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**UNDERRATED MYTHOLOGY OF THE  
UNDERRATED—REFLECTIONS ON ZBIGNIEW  
HERBERT'S *THE KING OF THE ANTS* OR A TRAGIC  
ATTEMPT TO TAME THE CRUELTY OF GODS**

*The King of the Ants* (*Król mrówek*) was published three years after Herbert's death. The extended title of the book was *Private Mythology* (*Prywatna mitologia*). This anthology was published first in English. Herbert was working on a larger Polish edition, but he did not complete it. It was finally shaped by the editor, Ryszard Krynicki, after Herbert's death. The generic classification of texts of which this anthology is composed (these texts had earlier been published in periodicals) creates considerable problems. For example, Paweł Czapczyk called Herbert's narratives quasi-essays or texts of poetic prose. Jacek Łukasiewicz, on the other hand, used the term 'mythological apocrypha', and this term seems to describe best the sense of the texts collected in this anthology—they are grounded in the ancient traditions, but Herbert treated Greek texts and archetypical variants as pretexts to comment on contemporary issues. In this volume he tried to ask very important questions from philosophy, literature, ethics and politics. He did not always answer them, because, after all, we do not have to answer all questions—sometimes it is more important and useful just to meditate on a problem. He was concerned mostly about what he had earlier called "testing all ideas of mankind". It seems that it is also a task for Herbert's implied readers: to ponder old texts to better understand ourselves and our times. The time which has passed since antiquity has freed us from superfluous emotions which falsify truth.

Herbert's anthology adds to a set of books about the myths and ideas of Greeks and Romans which are available in Polish, such as: Tadeusz Zieliński's *Starożytność bajeczna* (*Fabulous Antiquity*), Jan Parandowski's *Mitologia* (*Mythology*), Zbigniew Kubiak's *Mitologia Greków i Rzymian* (*Mythology of Greeks and Romans*), Irena Parandowska's *Ze świata mitów* (*From the World of Myths*), Stanisław Stebryła's *Mitologia dla dorosłych* (*Mythology for Adults*) and Jerzy Ciechanowicz's *Priapea* (*Priapeia*). There are also available, on the Polish market, such translated anthologies as Robert Graves's *Greek Myths* and Karl Kerényi's *The Gods of the Greeks*.

As we can learn from the afterword of the editor of the Polish edition, Herbert at first wanted to call this anthology: *Atlas*. In the part which Krynicki entitled: "Utwory z kręgu «Króla mrówek» (nie dokończone lub zaniechane)" ("Texts from the circle of 'The King of the Ants' (unfinished or aborted)"): there is a text entitled "Wstęp do «Atlasa». Nota autobiograficzna" ("Introduction to 'Atlas'. Autobiographical Note"), which might be treated as Herbert's credo, an interpretative key to all his texts on mythology included in this anthology:

Mythology as it is was taught in school filled him with disgust, for it was the triumph of an anthropomorphic beast.  
 – he collected fossils, claw prints  
 – he hated the race of victors and his covenant with the vanquished seemed to him an inheritance  
 – from the mountain, the stream, the hunted insect, and the melancholy giant  
 – all his sympathy was directed towards weary and ambiguous heroes  
 He guessed at the hell of immortality, the flames that do not consume, the desert plateaus, the never ending incantations  
 They (the gods)  
 grant us a generous and thoughtless indifference, not understanding that we wait for punishment—as we do for grace  
 – he loved the monster and the injured man  
 – he loved the injured man

– was the knowledge of monster for him not propaedeutical to history?<sup>1</sup>

A careful reading of Herbert's writings and various possibilities of (often contradictory) interpretations must lead a reader to a problem which is not obvious at all: the problem of Herbert's own attitude to religion and the question of the divinity of the traditional gods of Greek culture. As Przemysław Czapliński aptly noted:

From the beginning of his writings Herbert has been challenging gods in a very specific way. This challenge probably started in the second volume, as few poems from the début volume *Struna światła* (*String of Light*) which were directed to ancient Gods ("Do Appolona" ("To Apollo"), "Do Ateny" ("To Athena)) are poetic confessions about the inability of recovering *sacrum* [...] While poems about antiquity from *String of Light* indicated a pole of unrealisable longing for the world of men overlooked by gods. The poem "U wrót doliny" ("At the Valley's Gateway") is set on the opposite pole; that of fear.<sup>2</sup>

It seems that in *The King of the Ants* it is the question about gods, semi-gods and ancient heroes which is crucial. Seen from a close perspective, they become 'anthropomorphic beasts', and their alleged divinity could be mostly seen in their violence. Herbert acted in a way similar to an ancient writer, Euhemerus, the author of *Hiera anagrafe*, whose name was used to coin the word 'euhemerization', which means explanation of things which are apparently beyond the human condition on earth, in terms which are fundamentally human. Euhemerus claimed that myths are not in any way stories about supernatural events, but that they are stories about people,

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<sup>1</sup> Zbigniew Herbert, *The King of the Ants*, transl. by John and Bogdana Carpenter, with additional translations by Alissa Valles, in *The Collected Prose, 1948-1998*, Harper Collins, New York, 2010, 389.

