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**Opening Pandora's Box**

Presentation & Workshop

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**Part I**

The idiom "Pandora's box" is quite current in every day's speech, so current, indeed, that people do not notice anymore the mythical complexity behind it. Even those who know the story roughly are not always conscious that what they know is only a super-structure, built on scattered materials of ancient myth, which are only partly known to us.

Unlike other mythical figures, such as Oedipus, Prometheus, Odysseus, or Medea, no ancient poet composed a coherent and consecutive story out of the mythical materials connected with her, at least – no such work has survived. The only poetic work referring to her story, is that of Hesiod in his ***Works and Days*** and ***Theogony*** (700 b.c), but as we shall see soon, his two versions leave a strong sense of row material. Beyond that, there is a short references to the myth in a commentary on Hesiod written in late antiquity, which is based on a quotation from a lost work by the neo-Platonist philosopher Proclus, who in his turn is probably based on a lost satiric play by Sophocles. Later versions since the Renaissance, have reconstructed Hesiod's source in an entirely different way.

The abruptness and incoherence of the story can be easily explained by the various goals of the sources, which have never been purely narrative. Hesiod's ***Works and Days*** is a didactic epic, aimed to instruct hard working Boeotian peasants. Its world view is highly pessimistic, in accordance with the hard and hopeless life of the audience. The poet's intention is not to charm them by virtuous storytelling like Homer, but to use narrative fragments for his rhetorical needs, and so the myth of Pandora serves him to explain the hardship of his listeners' lives. Accordingly, the story which emerges in various ways from the epics, is fragmented, and what is emphasized is only what may support his views. Does he refer to a well known myth, which he believes his hearers know already and do not need to hear fully? Does he invent a new variation of an old myth? there is no agreement among scholars.

The anonymous commentator quoting Proclus, too, has no narrative aspiration: all he wants is to explain a specific line from Hesiod's work, so he gives only a short summary. And Erasmus version from 1508, the first version from modern times, upon which most later versions are based, is also a short summary brought in an essay and aimed mainly to demonstrate a certain idea.

Pandora's myth is related to a story which had much more central and well known adaptations in Greek literature – the Prometheus myth. This relative story too can of course support the reconstruction of the myth.

I shall try to construct from the ancient materials a story coherent and successive as possible, and leave the modern reconstructions for later.

This is more or less what can be learned through combining the ancient materials:

In old days people were much happier than nowadays, the reason was partly the fact that they were only male and the female sex has not yet been created. But Zeus, the head of the gods, was very hostile toward them and did not like their happiness, so he tried to rob them of the sources of living. In the first stage he expropriated the fire, but Prometheus, the god favored human beings, stole it and gave it back to them.

One of the reasons for the happiness of humans was the fact that all misfortunes which distinguish gods and humans: old age, maladies, misery, death, whew all still stored in heaven. When Prometheus heard that Zeus intends to spread them among humans, he urged the satires to steal them for him, then he locked them in a great jar. To be safe he deposited the jar in the house of his brother, Epimetheus, and warned him never to open it, and also to refuse any gift from Zeus.

He needed his brother's aid in this matter, since Zeus was already after him, and indeed, Zeus punished him severely, binding him to a rock in the Caucasian mountains, as we know from Aeschylus tragedy ***Prometheus bound***, and from various other adaptations of the myth.

But Epimetheus was not equally gifted as his brother: as implied in their proper names, **Prometheus** was the one who has the advice (*mêtis*) beforehand (*pro*), while **Epimetheus** was the one who had it only after (*epi*), when it was too late.

Anyway, to take revenge from human beings Zeus commanded the gods to create a woman, **Pandora**, which means a present (*dora*) from all (*pan*), since all the gods took part in her creation: Hephaestos made her body out of clay, Aphrodite bestowed her with beauty and sexuality, Athena taught her the arts of weaving and spinning, and Hermes bestowed her with the capacity of deceptiveness. So, they made a most beautiful girl, and when she was ready Zeus gave her to Epimetheus as a wife.

Epimetheus, who lacked foresight, was attracted by her charms and took her, in spite of his brother's warning. Pandora opened the jar, and immediately a host of ugly winged creatures burst out, the misfortunes, which spread right away among people. Pandora, terrified, closed the jar, so that the last creature was caught under the lid. That was Hope.

