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# WHAT IS MYTHICAL HOPE IN CHILDREN'S AND YOUNG ADULTS' CULTURE? – OR: SHARING THE LIGHT

*To Professor Jerzy Axer*
*with gratitude for His faith in Childhood*

> L'enfance croit ce qu'on lui raconte et ne le met pas en doute.
> […] C'est un peu de cette naïveté que je vous demande et,
> pour nous porter chance à tous,
> laissez-moi vous dire quatre mots magiques,
> véritable "Sésame ouvre-toi" de l'enfance:
> Il était une fois…
>
> Jean Cocteau, *La Belle et la Bête*, 1946

"Long, long ago, when this old world was in its tender infancy, there was a child…" – this is how Nathaniel Hawthorne's tale "The Paradise of Children" begins. It belongs to the collection *A Wonder-Book for Girls and Boys* (1851).[1] Its narrator, a young man bearing the telling name of Eustace Bright – with the Greek prefix εὖ, 'well' / 'good', and an allusion to light included – is staying with his little cousins at Tanglewood, a beautiful manor in Lenox, Massachusetts. They are cut off from the world by a strong winter snowstorm over which the children "rejoiced greatly", though Eustace not so much. Thus, cousin Primrose, both to make Eustace feel better and provide their group with some indoor entertainment, asks him for a story. The therapeutic function of storytelling in plain sight. The thoughts of Eustace go to warm weather, and he tells the children

[1] In the present chapter the following edition is used: Nathaniel Hawthorne, *A Wonder-Book for Girls and Boys*, Boston, MA: Houghton, Mifflin and Company, [1879], 89 (in the further quotations the page numbers from this edition will be given in parentheses). On Hawthorne and children's literature, see in the first place Sheila Murnaghan with Deborah H. Roberts, "'A Kind of Minotaur': Literal and Spiritual Monstrosity in the Works of Nathaniel Hawthorne", in Katarzyna Marciniak, ed., *Chasing Mythical Beasts: The Reception of Ancient Monsters in Children's and Young Adults' Culture*, "Studien zur europäischen Kinder- und Jugendliteratur / Studies in European Children's and Young Adult Literature" 8, Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag Winter, 2020, 55–74; and Sheila Murnaghan and Deborah H. Roberts, *Childhood and the Classics: Britain and America, 1850–1965*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018.

about the times when there was "but one season in the year, and that was the delightful summer; and but one age for mortals, and that was childhood" (88).

As this story of the Golden Age develops – with Eustace's charming descriptions of meals growing on trees, carefree fun, and the bright aura – it in fact reveals the sinister myth of Pandora, here a "playfellow" sent by the gods to the boy Epimetheus, in whose household "a great box" menacingly awaits. Even though in Hawthorne's version the girl is not responsible for bringing the box to Earth (it had been deposited by Mercury in person much earlier[2]), it is still hers to release the evils and, as a result, to put an end to this Paradise of Children, "who before had seemed immortal in their childhood, now grew older, day by day, and came soon to be youths and maidens, and men and women by and by, and then aged people, before they dreamed of such a thing" (104–105).

The horror that follows the opening of the box by Pandora is foreshadowed in the moment she lifts the lid – by a change in the weather: there was a heavy thunderclap, "the black cloud had now swept quite over the sun, and seemed to have buried it alive" (102); it was so dark that Pandora could hardly see a thing. But she heard. Hawthorne's emphasis on the sense of hearing enhances the dreadful atmosphere of the scene: the ears of Pandora were hit by "a disagreeable buzzing, as if a great many huge flies or gigantic mosquitoes […] were darting about" (103). As her eyes grew accustomed to the darkness, she saw "a crowd of ugly little shapes, with bats' wings, looking abominably spiteful, and armed with terribly long stings in their tails" (103). They were "the whole family of earthly Troubles", including evil Passions, Cares, Sorrows, and Diseases. And they attacked and strung first Epimetheus and next Pandora. The girl, distressed, opened the windows and the doors to drive them out of their household, and thus they scattered and began tormenting people all over the world.

