

**HOW TO CHEAT DEATH:
ANCIENT AND MODERN LANGUAGES OF IMMORTALITY**

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*“... he would not belong
to our species, nothing about
his life would be like ours.
Not love or ambitions, or feelings,
or nostalgia; nothing...”*

To escape death, to find a way to break out once and for all from the necessity of one of the qualities which ontologically primarily marks and defines the human condition. In one of his letters to Verlaine, Mallarmé once wrote that «il existe un et un seul mythe, toujours le meme, qui émerge dans la poesie écrite tout avant que dans les traditions orales: c’est lui qui dicte les diverses inflexions de la tentative de response à la question “pourquoi l’homme doit-il mourir?”»¹. However, in some of these myths we may even find something more than the question itself, along with its apparently unchangeable answer²: in some of them there is a fascinating struggle for a different outcome, a rebellion that some subjects, at a specific point in their lives, undertake more or less consciously to avert the obligation of death for themselves or their loved

¹ I found this quotation, so suitable to my analysis, in the interesting article of Pierre Marandra, *Cendrillon: theories des graphes et des ensembles*, in CL. CHABROL *Semiotique narrative et textuelle*, Paris 1973, pp. 122 – 136, especially p. 122.

² Which is, although it may seem obvious and even tautological, that mankind is mortal. There has always been an interesting overlapping in the Greek language, since its first attestation in Homeric poetry, between the words *broto/s*, meaning exactly «mortal» (and therefore used to signify «man») and *bro/tos*, which is the «sang qui à coulé d’une blessure» (cfr. CHANTRAINE, *Dictionnaire etymologique de la langue greque*, Paris 1968 s.v. *brotow* vs. *brotow*), along with the concepts they are connected to. In our modern language, this overlap would be expressed by the syllogism that man is mortal because he can be wounded, as he could be wounded to death for he is mortal. The Greek perception of our human state is expressed by the chain forged through this vicious circle.

ones. But how? As we will see, all the lore and myths about immortality tell none other than the same story, proving that Verlaine was right more than he thought.

The recent movie 'Troy' renewed the image and the fame of one of the brightest heroes we may find in Greek mythology: Achilles - mighty in battle, skilled in combat and victorious over Hector - whose body is invulnerable to everything save for a small spot on his heel. His strength and deeds are known as well as his story is, but few know that, despite the excellence he earned in life, he is also a paradoxical and clear emblem of a failure.

Here are the two main versions of his birth and first days of life, between the royal walls of King Peleus, in Ftia:

Apollodorus III, 13, 6

Apollonius Rhodius IV, vv. 869 – 876

When Thetis had a baby by Peleus, she wished to make it immortal, and unknown to Peleus she used to hide it in the fire at night in order to destroy the mortal element which the child had inherited from its father, and by day she anointed him with ambrosia. But Peleus watched her and, seeing the child writhing on the fire, he cried out; and Thetis, thus prevented from accomplishing her purpose, forsook her infant son and departed to the Nereids.

For she (Thetis) ever encompassed the child's mortal flesh in the night with the flame of fire; and by day she anointed with ambrosia his tender frame, so that he might become immortal and that she might keep off from his body loathsome old age. But Peleus leapt up from his bed and saw his dear son gasping in the flame; and at the sight he uttered a terrible cry, fool that he was. And she heard it, and catching up the child threw him screaming to the ground... ..then she left.

As we read these two accounts of the same story, the first information we gain is that, at the beginning of his life, Achilles was meant to be much more than (almost) invulnerable. His destiny was of a much higher quality than fortune and glory in battle, for his divine parent was trying to bestow on his body nothing less than immortality and never ending youth, though he did not belong to the race of gods³. But, as again a short reading of this myth may tells us, despite all her efforts she

³ Races were strictly defined in Greek theology since the very beginning of Greek thought, as we may read in Hesiodus' Theogony.

eventually failed to complete the rite of immortality, sealing with this failure the fate of Achilles under the sign of death: unable to join the number of the immortals, the hero decided to embark on a life of battle, pursuing a lesser form of immortality earned through the fame that his deeds granted him. In a word, a second strategy of a more limited form of immortality, after the first had ended in failure.

