

OUR MYTHICAL CHILDHOOD

OUR MYTHICAL HOPE

The Ancient Myths
as Medicine for the Hardships
of Life in Children's
and Young Adults' Culture

Edited by
Katarzyna Marciniak



OUR MYTHICAL HOPE

“OUR MYTHICAL CHILDHOOD” Series

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in the series "Our Mythical Childhood", edited by Katarzyna Marciniak (University of Warsaw, Poland)

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PART II

The Roots of Hope



*MYTH AND SUFFERING IN MODERN CULTURE:
THE DISCURSIVE ROLE OF MYTH
FROM OSCAR WILDE TO WOODKID*

The real substratum of myth is not
a substratum of thought, but of feeling.

Ernst Cassirer, *An Essay on Man*, 1944

The mythization of the world is not finished.

Bruno Schulz, "Mityzacja rzeczywistości"
[The Mythization of Reality], 1936

Marcel Reich-Ranicki (1920–2013), the influential Polish-Jewish-German literary critic, believed that "there are only two great subjects of literature. One is evanescence: the fact that people get old and pass away. Everything passes. The second subject is human suffering regardless of the epoch. Antigone in jeans suffers the same as of yore".¹ And yet, there is an unexamined belief that says children's literature, as if exempt from this unwritten law, is easy. Easy to read, easy to write – in a word: fun. Indeed, literature for children need not be difficult, but neither is it any good if it is facile. In its briefest and most intense form, that of a folk or fairy tale, there is already a great condensation of meaning. Ultimately, it is meaning, not entertainment, that human beings seek in life, and the quest for meaning that is reflected in children's literature begins very early, with the first questions that a three-year-old asks her mother or father. Death, loss, and suffering are, therefore, most natural elements of both children's and young adults' literature and art.

¹ Marcel Reich-Ranicki, "Polacy nie zasługują na poezję Tuwima" [The Poles Do Not Deserve Tuwim's Poetry], interview by Angelika Kuźniak and Agata Tuszyńska, *Duży Format* [The Big Format], 28 October 2008, http://wyborcza.pl/duzyformat/1,127290,5849827,Polacy_nie_zasluguja_na_poezje_Tuwima.html (accessed 28 April 2020): "Tak naprawdę istnieją dwa wielkie tematy literatury. Jeden to przemijanie. Że ludzie się starzeją i przemijają. Wszystko mija. Drugi temat to obraz ludzkich cierpień niezależnych od epoki. Antygona w dżinsach cierpi tak samo jak dawniej". All quotations have been translated by K.J., unless stated otherwise.

In the first decades of the twenty-first century, there has been an avalanche of children's books. If one walks into the children's section of a large bookshop, one is immediately struck by a curious phenomenon: there are beautiful covers, lots of tempting gadgets, books with buttons, books with shoelaces, books with-in boxes, books with golden necklaces and pendants, books with games, books with tools, books with wheels. One will find books that advertise their ability to teach children about texture, as if children lived in a vacuum without people, plants, fabrics, and utensils. Including books for children as young as one year old. Books that insult the youngest readers by the presumption that everything for children has to be in loud, primary colours, and every character has to have big eyes and be an animal. Such so-called books stand in sharp contrast to the treasury of both ancient and modern stories – myths, fairy tales, and contemporary authorial mythopoeic works – that address both suffering and evanescence as well as some of the other most painful topics that there are: orphanhood, loneliness, death, unrequited love. In what follows I will consider the role of both ancient myth and modern mythopoeia in confronting these issues.