"L'enfance croit ce qu'on lui raconte et ne le met pas en doute" – childhood or, in fact, children believe in what they are told and do not question it. This is how Jean Cocteau, in 1946, begins his fairy-tale movie *La Belle et la Bête*. But do young people really accept everything uncritically? Well, in Hawthorne's myth of Pandora, in the section "Tanglewood Play-Room: After the Story", one of the cousins asks Eustace how big the box was and whether it truly contained all the troubles. The storyteller confirms it did, adding that the box included even the snowstorm and was "perhaps three feet long, […] two feet wide, and two feet and a half high" (110). Such a precise answer, however, does not satisfy the boy:

[2] For Hawthorne, children embody innocence; Pandora's curiosity is "provoked" by the mysterious presence of the box (90).

> "Ah," said the child, "you are making fun of me, Cousin Eustace! I know there is not trouble enough in the world to fill such a great box as that. As for the snowstorm, it is no trouble at all, but a pleasure; so it could not have been in the box." (110–111)

Pandora did her homework, too. She developed critical thinking (a side effect of her knowledge of good and evil), and when she heard a little tap from inside the box and a gentle voice asking her to open it again, she replied: "I have had enough of lifting the lid! […] You need never think that I shall be so foolish as to let you out!" (106). This is not the end of her story, of course, but we need to learn more before returning to it.

In fact, Cocteau's Belle is not naive, either. She gains the ability to see beyond appearances and in the moment of ultimate trial she displays her own agency and manifests a sharp assessment of the situation and her feelings, thereby leading to the triumph of Good, which also entails her personal victory.

It is remarkable that Cocteau, who enjoyed the reputation of an avant-garde artist *par excellence*, in his movie *La Belle et la Bête* elaborates upon one of the oldest classical tales, and, as observed by critics, he makes his work a "rather faithful adaptation" of Jeanne-Marie Leprince de Beaumont's version of the story (1756).[3] The opening of the movie, with the director's request to watch it with a certain naivety, is accompanied by his evocation of childhood (*l'enfance*) and the fairy-tale tradition both of the Orient (*véritable "Sésame ouvre-toi"*) and European folklore (*Il était une fois…*): together they define the sources of Cocteau's "personal mythology".[4] But mythology in the classical understanding of the term is present in the movie, too – not only via numerous details, like, for instance, the sculpture of Diana coming alive in the garden of the Beast,[5] but above all in the whole narrative framework based on the Greek myth of Eros and Psyche, with the final scene of Belle and her Prince-not-Bête-anymore flying into the sky like Cupid and his beloved on the famous painting by the French academic William-Adolphe Bouguereau (see Fig. 1).

That Cocteau demands "un peu de cette naïveté" – a bit of this naivety – from his viewers when evoking the mythical and fairy-tale context is not a coincidence. Indeed, this naivety is the condition *sine qua non* for viewing such

[3] See William Verrone, *Adaptation and the Avant-Garde: Alternative Perspectives on Adaptation*, London: Continuum, 2011, s.v. "Jean Cocteau's *Beauty and the Beast*".

[4] Ibidem.

[5] Diana plays the key role in the finale, when she shoots the antagonist and transforms him into a beast.

**Figure 1:** William-Adolphe Bouguereau, *The Abduction of Psyche* (ca. 1895), Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain.

paintings and movies and for reading and listening to such tales and myths, insofar as we wish to grasp their essence. We need to believe, at least for a moment, that a rose can cause a family drama or that all the world's evils originate from the intriguing box deposited by Mercury in Epimetheus' house. Only then can we enter the realm of primordial stories and learn our lessons. And owing to the particular reaction triggered by childlike innocence, these lessons take an unexpected turn, as we can see in the sceptical remark of Eustace's little cousin. In fact, it turns out that this kind of naivety is not at all contradictory vis-à-vis the protagonists' agency or the young audience's inquisitiveness. On the contrary, it inspires these features as if they were its precious side effects, while the lack of experience along with the feeling of joy at discovering the world with humility when facing its wonders arouses curiosity and leads to wisdom, even though there are some complications along the way.