<sup>2</sup> Przemysław Czapliński, *Ironia mniejsza. Apokryfy mityczne Zbigniewa Herberta*, in *Portret z początku wieku. Twórczość Zbigniewa Herberta. Studia*, ed. by Wojciech Lięża, Magdalena Cicha, Lublin 2005, 287.

which were forgotten. According to him, Greek gods were kings, great and mighty it is true, but this did not change their status as mortals.

Herbert, through his specific reading of mythology, puts on it his own private signature, questioning the apparent necessity of fate. A similar phenomenon could be noticed in the writings of Lucian of Samosata (second century A.D.), who exposed ancient gods in satirical dialogues, showing them in indecent situations.

In his conversation with Renata Gorczyńska, Herbert explained, somewhat ironically:

Why do I like Greek mythology so much? Because it is something intermediate between the God of philosophers and the God of Plato and mostly of the God of Socrates, who is already para-Christian and prefigures the only God. And at the same time we have all these sexual and hunting stories, all these metamorphoses, in which the Greeks of the enlightened periods, I think, did not believe. They were more like rhetorical figures. I write such apocrypha in which gods complain that they are immortal. How much happier are people who have a finite way from here to there.<sup>3</sup>

However, we should not be deceived by Herbert's words. Herbert was not an apologist of the vision of the world represented in myths. He also was not, it seems, a devil's advocate, who treats myths with a pinch of salt as if they were sentimental romances. He did not want to create ornaments. He was an explorer and a prosecutor. That is why he was so fond of apocrypha, that is things which are not canonical, which are not sanctioned by an irrevocable verdict, not fixed in a petrified shape. Let Herbert speak once again.

The apocrypha as a literary form is of great interest to me. Texts have certain aporias. Imposing upon myself certain frames of reality, frames of historical narration, and filling with imagination what is permissible within the limits of imagination gives me a stronger conviction that it is worth something, worth more than a plot I cannot

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<sup>3</sup> *Sztuka empatii. Rozmawia Renata Gorczyńska, in Herbert nieznanym. Rozmowy*, [ed. by Henryk Citko], Warszawa 2008, 175.

conceive of. Probably it is the result of my inhibitions, maybe of my limited imagination. I must base it on concrete things.  
[...] using a form of historical narrative, it is easier for me to explain some truth or express some anxiety.<sup>4</sup>

Herbert knew that history is most often written by victors, and that is why he adopted the role of a detective searching for places the odour of inhumanly treated victims could be felt. It was his intention to show mythological stories from the perspective of losers, to reveal what the earlier mythologies (for example, Kubiak's or Parandowski's ones) assumed as axiomatic: that is imminence, inevitability, the definite nature of fate's verdicts—human fate decided earlier in a categorical and a priori way: Iphigenia had to be offered as a sacrifice, Antaues had to be killed, while Arachne and Niobe had to be punished for their pride. Herbert wrote: "In everything irreversible we have the tendency to see the interference of supernatural forces governing the world—in reality the matter can be completely explained in human categories."<sup>5</sup> Herbert, therefore, was strongly against the fossilized necessity of myths. He chose and showed the valour of: "the weak things of the world [...] the lowly things of this world and the despised things" (1 Cor 1, 27-28). Paweł Czapczyk wrote:

Paradoxical exposures, derisory denudations and antithetical juxtapositions, which result in full scale (not only mythological) re-evaluations are the favourite tools of Herbert and are often *differentia specifica* of his poems, poetic prose, dramas and even essays. Herbert was a writer of imagination which was too lively, maybe even eidetic, to be satisfied with existing plot schemata and simply non-ironic narrations which are their results.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Światło na murze. Rozmawia Marek Sołtysik, in *Herbert nieznan. Rozmowy, op. cit.*, 115.

<sup>5</sup> Herbert, *The King of the Ants*, op. cit., 338.

<sup>6</sup> Paweł Czapczyk, *Mitologia na nowo odczytana. Wokół prozy poetyckiej Zbigniewa Herberta*, „*Twórczość*” 2003, no. 4, 62.