The Inevitability of Mythology

In *Language and Myth* (1925), Ernst Cassirer analyses the interconnectedness of two basic human prerogatives: that of communication in language and of myth-making. In his analysis he goes back to the thought of Max Müller, who claims that “[m]ythology is inevitable, it is natural, it is an inherent necessity of language, if we recognize in language the outward form and manifestation of thought [...]. Depend upon it, there is mythology now as there was in the time of Homer, only we do not perceive it, because we ourselves live in the very shadow of it”.²

Using Cassirer's fundamental ideas on mythical thinking developed in his *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* (1923–1929), and later presented again in a more succinct form in *An Essay on Man* (1944), I analyse the persistence of myth in modern literature for children and youth. I focus first on two canonical authors, Oscar Wilde (“The Birthday of the Infanta” from the volume *A House of Pomegranates*, 1891) and Antoine de Saint-Exupéry (*Le Petit Prince*, 1943), and demonstrate how they both employ a mythical substratum that allows for

² Max Müller, “On the Philosophy of Mythology”, lecture at the Royal Institution in London, 1871, quoted from Ernst Cassirer, *Language and Myth*, trans. Susanne K. Langer, New York, NY: Dover Publications, 2012 (ed. pr. 1925), 5.

a combining of the two traditional literary forms, the myth and the fairy tale, into a seamless new genre. The issues of overcoming suffering, loss, and death are at the core of the two authors' oeuvre, as both hark back to tragedy and Baroque tragic drama as well as to myth.

In the second part of my paper, I will turn to the contemporary expression of the mythical chronotope, both in children's literature and in other media. I will briefly mention the direct and somewhat reductive renderings of the Ancient Greek myths in such novels for young readers as Katherine Marsh's two volumes, *The Night Tourist* (2010) and *The Twilight Prisoner* (2014), which make overt use of, respectively, the story of Eurydice and the myth of Demeter and Persephone, but stage them both in twenty-first-century New York City and its Underworld. In psychological terms, the original novel and its sequel deal with loss and mourning as well as with the role of friendship in adolescence.

Last but not least, I will analyse the video clips and the lyrics of the French artist Woodkid's first musical album, *The Golden Age* (2013). As the music and the imagery were immediately used by Ubisoft in their action-adventure video game series *Assassin's Creed III* (2013), as well as in dozens of other trailers, films, and advertisements, the entire concept album reached an unprecedented number of young people and children. I will demonstrate how the ostensibly ultra-modern medium nonetheless makes use of mythical discourse in the depiction and overcoming of violence, trauma, and addiction. Mythical thinking, it seems, persists up to our era, and the mythical discourse lends itself to the representation of the suffering, grief, and, occasionally, resilience that accompany rites of passage from childhood into adulthood.

Myth-Making Creatures

"There is no natural phenomenon and no phenomenon of human life that is not capable of a mythical interpretation, and which does not call for such an interpretation",³ claims Cassirer in a radically generous and inclusive definition of "mythical". This broad take is, albeit momentarily, useful here because it allows for a universal and a general approach to both classical myth – in any culture – and to modern myth-making. It makes possible the definition of the human being as a myth-making creature. At the same time, Cassirer points out

³ Ernst Cassirer, *An Essay on Man*, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1944, 73.

that “[a] theory of myth, is, however, from the beginning laden with difficulties”.⁴ To him, myth is fundamentally non-theoretical, which explains perhaps why thinkers have been grappling with it for so long: “It defies and challenges our fundamental categories of thought”.⁵ In examining the mythical propensity of the human mind, Cassirer traces its interpretation from the English philosopher Francis Bacon’s *The Wisdom of the Ancients* (1609) through Sigmund Freud all the way to the Polish anthropologist Bronisław Malinowski’s *Myth in Primitive Psychology* (1926). He points out that Bacon interpreted myth as allegory, thus following in the long line of philosophical interpretation that has been practised since the Stoics. The weakness of such an approach, according to Cassirer, is that it isolates myth as something artificial and “a pretense for something else”.⁶ Such a conception of myth, he argues, portrayed it as a subconscious fiction that called for a conscious, scientific analysis in the process of which myth-making was reduced to a single motive.