Indeed, Psyche ruined her happiness while discovering her husband's identity; Belle boldly entered the forbidden room where the Beast kept the magic rose and nearly crushed the delicate flower; Pandora satisfied her curiosity, but in consequence she released a host of evils to torment humankind. With such protagonists, ones we typically do indeed meet in childhood, we learn to doubt – not the fantastic elements of the given story (these we believe, as per Cocteau's request), but our judgements of events, of the motivations of the heroes and heroines, and of our imaginary choices, had we been in their shoes. Thus, the myths and fairy tales help us achieve ever more agency in the coming-of-age process, and this is essential for us both to become able to make our own decisions in our own stories and to strive with hope for the (im)possible happy ending.

Sometimes these lessons need to be repeated, especially when disaster strikes, shattering our childhood ideals. This may explain why the visionary French director chose such an unexpected source – "the tale as old as time" of Beauty and the Beast – as the theme for his movie shortly after World War Two had utterly destroyed the dream of creating the Century of the Child and bringing the Golden Age back to Earth.[6] Cocteau understood the artist's mission – the effort to rekindle this dream for the future of humankind.

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[6] In fact, the idealized concept of the Century of the Child by Ellen Key (ed. pr. in Swedish 1900) was shattered already by World War One; see Bettina Kümmerling-Meibauer, *Klassiker der Kinder- und Jugendliteratur. Ein internationales Lexikon*, vol. A–K, Stuttgart and Weimar: Metzler, 1999, ix; Bettina Kümmerling-Meibauer, *Kinder- und Jugendliteratur. Eine Einführung*, Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 2012; Katarzyna Marciniak, "What Is a Classic… for Children and Young Adults?", in Katarzyna Marciniak, ed., *Our Mythical Childhood... The Classics and Literature*

After all, the myths and fairy tales we come to know with a sort of naive open-mindedness teach us to channel curiosity into the trust we consciously bestow upon someone. Psyche's terrible deed triggered her maturation and brought her to wise interactions with other creatures and, in the (happy) ending, to a full reunion with Eros on Mount Olympus. Belle violated the Beast's ban on moving around the castle, but this was how she learnt to notice what was invisible to the eye (quite literally, too, the enchanted servants included) and how she came to know the curse, which she later lifted owing to her courageous and independent actions. Pandora… well, she sentenced humankind to eternal suffering, but she also brought Hope into the world.

Pandora, indeed, transformed her original, vain, and empty naivety into the naivety as meant by Cocteau – wise, humble, and leading to trust. In spite of her very worst experiences and after many doubts, she took the decision to place confidence in the voice that promised not to be "those naughty creatures that have stings in their tails". However, as if by an ironic twist of Fate, this time it was extremely difficult to lift the lid – it suddenly became very heavy and the girl needed Epimetheus' help. Only together, jointly did they succeed, whereupon they saw a "beautiful creature" (108), as Pandora exclaimed in awe. She was a sunny and smiling little fairy-like personage with "rainbow wings, throwing a light wherever she went" (107). Her gentle touch healed the inflamed wounds left by the evils on the children's bodies and "immediately the anguish of it was gone" (107). Hope – having presented herself with this name – explained that she had been "packed into the box to make amends to the human race for that swarm of ugly Troubles", and then she made the following promise to Pandora and Epimetheus: "Never fear! We shall do pretty well in spite of them all" (108).

This promise is also conveyed both to Eustace's audience and to the little readers of Hawthorne's story, thereby further strengthening the agency of the children, who are encouraged to change the world for the better with Hope's help. And she is a very special helper, for she gives her cures and blessings to all in need (*pour nous porter chance à tous*), as if the Golden Age were still

*for Children and Young Adults*, "Metaforms: Studies in the Reception of Classical Antiquity" 8, Leiden and Boston, MA: Brill, 2016, 6. However, the dream to revive it is still strong, with many great initiatives, like the establishment of the International Board on Books for Young People (IBBY) in 1953 that within its first efforts promoted the pacifistic *Ferdinand the Bull* (1938) by Munro Leaf and Robert Lawson; see Katarzyna Marciniak, "*Et in Arcadia Ferdinand*: The Mythical Victory of an Extraordinary Bull", in Jan Stanisław Ciechanowski and Cristina González Caizán, eds., *Spain–India–Russia: Centres, Borderlands, and Peripheries of Civilisations. Anniversary Book Dedicated to Professor Jan Kieniewicz on His 80th Birthday*, Warsaw: Faculty of "Artes Liberales" of the University of Warsaw and Wydawnictwo Naukowe Sub Lupa, 2018, 247–262.

on Earth. That is why, in case the evils manage to make Hope disappear from our horizon in certain circumstances, it is so crucial to travel back to the realm of childhood, via fairy tales and myths, to lift the lid and find her again.

