this professional secret and, as far as I know, kept his promise.

Things went differently with the blacksmith. Nowadays, blacksmiths are unfortunately very rare: we found one two hours away by foot and he was a yokel, stupid and brutish. My father tried in vain to persuade him to maintain a certain reserve, which included paying him tenfold as much as was due for his services. It made no difference; every Sunday at the tavern he gathered a crowd around him and told the entire village about his strange client. Luckily, he liked his wine, and was in the habit of telling tall tales when he was drunk, so he wasn't taken too seriously.

**I**t pains me to write this story. It is a story from my youth, and I feel as if in writing it I were expelling it from myself, and that later I will feel deprived of something strong and pure.

One summer Teresa De Simone, my childhood friend and cohort, returned to her parents' house. She had gone to the city to study; I hadn't seen her for many years, I found her changed, and the change troubled me. Maybe I had fallen in love, but with little consciousness of it: what I mean is, I did not admit it to myself, not even hypothetically. She was rather lovely, shy, calm, and serene.

As I have already mentioned, the De Simones were among the few

neighbors whom we saw with some regularity. They knew Trachi and loved him.

After Teresa's return, we spent a long evening together, just the three of us. It was one of those rare evenings never to be forgotten: the moon, the crickets, the intense smell of hay, the air still and warm. We heard singing in the distance, and suddenly Trachi began to sing, without looking at us, as if in a dream. It was a long song, its rhythm bold and strong, with words I didn't know. A Greek song, Trachi said; but when we asked him to translate it, he turned his head away and became silent.

We were all silent for a long time; then Teresa went home. The following morning, Trachi drew me aside and said this:

"Oh, my dearest friend, my hour has come: I have fallen in love. That woman has got inside of me, and possesses me. I desire to see her and hear her, perhaps even touch her, and nothing else; I therefore desire something impossible. I am reduced to one point: there is nothing left of me except for this desire. I am changing, I have changed, I have become another."

He told me other things as well, which I hesitate to write, because I feel it's very unlikely that my words will do him justice. He told me that, since the previous night, he felt that he had become "a battlefield"; that he understood, as he never had understood before, the exploits of his violent ancestors, Nessus, Pholus; that his entire human half was crammed with dreams, with noble, courtly, and vain fantasies, and he wanted to perform reckless feats, to do justice with the strength of his own arms, raze to the ground the densest forests with his vehemence, run to the edges of the earth, discover and conquer new lands, and create there the works of a fertile civilization. All of this, in a way that was obscure even to himself, he wanted to perform before the eyes of Teresa De Simone: to do it for her, to dedicate it to her. Finally, he realized the vanity of his dreams in the very act of dreaming them, and this was the content of the song of the previous evening, a song he had learned long ago during his adolescence in Colophon, and which he had never understood and never sung until now.

For many weeks nothing else happened; we saw the De Simones

every so often, but Trachi's behavior revealed nothing of the storm that raged inside him. It was I, and none other, who provoked the breakdown.

One October evening, Trachi was at the blacksmith's. I met Teresa, and we went for a walk together in the woods. We talked, and of who else but Trachi? I didn't betray my friend's confidence; but I did worse.

I quickly realized that Teresa was not as shy as she initially appeared to be: she chose, as if by chance, a narrow path that led into the thickest part of the woods; I knew it was a dead end, and knew that Teresa knew. Where the path came to an end, she sat down on dry leaves and I did the same. The valley belltower rang out seven times, and she pressed up against me in a way that rid me of all doubt. By the time we got home night had fallen, but Trachi hadn't yet returned.

I realized immediately that I had behaved badly; actually, I realized it during the act itself, and still today it pains me. Yet I also know that the fault is not all mine, nor is it Teresa's. Trachi was with us: we had immersed ourselves in his aura, we had gravitated into his field. I know this because I myself had seen that wherever he passed flowers bloomed before their time, and their pollen flew in the wind of his wake as he ran.

Trachi didn't return. Over the following days, we laboriously reconstructed the rest of his story based upon witnesses' accounts and his tracks.

After a night of anxious waiting for all of us, and for me of secret torment, I went to look for him myself at the blacksmith's. The blacksmith wasn't at home: he was at the hospital with a cracked skull; he was unable to speak. I found his assistant. He told me that Trachi had come at about six o'clock to get shoed. He was silent and sad, but tranquil. Without showing any impatience, he let himself be chained as usual (the uncivilized practice of this particular blacksmith: years earlier he had had a bad experience with a skittish horse, and we had, in vain, tried to convince him that this precaution was in every way absurd with regard to Trachi). Three of his hooves had already been shoed when a long and violent shudder coursed through him. The blacksmith turned upon him

with that harsh tone often used on horses; as Trachi's agitation seemed to increase, the blacksmith struck him with a whip.

