The myth of the Minotaur: from the genesis to the contemporary interpretation

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The Greek myth: the antecedent

- *Minos* was born from the union between *Zeus* and the beautiful Phoenician young girl *Europa*, abducted from the god turned into a bull.

- *Asterion*, king of *Crete*, adopts *Minos* that succeeds him to the throne, thanks to the favor of the god *Poseidon* that sends a white bull from the sea as a sign of his benevolence and a seal of the royalty of *Minos*.

The sin of Minos: the ùbris

- The impiety of Minos is to have broken his promise to Poseidon: the sacrifice of the bull.
The Minotaur

- The Minotaur born of the insane passion of the queen of Crete, derives from two blames:
- the atheism of Minos;
- The against nature passion of Pasiphaë.
The divine punishment: *phtònos theòn*

- Minos is punished by the god of the sea that induces *Pasiphaë* to unite with the bull, hiding herself inside a wood heifer, built by *Daedalus*.

  In this way, the ancient sources tell, the queen took vengeance for some numerous betrayals of her husband.

The labyrinth

- The monstrous son, with the taurine head on a human body, is confined in the labyrinth, a construction with inextricable runs realized by Daedalus.
- The labyrinth (perhaps from labrys: two-edged axe) is the fantastic transposition of the palace of Cnossos.
- It becomes symbol of the Minoic civilization, portrayed on the coins.

Subsequently to a conflict, *Minos* coerces the city of Athens to give an annual tribute of 7 young people and 7 young girl to immolate to the *Minotaur*.

*Theseus*, son of the Aegean king of Athens, with the help of *Arianna* and *Daedalus*, kills the *Minotaur*.
The historical interpretation

- The myth reflects elements documented by archaeological sources:
- the labyrinth-palace;
- the sacredness of the bull, symbol of the generating strength of the nature, attribute of the *Great Mother*, principal divinity in *Crete*;
- the passage from the Minoic civilization (*Minos*) to the Mycenean civilization (*Theseus*).
The tauromachy or taurokatapsia
The psychological interpretation

- It is a myth:
- male chauvinist, because it imputes the guilt to the woman;
- integralist, since all the events happen following the *Minos’* impiety;
- ideological, because it affirms the primacy of politics on ethics.
Metaphors

- The labyrinth represents the vain attempt by *Minos* to disguise his hypocrisies.
- The *Minotaur* is the antinomic representation of the private life of *Minos*.
- *Minos-Minotaur* devours who puts in discussion his power.
- The myth represents the failure of a politics separated by ethics, the contrast between correct laws and unjust society.

The ancient sources

- **Ovid (Metamorphoses):** Pasiphaë makes build to Daedalus a maple heifer where she hides herself to couple with the divine bull.

- **Homer:** the Minotaur is the judge of the souls in Hades.

- **Attic Tragedians:** negative judgment on Minos, positive on his brother Radamanthus.

- **Plato (Minos):** correct legislator, he embodies the, wished in Republic, figure of the philosopher king.

The Minotaur in the Divine Comedy

- He symbolizes the "matta bestialitate" (Inf. XII, 33), the blind violence.
- He is custodian of the VII circle where the violent are punished.
- As Minos, Charon, Cerberus, Pluto, he is one of the characters of the classical mythology passed to the Christian Dante’s Inferno, on the base of the interpretation by the Church Fathers: evil spirits and pagan gods are figures of the demon.

The surrealistic interpretation

- The Surrealists was very interested in the myth of the \textit{Minotaur} and of the Labyrinth and to the correlated myths of \textit{Europa} and \textit{Zeus}.
- In 1933 their official review is entitled \textit{Le Minotaure}.
- \textit{Picasso} illustrates the cover of the I number with this collage in which the figure of the monster appears holding a dagger on a background of paper leafs.

Picasso and the Minotauromachy

- The autobiographic projection of the theme of the Minotaur,
- He embodies some contrasted values: the primitive bestiality and love; the tormenter and the victim; man and beast; masculine and female.

The *tauromachy* and the bullfight

- *Picasso* discovers the relationship between the *tauromachy* and the bullfight.
- The bullfight like the *tauromachy* and the cult of *Mithras* in the ancient *Rome*, are tied to religious meanings, the sacrifice of the bull to the *Eucharist*, so much so that *Picasso* represents *Christ* in the arena.

Also in the 1937’ work, which synthesizes so many aspects and themes of his artistic run, *Picasso* inserts the *Minotaur* as symbol of the blind violence of the bombardment and the horse which embodies the boldness of the Spanish people.

The labyrinth

- **Andrè Masson** combines in this work the theme of the *Minotaur* and the labyrinth in an inverse way: the *Minotaur* contains the labyrinth inside the torn body.

- The myth is twisted and reversed in autobiographic key: *Masson* sees himself as a stabbed *Minotaur*, tormented by the nightmare of a contort unconscious, the labyrinth similar to viscera opened in his abdomen.
F. Clerici. View of two temples of the egg, 1956

F. Clerici: *The labyrinth*, 1966

F. Clerici: The graphic works

They represent almost a diptych: *Afternoon in Cnossos* and *Death of the Minotaur*, 1967.

He puts in scene on a theatrical stage a trial in which the public accusation, the monster, shows his mother *Pasiphaë* to the overcrowded public of the jury. In the second work, it is represented the final action of the death of the accuser that succumbs at the end of the trial.

And psychoanalysis …?

- **Freud** was interested in the theme of the labyrinth that conducts to the most hidden part of the self, the unconscious.

- **Jung** interprets the *Minotaur* as an archetype of the devouring maternal image, as well as of the labyrinth as run of the soul toward the equilibrium of own self.

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A poetic conclusion

- Jorge Luis Borges deals with the myth of the Minotaur in the brief story *The house of Asterion*.


Who is *Asterion*?

- He is not a monster; he is the monster that lies in every of us.
- Who the guilt belongs? Not certainly to *Asterion-Minotaur* that is searching his identity and the goal of his existence.
- The problem is the single being, therefore “*monstrum*”... in an universe-labyrinth.