

Hercules 5

By Heiner Mueller, 1964

Translation: Dennis Redmond © 1999

Translation notes: There are a number of myths dealing with the twelve labors of Hercules, but the generally accepted versions of the first five are: (1) strangled the Nemean lion, which no weapon could kill; (2) destroyed the Lernaean hydra; (3) ran down the Cerynian hind, with hooves of brass and golden antlers; (4) captured the boar of Erymanthus; and (5) cleaned stalls of Augeas

1

Sleeping Hercules between cattle-skeletons, holds one in the hand, snores. Cries: Hercules. Enter two Thebans. They hold their noses.

FIRST Piggled out again.

SECOND Softer!

FIRST *softer with more force:* After every labor another ox!

SECOND Do you want to do the work?

FIRST Do you?

SECOND The song of praise.

FIRST *shocked:* All the verses?

SECOND *outraged:* And you're holding *your* nose?

BOTH He whom slew the Nemean hydra –

Both shake their heads. The Nemean lion –

Both nod their heads. He whom beheaded –

Both shake their heads.

He whom strangled the Nemean lion and beheaded the hydra

He whom caught the wild magic hind and speared the rampaging boar

Hercules yawns.

Hercules, son of Alcmene, conceived in the bed of Amphitryon

Grinning. Not from Amphitryon –

Thunder. The Thebans heap abuse on each other.

Swine, how dare you insult the gods!

Louder: Hercules, son of Amphitryon, lend us oh doer of the four great deeds, your arm for the fifth and assent to wash the stall of Augeas, O Liberator, in order to free us from the stink of the unfortunately necessary fleshpot.

Hercules holds his nose.

FIRST The number of oxen after the number of labors.

SECOND It's the fifth labor.

FIRST Makes five oxen.

HERCULES Go free yourselves. *Snores.*

BOTH Only you are Hercules.

HERCULES *Gets up, proudly.*

I will rid Thebes of its stench.

My down payment.

Bleating of an ox being slaughtered.

THEBANS What bleats there is your down payment.

The ox is brought forwards.

HERCULES *sits down*: You may go.

THEBANS Don't waste any time, Thebes needs our stout arms.

Perspective: Thebes in decay, population in rags.

HERCULES And mine. Now leave me.

Exit Thebans, Hercules eats the ox.

2

The stall of Augeas, to the right and left a river. Enter Hercules. He holds his nose.

HERCULES Augeas!

Enter Augeas.

AUGEAS Hercules. What do you want?

HERCULES To wash your stall.

AUGEAS With one hand?

Hercules takes his hand from his nose, keels over, Augeas laughs. Hercules holds his nose again, gets up.

My cattle are good enough for your bellies, but your noses are too fine for the dung. And even if the plague stinks from my stall: are you immortal even without the plague? The end dwells in the beginning, the dead in the striving. What do you have against dung? How long does it stink? Open your nose. Three days and you won't be able to breathe without the stench which burns your nostrils on the first day. The dung rises, the stench increases. Not for you: you inhabit it. Your fifth labor?

Hercules counts on fingers, nods. Ever hear of Sisyphus? Hear my cows shit?

Music.

And no end to it. Number six is cancelled. Vomit is the alterior condition of the flesh. And its final form. No way out from the society of shitting than in the democracy of the dead. Two rivers. Pick one. A river swallows everything, whether flesh or dung, off and out to the sea. A bucket, a shovel.

From the stage flies a cart, a shovel.

You can have two shovels. You can't use more than one with two hands at once. Two shovels aren't more than one, two thousand wouldn't be enough in so much dung. And my cows shit fast, you can hear it.

Music. You won't have much luck doing that: you can dig with the handle.

And don't get your hopes up that the wood will peel itself off the ground and on a drumroll spring back to its tree-roots, dung turning into grass during the return trip through the flesh and so forth, just because your father rules the heavens. Or take the hands, if you want; ten fingertips. How did you slay the sea-monster of Crete? A spring from the cliff through his maw into the

stomach and back through the flesh with the knife. Here lies your cliff,
gleams your knife, stinks your fish.

Exit Augeas. Hercules shovels and carts off dung, first with one hand, the other holding his nose, then with both hands.

