



Stefan Orgass

'Presentation' of ancient myths in a mythological *Atlantic Series*

1. Observation under caveat – The caveat of Observation

The person who writes about art, not being an artist or an art expert, maintains a stance to his subject that is similar to that which the re-teller of myths has to those myths: He is aware that every word used, at the very outset, is grasped "from the other side" so to speak, thus preventing him from getting up close to his subject. What is meant in this regard is not the discussion of art, which I do not consider to be problematic, insofar as we are aware that we mean the interaction of the method of expression and its associated expressive function – which in art, is that of the *Sample* or the *Labels*,¹ which in language (primarily) is that of the understanding. Rather, the talk of a counterpart to the myth suggests a fundamental inadequacy in what can be "understood" from the picture in contrast to its targeted themes. For the myth does not permit "time" and "space" as pure forms of contemplation, in the same way as it removes the idea of causation: It is, in actuality, not perceivable per se.² Its effect is a pure perpetual manifestation in the "now"; it elucidates worldly phenomena in the sense of an individual act of volition (e.g. of the gods), which as a free act does not lend itself, nor does it even require, further explanation.³ The inherent deficiency of attainable, or graspable, clarification and the corresponding objective observation of the subject provides another thematic element of the *Atlanten Series*, of which the observer must be aware. The inadequacy of his contemplative act and the auxiliary apportionment of meaning is principally one that may induce a sense of unease, which in turn provides the stimulus to a yet more intense confrontation.

¹ Goodman 1997, p. 63 - 72.

² Geyer 1996, p. 92.

³ Cassirer ⁹1994, p. 64 et seq.

2. Myths - Mythology

The Myth is not constructed in the way that a work of art is. It does not exist as something made manifest at some time, the author of which is known or who may be determined by philological methods. It simply exists and even the "classical authors" can only recount it using their own particular variations for it was in this world long before their own era, for so long that it almost seems as if it had always existed. Is for example Prometheus "little more than a trickster, a cunning old dog, who outwitted Zeus", or rather is he - as in the Hesiodic *Theogony* and in Aeschylus' *Prometheus Bound* - the "The Human Creator and Redeemer", who brings humankind fire and grants them mercy in order that they may not see the future?⁴ We are concerned here with a question that can only be decided within the mythological concrete structure, wherein what comprises the concretion is immediately removed from the myth. In this respect, "the *actually mythic* represents a type of delineation of boundaries, unattainable and, because it cannot be verbalised, can only be experienced in silence. This means however: the discussion of the myth [the myth as a form system] continually underscores the intentions of the myth [the condition of the mythical content as a timeless realisation, as a way of becoming one with all things etc.]."⁵

If this is correct, then the visual representation, e.g. that of Prometheus, must encapsulate the identified paradox, allowing itself to be subsumed within the material, meaning that the observer, at the outset, allow himself to "over span" it. The aforementioned deficit of meaning assigned within the observational act - with one eye on the relationship between the perpetual immediacy of the core of the myth and its mythological concretion - has necessarily characterised the purposeful nature of the creation, the intention of the representation and presentation and also the processes of production of the works in the *Atlanten Series*, and it is precisely in this regard that Helmut Berka is compelled to react.

3. A technique for the construction of a relationship based in the underlying tensions between myth and pictorial mythology: Aleatoric

From both of the aspects of 'deficiency' as discussed - (a) from the insufficiency of graspable clarification and objective perception and (b) from the paradox of

⁴ cf. Grant/Hazel ¹²1996, p. 353.

⁵ Geyer 1996, p. 91, italics.

the representation of what cannot be represented - Helmut Berka draws technical consequences for the material: The representations of each of the mythical forms – the representative mythology in that sense as explained under point 2 – are each covered with a whitened plaster layer. This accommodates itself as a counterpart to the both of the stated “deficiencies”, whereby the insufficiency of clear elucidation and objective perception (a) on the part of the artist may be already anticipated in the sense that a representation is being made to the intended observer. (The other deficiency is indeed an integral part of the production process.) In the aleatoric sense, it is, to a certain extent, really not foreseeable what shall appear by means of the abrasive process, several attempts are sometimes necessary for creating one picture. The result is a perceivable duality in which the two levels are in fact no longer separable from one another. In a metaphorical reading: Just as the myth is related to the mythology, if it is actually supposed to be relevant in the sense of being perceivable, the mythological representation must then refer back to the myth, which in turn may not be “shown” as such.