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Gods, protagonists of mythology and impeccable heroes were presented in Herbert's apocrypha as deviants<sup>7</sup>. Cruel, ruthless, spiteful, and sometimes merely stupid creatures. However, Herbert was not a forerunner in this type of writing. Gods were presented in a similar manner by prominent representatives of the Athenian enlightenment of the 5-th century B.C., such as Euripides. His Dionysus, taking ruthless revenge on the family in *Bacchae* illustrates in a paradigmatic way the cruelty of gods: Pentheus, the king of Thebes dies a horrible death, his mother—and a killer in one, Agaue—must in a state of full, mind boggling consciousness, understand what she did, while Cadmus, the grandfather, must come to terms with the total destruction of the whole dynastic line. Cadmus asks Dionysus for mercy, but the verdict of the god of wine is inexorable. What is important is that lack of human compassion and mercy does not appear only at the end of *Bacchae*—Dionysus shows a total lack of understanding of human imperfectness and frailty throughout the entire drama.

Why, then, did Euripides and other representatives of the Athenian enlightenment, such as Xenophanes, who were critical of visions shown in the epic poems of Homer and Hesiod, decide to show gods as vengeful and nit-picking? The answer may lie in gods' very nature. Traditional Greek gods were anthropomorphic, both in their external outlook and in their emotions and features of character. Simultaneously, they were also personifications of the power of natural forces. Anthropomorphism, since the times of Homer, has been perceived (mostly by philosophers) as a serious problem. Granting emotions and virtues taken from humans makes conceptualization easier and is creative for the imagination. However, gods are immoral and are immune to human sufferings. This immunity of gods inevitably

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<sup>7</sup> "Gods, titans, heroes—O what a fascinating and rich gallery of psychological deviations. Their world swarms with monomaniacs, paranoiacs, melancholiacs, schizophrenics, not the mention such gentle deviations as alcoholics and erotomaniacs. Herbert, *The King of the Ants*, op. cit., 366.

leads to a lack of emotions and reflexes which are truly human, such as courage, altruism, sacrifice. These features cannot be ascribed to beings who have nothing to lose and who are unable to experience any form of absence. Thus, to a certain extent, the pettiness of gods is a part of the system.

Anthropomorphism, however, cannot account for gods' cruelty and lack of mercy in Euripides. They could be understood, when we take into account a different aspect of gods: the fact that they are personifications of natural forces. According to the ancient Greeks, nature cannot be appeased; pleas for mercy directed at forces of nature have very little sense. Also, there is no space here for Messianic denaturalization of gods and transcendence of the absolute. Werner Jaeger wrote:

The Greek gods are stationed inside the world ; they are descended from Heaven and Earth, the two greatest and most exalted parts of the universe; and they are generated by the mighty power of Eros, who likewise belongs within the world as an all-engendering primitive force. Thus they are already subject to what we should call natural law, even if the hypostatical mind of Hesiod represents this law as a god among gods rather than as one, all ruling principle [...]When Hesiod's thought at last gives way to truly philosophical thinking, the Divine is sought inside the world — not outside it, as in the Jewish-Christian theology that develops out of the book of Genesis.<sup>8</sup>

Agata Bielik-Robson claims that:

Greek religiosity—the one described by Nietzsche as 'tragic religion' [...] and the one described by Werner Jaeger in categories of 'pre-Socratic natural theology' is oriented towards myths: a certain holistic vision of being, which because it is a closed whole, strengthened by solid *arche* and closed *telos*, is unravelled as intrinsically diffused with holiness. Max Weber, and Mircea Eliade in Weber's footsteps, called it a religion of immanent sacrum; the characteristic feature of which

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<sup>8</sup> Werner Jaeger, *Philosophy of Early Greek Philosophers*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1947, 16-17.



is a fatalistic close shut, perfectness of the internal cycle, which is invariable in its rhythm of holy repetitions: *Genesis kaiphora*, that is of arising and perishing, determining an eternal return of the same, ceaseless pulse of Greek *physis*, the idea of which was still fascinating to Nietzsche and Heidegger.<sup>9</sup>

The nature of gods was one of many intellectual, religious and philosophical issues which were debated in Athens during its golden age. It might be tempting to claim that Euripides fully consciously moves beyond boundaries of anthropomorphism, while trying to make his own voice heard in the ongoing national debate. Euripides drew radical conclusions from the custom of treating gods in man's image and likeness, turning the idea around and making it seem absurd. He seemed to be saying that thoughtless anthropomorphism of gods would invariably lead to such 'final products' as Dionysus from *Bacchae*.