Despite this outcome, it is still interesting for us to decipher the lines of the immortality⁴ Thetis tried to earn for him, and even more importantly the reasons why she eventually failed. In other words, through the study of this myth we might uncover the underlying language by which the inner structure of a man is meant to be dramatically altered, his specific mark of death removed, and finally his destiny completely changed; and why this language, as far as Greek mythology is concerned, always ends with a negation⁵.

But before our analysis may begin, there is one last premise to make, concerning the special nature of our protagonist, Achilles.

While it is right to say that he is not a god, it would be wrong to assert that he is 'just' a man. He is a hero and therefore he is, in Greek culture, the fruit of a union where a human being has joined with a divine one through an act of love. As a direct consequence of this union, his particular nature earns him the right to partake of both of the domains his parents belong to, the divine and the human, but at the same time it

⁴ Due to my purpose, I decided not to include in this analysis all the strategies of immortality which may be found throughout Greek mythology. However, some words about this topic are due. There are two main kinds of immortality a Greek hero could aspire to, but they are so different that they should not be even considered as synonymous. Among them, the one related to Sisiphus is a good example of what I would call a 'fake' immortality. His tale is well known: when his final day arrived, he first escaped his fate by imprisoning Thanatos (i.e. death itself) in his dungeons and then, once he had finally sunk into Hades, he devised a trick to break away again and gain the light (cfr. HOM. *Od.* XI, 539 – 600; THEOGN. 702 – 712; *Scholia ad Plat. Res publ.* X, 611C). Nevertheless, his stratagems earned him nothing more than a delay, for the same myth tells us that he did finally have to end his days, although as an old man. Along with Sisiphus, there are several other cases of 'resurrection' from death (i.e. in one version of the story concerning Sisiphus' son, Glaukos, whose life had been restored thanks to a special herb - as we are told in APOLL. III, 1, 3), but still it is just a delay, a 'second chance' that will however lead to an end. Another case of 'fake' immortality is the one accorded only *sub condicione*, usually a special one by which the hero doesn't die as long as (and only if) he keeps on living in a certain place (i.e. the immortality offered to Ulysses by Calypso bound to her island, cfr. HOM. *Od.* V, 205 – 213 «...howbeit if in thy heart thou knewest all the measure of woe it is thy fate to fulfill before thou comest to thy native land thou wouldest abide here and keep this house with me, and wouldest be immortal...»). The term of comparison is the full immortality enjoyed by gods, without boundaries or conditions.

⁵ We may read a similar lore in HYG. *Fab.* 63; where we find the hero Triptolemus involved in the same process of immortality I am going to analyze. Due to lack of space, I will just point out that the structure of this myth as well as its result are identical. For a specific comparison between the two myths see my article *sulla natura degli eroi*, to be published in the next issue of MEDITERRANEA.

casts him into an ontological disorder⁶ which puzzles and challenges the established hierarchy of the *kosmos*. As a son of a god, he can rightly claim the immortal youth and bliss that define divine nature and oppose it to human nature, but as a son of a man he should also have to experience a slow process of decay by which both soul and body fade, until it draws him into a necessary death⁷. To summarize, the hero is a paradoxical and hybrid creature that narration configures as a semiotic *function*, where two conditions everywhere else without points of contact between them and usually opposed, are finally forced to join together and interact through the living flesh of a specific being, as long as his life lasts. But this is exactly the point we are discussing here: how long could a hero last? As we can see, what is at stake is far more important than personal immortality: in this myth we have the answer of how Greek mythology deals with the chance of a union between two categories of being, divine and human, that stand for notions, ideas and concepts, in a word realities, we find accurately separated and opposed everywhere else in ancient culture, at times even enemies, but here eventually joined together through the difficult *mélange* of a being. So asking how long a hero could last and investigating his possible immortality is also a questioning of how long these two conflicting natures suffer to find a compromise, and of what sort it is.