Cassirer’s conclusion, one that fits in well with the understanding of the role of myth in contemporary literature and culture that I propose in my reading of Wilde, Saint-Exupéry, and Woodkid, is that “[m]yth combines a theoretical element and an element of artistic creation. What first strikes us is its close kinship with poetry”.⁷ Just as Jean-Jacques Rousseau, in *Essai sur l’origine des langues* (1781), posits the imperative to speak out as a consequence of human lyrical impulse, so Cassirer, too, believes that feeling lies at the basis of myth. If we proceed even further, Walter Benjamin, in his monumental study of Baroque tragic drama, takes great care to distinguish between tragedy as that which is rooted in myth, and the *Trauerspiel* as rooted in history.⁸ While it is not common to consider children’s literature as the playing ground of tragic characters, I suggest that there are several eminent examples of a modern combination of tragedy and tragic drama to be found in the canonical literature for children as well as in the most recent cultural production for young adults. The discursive

⁴ Ibidem.

⁵ Ibidem.

⁶ Ibidem, 74.

⁷ Ibidem, 75.

⁸ George Steiner, “Introduction”, in Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, trans. John Osborne, London and New York, NY: Verso, 1998, 16: “Tragedy is grounded in myth. It acts out a rite of heroic sacrifice. In its fulfillment of this sacrificial-transcendent design, tragedy endows the hero with the realization that he is ethically in advance of the gods, that his sufferance of good and evil, of fortune and desolation, has projected him into a category beyond the comprehension of the essentially ‘innocent’ though materially omnipotent deities (Artemis’ flight from the dying Hippolytus, Dionysus’ myopia exceeding the blindness of Pentheus)”.

value of myth persists even in contexts where tragedy is no longer the sole proper point of reference, for example, in Wilde's "emphatically ostentatious, gestural, and hyperbolic"⁹ stories for children.

Melancholy Echoes of Myth in Oscar Wilde

The title of Wilde's 1891 collection of fairy tales – *A House of Pomegranates* – at first approach sounds elegant enough, even if it is not altogether clear. When we consider, however, that the four stories contained therein – "The Young King", "The Birthday of the Infanta",¹⁰ "The Fisherman and His Soul", and "The Star Child" – are all excruciatingly painful to read (one might say exquisitely painful, as the pain is highly aestheticized and yet real) and none have even a semblance of a happy end, we will realize that *A House of Pomegranates* stands for a construct of four pomegranate seeds, each of which bears death. The opening signal of "The Birthday of the Infanta", that is, the eponymous Infanta herself, is not obviously mythological or even related to Antiquity. Rather, it might recall the image of Diego Velázquez's 1656 painting *Las meninas* (made famous by Michel Foucault in *Les mots et les choses*, 1968), as it features the Infanta Margherita. Wilde's Infanta is twelve years old and a semi-orphan, her mother having died six months after giving birth to her. This in itself makes the Infanta a suitable children's literature character, joining the ranks of protagonists both from fairy tales and classic children's stories. The melancholy king has his wife embalmed, visits her dead body once a month, and tries to awaken her "cold, painted face"¹¹ with mad kisses. There is a mythological echo in these lines, above all, of the story of Orpheus and Eurydice, although the return of the dead

⁹ Ibidem, 18.

¹⁰ A 2011 London theatrical production of "The Birthday of the Infanta" makes it explicit both that the setting is the seventeenth century and that the plot is meant to address the difficulties of adolescence; see Lyn Gardner, "The Birth of the Infanta: Review", *The Guardian*, 27 March 2011, <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2011/mar/27/birthday-of-the-infanta-review> (accessed 29 April 2020): "Essentially, this is a story about difference and growing up and taking responsibility, in which the privileged young royal is a victim of the stiffened archaic attitudes of 17th-century court life. There's plenty of texture and emotional colour in this one-woman storytelling show, too, and there's even some audience participation. We become the children at the party, making a rose, offering it to the princess and even planting it in a garden".