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Herbert, similarly to Euripides, avoided false and sentimental poetic language and apology of a dehumanizing order. The narrator of Herbert's apocrypha—with the consciousness of a man who has experienced two totalitarian regimes—red and brown, was thrown under the communist rule set up by the triumvirate of Yalta, a man disinherited from the order stamped by Homer, ancient epic writers, lyric poets and mythological playwrights—was aware that if you deduced from the narrated history an aura of fatality and read, as Levi-Strauss did, paradigmatically a mythologem after mythologem,<sup>10</sup> there would appear a bloody pulp of mythology with a long line of murders, lies, cruelties, treasons, faithlessness and revenge. Herbert,

<sup>9</sup> Agata Bielik-Robson, *Powrót mesjańskiej obietnicy, czyli nowoczesność w perspektywie postsekularnej*, w: *Filozofia. Ogląd, namysł, krytyka?*, ed. by Marcin Maria Bogusławski, Andrzej Kucner and Tomasz Sieczkowski, Olsztyn 2010, 45.

<sup>10</sup> Bogdan Troch has lately researched two mythologems, of a labyrinth and of a dragon, in Herbert's poetry in: *Mythopoeiczne aspekty liryki Zbigniewa Herberta*, in *Pojęcia kielkujące z rzeczy. Filozoficzne inspiracje twórczości Zbigniewa Herberta*, [ed. by Józef Maria Ruszar], Kraków 2010, 99-137.

however, picked up mythological tradition. But he read it against the grain. He added valour to these figures, who in traditionally told stories were devoid of the grace of voice. In Herbert's re-narration they were given back their distorted human countenance.

And so, for example, in "Historia Minotaura" ("Minotaur's History") Herbert challenged all earlier narrations and versions of the myth, referring to the script linear A, which has not been deciphered yet. He told us who Minotaur really was and reconstructed the real, according to the narrator's sequence of events.<sup>11</sup>

We must be aware that in this and in other reinterpretations and reconstructions Herbert was not so much concerned with reaching for the apparently existing structure, which would from the deep and very deep level affect the surface structure, dominating it completely. Herbert was not a structuralist handyman, creating a collage out of existing elements, reconstructing a hypothetical, binary picture of the world. Therefore, he did not, in the manner of structuralists, create syntagmatic chains made out of mythemes, and did not group them in paradigmatic beams, which would put together in an exhaustive way all aspects of the myth. So, his was a different method from Levi-Strauss's analysis of the story of Oedipus. Levi-Strauss, with characteristic nonchalance (symptomatic for this kind of research), separated four beams in the myth: 'overrated bonds of kinship', 'underrated bond of kinship', 'killing of monsters', 'difficulties of mobility in vertical stature', while he treated the myth itself as a phenomenon, geared towards mediation (transition, constructing of a pendant, Hegelian synthesis) between two conflicting testimonies of man's origin: a conviction about the indigenous nature of people

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<sup>11</sup> "Poor Minotaur! From my earliest childhood I felt more tenderness for him than for Theseus, Dedalus or any other sly-boots. When my father told me the tale for the first time I felt a painful ache in my heart and compassion for the half-beast man trapped in the labyrinth and in an alien human history full of cunning and axes." Zbigniew Herbert, *Labyrinth on the Sea*, transl. by Alissa Valles, in in *The Collected Prose, 1948-1998*, Harper Collins, New York, 2010, 427.

(as scholars of religion and ethnology maintain) and the empirical fact of sexual reproduction.

Greeks were convinced that man had been descendent from the earth in the manner of plants (the first man was a semi-snake) and of man's descent from the relationship of man and woman. The mystery of Sphinx and Oedipus's doubts about his own ancestry would reveal in a paradigmatic, structuralist reading the rudimentary problem of the human condition and the problem of the descent of man. Thus, Levi-Strauss searched in myths for all traces which could support his argument, and found traces of the monstrous, ambivalent, autochthonous ancestry of three representatives of the line: lame Labdacus, clumsy Laius, and Oedipus with bound feet. Their disabilities were to support the claim of them being descendant from the earth. Therefore, the key aspect of the myth is the mediation between contradictory and mutually exclusive ways of understanding the world: in this case a theory of the autochthonous architecture of man and the empirical fact of sexual reproduction. The myth provides a logical model for dealing with contradictions.<sup>12</sup>

The analysis of Greek mythology with the use of structuralist methodology is paradigmatic; it is a systemic attempt to deal with all Greek stories and is based on the breaking of a story into mythemes contradictory to one another, out of which syntagma are constructed. For example, Edmund Leach, a disciple of Levi-Strauss, extracted eight stories,<sup>13</sup> which "exhibit permutations of a single plots" and the same protagonists, *dramatis personae*: "King, Queen, Mother, Father, Brother, Sister, Daughter, Son-in-law, Paramour".<sup>14</sup> He added his own comments to each story. Among them there was the story of Minos and Minotaur, treated parallel to the story of Kadmos, Europe and dragon's teeth. Leach concentrated on 'counting'

<sup>12</sup> Claude Levi-Strauss, *Structural Anthropology*, translated by Claire Jacobson and Brooke Grunfest Schoepf, Basic Books, New York, 1963,

<sup>13</sup> Edmund Leach, *Levi-Strauss*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1974, 67-68.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibidem*.

the elements-themes of different versions of stories, and he performed structuralist conversion and obversion. And so, for example, a variant in which there occurs a bull was replaced by the variant with a cow; where we used to have brothers, we had husbands. In Leach's reconstruction there resurfaced the following oppositions: Zeus (god of heavens)—Poseidon (god of seas); human child-monster child; Kadmos killing a monster—a monster killing Minos (man); Kadmos as a monster—a monster as Minos.

