THE MINOTAUR GIVES A LESSON IN THE NATURAL HISTORY OF MAN

an apocryphal mythology

McKinney Russell

[from *The Lost Travels of Odysseus*, a book in progress]

Richard Huber, *Treasury of
Fantastic & Mythological
Creatures* (Dover, 1981)

There in the center of the labyrinth, stone upon stone, under the shallow smoke-smudged dome, Odysseus sat on the low stool Asterion had shoved in his direction.

Odysseus' host was wrapped up again in that black spotted and stained cloak. He stood now on his hind legs again and gazed, as if transfixed, at the hole in the cavern's ceiling. The rock around the opening was blackened by smoke. On the floor below the hole the dirt was still charred. Being a chimney was not its original intention. The width of the circular hole was about the size of a man's torso.

Odysseus sat patiently. He took his host's moment of distraction as an occasion to look around and to plan some way of departing.

With a snoring inhalation of breath, Asterion began to speak again.

"You men are so clever, so versatile. You have such nosy little hands. There was a time when you scurried

like beetles around my dung, rolling it into nests and shelters. There was a time when the vast skies, fleeing in every direction for endless fathoms, spat on your peeling skin, and the sun, unblinking, stewed your watery eyes.

"You couldn't understand what it was about yourselves which made you so contemptible to the earth and sun and sky. Try as you might, you could not discover what it was your race was made for.

"In short, you did not fit. The grass folded around the auroch's teeth; the flesh opened up like a well under the lion's claw—opened like earth yielding to the tree's force. And there you were. Things were infinitely difficult for you. Nothing was effortless. Your conclusion, then, was that you did not fit.

"Unformed, unhinged, wandering always—not so much in search of food as in search of some reason to carry

FICTION

on. Your fathers thrashed you, your mothers pushed you away—yet even the hyena's children basked in love.

"You looked about, fiercely determined to discover why you lived, what purpose you served. And again and again you found no answer. But lived still only because of that determination. Standing there on those big wide feet, waving those obscene fingers at the sun, you screamed and swore, your brow more wrinkled than the snake's sloughed off skin. You asked yourself, why did everyone else have it so easy? why did the rest of the things that moved on the earth or out of it, or over it or through the waters—why did all those other things continue so cleanly, so clearly, with such a clear notion of why it all was.

"There was nothing apparent to see inside but the murk and sludge of your slippery moonlit souls—indeterminate and unkempt. To answer those impertinent questions, those impediments spawned in the very hearts of your indecision, you began to look outside.

"You looked through your hands and you watched. Science you conceived there and then. Watching and concluding. Looking, touching and discovering meaning where none existed or exists.

"You listened to the shrill tune as lions' claws plucked antelopes' ribs; you watched as the ducks dropped their excrement on your upturned faces, and as the pigs rummaged in the underbrush, and the dogs made love, and the ibises searched through the mud with their long round beaks.

"Through that perverse observational faculty, you confounded the animals with yourself—though, strangely, never yourself with the animals. That one-way street, that dishonest quirk, is what allowed you to eat them even as you worshipped them. The gods which must move the earth and the sky and even your own small and questionable acts began to take shape in your minds.

"Watching the ibis you interpreted its search through the mud as an analog to your own search for truth. In the vulture's search through the entrails of corpses you saw a search for justice. In the river-horse's bulging belly there resided, you thought, a child; permanently, as it were. Sturdy and happy and waiting to be born, that child. Not fearful like the children which lurch tearfully from your own bellies, but fierce and bellowing with the full joy of the hot air filling its lungs.

"And in the falcon, beating the air with gray and brown and green wings, mastering every other bird, climbing to the very sun and bathing in its yellow seas—in the falcon you saw the god itself, the sun.

"So fearful, so insecure were you that you immediately crowned these creatures, and made statues of them to keep. Heads of falcons and ibises, rams, cats, and goats, hippopotamuses and bulls—all ridiculously perched on those pointed shoulders of men. You turned them all into gods.