¹¹ Oscar Wilde, "The Birthday of the Infanta", in Oscar Wilde, *A House of Pomegranates*, available at Project Gutenberg, <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/873/873-h/873-h.htm#page31> (accessed 28 April 2020), transcribed by David Price from Oscar Wilde, *A House of Pomegranates*, 7th ed., London: Methuen & Co., 1915.

queen is less overt: the King beholds her in the face and the gestures of their daughter, the Infanta:

His whole married life, with its fierce, fiery-coloured joys and the terrible agony of its sudden ending, seemed to come back to him to-day as he watched the Infanta playing on the terrace. She had all the Queen's pretty petulance of manner, the same wilful way of tossing her head, the same proud curved beautiful mouth, the same wonderful smile – *vrai sourire de France* indeed – as she glanced up now and then at the window, or stretched out her little hand for the stately Spanish gentlemen to kiss. But the shrill laughter of the children grated on his ears, and the bright pitiless sunlight mocked his sorrow, and a dull odour of strange spices, spices such as embalmers use, seemed to taint – or was it fancy? – the clear morning air. He buried his face in his hands, and when the Infanta looked up again the curtains had been drawn, and the King had retired.¹²

The proximity of life and death is striking here, as it often is in myth: one step, or one fateful turn, and the promise of life turns into the certainty of death. The reflection of the dead wife's face in the living Infanta's visage ends as if in a burial – of the King's face in his hands. Within the space of a single paragraph, Wilde's story mirrors the Orphic katabasis. The unsuspecting reader is taken for a ride as it were, only to reap the ancient wisdom, "the Greeks' instinctive realization that loving is essentially a one-way street, and that mourning is its continuation".¹³

For the Infanta's birthday, various entertainments are staged to amuse her, including a make-believe bullfight and a "semi-classical tragedy" performed by wooden puppets. In a scene that recalls the standard play within a play familiar from *Hamlet* but that also prefigures the infamous passage in Marcel Proust's *A la recherche du temps perdu* (1913) in which the servant Françoise cries over the description of the kitchen maid's symptoms found in a medical textbook but not over the maid's suffering itself, the Infanta and her entourage weep over the tragic fate of the marionettes but later fail to be moved by the real-life death of the Dwarf:

¹² Ibidem.

¹³ Joseph Brodsky, "Ninety Years Later", in Joseph Brodsky, *On Grief and Reason: Essays*, New York, NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1995, 412 (on Rainer Maria Rilke's poem "Orpheus. Eurydice. Hermes").

The arena was then cleared amidst much applause, and the dead hobby-horses dragged solemnly away by two Moorish pages in yellow and black liveries, and after a short interlude, during which a French posture-master performed upon the tightrope, some Italian puppets appeared in the semi-classical tragedy of *Sophonisba* on the stage of a small theatre that had been built up for the purpose. They acted so well, and their gestures were so extremely natural, that at the close of the play the eyes of the Infanta were quite dim with tears. Indeed some of the children really cried, and had to be comforted with sweetmeats, and the Grand Inquisitor himself was so affected that he could not help saying to Don Pedro that it seemed to him intolerable that things made simply out of wood and coloured wax, and worked mechanically by wires, should be so unhappy and meet with such terrible misfortunes.¹⁴

The figure of the little Dwarf is an insertion of the ostensibly natural into the artifice of the court. Brought from the forest, grotesquely misshapen but unaware of his horrid form, the Dwarf performs for the Infanta and in doing so falls in love with her. As he looks for her after the performance, he finds a mirror instead. In a scene echoing Narcissus and foreshadowing Freud's *Das Unheimliche* (1919), the Dwarf sees a hideous form he at first fails to recognize as his own. The realization of his own monstrosity kills him. There follows a graphically brutal scene of the Infanta's uncle trying to revive him by slapping his dead cheek "with an embroidered glove":

"But why will he not dance again?" asked the Infanta, laughing.

"Because his heart is broken," answered the Chamberlain.

And the Infanta frowned, and her dainty rose-leaf lips curled in pretty disdain.