Trachi seemed to calm down, "but his eyes were rolling around as if he were mad, and he seemed to be hearing voices." Suddenly, with a furious tug, Trachi pulled the chains from their wall mounts, and the end of one hit the blacksmith in the head, sending him to the floor in a faint. Trachi then threw himself against the door with all his weight, headfirst, his arms crossed over his head, and galloped off toward the hills while the four chains, still constricting his legs, whirled around, wounding him repeatedly.

"What time did this happen?" I asked, disturbed by a presentiment.

The assistant hesitated: it was not yet night, but he couldn't say precisely. But then, yes, now he remembered: just a few seconds before Trachi pulled the chains from the wall the time had rung from the belltower, and the boss said to him, in dialect so that Trachi wouldn't understand: "It's already seven o'clock! If all my clients were as *currish* as this one . . ."

Seven o'clock!

It wasn't difficult, unfortunately, to follow Trachi's furious flight; even if no one had seen him, there were conspicuous traces of the blood he had lost, and the scrapes made by the chains on tree trunks and on rocks by the side of the road. He hadn't headed toward home, or toward the De Simones': he had cleared the two-meter wooden fence that surrounds the Chiapasso property, and crossed the vineyards in a blind fury, making a path for himself through the rows of vines, in a straight line, knocking down stakes and vines, breaking the thick iron wires that held up the vine branches.

He reached the barnyard and found the barn door bolted shut from the outside. He easily could have opened it with his hands; instead, he picked up an old thresher, weighing well over fifty kilos, and hurled it against the door, reducing it to splinters. Only six cows, a calf, chickens, and rabbits were in the barn. Trachi left immediately and, still in a mad gallop, headed toward Baron Cagliari's estate.

It was at least six and a half kilometers away, on the other side of the valley, but Trachi got there in a matter of minutes. He looked for the stable: he didn't find it with his first blow, but only after he used his hooves



and shoulders to knock down many doors. What he did in the stable we know from an eyewitness, a stableboy, who, at the sound of the door shattering, had had the good sense to hide in the hay, and from there he had seen everything.

Trachi hesitated for a moment on the threshold, panting and bloody. The horses, unsettled, shook their heads, tugging on their halters. Trachi pounced on a three-year-old white mare; in one blow he broke the chain that bound her to the trough, and dragging her by this same chain led her outside. The mare didn't put up any resistance; strange, the stableboy told me, since she had a rather skittish and reluctant character, nor was she in heat.

They galloped together as far as the river: here Trachi was seen to stop, cup his hands, dip them into the water, and drink repeatedly. They then proceeded side by side into the woods. Yes, I followed their tracks: into those same woods and along that same path, to that same place where Teresa had asked me to take her.

And it was right there, for that entire night, that Trachi must have celebrated his monstrous nuptials. There I found the ground dug up, broken branches, brown and white horsehair, human hair, and more blood. Not far away, drawn by the sound of her troubled breathing, I found the mare. She lay on the ground on her side, gasping, her noble coat covered with dirt and grass. Hearing my footsteps she lifted her head a little, and followed me with the terrible stare of a spooked horse. She was not wounded, but exhausted. She gave birth eight months later to a foal: in every way normal, I was told.

Here Trachi's direct traces vanish. But, as perhaps some may remember, over the following days the newspapers reported on a strange series of horse-rustlings, all perpetrated with the same technique: a door knocked down, the halter undone or ripped off, the animal (always a mare, and always alone) led into some nearby wood, and then found exhausted. Only once did the abductor seem to meet with any resistance: his chance companion of that night was found dying, her neck broken.

There were six of these episodes, and they were reported in various places on the peninsula, occurring one after the other from north to south. In Voghera, in Lucca, near Lake Bracciano, in Sulmona, in Ceri-

gnola. The last happened near Lecce. Then nothing else; but perhaps this story is linked to a strange report made to the press by a fishing crew from Puglia: just off Corfu they had come upon "a man riding a dolphin." This odd apparition swam vigorously toward the east; the sailors shouted at it, at which point the man and the gray rump sank under the water, disappearing from view.