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## KAFKA'S PROMETHEUS

After reviewing the reasons why Kafka, in his short story “Prometheus”, produces four versions of the myth of Prometheus, it is concluded that that the text refuses to become a parable in any simple way. Instead, it pushes the act of interpretation itself into the foreground, in this sense it is a parable about interpretation, which is not about the one and undividable truth but about texts.

### **Prometheus**

Von Prometheus berichten vier Sagen:

Nach der ersten wurde er, weil er die Götter an die Menschen verraten hatte, am Kaukasus festgeschmiedet, und die Götter schickten Adler, die von seiner immer wachsenden Leber fraßen.

Nach der zweiten drückte sich Prometheus im Schmerz vor den zuhackenden Schnäbeln immer tiefer in den Felsen, bis er mit ihm eins wurde.

Nach der dritten wurde in den Jahrtausenden sein Verrat vergessen, die Götter vergaßen, die Adler, er selbst.

Nach der vierten wurde man des grundlos Gewordenen müde. Die Götter wurden müde, die Adler wurden müde, die Wunde schloß sich müde.

Blieb das unerklärliche Felsgebirge. – Die Sage versucht das Unerklärliche zu erklären. Da sie aus einem Wahrheitsgrund kommt, muß sie wieder im Unerklärlichen enden.

### **Prometheus**

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 of 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 remains the inexplicable mass of rock. The legend tries to explain the inexplicable. As it comes out of the substratum of truth it has in turn to end in the inexplicable.

(After the translation of Willa and Edwin Muir, in *The Complete Stories*, Edited by Nahum N. Glatzer, Schocken Books, New York 1971, p. 432)

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There are only very few writings of Kafka where there are any references to the Greek mythology – or even any intertextual references whatsoever.<sup>1</sup> Notably, besides *Prometheus*, there is *The Silence of the Sirens* and *Poseidon*, there is a reference to the Tower of Babel in *The Crest of the City*, and there is *The Truth about Sancho Panza* – and it may be difficult to find any other overt or direct allusion to mythological or well-known texts.

One could infer that Kafka was not too much interested in mythology. Or that he did not know too much about it. Or that, more generally, he was not interested in writing about texts, that is, writing texts on texts (or using texts in his texts). It is evident that all these conclusions are false.

First of all, in a great number of Kafka's writings, there is a certain mythological touch. I would not want to suggest that it is Kafka's intention to create, produce or reproduce some kind of mythology, but he uses some specific devices, partially, at least, very simple stylistic tricks, to construct a sort of mythological atmosphere; and in his entire work, there is a clear stratum of parables, partly as a specific genre, partly as part of his novels. Kafka's mythology is sometimes pretty close to what we would call *tales*; where the heroes are not characterized by the usual ways that novels would employ, where deeds are not explained by the narrator (or this explanation is very much reduced), and so on.

So even if I would not suggest that Kafka creates a mythology – he is very far from doing so –, he makes use of mythology in several ways. Partly, he breaks it into parables; whereas mythology, as we know it from Greek mythology, for instance, is supposed to be a long, meandering story with recurrent characters, with a great number of sub-plots. Partly, he examines the machinery of working of the mythology, by creating fake myths, by transforming real myths or by deforming the conventional form of myths. His myths are, in fact, parodies of the myth itself, experimental transformations of mythical thinking, challenges of the traditional ways of telling stories.

Truncating the myth of Prometheus into this very short story is clearly a subversive act, I could even say that it is ironic. Not only because it radically changes the length of the original story so that there is practically one character remaining on the scene, but more emphatically because it radically changes its aim. Instead of telling the story of a hero, his deeds and the consequences of his deeds, the narration is restricted to the consequences. Note that there is a very significant absence in Kafka's text: there is nothing there about the heroism of the hero, about fire or about humanity, technological or any other progress whatsoever. Kafka is interested only in the very last moment of the chain of events – in punishment, or, to refer to another text of his, in *judgment*.