"For the future let those who come to play with me have no hearts," she cried, and she ran out into the garden.¹⁵

Wilde performs a sleight of hand here: it is easier to identify with the beautiful Infanta than with the rejected, misshapen Dwarf. Not only that: the Dwarf dies and the Infanta lives. But the lesson, if there be one, is that beauty lies within and that selfish love is no love at all. As Saint-Exupéry will affirm half a century later, "[o]ne sees clearly only with the heart. Anything essential

¹⁴ Wilde, "The Birthday of the Infanta".

¹⁵ *Ibidem*.

is invisible to the eyes".¹⁶ The Infanta's beauty and even her rank is ultimately short-lived, while the Dwarf's martyrdom and sacrifice are eternal. "Myths are essentially a revelatory genre. They deal in the interplay of gods and mortals or, to put it a bit more bluntly, of infinities with finalities",¹⁷ writes Joseph Brodsky.

The mirror of the self is never right: that is the mirror that can kill an anorexic or bulimic teenager. It is the other's loving gaze that is necessary sustenance. The real death is the inability to be moved. Like Hans Christian Andersen's mechanical nightingale in the 1843 fairy tale, the Infanta is not capable of bringing about life. Rather, infected by death in infancy, she herself is the angel of death. Thus, through the underlying layer of mythical discourse, Wilde is able to lead the reader towards a revelation: the Infanta, like Peter Pan after her, is the seductive model of the heartless, loveless child-tyrant.

Mythical Representation of Space in *The Little Prince*

Saint-Exupéry's *The Little Prince*, however indebted it might be to the same substratum of myth, points to a selfless, affectively charged model of relation. The Pilot and the Prince are not only alter egos: in looking back towards his own childhood the Pilot repeats Orpheus' mistake and loses his beloved. Like Eurydice, the Little Prince is bitten by a serpent, but, unlike her, it is through death that he is returned home. Without making much more of a claim to the mythical discourse in Saint-Exupéry's text, I would like to linger on the auratic landscape that ends the novel. In order to do this, I turn to an unlikely source: contemporary urban design. Its theoreticians believe that any space can be permeated with an aspect that distinguishes it from the surroundings and imbues it with a particular meaning:

Cassirer points out that "what seems to remain as the relatively solid core" of the mythical "is simply the impression of the extraordinary, the unusual, the uncommon" (*Mythical* 77). This "expressive meaning attaches to perception itself, in which it is apprehended and immediately experienced" (68). In other words, the affective impression of the unusual that

¹⁶ Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, *Le Petit Prince*, Paris: Gallimard, 1999 (ed. pr. 1943), 74: "On ne voit bien qu'avec le coeur. L'essentiel est invisible pour les yeux". Translation after Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, *The Little Prince*, trans. Richard Howard, San Diego, CA, New York, NY, and London: Harcourt, 2000, 63.

¹⁷ Brodsky, "Ninety Years Later", 417.

is typical for mythical thinking directly permeates spatial “representations” or images. From a mythical perspective, this means that concrete objects and places are viewed in terms of the presence or absence of affective magical forces. Along the lines of this distinction, the environment is molded into mythical representations. Some objects and places present themselves to the mythical consciousness with such extraordinary force that they seem magical or sacred, and detach themselves as particularly meaningful from their indifferent surroundings. As such, spatial representation distinguishes between enchanted, affectively charged, extraordinary places, on the one hand, and indifferent, profane ones, on the other: “All reality and all events are projected into the fundamental opposition of the sacred and the profane” (75).¹⁸