"But you confiscated their bodies—those were divine as you could never be, forming a single fabric with their minds. You took their bodies for your own use, and in turn you put your own bodies under these gods' heads—so they would always know to whom they must answer.

"You worshipped them and the qualities you thought they possessed, those qualities which forever eluded your comprehension.

"As the strange turns of your strange minds continued with this inexorable project, you turned everything around you into gods: the sea, the flames in which you charred your unfortunate meals, the air, and the green and multifarious earth.

"There you were, finally; comforted for a few moments, pacified and satisfied that now there was something to circumscribe the shapeless soul which snarled and quivered under your hairless skin.

"When you wanted wisdom you would consult the ibis; when justice was needed the vulture was appealed to. When you saw the sun sag down into the sea and disappear into darkness, you saw the beetle herding its unborn young through the black night.

"When your children were swallowed up by disease, you saw the crocodile snap his heavy jaws. And even your own deceit—that fluid motion with which you cracked your brother's skull—you blamed on those heavy, thoughtless green jaws.

"All around you the world was taking shape in your minds. What bewildered you with its mysteriousness, now came crawling into order. Strange order! You burdened each thing with meaning, the better to manage your own meaninglessness.

"That knowledge—that you had no sense, no meaning, no purpose—that secret knowledge which increasingly you denied, remained nonetheless deep inside you. Even that lurking knowledge you masked in divinity, in divine mystery.

"And all the while you were taking slaves. It was easy: you had meaning now. But the only way to maintain that meaning was to deny meaning to others. Even while you revered the mystery of the earth, you ground it underfoot, spreading your filth and refuse all around your homes and beyond. Cheerfully, you cooped

the birds of the marsh. Smiling, you made the horses of the steppes eat iron. And the bulls, your greatest, your fiercest and gentlest gods, you broke, castrated and made to toil out their days in servitude.

"Even your meals you had the indecency to befriend, the sheep and the pigs and the chickens, raising them with as much care as their own mothers. Only to cut their throats to the spine.

"And there you still stand, rubbing your flat hands while they suffocate on their own blood."

Asterion stopped speaking. Odysseus was quivering slightly; night had fallen and a cold breeze was hissing in through the hole in the roof.

His host struck a match and started up a small blaze near the table where Odysseus sat. Odysseus smiled agreeably and thanked the enormous creature. Placidly, Asterion asked Odysseus if he might be hungry and offered to go forage for something he, Odysseus, might wish to eat. Odysseus thanked him again and said, "No thanks, not a bit, thanks all the same."

Odysseus was surprised at how quickly Asterion had subsided after his long and difficult monologue. Frankly, Odysseus' concern for his own safety had been considerably sharpened—there had been moments in that disquisition where the Minotaur had looked absolutely menacing. And since humans were the object of this polemic, Odysseus was not a little worried that the whole situation might take a turn for the worse.

A shallow rut had been formed where Asterion had paced up and down on his hind legs during his discourse, and in a moment he returned to it. Looking up through the hole in the roof at an enormous star which had just moved into its scope, Asterion continued speaking, this time in a calmer tone of voice.

**Concerned about
Wildlife Conservation?
Furs? Factory Farming?
Vivisection? Zoos?
Hunting and Trapping?**

WE ARE TOO....

Did you know that philosophers have also made a contribution to the growth of the animal liberation movement? — Think of Regan, Singer, Clark, Magel, Rollin and Sapontzis.

Between the Species "is the only publication which allows such extensive examination of the philosophical basis for animal rights." — Brad Miller, Humane Farming Association

Subscribe today — and please send your tax deductible contribution — help us guarantee philosophers a forum in which to continue to evolve a sound basis for animal rights.

\$15.00 from
San Francisco Bay Institute
P.O. Box 254
Berkeley, CA 94701
Sample back issue \$3.00

**Quarterly Journal
of Ethics**

**PHILOSOPHICAL ACTIVISM
NEEDS YOUR SUPPORT!**