What we witness in this text is that it is a myth turned into parable. We are tacitly advised to see this story as a parable, as if there were something very important behind it, even in this very short form. Very roughly, whereas a short part of the myth is not supposed to refer to some general truth, to an example of human behavior, sin, virtue,

<sup>1</sup> Thanks are due to two former students of mine at Pécs University, Katalin Joós and György Vári, who – on different occasions – prompted me to deal with Kafka's short stories in class.

and so on, here the narrator seeks for some *explanation* (Erklärung) of something. He tells the story as if there would be something for which it serves as an explanation or interpretation.

The very first sentence of the short story ("There are four legends concerning Prometheus") calls into question the truth of what will follow. If there are four versions, and if one supposes that truth is one and undividable, how can it happen that there are four accounts of the same thing? And, furthermore, these accounts are not descriptions, histories or even stories but legends, the word in itself implying that the account has, so to say, a special relation to truth. The truth is that there are four legends concerning Prometheus – but it is not the truth concerning Prometheus.

*Prometheus* is not only about Prometheus – it is also – or I would say primarily – on the myth of Prometheus. On the working of the myth, on the possible forms of myth, on the special rules of the myth. The first conclusion could be that if one reduces myths into a simple story, it will not explain anything. A myth, the text suggests, cannot be used for explanation of any sort.

However, Kafka's *Prometheus* is a parable and yet it is not a parable; it has a form of a parable, but one cannot infer to any deep or transcendent idea from it – and, moreover, it is *not* a parable; it is a radically shortened myth, so that the reader finds it quite natural that he will not make any *Erklärung* from it; but he is also advised, in the last lines, to drop all the possible interpretations he may have by virtue of his earlier knowledge of the myth of Prometheus.

Why do we have four versions of Prometheus's story here?

1. One of the interpretations could be that it is an imitation (or rather parody) of the scholarly presentations of the Greek myths, which often have several versions. It mocks the scrupulous efforts of the text editors to fix all the possible forms of a myth. (In a similar way as the legendary exclamation of the classical philologist arriving to the sea: "Thalassa! Thalassa! Aber man kann auch sagen: Talatta! Thalatta!") The strange – or ironic – aspect of these versions is that they are very much different, as if they were not originating in the same myth. Implying that even the most controversial or disconnected texts can be, traditionally, the versions of the same, allegedly original, myth. Kafka's *Prometheus*, then, can be read as the story of the fruitless efforts of the old fashioned, down-to-earth philologist, in his desperate fight for a complete collection of the facts, inferring, however, no conclusion whatsoever.

2. Another, closely connected, interpretation is that it is not only scholarly discourse where a myth is presented in its versions, but it is in fact a sort of sum of its different, overlapping forms – or, rather, its versions taken together instead of the individual versions, as for instance Claude Lévi-Strauss puts it. Thus, to understand the story in its profundity, and to study it at all, it is a prerequisite to have all the variants, and one must take into account the whole set of related stories. The conclusion – ironically, again – is that we cannot really do anything with this set, we are not at all better off having all the versions. The lesson we would try to figure out of the story is even more obscure.

3. Third, the versions can be taken as different *aspects* of the story.<sup>2</sup> The first version is timeless; that is, it takes place in a perpetually iterating time, in a mythical time structure where an act is repeated infinitely, until the end of times – a typical punishment in Greek mythology, see, for instance, the case of Sisyphos or the Danaides. The second story is, however, placed in a world of time moving ahead, a time with progression and consequences. The act always repeated has its tangible traces in the real world: slowly and gradually the hero disappears, “until he became one with” the rock. In this story, there is an end (as there was a beginning and a middle, too). The third story has a similar structure, but we are not clearly informed what had in fact happened; we do not know if forgetting was a slow process or rather a sudden event, and even the conclusion is not clear – what has in fact happened? The torments have simply stopped? And did it all depend on the eagles? And if the second story states that in the *now* of the story there is nothing left there but the cliff, what could we find in the *now* of the third one? The fourth story is similar to the third one, and both actions (forgetting and growing weary) is mostly a result of *time*; but there was a process which cannot be either perceived nor controlled by the actors, and in this version the cause is shifted: it is not a function of the eagles but of the “meaningless affair.”