The answer, as we will see, is under the dramatic sign of tension, the unsolved contradiction, the clash between two orders of reality.

Let us finally analyze under this perspective the process of immortality by which Thetis tries to cure her son from the injury of death. As we can see, her cure consists of two actions that the narration stresses as both opposite and complementary, by placing them in a succession of day/night: during the night she «hid it (the child) in the fire... ..in order to destroy the mortal element which the child inherited from its father»⁸, while, during the day, she «anointed with ambrosia his tender frame»⁹.

⁶ As we may read, the philosopher and writer Lucian of Samotracia does not hesitate to often define the hero using the term *sunthetos*, which has a meaning ranging from a neutral *of a composed nature* to a more pejorative *spurious – ambiguous – hybrid* and finally *ontologically disordered*. Cf. LUC. *Eun.* 6, 13; *Bis Acc.* 33, 37; *Dial. mort.* 11, 6.

⁷ For an analysis of the anthropological differences between gods and humans see J. P. VERNANT, *L'individue, la mort, l'amour*, Paris 1989 pg. 15 and following.

⁸ The version of Apollonius Rhodius is less detailed, for it does not express what Thetis was aiming at, it just says that she «encompassed the child's mortal flesh... ..with the flame of fire», even if it defines better the «mortal element» by calling it *tas thnetas sarkas*; the deadly flesh.

So here is the fight I have just mentioned. The narration immediately identifies and distinguishes the two poles which embody the tension realized in the hero child by the two opposite natures he is made of: in the ‘right corner’ we have the human «mortal element» inherited from his earthly father, that we may find defined further in Apollonius’ version as «mortal flesh» (*thnetas sarkas*), while in the ‘left corner’ there is the «tender frame» (*teren demas*) that Thetis is patently anointing with ambrosia, and that we may consider, thanks to the scheme of oppositions that we may glimpse is underlying this myth, as the hero’s divine counterpart received by his mother. To shrink our problem to the bone, the language used in the myth presents us with a couple of words that oppose each other: *sarkas* (the adjective «mortal» is just redundant) vs. *demas*. It is time to see what they stand for, and what relationship binds them here. *Sarkas* is easy enough to define, for its meaning does not present many shades: it is just the flesh, in its utmost material and tangible reference, along with a diachronical coherence whose heir would be the language of the New Testament¹⁰. In Homeric language there are nothing more than *sarkas* the bleeding flesh of those who once were the Ulysses’ companions, killed and eaten by the Cyclops in a crude and fearsome banquet, as is *sarkas* the dead animal’s flesh roasted over the fire for the feast¹¹, or finally what is just left of the dead enemy on which crows and birds of prey feed¹². Summarizing, the term *sarkas* is related to the semantic sphere of death and immobility, as the flesh of not a living but rather of a dead being, a being not just the corpse itself in its whole structure, which in ancient Greek is what is meant by the word *soma*, but rather its dead first surface, the motionless pulp wrapped around the bones when life and movement have left the body. On the other hand, *demas* refers to a reality that is a little more complex: in Homeric language it denotes «la forme corporelle et la stature d’un homme vivant»¹³, that is the peculiar *forma* which organizes and orders the structure of a human being while it is still alive. We are not just talking about its bone or muscular structures, for their mere presence would not prevent the corpse of a dead body from assuming an

⁹ This time I prefer to use Apollonius’ version, for it adds an important particular completely absent in Apollodorus. I refer to that *frame* Thetis addresses her cares to.

¹⁰ Where it is used to convey the idea of ‘sin’, along with the ultimate death of the spirit in opposition to a spiritual and immortal pureness, which denies the dimension of this specific kind of flesh. Cfr. COOPER...