## A Sacred Word

In his version of the myth of Hope as a healer, Hawthorne overcomes the famous Hesiodean *crux*. In *Erga* the "beautiful creature" we know from "The Paradise of Children" is kept in the box (jar) by the will of Zeus, whose epithet νεφεληγερέτα (*nephelēgeréta*; cloud gatherer) brings to mind the storm and the dark cloud that seemed to have buried the sun alive, as described by the American writer. However, then the similarities are no more:

> μούνη δ' αὐτόθι Ἐλπὶς ἐν ἀρρήκτοισι δόμοισιν
> ἔνδον ἔμιμνε πίθου ὑπὸ χείλεσιν, οὐδὲ θύραζε
> ἐξέπτη: πρόσθεν γὰρ ἐπέλλαβε πῶμα πίθοιο
> αἰγιόχου βουλῇσι Διὸς νεφεληγερέταο.
>
> (Hes., *Op*. 96–99)

> Only Hope remained there in an unbreakable home within under the rim of the great jar, and did not fly out at the door; for ere that, the lid of the jar stopped her, by the will of Aegis-holding Zeus who gathers the clouds.[7]

The decision of Zeus and the function of Hope in this famous didactic epic leave room for discussions: did the king of the gods wish to preserve Hope for people and place her under their control?[8] Or, on the contrary – was his intention

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[7] Trans. Hugh G. Evelyn-White in Hesiod, *The Homeric Hymns and Homerica*, Cambridge, MA, and London: Harvard University Press and William Heinemann, 1914, via Perseus Project. For a discussion on this issue, see Willem Jacob Verdenius, *A Commentary on Hesiod:* Works and Days*, vv. 1–382*, Leiden: Brill, 1985, 66–71.

[8] Verdenius calls Hope "the natural companion of man" (66). See also ibidem, 67: Verdenius refers to Babrius 58, where the jar contains only the good things: Ζεὺς ἐν πίθῳ τὰ χρηστὰ πάντα συλλέξας / ἔθηκεν αὐτὸν πωμάσας παρ' ἀνθρώπῳ. / ὁ δ' ἀκρατὴς ἄνθρωπος εἰδέναι σπεύδων / τί ποτ' ἦν ἐν αὐτῷ, καὶ τὸ πῶμα κινήσας, / διῆκ' ἀπελθεῖν αὐτὰ πρὸς θεῶν οἴκους, / κἀκεῖ πέτεσθαι τῆς τε γῆς ἄνω φεύγειν. / μόνη δ' ἔμεινεν ἐλπίς, ἣν κατειλήφει / τεθὲν τὸ πῶμα, τοιγὰρ ἐλπὶς ἀνθρώποις / μόνη σύνεστι, τῶν πεφευγότων ἥμας / ἀγαθῶν ἕκαστον ἐγγυωμένη δώσειν (Zeus gathered all the useful things together in a jar and put a lid on it. He then left the jar in human hands. But man had no self-control and he wanted to know what was in that jar, so he pushed the lid aside, letting those things go back to the abode of the gods. So all the good things flew away, soaring high above the earth, and Hope was the only thing left. When the lid was put back on the jar, Hope was kept

to hide her from humans? If to hide, then why? To punish them more harshly or to protect them from the worst?[9] And if the latter cause, then what was that "worst" scenario?