The Little Prince, somewhat like Peter Pan before him, is an ageless being out of time. Like Peter Pan, he comes out of the air as it were, and like Peter he is afraid of death even though he seems immortal. The landscape that the reader is left with at the end of the book has all the qualities associated with the sacred and the extraordinary. The catastrophic beginning – the Pilot’s crash in the desert – is a literal downturn, while the Prince’s passing, on the other hand, is a re-turn. The final landscape is suggested with the bare minimum: two lines only, and yet it offers an archetypal *locus* where the Prince appears and where he disappears. Like a potential Messiah, this is also where he might come again.¹⁹ After the narrative of trauma and rupture, the text ends with hope: hope for an answer, a response. No longer part of the binding totality of myth, Saint-Exupéry’s story is nonetheless rooted in its tragic aftermath. Both the Pilot

¹⁸ Bart Keunen and Sofie Verraest, “Tell-Tale Landscapes and Mythical Chronotopes in Urban Designs for Twenty-First Century Paris”, *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 14.3 (2012), <https://doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.2038>. Quotations are from Ernst Cassirer, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, vol. 2: *Mythical Thought*, trans. Ralph Manheim, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1955.

¹⁹ This landscape is charged affectively because the Little Prince has graced it with his presence. At the same time when Saint-Exupéry was writing his novel in war-ravaged Europe, in America Theodor Adorno was putting together his *Minima moralia. Reflexionen aus dem beschädigten Leben*. In it he describes the American landscape as devoid of expression; see the English edition: *Minima moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life*, trans. E.F.N. Jephcott, London and New York, NY: Verso, 1978, 48: “It is as if no-one had ever passed their hand over the landscape’s hair. It is un-comforted and comfortless. And it is perceived in a corresponding way”. On the Messianic hero in children’s contemporary culture, see the chapter by Michael Stierstorfer, “From an Adolescent Freak to a Hope-Spreading Messianic Demigod: The Curious Transformations of Modern Teenagers in Contemporary Mythopoetic Fantasy Literature (*Percy Jackson, Pirates of the Caribbean, The Syrena Legacy*)”, in this volume, 219–229.

and the Prince survive their own deaths. The dominion of death is not absolute: the lyrical is an antidote to fatalism. Unlike the purposeful, not to say contrived, twenty-first-century renditions of the Orpheus and Eurydice myth in Katherine Marsh's *The Night Tourist* and of the myths of Persephone and Eros in *The Twilight Prisoner* – the story of the Little Prince stands on its own.

Indeed, while Saint-Exupéry, himself involved in life-threatening missions and writing in the midst of World War Two, treats the subject of life and death with appropriate deftness, Marsh uses the main character's mother's death as a facile, almost manipulative lead into the plot. However rewarding it may be for an informed reader to find once again the ancient story of Orpheus and Eurydice retold, it is nearly offensive to be hit over the head with it (the Eurydice character in the book is called Euri, just so there is no doubt). While Wilde and Saint-Exupéry tread lightly, Marsh lays it on so thick that even her teenage readers perceive her stories as overdone (see reviews of the book on Goodreads).²⁰ Perhaps the trouble is in the context: Marsh's novels purport to be pedagogical, ostensibly promoting the Latin language and ancient mythology, but her characters are not believable; rather, they seem to be puppets fitted into a neo-mythical scheme of things that does not allow for fully developed humanity. Few of us have had a chance to meet an Infanta or even a dwarf, but Wilde ensures that we connect with those characters emotionally. The mythical stratum is hidden in both Wilde and Saint-Exupéry, while in Marsh it is put forth with the good intention of a bad teacher. As a result, her novels fail as carriers of authentic myth, falling instead into the category of the artificial: while they appeal to the scholastic, they miss the organic. They will, no doubt, continue to be assigned in school but will not survive on their own.