¹¹ Cfr. HOM. *Od.* IX, 293 – 297.

¹² Cfr. HOM. *Il.* VIII, 379 – 380.

¹³ Cfr. CHANTRAINE, *op. cit.* s.v. *demas*.

unnatural position while lying on the ground. The word rather expresses some sort of dynamic force that belongs to a being when it is still alive, a changing and thus dynamic 'frame' operating within, shaped as a copy of the body itself and placed under the surface in order to preserve the body's harmony by dealing at all times with the correct and mutual relationships existing between its parts (limbs) while actions are performed. It is the *demias* that watches over the right motion of the body (or does it directly move it?) in order to make it walk, sit, wield a sword, jump, in a word to both live and interact with the world around through the dynamism of motion. Summarizing, this term belongs to the semantic sphere of what expresses its reality and its own existence through its movement, which moves itself and therefore is alive. At the same time, *demias* is also defined by its being thought of as both an inner and better physical dimension, something placed underneath, made of a better and immortal material.

In conclusion, from the analysis of the two terms involved, we may draw a scheme of the oppositions of which the hero, due to his hybrid nature, seems to be made. He expresses himself as an unresolved and ambiguous tension between the two conflicting poles of mortal vs. immortal, here described by a language where immobility stands in opposition to motion, the illusionary, mortal and frail nature of what is just surface to the legacy of the god the hero descends from, which is the immortal reality of what lies within him, under its first and visible layer. What Thetis is pursuing is then clear enough: she is trying to destroy with fire what falls under the semantic dominion of mortality, and therefore ascribes Achilles' life to the necessity of death, while she nourishes and feeds with the ambrosia its opposite, that which bears the semantic emblem of life and would allow the hero to be completely redefined into the category of divine. In other words, the union of the human and divine nature which join together in the living reality of the hero creates an equation between their most distinctive qualities, mortality and immortality. The strategy of immortality operated by the god is therefore the action of unbalancing this equation in advantage of the divine term, to the extent that if Thetis had not been interrupted in her therapy she would have consumed the entire part of mortal *sarkas* wrapped around the immortal *demias* of Achilles, resolving his hybrid state in an ontological coherence under the sign of his divine nature, finally earning him the same immortality a god would enjoy. But here we are back exactly to our main point: Thetis is disturbed and

the gift of immortality is lost. The mortal parent stumbles across the rite of immortality, sees his child nestled in flames and therefore fears for his life. Therefore he does not have much choice, his paternal love forces him to react even if we may guess that he does not have a clear understanding of what is going on (then Apollonius is right to remark that *fool he was*) so he gasps in the air, utters a terrible cry and, guided by his desire to save his own child, he paradoxically makes Achilles miss his appointment with immortality. It is a good example of what is usually called tragic irony, however we should not really reproach Peleus for what he did, for he simply reacts according to the state of world he lives in and the information he could count on. It is, again, a matter of opposite languages and realities linked to them that necessarily clash with each other, and once again draw a deep line of division between the human and divine conditions. According to the encyclopedic knowledge of Peleus¹⁴, fire consumes, burns, destroys, and consequently (mortal) flesh cannot suffer its contact without being devoured until death. Therefore, the child is in danger, the child must be saved before it finally dies. But here lies the cruel joke of an unnatural union between two opposite realities, the lesson ancient mythology is giving through this narration: even if forcedly joined together, the divine and mortal dimension still remain strangers to each other, without a chance of understanding the languages they use. For what to Peleus, according to his earthly and mortal tongue, is a word of death, when spoken by a divine being becomes an instrument of immortality. Due to the language, the experience and the knowledge bound to his mortal life, Peleus cannot help but interrupt the rite of immortality set up by Thetis, as Achilles cannot help but lose his never ending youth. He is still a hero, a being whose qualities gained through his divine nature take him on a path of excellence and glory, but he fails to escape the necessity of death.