The reduction to elementary particles, which are then placed in rows of oppositions creating a matrix, which in turn is placed over mythological narrations, tells us a lot about mythology itself and about the minds which created it—it shows irreconcilable antinomy pushed in the area of collective and individual subconsciousness which, once revealed, stand in contradiction with human morality and foreshadow imminent human tragedy. This method, however, is very pessimistic in its overtones, because it reduces people to pawns in an unfathomable, mysterious play of structures, which are in this case a code name for the imminent verdict of fate. Sacrifices offered to gods: relationships with them are full of ambivalence, duality, they cannot be performed without violence and turn out to be extremely expensive. As Leach correctly observed: "There are no heroes in these stories; they are simply epics of unavoidable human disaster. The disaster always originates in the circumstances that a human being fails to fulfil his or her proper obligations toward a deity or a kinsman".<sup>15</sup>

Apart from a structuralist interpretation, a duel between Theseus and Minotaur offers a full range of different readings. For example, neo-ritualists from Cambridge saw in it a paradigm of a rite of passage, a rite of initiation a youth into adult life. The subsequent stages would look like this:

1. Theseus, when he arrives in Athens, wears female clothes—the one undergoing initiation arrives at a place where a rite of passage is to take place as a not fully developed adult.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 88.

2. Theseus travels to Crete—the one undergoing initiation goes to a place of refuge away from home.
3. Theseus, destined to be killed by a monster, kills the monster instead—the one undergoing initiation is, to a certain extent and from a certain perspective, ‘dead’, away from home and often meets monsters on his way.
4. Theseus meets Ariadne and marries her—the one undergoing initiation is prepared for sexual life.
5. Theseus returns home and is crowned—the one undergoing initiation is fully adult now.

Psychoanalysts would like see in Minotaur, closed in the labyrinth, a representation of subconscious desires which are hidden, murky, repressed, not approachable by *ego*; the monster born as a result of sexual deviation is hidden in the labyrinth, which symbolizes the order of human culture binding desires. While the fight between Theseus and Minotaur leads to Aegeus, Theseus’s father, which might be read as an echo of Oedipal desire. Similarly, Hippolytus, Theseus’s son, repeats the model of the Oedipus complex, but this time it is turned around: this time it is the mother who desires her stepson, and this leads to the death of the son.

Herbert’s reinterpretation of the Minotaur myth was very different. According to mythology, Minotaur was half man, half god, who lived on human flesh. Herbert’s narrator, sensitive to the falsity of persecuting representations, disregarded them and spoke of Minotaur with great concern. According to him, Minotaur was not a monster, but a prince, “a true son of Minos and Pasiphae”; *ergo*, he was a dauphin.

The little boy was born healthy, but with an abnormally large head—which fortune tellers read as a sign of his future wisdom. In fact with the years the Minotaur grew into a robust, slightly melancholy idiot.<sup>16</sup>

As Rene Girard wrote in *The Scapegoat*

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<sup>16</sup> Herbert, *The King of the Ants*, op. cit., 371.

In the mythological monster the "physical" and the "moral" are inseparable, The two are so perfectly combined that any attempt to separate them seems doomed to failure

Physical and moral monstrosity are heaped together in myths that justify the persecution of the infirm. The fact that the other stereotypes of persecution surround them leaves no room for doubt. If this were a rare conjunction it might be dubious, the innumerable examples can be found, it is the daily fare of mythology.<sup>17</sup>

It turns out, therefore, that Minotaur not only was not a monster, but that he was a handicapped man, which for Minos was a snub and a scandal, as it was a threat to the authority of power: "The King decided to give him up to be educated as a priest. But the priests explained that they couldn't accept the feeble-minded prince, for that might diminish the authority of religion already undermined by the invention of the wheel."<sup>18</sup> Therefore Minos decided that he would bring to Crete "the engineer Daedalus, who was fashionable in Greece at that time as the creator of a popular branch of pedagogical architecture"<sup>19</sup> to build a labyrinth, a place of the Minotaur's seclusion.