HERCULES O envied Sysiphus, no stench stifled his stone. Fortunate water, it has no nose. Father, Creator of all Flesh, why does your flesh shit? *Throws cart and shovel away, seizes bow.*

Stench, where are you? Come out of your cloud, show your hide. Is Nothingness your dwelling? I'll speckle it with arrows. You can run but you can't hide. *Shoots wildly in all directions, throws bow away and seizes spear.*

We're enemies, dung. Throw yourself into the river of your choice.

The river or the spear. Waits for effect. No effect.

You've chosen.

Thrusts spear into dung, cries out, blinded by dung. Laughter from Augeas.

I laugh after you.

To the cattle: Come from your stall

And wash your cud from my face.

You devoured the grass. Devour what you turned the grass into. The earth bore you and as thanks you shit all over her. Eat or I am your stall, my belly your grave.

Protest from Thebes.

You're lucky, Flesh. Thebes doesn't want to feed itself grass.

He takes the shovel up again. And I eat no dung!

He throws the shovel away again.

Hear me, Thebans! Look upon my failure and discharge me from your labor, which was too great for me. Look upon my arms, not even strong enough to lift this tool.

He pretends that he cannot lift the shovel.

See my legs, which can hardly bear me.

He falls over. Applause and laughter from Thebes. Voices: Bravo. Terrific number.

Hooray Hercules. Da capo.

Who is Hercules? I body without name, I dungheap without a face?

Applause stronger. Voices: See his masks! Such style! Hercules hides himself, on hands and knees, under the lion's pelt, roars.

I devoured him alive, your Hercules. He went astray in the labyrinth of my intestines. From the fence of my teeth came his last words I am the Nemean lion. There's room in my belly for three Thebes.

Applause stronger, voices: He doesn't play the lion, he is the lion. I'm dying laughing. My husband died laughing. That's the art of the theater for you. Fine art: I have four children. Stop it. Keep going. Murder. The end. Da capo. Stop. Keep going. End. Da capo.

Yeeeeaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhhhhhhh!

I am the dungheap, the voice from the cud is my voice, under the mask of cud my face. That's what his fifth labor did to Hercules,

the doer of your deeds. Had I but not done the first! I wouldn't be standing in this fifth, stinking, my fame my prison, every deed entangled in the next one, every freedom chained to a new yoke, a victor defeated by his victories, Hercules mastered in Hercules. Willingly you fed the hydra with wenches, deaf to their last screams in expectation of your own last ones, when the lions devoured the menfolk. I strangled the lion, I returned, more wounds than flesh, in his bloodied skin, and you wanted to keep the wenches for yourselves. I beheaded the hydra eight days long, sealed the stumps with fire, the hounds the rest, I returned on hands and knees, breathless, to a transpiring Thebes, and the small evils were gigantic. They are no more, now you want meat without dung. I vanquished your terrors four times over, now you wish to live without the last, the murder on the new morn: immortality. I take back my deeds. Time, stand still. Roll backwards, time. Go back into your hide, Nemean lion. Hydra, grow your heads again. And so forth.

Applause from Thebes. Voices: Hear how he thinks. That is dialectics. Hercules the thinker. Hercules throws dung into the audience. Applause frenetic. Voices: see how he works. Hercules the worker. Go home, don't disturb his work.

Pay attention, Thebans, to what I do now with Hercules, the doer of your deeds:

I throw him into the dung, the dung his grave

Which swells and buries you and your Thebes.

Hercules stiffens himself to spring into the dung. Vomits.

What do I care for Thebes, who are you to me? I

Am Noone, Noone's son, whom has done nothing.

Zeus on a cloud. He holds his nose.

ZEUS Do your work, Hercules, my son.

HERCULES Why me, Father?

ZEUS Do it for this reward.

He winks. On another cloud Hebe floats by. She is naked and holds her nose as well.

HERCULES Stay! What breasts! What a pair of thighs!

Yield, dung, Hercules is what he was.

Have I said you stink, O burden, which bears me?

See my fist, which smites the liar. *Punches himself in the nose.*

Beauty of labor, sweet smell of filth

in anticipation of the all highest purpose!

Enter an ox in heat.

Welcome to the rut. What do you want? My

third leg won't stand up for your cows.

My Heaven grazes on another pasture.

Do you have one horn too many?

The ox attacks.

Also good.

Bullfight. Hercules remains the victor and yokes the ox to the cart.