Briefly summarizing the results of this analysis, it has been shown that:

1. The chance of immortality is granted only to a particular being whose peculiarity is that of being a bridge cast between two different worlds, an unresolved tension derived from its status of hybrid and ambiguous creature.
2. Both divine and human natures are embodied by two specific parts of the hero's body (*sarkas* vs. *demas*) that exemplify their distinctive qualities of mortality and

¹⁴ I am using here the linguistic concept of 'encyclopedic semantic' opposed to a 'dictionary semantic' as expressed by U. ECO *Filosofia e semiotica del linguaggio*, Torino 1997, pp. 106 – 127.

immortality through a scheme of oppositions. They also draw an interesting anatomy of the hero's body, where there is a first layer, made of inert and human material, promised to death, and an inner structure nestled in the flesh itself, which bears the marks of the divine and the immortal.

3. Those parts, along with the natures they hold, are involved in a relationship under the sign of conflict and tension, by which the destruction of the first corresponds with a proportional flourishing of the second. Immortality would be gained through the complete suppression of the human part, along with the acquisition of its divine counterpart *demas* as the only physical reality of the body.

4. In Greek mythology, immortality could not be acquired because of an irredeemable diversity between the human and divine conditions, embodied by the differences of meaning that the same words carry in their own languages.

It is now time to move toward the second part of my study, and analyze the language of immortality used by contemporary mythology.

Kyashan was one of the first and most famous 70's Japanese heroes. Released by Tatsunoko's studios¹⁵ in early 1973, its plot is easy enough to summarize in its main points, although here its depth has to be sacrificed due to the limited purposes of my study. In a distant future the earth is troubled by extreme pollution, to the extent that life has become almost impossible. To solve the problem, a scientist creates three androids engineered to face the environmental contamination and cleanse the atmosphere. But during a thunderstorm, these three machines become self aware and the new enemy of mankind is therefore born. They immediately rebel against their creator and decide to lead a campaign of subjugation against humans, using an army of droids that they force the scientist to build. Realizing the threat, the scientist's son offers himself to be deeply altered in his body's structure¹⁶ in order to stand a chance against the new menace, and finally persuades his father to turn him into a cyborg. The new hero is finally born. The popularity of this character has been recently

¹⁵ See <http://www.tatsunoko.co.jp>

¹⁶ An interesting point we will soon discuss is that the Japanese name of the manga was also Kyashan, but with the subtitle *shinzo ningen*, that could be translated as 'the man with a new body'.

renewed by the movie *Kyashan – Cashern*¹⁷, commissioned by Miramax studios due to the topicality of the themes it deals with and the success encountered by the comic book when it was released, but it critically missed its target because of some heavy changes the plot suffered, which disappointed the hard core of Kyashan’s fans. Pertinent to my study, among the elements Kazuaki introduced or changed are: genetic science takes the place of cybernetic, and the three androids along with the hero Kyashan become powerful modified DNA creatures created thanks to the discovery of a new kind of cells (neo-cells). To be discussed here is to what extent the immortality gained by this modern hero could be compared with the one we saw our ancient Achilles just missed. The issue at hand is the discovery of their structural similarities and differences in order to explain a difference presented by modern and ancient mythology that we may immediately see at a glance. For it is plainly evident that, while in antiquity immortality could not be gained, although its loss did not prevent a man from being recognized as a hero¹⁸, modern times offer us the image of a man that through science frees himself from the limits of his death, and *therefore* he becomes an hero.

Let us begin our analysis with noting that our starting point apparently shows a situation that, compared to what we found in Greek mythology, seems rather different. Before gaining his new status of hero along with immortality, Kyashan is nothing more than a normal human being with no embarrassing or ambiguous blending of different planes of existence to spoil his unity. Son of two mortal parents, he is just an ordinary person with no outstanding qualities, leading a life which is normal from every perspective. This starting ontology suddenly suffers a dramatic shift as soon as he offers himself to be turned into an android by his father’s science, but by the complete redefinition of his physical structure he also steps into a new

¹⁷ KAZUAKI KIRIYA, *Kyashan, Cashern*, Japan 2004. Actually, the word Kashern means ‘savior’, while it has been released in Europe and U.S.A. by the title *Kyashan, the rebirth*.