Its system of pathways, from elementary to more and more complicated, its variations in levels and rungs of abstraction, was supposed to train the Minotaur prince in the principles of correct thinking. So the unhappy prince wandered along the pathways of induction and deduction, prodded by his preceptors, gazing blankly at ideological frescoes. He did not get them at all.<sup>20</sup>

Therefore, the labyrinth of Dedalus was a very well designed and very complex pedagogic structure. The handicapped prince was accompanied there by enigmatic preceptors. Poor Minotaur was forced to think in terms of logic, induction and deduction, and as

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<sup>17</sup> Rene Girard, *The Scapegoat*, , transl. by Yvonne Freccero, The Athlone Press, London, 1986, 34-35.

<sup>18</sup> Herbert, *The King of the Ants*, op. cit., 371.

<sup>19</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>20</sup> Ibidem.

a result he became even more stupid. The process of re-socialization turned out to be a flop and the utopia of 'noble' teachers. While confounded Minos "having resolved all the resources [...] resolved to get rid of the disgrace to the royal line. He brought in [...] the ace killer Theseus."<sup>21</sup>

Herbert's story of Minotaur showed the process of initiation *a rebours*, presenting the king as the cruel and merciless killer of his son, while Theseus is seen as a *condotierre* and skilful assassin. Minotaur 'turns wise' in the moment when: "[t]hrough the labyrinth—now a useless primer—Theseus makes his way back, carrying the big, bloody head of the Minotaur with its goggling eyes, in which for the first time wisdom had begun to sprout, of a kind ordinarily attributed to experience."<sup>22</sup>

Minotaur, at the moment of his death, experiences something which he has been denied throughout his life: tangible reality. "Goggled eyes" transform a dunce into a true philosopher, because as Aristotle pointed out, philosophy is borne out of surprise. In the last paragraph the tense of the narration is changed from simple past into simple present, and thanks to this the story gains 'transcendental reality'.<sup>23</sup> The narrator locates himself in the order beyond history and myth, and the story becomes eternal *now*. Przemysław Czapliński called Herbert's irony, the irony he used to rewrite myths anew, a 'minor irony' "un-divine, counter mythical or post-mythical."<sup>24</sup> He characterized it in the following way:

1. Minor irony is a type of sabotage performed on other texts, because the starting point of it is made of stories (models of stories) which sanction violence as a tool necessary to preserve order; minor irony sneaks in, slips in to such a narrative in order to imitate it and turn it around.

<sup>21</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>22</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>23</sup> Paweł Czapczyk, *Mitologia na nowo odczytana...*, op. cit., 70.

<sup>24</sup> Przemysław Czapliński, *Ironia mniejsza.*, op. cit., 302

2. In the compositional plan minor irony uses the technique of denigrating reversal, that is of finding a perspective belonging to secondary protagonists or elements; the aim of such an action is to reveal truth about a real sequence of events, real motives for actions and real effects (the aim of minor irony is similar to Socratic irony).
3. On the ethical level, the characteristic feature of minor irony is siding with an underdog, against violence.<sup>25</sup>

Piotr Śliwiński, on the other hand, showed Herbert's reinterpretation of myths, rehabilitating victims and showing the values of these characters who had been sentenced by gods, fate, oracles (we may place here many terms referring to transcendental and enigmatic reality) to silence. Herbert's interpretation is in the manner of a Delphic oracle *oute legei, oute kryptei, alla semainei* (does not reveal, does not hide, only gives a sign); in a paradoxical way it was not a Copernican turn in the ways of reading mythology. Herbert, while questioning official narrations and searching for crevices, silences and cracks in them, implicates himself with *aporia*, from which he was constantly running away—into dazzling with originality. Such originality, which ceaselessly relies on the repetition of the same narrative pattern, paradoxically stops being original, and tires with its monotony. The narration becomes mono-phonic and overbearing, and minor irony, as described by Przemysław Czapliński, turned out to be double-bladed. Debunking a myth understood as eternal *genesis kaiphthora*, Eliade's cycle of eternal return of the same, gets stuck in similar, although not identical, ruts. This is an allegation only partly true, because Herbert's aim was not a post-modernist retelling, revealing traditional conventions, themes and motives. Herbert was really having a game of sorts with his readers, but it was not quite care free, because he, despite the fact that he relied on different versions of myths, relived them in contemporary scenery and used elements of the grotesque so common in post-modernist narratives, and a ludic collage of style, but nevertheless was defending values in which he

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 302-203.



believed. In this way Herbert confirmed that despite technological progress, change of surroundings, actors and instruments, certain human behaviours and attitudes remain universal.

