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Hope and Hopelessness through the Lens of Myths. A Comparison Based on Short Texts by Kafka and Camus

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Abstract. Not only do myths stand at the beginning or represent the birth of literature, but they have been present all along ever since. In times of havoc caused by natural catastrophes, wars or pandemics, people look for answers to the uncertainties that surround them. While often presenting such chaotic states themselves, myths can give an answer or offer a solution to these problems. The aim of the present paper is to compare and analyse short texts mainly by Kafka and Camus that deal with ancient myths (e.g. that of Prometheus, Odysseus, or Sisyphus) focusing on the type of answer they bring to the questions raised amidst and after the two world wars. The paper mainly focuses on the connection between hope and hopelessness.

Keywords: ancient myths, hope, hopelessness, existentialism

The current pandemic has caused a worldwide crisis similar to the effects of the two world wars almost a century ago. People's response to such an impasse often manifests itself in fear, and when facing the many uncertainties, they either seek hope or become hopeless. Besides the official help on the socio-political, economic, or psychological level, literature and myths can also offer a certain answer in such situations. Myths have been present in humanity's life since ancient times, cradling not only literature but also human mentality. Although myths have suffered several alterations over the years, their essence has remained the same. Many times the different versions of a myth function as multiple mirrors, showing us the ancient values but also pointing at the differences between past and present, old and modern, as well as at the possible reasons behind the changes, thus offering possible solutions, too.

The aim of the present paper is to look at and analyse short literary texts written roughly between 1917 and 1950 and referring to the mythical heroes of Prometheus and Odysseus by Franz Kafka (1883–1924) and Albert Camus (1913–

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1960), making reference to writings by Brecht and Sartre as well. The questions the paper tries to answer refer to how these texts present hope and hopelessness, what their response is to the problems of their time, and how their examples can be applied to our present situation. The chosen works, *Prometheus* and *The Silence of the Sirens* (1917) by Kafka and Camus's *Prometheus in the Underworld* (1946/1947) reflect on the condition of the modern individual confronted with the havoc provoked by the wars and the rapid changes on all levels of life.

One of the attitudes that can be adopted in a period of fear and despair is that of the existentialists,[1] a group which both Kafka and Camus, but also Brecht, not to mention Sartre, can be connected to. In fact, Sartre was one of the main existentialist writers of the period. His existentialist philosophy revolved around human liberty and the belief that human beings are able to rule over their own fate (Peyre 1948, 24). Descartes's "I think, therefore I am" is changed into "I do exist, therefore I am" because the source of actions should no longer lie in reason but in what existentialists call subjectivity, a sort of consciousness pre-existing before any reasons could be given to explain it. According to existentialists, we ourselves are the question, and therefore we cannot ever ask the question *why* about ourselves. Thus, existentialism highlights the importance of the subjective self, while this subjectivity becomes the source of our freedom as well (cf. Mansfield 1954, 13–14). Freedom is united with existence itself, which is tied up with experience. On the other hand, the experience of living from moment to moment is beyond any rational explanation. However, people tend to mask their freedom to themselves and like imagining that they do things because they have to. Each moment people make choices, yet if they mask their freedom and do not take responsibility for their choices and actions, they only place their hope into justifications, which is a kind of cowardice (Mansfield 1954, 12–18). The focus lies upon choice and action, the only reality; for human character cannot be taken for real, it is a mere possibility. What we call the *I* is total freedom, a kind of emptiness. Thus, to existentialists, human beings and human existence are ambiguous because, on the one hand, individuals are condemned to be free, while, on the other hand, they deny their freedom (Mansfield 1954, 20–21). Existentialist heroes are in a perpetual crisis because of the anguish they feel. This dread is not equal to fear since that would mean that there was something that one was afraid of. Existential anguish rather refers to the fear of nothing, to the awareness of being in suspense (cf. Mansfield 1954, 16). While this ambiguity of the human being itself had already been considered reality by Kierkegaard, one of the forefathers of existentialism, there were some differences in view with respect to hope and hopelessness between him and Sartre, for example. Kierkegaard postulated that there was no structure that was able to reach God because there lay

1 Existentialism refers to ways of thinking that were highly common in European philosophy between 1930 and 1950. These tendencies interpret human existence in the world focusing on its concreteness and problematic nature (britannica.com).

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an infinite space between us and Him, yet he believed that if one was to take a leap, then God could be grasped, and that this leap was hope or faith. In opposition to the Danish philosopher, Sartre's humanism is regarded as pessimistic. There is an unexplainable paradox which seemingly haunts the individual who is the forger of his/her own destiny, but his/her actions also determine the fate of every human being as well. On the one hand, there is absolute freedom, while on the other hand each individual is accountable for the way of the world (Mansfield 1954, 21–23). The state of anguish is caused by the magnitude of the task, that is, free choice and responsibility, which the individual can only master with courage. The burden is all on him/her; there is no God to assist them (Peyre 1948, 24).