¹⁸ In ancient Greece, heroes were not just abstract mythology. We have several examples of men recognized as such (and not “become” heroes for, as Nock pointed out several years ago: «a dead man can *become* a god: no one *became* a hero, except in the sense of being recognized as such» cfr. NOCK 1944, p. 143) after their death because of the excellence they had reached in one discipline during their life, usually related to war/fighting. As we may read in Pausanias (cfr. *Perieg.* VI. 6, 7), hero’s honors were attributed the boxer Eutimus by the community of Temesa, due to his great personal strength and valor shown in freeing the city from an enemy. The citizens of Temesa did not find embarrassing the plain evidence of Eutimus’s death, for they could recognize him as a hero only after his demise, but at the same time they felt the need to give their hero a divine birth, therefore he became the son of the river flowing beside the city. All the requirements we have seen in Achilles’ example are thus fulfilled: divine birth (and thus hybrid ontological state), a life of excellent deeds, but no necessity of immortality at all.

dominion of existence characterized by the same state of hybridism that we saw defining the hero in ancient mythology. In spite of the new mechanical body he receives, he does not experience a complete and definitive shift of status: not a human any more, shards of his former human nature still play an important role in governing his behavior as well as the dynamics of his feelings; in a nutshell, both his personality and interaction with the world around him. The relationship between his human and mechanical parts also becomes one of the main themes explored throughout the story by an iconographic language devoted to translating the hybrid and unresolved status he has been cast into by paradoxical images, such as the one where, although made of steel, he is portrayed in tears. [Here a presentation begins, fig n.1, Kyashan crying].

Concluding this part of my analysis, although the starting point in modern mythology may seem opposite, a necessary prerequisite to be an hero is still the ambiguous quality of being the result of a mixture, an equation set between different orders of realities that are usually thought of as opposite and even (and namely in Kyashan's case) enemies. As a consequence, both mythologies seem to be using the same word, *hybrid*, along with the concepts and notions attached to it, but while in Greek mythology this disorder is finally disciplined under the sign of humanity (and therefore mortality), here we have an opposite process and, along with it, a completely different outcome: what already has its own ontological and defined unity has to suffer a shift toward a state of promiscuity and confusion in order to be entitled to the new status of hero, therefore the equation derived from the coexistence of two natures is once more set in motion, along with the difficulties and the contradictions that come with it.

The way Kyashan's structure is altered may enlighten another stage of the paths ancient and modern mythologies took. What redefines Kyashan as a hero is the mechanical body he acquires, but the alteration does not affect his body on its visible surface, it rather concerns what lies within, its inner structure which is now newly organized in its parts by a different cybernetic frame. The idea of a modification coming deeply from within and not just affecting an external and accessory dimension of the body is even more emphasized by the different processes of alteration Kyashan goes through that we may see in the movie version. As said before, this time there is no cybernetic implant but rather a deep DNA redefinition of his structure: the visual narration used by Kazuaki [Presentation, Kyashan's baptism fig 1 – 3] stresses the

concept of a definitive resurrection¹⁹ to a different life by linking the rebirth scene with the iconography of a baptism. In conclusion, the similarities with what has been addressed before with the term *demas* in Achilles' mythology are so striking that we may even be tempted to take Kyashan's mechanical frame as a possible visual description of it²⁰: both of them belong to the semantic sphere of what lies within, of what is hidden and structurally opposed to the category of the visible and the accessory, they are both made of a material which does not suffer death, finally they both grant immortality under the condition of completely replacing the «deadly flesh» Achilles and Kyashan are wrapped into with them, until they become the heroes' only physical realities.