4. A fourth interpretation could be that the three stories are the possible outcomes of the first one, and the variations give clues for an understanding of the *nature of punishment*. The first punishment has the good old mythic structure: not only is it life-long, but perpetual. The first outcome (that is, the second version) is the infinite pain and the total perishing of the hero, and, this way, the punishment is really *completed*. The third is forgetting – perhaps as a sort of pardoning; sins are forgotten, punishment ends in a sort of forgiveness. The fourth does not give this absolving, it is a random or accidental or merely physical conclusion, without any further motivation. Punishment may end in an unexpected and unintended way.

(4a. Theoretically, one could speculate that we could read the four versions as falling in the same line, that is, chronologically or sequentially ordered – but it is too far-fetched. It may be true (or even it *must* be true) that the first version is chronologically the first, and also that the second is the second; but logically the fourth (weariness) should precede the third, and not vice versa.)

5. A fifth interpretation of the variational structure is that Kafka imitates the Midrashic structure here. Midrash is an explanation or interpretation of the Scripture; or, rather, explanations along with explanations of explanations. It is a particular way of reading and interpreting a biblical verse. A part of the Scripture will have, of course, several interpretations, and there are, moreover, a number of additional textual and interpretational traditions connected to that part, or, rather, to the interpretation of that part. Also, the form of Kafka’s text will also remind us to the Hassidic

<sup>2</sup> Or perhaps – as a version of this interpretation – that it is about different forms of remembering to the same (?) event; “This story is about memory and its importance despite the weariness of everyone involved, the Gods, the eagles, and the wound, yet Kafka remembered,” writes R. Moshe Reiss: “An Imaginative Encounter between Franz Kafka (1884–1924) and Reb Nahman (1776–1810).” <http://www.moshereiss.org/kafka.htm>

Tales, those for instance published and rewritten by Martin Buber. These tales often have variations modifying the “original” – or, rather, the starting – text. As is well known, not only did Kafka know very well the Hassidic tales but he was also a devoted reader of Reb Nachman (1776-1810); as R. Moshe Reiss shows it,<sup>3</sup> there is a considerable resemblance between them,

...they had much in common. Stunning similarities existed in both their lives and works. Both were master story tellers and both lived with ‘demons within them’. They wrote in a similar literary style often characterized by the creation of their own reality in which paradoxical and unexpected events occurred. Simple and concrete language was their medium and some of their tales had antithetical and a fragmentary nature.

Moreover, „Both men can be seen as prophets of a sort. Reb Nahman created a religious sect and Max Brod, Kafka’s friend, suggested that Kafka was like a founder of a religion.” – Kafka, then, plays with smelting down Greek mythology into the Jewish tradition, he muses in fusing the two horizons. The stake of this operation is to see what happens if these two ways of thinking are confronted: which will roughly mean the confrontation of mythology and parable. An interesting difference is that both in Midrash and in Hassidic legends there is always an authority standing behind the story as well as its interpretation. Names of those who told or interpreted the story are carefully given, they are held responsible for what is told. In mythology – and in Kafka’s text – however, the legend is *told* in four variations, and the final paragraph is told by the nameless narrator.

So much about the possible interpretations of the four legends told about Prometheus. (Let me add that the Hungarian word *monda* which preserves the word *mond*, “say”, is much closer to the German original “Sage” than the English word *legend*, which refers, in turn, to the reading of the story.)

But how can we make a parable of Kafka’s Prometheus? How can it be interpreted so as to offer a sort of lesson, a clear guidance, some moral to draw? It seems that the text refuses to show any simple way to do this. In fact, in its last line it expresses that the legend ends in the “inexplicable,” it is this refutation which seems to be the very point of it. However, one can try. For instance, Victor E. Taylor and Gregg Lambert, in their manifesto for the future of theory argue that „[t]he future of theory, similar to its past, will be Promethean,” in Kafka’s sense, in as much as “the legendary, heretical writings ... forming the *corpus* of theory remain the “inexplicable mass” giving rise to a desire to explain, to refute, to show, and to occasionally hide the contours of its own “image of thought.”” That is, we are always confronted with texts, which remain to be interpreted, which provide a difficult task for every coming generation; for Taylor and Lambert, then, the main point of Kafka’s Prometheus is the ever renewing challenge to explain that which has hitherto remained inexplicable.<sup>4</sup> – This interpretation, however, uses Kafka only as an illustration, and not in a quite acceptable way. It seems to forget that in Kafka’s text it was the legend that tried to explain the inexpli-