When we examine Hesiod's well known version according to this reconstruction, a series of improbabilities and informational gaps are revealed. Precisely the strongest image of the Myth, the closed jar, is handled in the most fragmented way: what is its origin? Hesiod says nothing about it, and it is entirely unclear if the jar was from the start in Epimetheus' house or brought there by Pandora. If the jar was sent together with Pandora, two problems rise: first, Epimetheus loses any narrative significance, since Pandora could have opened the jar anywhere, there was no need to give her to Epimetheus. Moreover, as was commented (Verdenius 64), the Greek word *pithos* means a huge storing jar, sometimes half buried in the earth. Carrying such a vessel from the Olympus by Pandora should have needed a special story.

The version transmitted by Proclus, according to which the jar was already in Epimetheus home is much more plausible from the narrative view point, since giving Pandora to Epimetheus is Zeus device to open the closed misfortunes jar, kept in Epimetheus house.

However, this is not the only way to tell the story. There are versions which regarded the vessel of misfortunes as a metaphor of Pandora, as we shall see later; these versions may talk about a smaller container, a box, actually brought by her.

And what were her motives in opening the it? Innocent curiosity or wickedness? This too is unclear: indeed, Hesiod's rhetoric ascribes to women every possible guilt, but what he actually does in his narrative does not strongly support his attitude: he does not mention any warning given either to Pandora or to Epimetheus concerning that jar, (the only warning mentioned is that addressed to Epimetheus not to accept any gift from Zeus). If there is no violation of any taboo in Pandora's deed, it means that she has just opened a jar in her husband's home. In spite of the severe outcomes, it does not involve any real guilt.

And finally – what is the place of hope in Hesiod's version? Does it say that Zeus wanted to spread the troubles among human beings, and withhold only hope? Or on the contrary, perhaps hope is preserved for human beings as a remedy for their misfortunes? In Hesiod's version this is unclear: from the narrative viewpoint both possibilities exist, in spite of the fact that rhetorically everything is presented as an outcome of Zeus hostility toward human beings.

And what is the source of hope? Hesiod says nothing, neither about the source of hope nor about that of the misfortunes. According to the myth referred to by Proclus, Prometheus stored the jar in Epimetheus house, and that may bring to mind that Prometheus is also the source of hope. Hesiod does not say a word about it, but according to Aeschylus' version of Prometheus' story, as we shall see later, Prometheus is the one who bestowed hope to human kind. And so, perhaps he is the one who put it in the jar as a remedy for the misfortunes stored there, should they burst out after all? This is nowhere said explicitly, but absolutely complies with the other parts of the myth.

It is interesting too to note the proportion between the narrative elements in Hesiod. The process of creating Pandora is very long and quite detailed, while the arrival in Epimetheus' houses and opening the jar, which is the narrative center, is related very briefly in few lines. Hesiod elaborates everything which may express his attitude toward women, but is very short when it goes to narrative structure.

While in Hesiod the vessel in which the misfortunes are locked is almost unrealized, in the western cultural memory precisely this vessel became the central image of Pandora's myth. Side by side with that centrality another metamorphosis occurred: the vessel, which was originally a big storing jar, (*pithos*), turned at a certain point to be a **box**, and so it became fixed in the western cultural memory.

On the face of it, this is only a formal change in the visual appearance, However, it is a meaningful transformation. The source of the change is a translation mistake or a memory lapse in the summary of the myth as formulated by the Renaissance humanist Erasmus from Rotterdam (1508): he substitutes the Greek word *pithos* by the Latin *pyxis*.

His version follows roughly Hesiod's structure, that is, Prometheus' part is very much reduced. But in his version Pandora explicitly descents from haven with the box in her hands. The box is also specified as very pretty. Like Hesiod, Erasmus too does not refer to the source of the vessel's content. The motive for opening it is implicitly curiosity, but it is unclear whether the one who actually opened it was Pandora or Epimetheus. And in that summary there is no reference to the issue of hope.

The substitution of the jar to a box does not introduce any alien object into Greek culture: there are many artistic images of young women with small jewel-boxes, mostly on reliefs or painting representing women who died unmarried. Such images may have been viewed by Erasmus as portraits of Pandora. But it is much more probable that Erasmus assimilated the myth, consciously or unconsciously, with another ancient story, where a woman opens a box in spite of a warning, which leads to a crisis.