Woodkid's Mythopoetic Childhood

The Golden Age, the debut album of the French video director and singer Yoann Lemoine (b. 1983) known as Woodkid, puts forth the time-space of childhood and its loss as the defining elements of individuality. The twelve songs progress chronologically from a golden age of early innocence (Lemoine's Age of Wood), through a Blakean initiation into experience in the city (Age of Iron),

²⁰ "The Night Tourist by Katherine Marsh", Goodreads, https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/1239219.The_Night_Tourist (accessed 10 May 2020).

to subsequent loss of self and its recuperation through art (Age of Marble).²¹ The topos which replaces the age of innocence is visually rendered as a forbidding black-and-white metropolis. Not an idealized, domesticated city akin to Walter Benjamin's Berlin in his *Berliner Kindheit* (written in the 1930s, ed. pr. 1950), but a cold, chartered hell. Religion and society – as in William Blake and other Romantics – are the oppressive forces. The child fights back by conjuring the demons of his imagination, but the worm is already within: drugs, sex, and self-indulgence make the young man a prisoner in the city.

A successor to the poetic outlook of Blake, Rainer Maria Rilke, and Andrei Tarkovsky, Lemoine's chronotope of childhood is the mystical source of self. Peter Pan may have remained a boy forever but real childhood is the one that is lost forever. Just as Odysseus cannot return to Ithaca because neither he nor Ithaca are the same, Woodkid's lyrical persona knows full well that a return to childhood is precluded. Nonetheless, he builds his world on the foundations of early bliss, shattered into smithereens when the adult petrification cracks.

Spatially, Woodkid's "Run Boy Run",²² as realized in Lemoine's own video clip, begins as a forbidding, colourless cityscape of unfreedom. The main character, the eponymous Boy, breaks away on his own, and only during his flight acquires some chthonic companions that furnish him with arms and run alongside. The beasts may seem monstrous but they are in fact benevolent. Like the young protagonist in Maurice Sendak's *Where the Wild Things Are* (1963), the Boy is more at home with the wild beasts than in the restraining environment of society. The last image of the video, that of the triumphant Boy about to board a tall ship, is a recapitulation not merely of every little boy's dream, but also of the archetypal adventure: a voyage.

²¹ Here I have in mind William Blake's painful poem "London" from *Songs of Experience* (in William Blake, *Songs of Innocence and Songs of Experience*, New York, NY: Dover Publications, 2017, 41) which paints the metropolis in dystopian terms: "I wander thro' each charter'd street, / Near where the charter'd Thames does flow / And mark in every face I meet / Marks of weakness, marks of woe". In such a modern City the child is doomed to a life of servitude, like the little Chimney Sweeper. Blake's experience of London was one of the advent of the Industrial Revolution. It is fitting that Woodkid's age of experience is an Age of Iron since it was the increased production of iron that fuelled the Industrial Revolution. Blake's mythopoetic visions of both apocalyptic and millennial modernity as well as his focus on the importance of the child as a source of inspiration and imagination make him a lucid predecessor of twentieth-century authors and artists such as Wilde, Saint-Exupéry, and even Woodkid.

²² At the time of writing the present article, the video had over 75 million views on YouTube; see Woodkid, "Run Boy Run", YouTube, 21 May 2012, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Im-c21V-zBq0> (accessed 10 May 2020).

The appeal of the hero is universal because the Boy, just like the Little Prince, is not of this world. Mythical creatures must help him to escape because he is, after all, a child: the feat he undertakes needs supernatural support. The plot is drawn with utmost economy; like in a classical myth or fairy tale, there is no ornamentation. An event of great importance seems to precede the dramatic escape, propelling the Boy into the world. The body of the video consists of the hardship of the flight – it is effortful, dangerous, and almost manqué as at some point the Boy falls. He does not give up, and in this archetypal fashion makes it to the shore where a ship meets him. It is only the beholder's willing imagination that suggests that the voyage is that of the Argonauts, because what boy has not dreamed of the Golden Fleece? The Golden Age of the album's title is, nonetheless, profoundly ironic: however much one would like to hold on to it, it is always replaced by a fallen era of Iron. In the next video, entitled "Iron",²³ the Boy is already a young man, forced to fight his way through the dystopian reality of a marble city. While his struggle is not altogether lonesome, he is nonetheless utterly alone in the end. Broken, he falls onto the world in a myriad pieces.