In any event, contemplation of the whitened plaster layer may induce impressions of paleness, winter, coldness, forlornness, disconsolation, etc. During the observation, “German” associations with winter landscapes, winter journeys, winter fairytales may be made; within a pure content context, they emerge, in view of the mythological-mythical technical content of the technique, rather more as a – possibly indeed welcome - 'concomitant phenomenon'.

4. The suffering man and its mythical 'images': Minotaur - Atlas - Prometheus - Sisyphus

The deficiency is – together with the observation and the artistic production – concrete in another third aspect: From the very title of the series, the restriction to the theme of suffering and pain is indicated, in which it transforms the single Atlas into the plurality 'Atlanten', i.e. into a super-ordinate term for the suffering mythological figures of Antiquity: the Minotaur, Atlas, Prometheus and Sisyphus, and it is to these that I would like to limit my observations. As a corresponding term to “Titans”, Helmut Berka has employed the formulation 'Atlanten', which is not actually known in Greek mythology. Because of the associations with '*globality*' that this term brings forth, human suffering appears as existential within the metaphorical compression and anthropological, or fundamental ontological, context. The suffering human-being finds an explanation and the

reason for his suffering in the “certain” fact, expounded within the myth, that even the gods could not trust their “fellows” because their “kind” was quite simply brutal and without pity. By this “certainty” something wholly haptic is implied: The myth lends palpable “structure/body”⁶ or “forms of substance” to even the most simple conditions or characteristics, but not in the sense of purely allegories, but rather independent, things that exist per se, and even more still: things that have always existed. The contingency of a suffering existence is quasi categorized within the mythical factual and causal context. The ever-reoccurring experience of pain does not disappear within this, but, rather, is rationalized through a “mythical” thinking structure.

And hereby the third deficiency is addressed: Man attempts to understand the incomprehensibility of human suffering (c), by representing this mystery and objectifying it in this respect. But the contingency of suffering is a fundamental: Minotaur – the bull on the island of Minos – as monstrous mix of human body and bull’s head – is able to know why he is held prisoner in the underworld Labyrinth of Knossos, because of the requirement that the unnatural passion of Pasiphae (the wife of Minos), who had sexual relations with a bull, remained covered up. But fate has pre-ordained him for this pitiful existence, he does not have any alternative but to accept, even if he has no explanation for it. Atlas can know why he must carry the globe of the world, why he, the patient sufferer, must endure his suffering and burden, for in a confrontation with the gods, he joined forces with the Titans who would be vanquished. But why this should be, only fate actually 'knows'. Prometheus, the most human of the Titans, is able to know why he must endure his suffering shackled to a crag on the edge of the Okeanos, tormented by Zeus with the aid of his liver-consuming eagle: He was bade not to give fire to the mortals which Zeus had wanted to withhold from them. But why he, as a Titan, should have possessed less power than the gods, is once again a question of fate, which is given concrete form in a mythic scene in which even the bringer of fire must reconcile himself. Sisyphus is furnished with the knowledge that because of his betrayal of Zeus and disrespectful behaviour to Hades, he was subjected to his torment at Tartaros where he was forced, for eternity, to roll a stone up a mountain only for it to roll back down again as soon as Sisyphus reached the summit. But to that fate which ordained that he must drag out his existence in this miserable fashion, despite the fact

⁶ Cassirer ⁹1994, p. 71 et seq.

that his actions were all too human and therefore were comparable to the gods in almost every respect, Sisyphus must – as the embodiment of an existence so absurd – merely acquiesce etc.

In Helmut Berka's representation of Prometheus, Zeus' eagle is nowhere to be seen. For me this observation, that Prometheus is designated as one of the 'Atlanten' by Berka, rather than be transformed into a Spartacus-like characteristic who struggles on behalf of the whole human race in the fight against an illegitimate superior power, but who ultimately has drawn the short straw - as one could say from a promethic viewpoint, in contrast to Hesiod's stance in favour of a righteous Zeus - is central for my approach to the entire *Atlanten Series*. Prometheus, who from objective observation is clearly identifiable as a manly figure in the given context, and whose outstretched arms appear to be bound to something by the wrist, for Berka is someone who is simply shackled and does not at all enter into any interactive relationships - not even if it were only with an eagle – that might help explain this condition. After the 'twilight of the gods' there only remains - according to the bleak interpretation represented here – the pure suffering and never once the possibility of a mythological elucidation. The thought extrapolated: Neither the fall of mankind and wrath of the gods nor the self-martyrdom through wrongful or immoral treatment can explain this very real suffering and the old theodic question is proven given this background to be quite baseless. When people find their existence to be absurd, this does not disrupt Existence to any degree whatsoever – so one could make a comment on the question perpetually posed by people, why all this suffering is permitted. We have already mentioned discussion of a certain unease that may arise during a reflective observation of the *Atlanten Series*; but this unease finds its concrete expression in, what is henceforth, a clearly delineated thematic regard. It is one that may initialise the aesthetic perception.