This is Apuleius' fairy tale ***Cupid and Psyche***, told in the Latin novel ***The Golden Ass*** from the second century. It tells, in a complicated and picturesque plot, about the wanderings and hardships of **Psyche**, trying to win again her lover, the god **Cupid**. She is demanded to pass endless trials and fulfil very hard assignments. The last task, imposed upon her by **Venus**, Cupid's mother, is to take a box, descend with it to the underworld, and ask **Proserpina**, the queen of the dead, to send in it something of her beauty. Psyche is forbidden to open the box, but since she too is blessed with almost godly beauty, she is curious to see Proserpina's divine beauty. But when she opens the box what she finds there is deathly sleep. She falls asleep, but Cupid at last comes to her aid, wakes her up and marries her.

This fairy tale from late antiquity, is of course remote from Hesiod's archaic world, however the assimilation of both heroines posed Pandora in a much more positive place, and liberates the ancient myth from its quite rough misogyny.

Moreover, Erasmus felt perhaps that Psyche's story too is a myth of femininity, (as was shown years later by Erich Neumann), and it can serve as a response or alternative to the myth of Pandora. Anyway, this assimilation contributed to the reception of Pandora's myth as a myth of womanhood, like that of Eve. This gender element is doubtless what attracted poets, artists, and scholars to deal again and again with that myth.

This enigma of femininity can lead either to an adoration of womanhood, like in Goethe, who was occupied with the character of Pandora all his life, since his youthful dramatic fragment ***Prometheus*** to his dramatic fragment ***Pandora***, composed 40 years later. And on the opposite, this enigma can lead also to regard Pandora as a kind of fearful and threatening *femme fatale*, as in Frank Wedekind's two parts drama, ***Pandora's Box*** and **The Earth Spirit**, known also as ***Lulu***.

In scholarship the ground breaking work of Jane Harrison should be mentioned, which regards Pandora as a late metamorphosis of the archaic Earth goddess **Rhea**, who beard the name **Pandora** as one of her ritual names, in the sense of **all-giving** mother. The new ritual of the Olympian gods caused her to be degraded to the mortal harmful figure of Pandora we know. One should mention also the study ***Pandora's Senses*** by Vered lev Kenaan, which deals with the Pandora's myth as the birth of the inside-outside and concealing-revealing opposition, which makes possible the rise of Greek culture and philosophy.

But whereas poets and thinkers referred mainly to the gender aspects expressed by the figure of Pandora, Everyday language deals mainly with the image of the vessel, which incautiously opened may lead to a flooding of unwanted and harmful contents.

This understanding too may be latently supported by the assimilation of Pandora with Psyche, Since the meaning of the name **Psyche**, soul, makes it possible to read the story not only in gender light, but also as a myth about the soul. This makes it possible to locate the well known box in a sort of mental space. The psychoanalytic language, speaking about **repressing**, **unconscious**, etc. seems to be perfectly reflected in that image.

This use, is also the one which will occupy us in the present workshop. The question is **if**, **when**, and **under which conditions** such Pandora- boxes may be opened?

It seems that the myth can lead, at least partly, of an answer. This regards mainly the way one understands the concept of hope and its function, both in the myth and in structuring our own world.

We said that Hesiod's myth is quite ambiguous about hope, but here we can be aided by the myth of Prometheus, which is closely connected with that of Pandora. As presented in Aeschylus' drama ***Prometheus Bound***, Prometheus is the one who gave hope to human beings:

Prometheus tells the chorus about the history of his conflict with Zeus, and finishes mentioning of the fact that he has saved human being from the destruction Zeus planned, and is now severely punished for his compassion to human race. The chorus asks if there is something else beyond that which may have incited Zeus' rage:

**Chorus**: Did your offence perhaps go further than you have said?

**Prometheus**: Yes: I caused men no longer to foresee their death.

**Chorus**: What cure did you discover for their misery?

**Prometheus**: I planted firmly in their hearts blind hopefulness.

**Chorus**: Your gift brought them great blessing.

**Prometheus**: I did more than that:

I gave them fire. (247-252)

Note that what Prometheus regards as the first thing he gave humans is hope. The theft of fire, which is usually so much identified with Prometheus, is presented only at the second place ("I did more than that").