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> <http://jcr.org/archives/04.2/lambert-taylor.intro.shtml>

cable, and it was the legend that came out of the substratum of truth, and it is because of this that it had in turn to end in the inexplicable.<sup>5</sup>

Another interpretation, that of Heinz Politzer, implies that the “substratum of truth” is the forlornness of Prometheus as a result of his presumption, a trait of the Greek heroes. This is, then, something that cannot be explained. Politzer adds that Kafka’s reference to the Greek gods in the *Castle* just as in his *Prometheus* implies the complete incongruence of grandeur and the modern world; consequently, what cannot be explained here is the presence of an ancient hero in our world. Kafka, Politzer says, „stressed the nightmarish quality of a thoroughly modern despair by blending it in a mock-heroic fashion with the inevitability of Greek myth.” For Politzer, then, *Prometheus* is a parable of confronting worlds, that of the world of Greek myths and that of modern man.

There is, however, a fifth, implicit, legend hidden in the text. It says that the birth of the legend of Prometheus itself is due to the presence of the Caucasus rock, which needed explanation; as if people confronted with this phenomenon would need to invent a story to explain it. This would be the legend of the birth of the legend; a legend on the useless or defected nature of legends. However we try, we cannot interpret the phenomena of the nature, it implies; it is in vain that people invent explanations for strange or obtrusive objects. The legend, then, is about the hopelessness of the legends.<sup>6</sup> The parable suggests that we cannot use parables.

This parable which refuses to be a parable, which challenges any explanation (by saying that its subject matter will always remain inexplicable), is, for me, a parable about explanation itself; it is also about myth and parable. It is a parable of parables.

What is it that is *not* explained in the legend? What will remain unexplained are the facts presupposed or taken for granted: that is, that Prometheus did in fact steal something from the gods; that it was a sin; that he deserved the punishment; that the rock and the eagles are proper instruments of his punishment; that punishment must last for a lifetime. All these elements would require explanation, sometimes even motivation.

However, this quest for explications runs completely against the mythological nature of the “legend”. A mythological story is specific in its great realm of presuppositions, it is its characteristic trait that it must leave quite a lot of things unexplained. And Kafka who himself made wide use this device, as I have noted earlier, knew this nature of the myth very well. So what is suggested here is that since myth does not explain anything, it must be myth itself which requires explanation.

<sup>5</sup> Or, as another example, take Iakov Levi’s argument that “the Tree of the Cross, to which Jesus was hanged is equivalent to Prometheus’ rock, to which he was chained. The bird, which daily comes to devour Prometheus’ liver, is Zeus’ phallic symbol.” “Pinocchio and the Cult of the Trees.” <http://www.geocities.com/psychohistory2001/anal.html>

<sup>6</sup> “In this story as in many others by Kafka, the myth that may once have been a key to unlocking the human psyche becomes merely a fragment to reflect that psyche in an alienated world.” “When a sense of community is lacking between writers and their audience, the short story is particularly apt at showing this lack,” Sarah Hardy, “A poetics of immediacy: oral narrative and the short story (The Short Story: Theory and Practice)”. *Style* 9/22/1993.

What is it that one can possibly interpret? The rock cannot be interpreted since it is part of the reality. What came out of the substratum of truth cannot be explained or interpreted since there is nothing to explain or interpret. It just exists. It is something given. What we could interpret are the variations and the texts. A rock in turn is singular, individual, particular. An interpretation is always focused on texts, that is, it is always an interpretation of interpretations – ultimately, an interpretation of the interpretation of the world around us. This is the fundamental principle of Midrash. A Midrashic interpretation is never about the truth in the world – it is about texts (ultimately, the Scripture). Reality or truth itself must remain and will remain inexplicable, whereas the texts about reality or truth can and always will be interpreted.