To those who consider this interpretative horizon too distant, is contemplating the figure of the bull, whereby it was not the aim of Helmut Berka to depict a human-beast monstrosity. A bull is discernable, less imprisoned by bars as by 'structures', which do not allow an unambiguous identification as a cage. As with the shackled figure which is only referring to Prometheus, so the observer here may, given the context, associate the bull's head with the Minotaur; the human body that belongs here must be imported by in a "semiotic"

fashion, beyond and even away from the picture. If then, the picture is to be contemplated as a symbol (in this case as 'Sample', rather than 'Label') of human existence, then here too a bleak image is evoked of an animalistic self-decaying imprisonment, which denies any 'explanation' by the context of the events. The myth is transformed into a "context", which is underpinned by the thematic staging of the series and in particular by its titles; it does not, however, create the construct for concrete material 'Texture'. (Incidentally Berka has entitled the file storing the picture of the bull in electronic form, "Ox". Human existence would from that – taking this labelling literally – be compared with, for good measure, the life of a castrated bull...)

Seen in this light, Helmut Berka is reacting to the paradox of representing the wholly unrepresentable (see above, deficiency 'b') by choosing from the conceivable motifs of the various myths, and their conceivable mythological representations, those which *radicalise* the relevant matter, thereby rendering their appearance yet more abject than they already were in the ancient mythology. Wherein, through the choices he has made, whole sensory aspects of the respective myth has been completely diminished, he simultaneously enables a yet deeper experience of the other form of 'deficiency', namely the incomprehensibility of the thematically adduced human suffering (see above, c).

5. 'Presentation' of the Myth

Through the choice, detailed here, and diminishment of sensory aspects of the ancient myths, the observer is drawn into a 'substantial semiosis', to an individually-orientated completion of the sensory gaps, thereby inducing a sense of uneasiness within the observer, generating an impulse to an aesthetic recognition, already discussed above. There is substantial importance in the "making of meanings" which the observer utilises to relate to the works, because this is how the myth at hand is 'presented'. Seen from this perspective, Berka is merely providing, with the medium of the art – with his 'presentation' of the myths – a starting point for this 'presentation'. The expounded deficiencies in a graspable explanation, in view of the alternatively constructed mythic thinking, and the corresponding objective perception (a) combine to create a platform for intended observation, in which there is stimulation for experience and reduction of the associated 'cognitive dissonance'. The assertion that this persists within the sense of a generalised 'gap theory' which is actually the case with all art, is not adequate to the representation of this myth-related conundrum, as revealed

by Berka's *Atlanten Series*. If it is accurate to say the myth has,⁷ "always faded into the *reception* and is not perceptible as anything but a historical response", then Helmut Berka's '*reception*' of the myths is not a 'function' in a hermeneutic sense – that is to say there can be no application of his current philosophical attitude to a myth reconstructed, in whatever fashion that may be, as in the way it may have been understood in ancient times -, rather his 'presentation' is merely an asymptomatic approximation of the 'limit values' that are to be defined. This presentation distracts in any case: even should the observer fail to perceive the myth-related 'substantial semiosis' (either because the myths do not 'say anything' to the observer, or because he does not know them), he shall perceive the suffering forms and progress onwards beyond the mere internally intoned sentiment 'Yes, yes, so this is indeed human suffering', even if, by the same token, Helmut Berka, through the disassembly or deconstruction of the myths, does not offer a (more) positive outlook....

Literature

- Cassirer, Ernst: *Philosophie der symbolischen Formen. Zweiter Teil: Das mythische Denken*, Darmstadt, 9., amended edition 1994 (¹1924)
- Geyer, Carl-Friedrich: *Mythos. Formen - Beispiele - Deutungen*, Munich 1996
- Goodman, Nelson: *Sprachen der Kunst. Entwurf einer Symboltheorie*, translated by Bernd Philippi, Frankfurt am Main 1997 (English Original: *Languages of Art. An Approach to a Theory of Symbols*, Indianapolis ²1976)
- Grant, Michael/Hazel, John: *Lexikon der antiken Mythen und Gestalten*. translated from the English by Holger Fließbach. German Edition: Caroline Creutzer. unabridged edition, Munich ¹²1996 (English Original: *Who's Who in Classical Mythology*, London ¹1973)
- Dr. Stefan Orgass, Professor of Music Education
Translation by Conor Murphy

⁷ Geyer 1996, p. 92.