Finally, it is worthwhile dedicating few lines to the iconography by which the process of integration between human and mechanical natures in Kyashan is narrated, for we may glimpse another reference to a category of thought used in a famous Greek myth. [Powerpoint] As we see, what we may still address as 'Kyashan' within the mechanical frame, what still bears the personal mark of the hero's identity and his previously unspoiled human condition, is claimed by his living sight, unaltered during the process of immortality he is undergoing. On the other hand, the machine comes to life thanks to the eyes themselves it was missing and now receives, by which it gains the faculty of seeing what is around it and therefore the chance of interacting with it. For this reason, as the *primo piano* stresses, the eyes are the ideal place where the two natures that Kyashan will be made of finally join, through a process by which both of them will gain something from each other.

It is astounding to find the same process described two thousand years before, by an elegant imperial Latin poet who particularly enjoyed writing about mutations, transformations, metamorphoses. The story is well known: Pygmalion, prized artisan and sculptor, creates for himself a marble image of the perfect feminine beauty and desperately falls in love with it. In answer to his prayers, Venus breathes life into the statue, turning it into a living maiden who may answer to his love. Although the transformation is described as a slow process, however, the apex that Ovid decides to

¹⁹ This is one of several differences between the anime and the movie: while in the comic book Kyashan is alive and well, the movie presents him as a victim of war, whose dead body is placed by his father into the DNA modification pool.

²⁰ As we have seen, Chantraine defines the *demas* as the "standing structure" of a living man, what grants him the harmonic movements of his body, and the new body of Kyashan is exactly presented in a standing position.

set for the coming to life of the statue is exactly the point when the new being opens her eyes, meets the eyes of her lover with the bright light of the sky, and therefore she completely becomes a human being.

Ovidius, MET. X, 243 – 276

...yes, it was real flesh! The veins were pulsing beneath his testing fingers.again pressed with his lips real lips at last. The maiden felt the kisses, blushed and, lifting her timid eyes up to the light, she saw the sky and her lover at the same time...

Back to our quest for immortality, the second requirement previously set by Greek mythology is also fulfilled, even if a crucial difference occurs between the two languages. Everlasting life seems to be pursued in the same way by both our ancient and modern heroes, that is by making their divine/mechanical frame/*demas* their unique physical reality, but while the former loses his prize because of an interruption, the latter goes through the whole process, finally gaining it. Therefore, we have once again the same word used in both languages, but displayed in such a different order that structures and sentences build with it could hardly be considered analogous. While in ancient Greece, mythology expresses its denial of ever lasting life bestowed upon a human, we now apparently have the opposite outcome, a success by which modern mythology seems to change under the sign of an assertion the answer her ancient counterpart gave us through Achilles. So yes, it seems that man can finally gain his immortality, and yet something among the consequences of his gift casts thick shadows on this outcome. Kyashan is now immortal, but there is a quite obvious question we may ask him, along with all the other heroes who gained immortality: if a man is primarily defined by his condition of mortality, by his bleeding to death, will someone who gained immortality be still considered human? Of course he will not²¹, therefore he might face the risk of a complete separation from

²¹ There is an interesting passage on this subject from Kundera's novel "Ignorance", worthy of quoting in its entire length: «A human lifetime is 80 years long on average. A person imagines and organizes his life with that span in mind. What I have just said everyone knows, but only rarely do we realize that the number of years granted us is not merely a quantitative fact, an external feature like nose length or eye color, but is part of the very definition of the human. A person who might live, with all his faculties, twice as long, say 160 years, would not belong to our species. Nothing about his life would be like ours – not love, not ambitions, feelings, nostalgia; nothing» M. KUNDERA, *Ignorance*, Kent 2003, pp. 122 – 123.

the social group he belonged to before his alteration²². Other examples tell us that in modern mythology isolation becomes a necessary counterpart of immortality to the extent that they cannot be divided, therefore being scattered through two different realities becomes a relevant linguistic mark which is always present when modern mythology composes its sentences over immortality²³.