Camus did not want to be associated with the existentialist group and Sartre, yet his philosophy allied with the anti-Christian ethics of the former. In Camus's view, the sin against life consisted in putting one's hope into another one, whereas clear-sighted indifference should always be the starting point (Peyre 1948, 27). In a similar way to Sartre, Camus focuses on making choices and taking decisions: "I shall continue to believe that this world has no higher meaning. But I know that there is one thing in it that has a meaning: man, because he alone demands to have a meaning" (qtd. in Peyre 1948, 28). Thus, both in Sartre's and Camus's view, existentialist heroes are men of choice and decision. Writers also belong to these heroes because they use words as signs and not as mere objects. By writing, they enter the realm of action, and their texts deliver a certain message (Peyre 1948, 29).

Kafka, whose literary work also bears existentialist traits, chooses heroes who have lost their freedom, or, more accurately, the initiative of choice, and as a consequence have no foothold on the world. The absurd situations that surround these heroes lead us to believe that Kafka's universe builds on an impossible assumption, yet the readers and the protagonists seem to share the nostalgia to be a pure object, not aware of their pure freedom (Mansfield 1954, 16). In his short texts *The Silence of the Sirens* and *Prometheus*,[2] the author borrows his protagonists from the ancient Greek mythology, yet dresses them into modern garments. In the story relating the encounter between Odysseus and the sirens, Kafka alters the Homeric version of the myth; here, Odysseus not only lets himself be tied to the mast but puts wax into his own ears, too. In this way, he cannot hear the sirens sing, nor move away, having secured himself in a double manner. At least this is what Odysseus thinks, because in this version of the story the sirens do not sing: "And in fact, when Odysseus came, the mighty singers did not sing, either because they believed the only way of tackling this opponent was with silence, or because the sight of the utter bliss on Odysseus's face, as he thought of nothing but wax and chains, caused them quite to forget their singing" (Kafka 1917, n. p.).

2 Both texts appeared in *The Blue Octavo Notebooks*, sometimes referred to as *The Eight Octavo Notebooks,* published posthumously in 1953, which contained philosophical and literary writings, fragments and extracts written by Kafka between 1917 and 1919.

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Kafka used a kind of silent hermeneutics, where without singing, that is, without words, only the movements remained, which could be filled up with whatever content (Seidensticker and Vöhler 2001, 327). The modern garments are the movements that without words are void of any particular meaning. At the beginning of the 20th century, ancient myths and heroes got stripped off their vast meaningfulness. There was the modern individual left without any assistance, no gods, no belief system to rely on, just as Sartre would render the situation later on. On the other hand, pure rationalism could not provide meaning either, nor was it able to replace the ancient world. Since the sirens refused to sing, and it was only Odysseus who thought they would be singing, the hero got defeated. Odysseus, "a cunning fox" (Kafka 1917, n. p.), relied on his intellect in order to win over the dangerous singers. However, his wit was useless. What the modern individual was proudest of, namely his intellectual power, turned out to cause his downfall, a winner on the outside, a loser on the inside. Kafka's Odysseus made a choice and acted, but from the Sartrean perspective these are to be interpreted as justifications, reactions and not initiatives, and thus, acts of cowardice. The modern individual wants to succeed without really taking responsibility, without really listening to and seeing what is needed to be done. The intellectual power that Kafka's Odysseus hopes to find refuge in is only illusory since reality and the human being are more complex and definitely more ambiguous in nature.

The true hero of the second text to be discussed by Kafka is not Prometheus as the title shows, but the relationship between reality, truth, and texts. This modern parable[3] is made up of five short paragraphs, the first four of which are variants of the Promethean myth, while the last one is an explanatory interpretation of the previous ones. Each version of the myth presents another facet of Prometheus's story. Kafka begins with the closest variant to the ancient Greek myth, where the focus lies on the betrayal, the punishment, and the hero's timeless suffering (Kálmán 2007, 54): "According to the first, because he had betrayed the gods to men he was chained to a rock in the Caucasus and the gods sent eagles that devoured his perpetually renewed liver" (Kafka 1917, n. p.). Next, due to his suffering, Prometheus gets melted together with the rock, which means that his suffering and the rock are one (Kálmán 2007, 54), and it is only the rock that can be seen: "According to the second, Prometheus in his agony, as the beaks hacked into him, pressed deeper and deeper into the rock until he became one with it" (Kafka 1917, n. p.). In the third variant, Kafka highlights the process of forgetting, because no one seems to remember Prometheus's treachery, the reason behind the cruel punishment. However, we no longer get any information about the other aspects mentioned in

3 For this part about Kafka, as well as Camus later on, cf. Mihály Vilma-Irén "The Myth of Prometheus – A Brief Encounter between Kafka and Camus in Literature, Discourse and Multicultural Dialogue". *LDMD* vol. 8, 2020, Literature, 187–195; http://asociatia-alpha.ro/ldmd/08-2020/LDMD-08-Lite.pdf.