Hope in Greek culture has an ambiguous meaning. That is why scholars usually leave it (her) untranslated in their analyses, as Ἐλπίς / Elpis. The most neutral versions, 'expectation' or 'anticipation', cover both denotations: "anticipation of bad as well as of good things", to quote Glenn W. Most.[10] The first denotation makes us realize why Zeus's decision to keep Hope imprisoned in the jar might be interpreted as, in fact, an act of mercy: a life spent awaiting only terrible events would be torture. The second denotation is the one that corresponds best to our contemporary understanding of Hope in English as – let us quote Wikipedia for the most popular definition – "an optimistic state of mind that is based on an expectation of positive outcomes with respect to events and circumstances in one's life or the world at large".[11] What is interesting, this positive definition, attested by English etymological dictionaries as the principal meaning of "hope" ('expectation of good'),[12] is found also in the Slavic languages (for example, *nadzieja* in Polish), despite the different roots of this noun. For instance, Wiesław Boryś's *Słownik etymologiczny języka polskiego* [Etymological Dictionary of Polish][13] defines Hope as "oczekiwanie spełnienia czegoś pożądanego" (anticipating the fulfilment of something desirable). However, even such a positive meaning can lead to negative consequences: Hesiod warns his public against κενεὴν ἐπὶ ἐλπίδα μίμνων (*Op*. 498) – "the vain (empty) hope" that makes people lazy.[14]

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inside. That is why Hope alone is still found among the people, promising that she will bestow on each of us the good things that have gone away; trans. Laura Gibbs, in *Aesop's Fables*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002). Of course in this version there is no blame of Pandora-the-woman. For the most recent retelling of the Pandora motif, see Natalie Haynes (who rejects the Erasmian "box" already in the title), *Pandora's Jar: Women in the Greek Myths*, London: Picador, 2020.

[9] Verdenius, *A Commentary on Hesiod*, 66–71.

[10] Glenn W. Most's commentary in Hesiod, *Theogony; Works and Days; Testimonia*, ed. and trans. Glenn W. Most, Cambridge, MA, and London: Harvard University Press, 2006, 95, n. 7. See also the entry "Pandora's Box" on Wikipedia, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pandora%27s_box-#cite_note-23 (accessed 20 December 2020); Verdenius, *A Commentary on Hesiod*, 69–70. See also Martin L. West's commentary in his edition of Hesiod, *Theogony*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978, 169; Noriko Yasumura, *Challenges to the Power of Zeus in Early Greek Poetry*, London and New York, NY: Bloomsbury, 2011, 186.

[11] The entry "Pandora's Box" (accessed 20 December 2020).

[12] See, e.g., William W. Smith, *A Condensed Etymology of the English Language for Common Schools*, New York, NY, and Chicago, IL: A.S. Barnes & Company, [1870], 69.

[13] Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 2005, 347.

[14] See Verdenius, *A Commentary on Hesiod*, 66.

We could conclude that Hesiod is a rather pessimistic expert on Hope, if not for a single detail that changes everything. Despite all his dark thoughts, he wrote *The Works and Days* as a poignant appeal to his brother, with whom he wished to be reconciled. The choice of this kind of narrative framework for his message is the best testimony to the "hopeful side" of Hesiod's personality and his faith that positive change is possible – you only need to channel your agency in the right way, with humility and trust. Interestingly, the concept of agency is also a crucial component of Hope's etymology both in Greek and Latin: the origin of *elpis* is associated with the root meaning 'to want', 'to choose',[15] while the Latin noun *spes* has among its cognates such verbs as 'to be capable', 'to succeed', and 'to prosper'.[16]

Great expectations, to evoke the title of Charles Dickens's famous novel (1860–1861) having Hope and Love as the engines of the young protagonist's life,[17] require great efforts – a true quest *per aspera* (nota bene, an idiom linked by some scholars with the Hope semantic field: *ab-spe*[18]). Thus, Hope grows to the rank of an ally in our struggles with the evils set free by Pandora[19] and is added by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe to the four sacred words (ἱεροὶ λόγοι; *hieroì lógoi*) symbolizing the divinities who are supposed to accompany us from childhood: Daimon, Tyche, Eros, and Ananke.[20] The importance of Hope is also acknowledged in the Christian religion – it is one of the three theological virtues, next to Faith and Love. What is interesting, the connection between Hope and Faith is traceable already in Archaic Greek poetry. Douglas Cairns, in his fundamental study of Greek metaphors, shows this in a fragment by Semonides

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[15] M. Gnanavaram, "Preaching as a Language of Hope: An Indian Perspective", in Cas J.A. Vos, L. Lind Hogan, and Johan H. Cilliers, eds., *Preaching as a Language of Hope*, Pretoria: Protea Book House, 2007, 225.