Hope is significantly qualified here: it is blind. It is attained by preventing the knowledge of the day of death. Later, when Prometheus specifies his gifts for human beings, he says almost the opposite: he tells that in the beginning people entirely lacked orientation in space and time, and he is the one who bestowed them with the capacity of orientation and foreseeing future:

[They] knew no certain way

To mark of winter, or flowery spring, or fruitful summer;

Their every act was without knowledge, till I came.

I taught them to determine when stars rise or set –

A difficult art. (454-8)

It comes out now that all this development of orientation is made possible by a primal act of erasing knowledge, planting in the heart a certain blindness. Blind hopefulness is here the substitute of foreseeing the day of death, and actually, it is the opposite of knowledge.

When one knows the time of death, when future is uncovered, one can regard one's own life as a spectator, and observe it as a process realized before one's eyes; one is not required to do anything, so one becomes, in a way, a witness of one's own life, rather than an active participant.

Once foreseeing the future is prevented, one takes responsibility for one's life and becomes an active participant in processing it. Hope is based, not on knowledge and certainty, but on an expectation mixed with will, wish, intention, and belief in one's capacity to implement all this. Hope is what makes possible any human endeavor, and what makes people active.

According to the myth Prometheus is the one who created human beings. He created them as different from god, mainly as mortals, but at the same time he provided them with every thing they need to fill up the gap and liken gods. The gift of hope is a good example: on the one hand it stems basically from human mortality. But precisely the blindness toward the day of their death makes people feel and act as if they will live eternally, like gods.

Note that Prometheus an Epimetheus, in their names and in their very actions, represent that opposition between foresight and blindness, so crucial for hope.

It should be remarked that an opposite concept of hope, leading to passivity, may be imagined too. This is possible when hope is based on absolute trust and belief. Absolute trust and belief are like knowledge: they cannot be represented as blindness. Once they exist, one is not required to act for implementing one's destiny, one has only to wait and see how the divine plan will be realized without one's involvement.

This is the basic assumption for legends about faith and belief, as the Chasidic ones for example, but it is entirely different from the way hope is conceived in the Greek world: hope is always connected there with will and initiative, sometimes it is presented almost as a synonym for ambition. The hopeful man is active and energetic: he experiences future horizon as entirely open and inviting him to act.

So, for example, is the Athenian temperament described by a Corinthian politician, who warns the Spartans from their rivals, as quoted in Thucydides' ***Histories***:

They again are bold beyond their strength, adventurous above their own reason, and in danger **hope** still the best. [---] If they fail in any attempt, they do what is necessary for the present and enter presently into other **hopes**. (Ibid. I, 70).

And note the way Aristotle, in the ***Rhetoric***, uses the term **hope**, when describes the temper of young men:

They are [---] full of **hope**, for they are naturally as hot blooded as those who are drunken with wine, and besides, they have not yet experienced many failures. For the most part they live in **hope**, for **hope** is concerned with the future, as memory is with the past. For the young the future is long, the past short; for they are in the morning of life it is not possible for them to remember anything, but they have everything to **hope**; which makes them easy to deceive, for they readily **hope**. And they are more courageous, for they are full of passion and **hope**, and the former of these prevents them fearing, while the latter inspires them with confidence, for no one fears when angry, and **hope** of some advantage inspires confidence. [---] They are high minded for [---] there is high mindedness in thinking oneself worthy of great things, a feeling which belongs to one who is full of **hope**. (II, 12)

And old people on the other hand:

And they are little given to **hope** owing to their experience, for things that happen are mostly bad and at all events generally turn out for the worse, (---) They live in memory rather than in **hope**, for the life that remains to them is short, but that which is past is long, and **hope** belongs to the future, memory to the past. (ibid. II, 13).

And so, in the Myth of Pandora, no matter if hope is preserved for human beings or prevented, it is conceived as a kind of living potion, which makes possible for people to take part in their destiny, and not only be victims of the misfortunes locked in the box.

The correct opening of pandora boxes is thus entirely conditioned by the place and function we ascribe to hope.

**Part II**

[Workshop]

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