In the video clip entitled "I Love You",²⁴ the innocent Boy is already dead. The death may be symbolic, because his character continues in the guise of a young man, but all the same there is a sense of irreversibility of time. In the end, the protagonist undergoes a metamorphosis worthy of Ovid: he is petrified.²⁵ No longer pliable and flexible, he is now made of marble, a noble and beautiful material that can, however, crack. The suffering of unrequited love that killed Narcissus and Wilde's Dwarf is represented as the acute pain of becoming fossilized. In a reversal of the myth of Galatea, in which the love is requited and therefore the stone turns into a living being, in "I Love You" the human being turns to stone.²⁶ Writing about one of his books, *Sklepy cynamonowe* [Cinnamon Shops, 1933], the Polish writer Bruno Schulz has perhaps seized the nature of the mythical discourse in its relation to childhood:

²³ 81 million views as of the writing of the present text; see Woodkid, "Iron", YouTube, 29 March 2011, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vSkb0kDacjs> (accessed 10 May 2020).

²⁴ Woodkid, "I Love You", YouTube, 4 February 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KQu8FOjXdl> (accessed 12 September 2017).

²⁵ For a useful discussion of petrification in modern and postmodern literature, see Theodore Ziolkowski, *Ovid and the Moderns*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2005.

²⁶ My thanks to Katarzyna Marciniak for having pointed out this meaningful reversal.

The elements of the mythological idiom operating here rise out of that misty region of early childhood fantasies, forebodings, anticipations, terrors which is the true spawning ground of mythical thinking.²⁷

* * *

Modern mythopoeia, whether it be in the guise of canonical children's literature, such as Oscar Wilde's or Antoine de Saint-Exupéry's tales, or Woodkid's post-modern video clips, seems to follow a primal call. Already Bronisław Malinowski observed that the Melanesian natives make use of magic and myth only when their task is out of the ordinary, requiring superior effort. Thus, too, our most civilized texts return to their mythical sources when fortitude, solace, and hope are needed. Like an underground river, myth may have all but disappeared from our daily intercourse, but its current still runs strong right below the surface.

²⁷ Bruno Schulz, "A Description of the Book *Cinnamon Shops*", in Bruno Schulz, *Letters and Drawings of Bruno Schulz: With Selected Prose*, ed. Jerzy Ficowski, trans. Walter Arendt and Victoria Nelson, New York, NY: Harper & Row, 1988, 154.

The book is to be recommended for academics as well as graduate and post-graduate students working on the reception of Classical Antiquity and its transformations around the world.

David Movrin, University of Ljubljana
From the editorial review

Our Mythical Hope is the latest collection of articles by scholars participating in an ongoing collaboration to ensure that the beauty and profundity of Classical myth remain known, and (hopefully) remain part of our modern culture. The size of this compendium, the sweep of subjects considered, the involvement of leading experts from around the world, all testify to how important and extensive this initiative has become over the last decade. The project's continued commitment to engage all ages, especially the young, and to extend its outreach beyond the Academy merely, makes it a leading model for how research retains its relevance.

Mark O'Connor, Boston College
From the editorial review



Classical Antiquity is a particularly important field in terms of "Hope studies" [...]. For centuries, the ancient tradition, and classical mythology in particular, has been a common reference point for whole hosts of creators of culture, across many parts of the world, and with the new media and globalization only increasing its impact. Thus, in our research at this stage, we have decided to study how the authors of literary and audiovisual texts for youth make use of the ancient myths to support their young protagonists (and readers or viewers) in crucial moments of their existence, on their road into adulthood, and in those dark hours when it seems that life is about to shatter and fade away. However, if Hope is summoned in time, the crisis can be overcome and the protagonist grows stronger, with a powerful uplifting message for the public. [...] Owing to this, we get a chance to remain true to our ideas, to keep faith in our dreams, and, when the decisive moment comes, to choose not hatred but love, not darkness but light.

Katarzyna Marciniak, University of Warsaw
From the introductory chapter