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the previous paragraphs, whether the suffering has stopped, or how the story has come to an end; this section is only about having been forgotten (Kálmán 2007, 54): "According to the third, in the course of thousands of years his treachery was forgotten, the gods forgot, the eagles forgot, he himself forgot" (Kafka 1917, n. p.). The last variant takes the row of interpretations one step further; it implies that people have gotten weary of Prometheus's story. This is possible because the story has become meaningless (Kálmán 2007, 54): "According to the fourth, everyone grew weary of what had become meaningless. The gods grew weary, the eagles grew weary, the wound closed wearily" (Kafka 1917, n. p.). Thus, the story begins and ends with the rock, that is, reality, the unexplainable that the story tries to explain. This is what the fifth paragraph points out: "What remained was the inexplicable range of mountains. The legend tries to explain the inexplicable. Since it arises out of a foundation of truth, it must end in the realm of the inexplicable" (Kafka 1917, n. p.). There is something to truth which cannot be rendered in words or in texts. Stories are only able to hint at deeper meanings using words as symbols. However, just as in the case of Odysseus and the sirens, in this text Kafka also reflects how the ancient myths became devalued in the early 20th century. Throughout the five paragraphs taking the Promethean myth as an example, he follows how mythic stories came into being and how their elements faded with time, leaving behind only the rock. The modern individual is not at a loss because of having been left with the rock, i.e. reality. They are at a loss because this is a frightening reality. This situation leaves them in a state of anguish since they can no longer rely on ancient belief systems, nor on God nor on their intellect because neither of these can provide a reliable explanation. Kafka's modern parables are statements of "man's awareness of the supernatural, but rather than bridging the gap between the here and the there, the rational and the irrational, they reveal and perpetuate this gap in an insoluble enigma" (Politzer 1960, 49). These texts suspend time and thrive towards the supra-real, managing to conquer reality by extending into unreality; they are "parabolic trials instituted against a world deprived of any meaning" (Politzer 1960, 57). This way Kafka is in line with existentialist thinking, where they were more concerned with questions than giving answers. His heroes are trapped in dread, are weak, and do not have the courage to act. Yet, despite the weakness of the protagonists and the pessimism of the content, the texts are signs and have a message. They clearly show the actual state of the human beings at the beginning of the 20th century, that is, anguish, and they raise questions that demand an answer.

Bertolt Brecht provides an answer to the questions in 1933 with his short story entitled *Odysseus and the Sirens*, which he intends to be a kind of myth critique, but myth correction, too: "One finds a correction for this story in Franz Kafka, too, which does not in truth really seem credible latterly!" (qtd. in Parker 2014, 332). Brecht combines the Homeric source with Kafka's version: in a similar way to Homer's text, Odysseus lets himself be tied to the mast and puts wax into the

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ears of his companions, yet, as with Kafka, the sirens refuse to sing. However, they do not remain silent either, they curse as the ship goes past:

> Are we saying that I am the first to register concerns? I said to myself: all well and good, but who – apart from Odysseus – says that the Sirens really sang, at the sight of the bound man? Are we saying that these powerful and adroit women really squandered their art on people who possessed no freedom of movement? Is that the essence of art? My preference is to assume that the distended throats seen by the rowers were cursing the damned wary provincial with all their might, and our hero performed his (equally attested) contortions because he was in the final analysis embarrassed! (qtd. in Parker 2014, 332)

By dismissing Odysseus's credibility, but also that of the truth value of the myth, Brecht agrees with Kafka and proves that these ancient stories have become obsolete. However, he also makes use of the myth to point at the role art should play in the society towards the middle of the 20th century. He corrects the myth so as to make it appropriate for a particular situation. The sirens stand here for socially engaged art, whereas Odysseus is the "wary provincial", who does not really want to listen to what art is saying. Another important idea underlined by Brecht is that art is not for people who are not free. Both of these arguments bring Brecht closer to Sartrean existentialism, firstly due to the use and role of words, i.e. these/art should become actions, and, secondly, because of the idea of freedom/lack of freedom.