In “Pies infernalny” (“The Infernal Dog”), dedicated to Julia Hartwig and Artur Międzyrzecki (the address of this dedication points to a certain reading of this text, because it makes as if *a priori* the word as the protagonist), at the very beginning the narrator offers different versions of this myth known to him, referring to different authors (Hesiod, Homer, Pindar, and also to Greek sculptors and painters). It turns out that the story of Heracles and Cerberus has been, from times immemorial, told in very different ways “different, contradictory versions vacillate between a bloody wrestling match and something like a Sunday hunt for booty”.<sup>26</sup> The narrator himself had his own version of the myth, which is marked by the change of form—the narration is interspersed with dramatic elements—the roles, which are sometimes embellished with stage directions. The narrator tells the story from the perspective of someone living in the twentieth century—his story is rich in psychological analysis—he feels and shows empathy both towards Cerberus and towards Heracles.

Sounds, shapes, odors fall on him like an avalanche. The world appears in furiously intense colors like Fauvist paintings: the grass flaming red, trees cinnabar, limestone rocks violet and black, the sky green.<sup>27</sup>

Heracles is carried away by Cerberus’s voice as if on a powerful ocean wave, As he listens he wants to howl with him. But he knows he would discredit himself, for he is unable to draw such pride and despair from his throat.<sup>28</sup>

The narrator, an erudite of contemporary art, carries his narration about form with great care (unusual similes and metaphors). We become witness to surprising events: during their journey Heracles

<sup>26</sup> Herbert, *The King of the Ants*, op. cit., 312.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 313.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 314.

and Cerberus undergo metamorphosis—Heracles, smelling of “blood. Leather and slaughter”<sup>29</sup> in a censorious manner starts telling the guardian of the kingdom of the dead about clover, photosynthesis and Kant—he becomes a teacher, while Cerberus is no longer an infernal dog, a beast, a mongrel, who “terrorized the vegetable markets”, and was the favourite of children.<sup>30</sup> At the end, both of them plan to start a circus. When the story almost draws to a conclusion, Heracles unexpectedly breaks the freshly created bonds and kills Cerberus. The final words are: “A nagging question will remain unanswered forever, how could Hercules push this damp, dirty sack deep into the dark opening full of helpless screams and the howling of disappointed love.”<sup>31</sup>

Language-word is the key to understanding this story-apocrypha. Herbert interchangeably used the following language registers: scientific, literary, everyday; added words from German and Latin, and stylized his story to appear as a drama or an adventure novel: “[t]hey reached Mycenae the next evening”<sup>32</sup>. He had fun while he was telling this story, and maybe he was imitating post-modernist plays with conventions. Yet, the story of Cerberus and Heracles, who while on the way to king Eurystheus adopted different roles: prisoner, jester, dog, friend; ends tragically. Because in a world where there is no understanding of roles, there is also no identity, no sense—everything is possible, everything has equal value: tragedy and comedy, laughter and tears. In spite of appearances, such a world is not a world of freedom, but of bondage; it is not the world of tolerance, but of crime. The use of ancient costumes allowed Herbert to avoid intrusive moralizing. He made his story clear to those he referred to—to educated people, because Herbert was not a populist, he was a poet of culture, who directed his words to the intellectual elite. In spite of appearances, there is nothing which brings us closer to salvation

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 313.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 317.

<sup>31</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>32</sup> Ibidem.

than revealing truth: that levelling of all standards ultimately leads to disaster.

At the end of this selective, fragmentary analysis of Herbert's mythology let us look at the text devoted to Prometheus. In "Stary Prometeusz" ("Old Prometheus") the figure of a titan rebelling against tyranny loses its tragic dimension. Prometheus at last lived to cheerful old age. "He is writing his memoirs. In them he tries to explain the position of the hero in a system of necessity to reconcile the mutually contradictory concepts of existence and fate". So, he is dealing with futile divagations of no consequence. "The fire is crackling cheerfully in the hearth; in the kitchen his wife is bustling—a gushy girl who couldn't bear him son but consoles herself that she will enter history anyway".<sup>33</sup> Prometheus's closest friends are now "the local priest [...] as well as the pharmacist".<sup>34</sup> The process of losing qualities of a hero is in progress, a hero who started to believe that a compromise with a tyrant is possible, exactly because rebellion is futile. The symbol of this futility are a stuffed eagle and a letter of gratitude from a tyrant of the Caucasus. Old Prometheus is a dwarf, a burnt-out case, someone who has understood that opposition to tyranny was only a repetition of the same process of establishing and strengthening of the status of tyranny. The text ends with a bitter punchline "Prometheus chuckles to himself, This is now his only way of expressing his quarrel with the world".<sup>35</sup> This text comments on "the problem of contemporary nihilism".<sup>36</sup>

"Old Prometheus" is very similar, in spirit and intention, to a famous apocrypha of Franz Kafka entitled "Prometheus":

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 368.