[16] Michiel Arnoud Cor de Vaan, *Etymological Dictionary of Latin and the Other Italic Languages*, Leiden and Boston, MA: Brill, 2008, 580.

[17] See Monika Peplińska, "Sposoby konceptualizacji nadziei w wypowiedziach młodzieży licealnej" [Methods of Conceptualizing the Term Hope in High School Students' Utterances], *Studia Językoznawcze* [Linguistic Studies] 4 (2005): *Synchroniczne i diachroniczne aspekty badań polszczyzny* [Synchronic and Diachronic Aspects of Research into the Polish Language], 258. The scholar observes that young people are more creative in their use of the term of "hope", far beyond its dictionary definitions.

[18] See de Vaan, *Etymological Dictionary*, 58, 580; Sophia Papaioannou, "'A Historian Utterly Without Hope': Literary Artistry and Narratives of Decline in Tacitus' *Historiae* I", in George Kazantzidis and Dimos Spatharas, eds., *Hope in Ancient Literature, History and Art: Ancient Emotions I*, "Trends in Classics – Supplementary Volumes" 63, Berlin: De Gruyter, 2018, 214.

[19] Papaioannou, ibidem, notices that *spes*-related words were used by Tacitus in Book 1 of his *Histories* twenty-six times.

[20] Davide Stimilli, *The Face of Immortality: Physiognomy and Criticism*, New York, NY: State University of New York Press, 2005, 105.

of Amorgos: ἐλπὶς δὲ πάντας κἀπιπειθείη τρέφει / ἄπρηκτον ὁρμαίνοντας (1.6–7 West) – "Elpis and credulity nourish all as they strive for the impossible".[21] Hawthorne's title of his tale, "The Paradise of Children", may create a link between Christian tradition and the Graeco-Roman mythology with the aim of strengthening the positive interpretation of Hope (not so obvious for the Greeks) as a vital source of power for humans during the hardships of life. The full understanding of this message comes in adulthood, when we all become aware that striving for the impossible is an intrinsic part of human fate and that happy endings are an exception rather than something guaranteed.

In fact, childhood, even when not idealized to such a degree as in Hawthorne's writing, is probably the period of our highest hopes, even in grim circumstances. And if one emotion should be indicated as characteristic of this time, hope would be the obvious choice (nota bene, in Polish "być przy nadziei", literally 'to be with hope', means 'to expect a child').

Hope together with curiosity opens us up to the world. This process does bear some risks, as we have seen in the examples of Pandora, Psyche, and Belle, thus all the more so is Hope needed to make us ready to trust over and over again – to allow ourselves to be persuaded to lift the lid once more and set free the beautiful creature who can heal wounds and who dispels the darkness with her shining wings. No further explanation is necessary as to why we dared turn exactly to Hope as our patron for the opening phase of an enormous new endeavour within the *Our Mythical Childhood* programme.

## Our Mythical Hope

The programme *Our Mythical Childhood* was born in 2011, indeed from a childhood dream I shared one day with Jerzy Axer and Elżbieta Olechowska at our Alma Mater – the University of Warsaw. We were at that moment in the middle of intense transformations: the Institute for Interdisciplinary Studies "Artes Liberales", that arose from the Centre for Studies on the Classical Tradition (OBTA), was evolving into the Faculty of "Artes Liberales", with OBTA becoming one of its main units.[22]

[21] Douglas Cairns, "Metaphors for Hope in Archaic and Classical Greek Poetry", in Ruth R. Caston and Robert A. Kaster, eds., *Hope, Joy, and Affection in the Classical World*, New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2016, 32.

[22] On these processes, see Katarzyna Marciniak, ed., *Antiquity and We*, Warsaw: Faculty of "Artes Liberales", University of Warsaw, 2013, also available online (http://al.uw.edu.pl/pliki/akt/Antiquity_and_We_eBook.pdf).