In *The Flies* (1943), Sartre elaborates on the existentialist theme of freedom: "men are free, and once freedom has burst into a man's soul, the gods are powerless against that man" (qtd. in Peyre 1948, 25). Like Prometheus, Orestes disobeys Zeus and the Furies, arguing that he has his own law: "For I am a man, and every man must discover his own path. Nature abhors man, and you too, sovereign of the gods, you abhor men" (qtd. in Peyre 1948, 25). Orestes's and Prometheus's deeds are not mere acts of rebellion but a proof of responsibility – they act free according to the situation they find themselves in.

Camus's Prometheus, though in the Underworld (1946/47) – World War II can rightfully be considered hell –, is also able to make decisions and take action when needed. The text starts with the question "What does Prometheus mean to man today?" (qtd. in Thody 1970, 77). Throughout the essay, Prometheus's figure is shown from different angles, his character ranges from the positive hero to the sinner, which allies with the ambiguity of the human being. His rebellion may have caused the historical chaos of the time, yet he is still considered a fellow individual (Thody 1970, 77). While Prometheus is the cause of mankind's problems, he also presents the solution to them, in as far as he has followers. Prometheus loved mankind to such an extent that he gave them freedom, and means to use fire, technology, and art.

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However, out of the Promethean gifts, the modern individual only used technology and saw an obstacle in art – this attitude resembles that of Brecht's Odysseus, too. This is contrary to the true spirit of Prometheus, who did not distinguish technology from art, i.e. body from soul. The modern individual would try in vain to first free the body by all means and forget about the soul, for was/is it possible for the soul to die? (cf. Thody 1970, 77). Although the background against which Kafka and Camus wrote, an alienated and alienating world, was similar, whereas in Kafka's text all the protagonists got weary of everything, Camus's Prometheus can perform actions and thereby change the situation. In this instance, it is the modern individual who acts as the ancient gods did, because in case Prometheus returned, they would tie him to the rock, acting out of the very humanism that Prometheus symbolized. The modern individual's blindness can also be compared to people's betrayal of Christ (cf. Thody 1970, 77–78). What Prometheus and Christ offered to people was freedom, the promise of choosing their own future, of making their own decisions. Thus, in Camus's text, we have a congruence between content and writing intention: choose, decide, and act the way Prometheus did, for we are all in a net, and what one decides has an effect upon the whole.

At the end of his essay, Camus turned from the Promethean myth to myths in general: "myths have no life of their own"; they have to be given flesh (qtd. in Thody 1970, 78), a view that resembles Kafka's, since the source of these myths is to be found beyond their interpretative variants, i.e. in the realm of absolute truth. It may be true that the modern individual no longer believes in the world of the ancient myths; however, there is a mythic grid that lies at the foundation. This grid is made up of residual elements – by residual I mean essential, that which has been preserved over the years –, which are always the same, yet can take up whatever shape needed according to the prevailing times. In Camus's text, for example, Prometheus's strength lies in "his quiet faith in man. This is how he is harder than his rock and more patient than his vulture. His long stubbornness has more meaning for us than his revolt against the gods. Along with his admirable determination to separate and exclude nothing, which always has and always will reconcile mankind's suffering with the springtimes of the world" (qtd. in Thody 1970, 79). It is the figure of Prometheus, and not the rock, that Camus takes for reality – another proof of existentialism and subjectivity. No gods, nor God was there to help, and thus Sisyphus and Prometheus are the examples to follow; they are metaphors of the modern individual's condition, but at the same time models to follow.

This attitude may be applied today as well, regardless of the nature of the crisis. Existentialist ambiguity resembles incertitude caused by any sort of havoc, most of all due to the anguish which these states result in. In seemingly hopeless times, the individual seeks hope, yet, as the analysed texts show, the realm they think to find hope in, e.g. ancient belief systems, God, reason, etc., is quite illusory. However, these texts cannot be regarded as hopeless and pessimistic, precisely

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because of their deep humanism. Their words are actions. On the one hand, they present a diagnosis of the period they lived in; they are signs of the alienation felt by many intellectuals. On the other hand, all the texts deal with and make use of myths in order to perform their actions and render their messages. This is possible because there is a deeper layer of myths, which is grounded in truth that cannot be fully depicted in/by/through the various textual versions. Thus, while myths undergo changes – as proved through the close reading of the texts –, in fact, the mythic grids and the residual mythic elements remain the same. Only times and texts, i.e. the outer garments, change, becoming mirrors of their ages. Thus, their actions work on at least two levels: firstly, on the level of content, i.e. Odysseus becomes a weak hero, a model not to follow, while Prometheus urges to choose and act in the name of human liberty; secondly, they prove the existence of a mythic grid that goes beyond everything, even beyond dichotomies such as hope and hopelessness. Becoming aware of these grids one can understand better the way all phenomena work, and this awareness can bring one closer to making decisions more consciously and act accordingly.

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