<sup>34</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>35</sup> Ibidem/.

<sup>36</sup> Tomasz Garbol, *Dlaczego klasyk? O problemie klasycyzmu poezji Zbigniewa Herberta*, "Roczniki Humanistyczne" 1999, .1, 227.

There are four legends concerning Prometheus:

According to the first he was clamped to a rock in the Caucasus for betraying the secrets of the gods to men, and the gods sent eagles to feed on his liver, which was perpetually renewed.

According to the second Prometheus, goaded by the pain of the tearing beaks, pressed himself deeper and deeper into the rock until he became one with it.

According to the third his treachery was forgotten in the course of thousands years, forgotten by the gods, the eagles, forgotten by himself.

According to the fourth everyone grew weary of the meaningless affair. The gods grew weary, the eagles grew weary, the wound closed wearily.

There remained the inexplicable mass of rock. The legend tried to explain the inexplicable. As it came out of a substratum of truth it has in turn to end in the inexplicable.<sup>37</sup>

Agata Bielik-Robson commented on Kafka's text in the following way:

After years of repetition of the same act of revenge on a proud individual, full of tragic tensions—when the eagle with equal earnestness tore at the liver of a protagonist chained to a rock in the Caucasus, which was regenerating with equal earnestness—suddenly, as if with the awareness of the total lack of sense of this situation, any movement on a mythical stage freezes "Die Gotter wurden mude, die Adler wurden mude, die Wunde schloss sich mUde...Tiredness, exhaustion, spell's diffusion end the whole case, which spontaneously ceases to exist. What remains—as Kafka mysteriously suggests—is the rock itself. The rock, the stony bottom of being is reduced to absolute literariness. The subject is dying in a state of destitution, among post-symbolist and post-tragic rocks, on a desert of nonsense, where not a single phantasm, not a single imagined thing adds nothing to what merely is. This is Eliot's *Waste*

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<sup>37</sup> Franz Kafka, "Prometheus" (transl. by Wila and Edwin Muir, in *The Collected Short Stories of Franz Kafka*, ed. by Nahum N. Glatzer, Penguin Books, London, 1988, 432.

*Land*, “where the sun beats, the dead tree gives no shelter, the cricket no relief and the dry stone no sound of water.”<sup>38</sup>

In one interview, Herbert, in a voice full of emotion, declared:

My ambition was—I do not know if I have managed to realize this—not to address a group of educated people, but the building of something which I would call a universal agitation, something which is not only my experience, but which can be transmitted. How to do it, then? I do not like at all such direct lyric poetry, that the sun is setting, your soul is sad, your beloved far way; which is also in a way universal. And so I wanted, I have tried to do something which is, which maybe an experience of different people. And this is exactly reaching for these myths.<sup>39</sup>

Myths were for Herbert merely a canvas onto which he could weave his own reflections. These reflections had a very precise structure, and that is why Herbert was able to reach the hidden and distorted truth of man existing in these myths. In the process, he managed to stay clear of pathos and sentimentalism. He did not introduce ancient mythology to his poetic laboratory in a neo-classicist fashion. He was aware that such poetry and such humanism do not save. He presented this mythology in contemporary language, which, thanks to Herbert’s unique and characteristic style, allowed him to make the experiences and fates of his protagonists universal. This was the best test for the topicality of the message of these myths. While reinterpreting them Herbert asked many questions about the condition of contemporary man, whose life became accidental, banal, and an escape from fundamental questions. On many occasions the contemporary world appeared to Herbert to be devoid of harmony, and all the values dear to him were being destroyed in it.

<sup>38</sup> Agata Bielik-Robson, «*Na pustyni*». *Kryptoteologie późnej nowoczesności*, Kraków 2008, 253-254.

<sup>39</sup> Piotr Załuski (dir.)(2005-2006), Zbigniew Herber—fresk w kościele (fresco in the church) (part 2):<https://youtu.be/KKeszFrHi-Q?t=3m44s> [Retrieved: 26.06.2015 r.]

J. JURKOWSKI, "UNDERRATED MYTHOLOGY OF THE UNDERRATED..."

That is why his need to revitalize ancient mythology was even keener, so that he could speak in a new way about issues as old as the world. Myths, as well as other episodes he took from the treasure of the Mediterranean tradition, became in his writing Eliot's 'objective correlative'. T.S. Eliot wrote:

The only way of expressing emotion in the form of art is by finding an 'objective correlative'; in other words, a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that particular emotion; such that when the external facts, which must terminate in sensory experience, are given, the emotion is immediately evoked<sup>40</sup>.

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<sup>40</sup> T. S. Eliot, *The Sacred Wood. Essays on Poetry and Criticism*, London 1957. 1.