However, it is paradoxically right here, exactly where we might have had the peak of division between the two mythologies we are analyzing, that the Greek legacy strongly reappears as the main thread that modern mythology uses to wave its pictures over immortality.

There is another story Greek mythology offers us, that we may read from several sources²⁴, about a lucky fellow who by chance did actually succeed right where the mighty Achilles, helped by a goddess, failed.

Scholia. ad Plato. Rep. X, 611C

...they say that Glaukos was son of Sisyphus and Merops, and that he became a demon of the sea. Having found by chance the spring of immortality and having stepped into it, he gained immortality. But in order to not let him point the spring to anyone, he was dragged to the sea... ...the demon is invisible to their (fishers) eyes, and mourning its immortality he drives the ships to wreckage with its words...

Here we have something that may seem contradictory with the statement we made before, that Greek mythology does not allow any man to become immortal. There can be no doubt about the complete humanity of Glaukos, since the source stresses that both of his parents are mortals. Not a divine progeny and thus being entirely human, he is at peace with his own nature since there is not even a glimpse of the ontological disorder we have seen defining Achilles' status. In addition, he is not even willingly setting himself on a path of immortality supported by a supernatural being who knows

²² Namely, one of the main themes developed in Kyashan's original comic book, as well as in the movie, is exactly the price he has to paid for such a gift of immortality. He remains caged in his condition of half-breed, rejected by both machines and humans.

²³ This mark could be developed to its highest degree by presenting the hero not only banished but even hunted down by the race or group he came for, or he is defending. A bright example of this extreme degree might be found in the comic book "Blade: the vampire hunter", where the hybrid nature of the protagonist (half human-half vampire) is feared and fought by the same humans he stands for.

²⁴ For Glaukos' story see PLIN. *Nat. Hist.* XXV, 451 – 552; APOLL. *Bibl.* III, 1, 3; SERV. *Ad Georg.* III, 268; *Schol. ad Plato Rep. X, 611C.*

the secrets of the process, he just stumbles across this wonderful spring by sheer chance, not even earning the right to it by performing some extraordinary deed. Finally, the source we take this story from does not even suggest that he is really aware of what is happening. However, and in spite of all those negative premises, he alone earns the precious gift of immortality without proving himself worthy of it, without even desiring it. A true stroke of luck, we may say, but here is exactly the point we should discuss: can we say that this immortality is a gift, that it was really chance that drove Glaukos to that spring, and that there is at least one man who Greek mythology had as immortal? We will begin with our last question. While on the one hand the statement “Glaukos earned immortality” is obviously true, on the other, saying that in this myth “a man earned immortality” would prove itself to be false, as soon as we notice that the price Glaukos has to pay for this ‘gift’ is his own condition of human being, along with his right to be part of the society he was from. The alteration he suffers is radical, he becomes a «demon of the sea» whose isolation from the human world is stressed by the category of the invisible he now belongs to. In a world where to have sight, to come into the light in order to see as well as to be seen by others, are features that usually describe and oppose the livings vs. the dead, eye contact with other living men, as well as the interaction with them that it stands for, is a necessary mark to distinguish the two different planes of reality. If Glaukos could not establish this eye contact with another living man, because one of the two terms involved in the relationship fails to see the other, then he is now ascribed to the category of the unseen, and by this the narration is just pointing out that the steps he took by entering that pool of spring water were nothing less than his journey through a portal which led him into a new and different dimension of being.

At the end of this study, both modern and ancient strategies of immortality do look similar, as well as their results. The answer to the question ‘can a man become immortal?’ is always negative, for when we find something similar to success, it is something other than a human which gains immortality. Also, those immortals do look like the repetition of the same formula: bound to the new dimension of life they have received by giving up their former natures of human beings, they find themselves trapped into an unexpected isolation from others, where what has been bestowed as a gift turns to be a never ending course.