Pull! *The ox does so and falls into the river.*
 Stop! *Hercules pulls the ox on the cart from the river.*
 Earn your death, do your work.
 Pull, Hercules!
The ox remains standing. Five bushels of straw as your reward.
The ox pulls. And a cow as your Heaven. *The ox pulls harder.* That got him.
 Fill the cart for me and empty it by yourself.
 No pay until you finish.
The ox tries to dig the dung, the dung falls on Hercules instead of the cart.
 O vacuous mirror! Incomplete tool!
 If you don't want to be part of a machine, stop being one.
Hercules throws the ox into the river. With the ox falls the cart.
 AUGEAS My ox! That goes on your tab.
 HERCULES River, my ox!
 Keep the ox and spit the cart out. Do you want to wash the stall?
 You can write off the ocean. Your shore will swallow you up. My
 cows will shit on you as well. With the arses of my cows your
 shore will swallow you up. With the mouths of your shore
 my cows will shit on you.
 AUGEAS Did you say my cows?
 HERCULES And your dung.
Throws the shovel away. Protest from Thebes.
 I shit on Thebes.
*Hear hear and boos from Thebes. On her cloud Hebe floats by. Hercules takes the shovel
 again.*
 For Thebes. River, the cart!
Augeas. A cart.
 AUGEAS My ox.
 HERCULES My Father on the cloud, step forwards.
 Lend your river an ear for your son. *Silence.*
 Who counts for more, your son or the river?
 Hear what I will and tell it what it must do. *Silence.*
 Your silence, Father, tastes like my sweat.
Zeus on a cloud, a naked wench in his arms etc.
 ZEUS Do your work. No pain no gain. *Leaves.*
 HERCULES Did you say work? Drown the shovel too.
Throws the shovel into the river.
 Be what you robbed me of, River my cart
 River my shovel, River my ox. You too
 on the left. Two rivers wash more than one river.
 Have you no ear for me, then hear my fist
 I tame you and alter your course
 And you and your course, in your language.
To the heavens: Pay attention to what I do with your water.
 If you haven't helped me, now watch
 how I help myself and what it can do, your river

When it's strapped to my yoke, because it must.

Struggle with the river.

River, have you no other body than nothingness?

River, have you no other weight than my weight?

Who are you, Enemy, one with our field of battle
whom with my own arms strives against me? There
is no neck which I cannot press into the yoke

Yet your river has no neck for my yoke.

A cow steps into the water, drinks and pisses.

Thanks for the example. *Directing a river. Drinks.*

I your estuary. *Pisses.* I your source.

Now do my work and wash the stall.

Do you lose yourself in the labyrinth of the intestines?

Where is your course, which swept away my strength
with the power of a thousand oxen

and now you invite me with your weakness
which raises no dust in the air

Deaf to my words and deaf to my power

A grain of sand in the machine of my body.

What's left? Hand my shovel, hand my cart
and Hercules is Hercules my ox.

Manual labor.

Better to move the world than your cud!

Dambuilding.

See your mountain move with my legs

See your river rise up before your mountain.

Thunder.

Did I forget to ask you? Permit me to alter your world, Papa.

Augeas, take your cattle from your stall

I, Hercules, come two rivers strong

Master of the waters and your stable-boy

The river is my hand and my power

The one defeated with my bare hands

The other with my weakness.

AUGEAS My stall! My cattle!

UPROAR FROM THEBES Our flesh to the fishes!

HERCULES *opens the dam.*

Out of my way, cattle-rancher. I am the one

whom washes your stall, Hercules the river

directed by Hercules the river-master.

Thunder.

I know you can thunder. And see, I can lead your rivers wherever
and whence I will.

Winter. The river remains standing, frozen.

Hey, what's that supposed to mean!

AUGEAS Hercules the river-master.

HERCULES *To the heavens:* You started this.
Tears the sun from the sky, holds it in his hand until the ice melts. Hand and stall burn.
Where is your winter, Zeus?

AUGEAS My stall is burning!

HERCULES *regards his hand, it is burnt black.* Burning? Not for long. Stand back, Augeas.

The river washes the stall.

AUGEAS Seven oxen!

Jubilation from Thebes. Cries hooray Hercules. Bravo. Da capo. Hercules whistles mountain and rivers back to their places.

HERCULES The labor is done. And now my reward.

Thunder and lightning.

AUGEAS For your reward my cows will suffice

Your dung of tomorrow is the price.

HERCULES Did you say my cows?

AUGEAS And your dung.

HERCULES My river took care of your dung for free.

End of the play. Your stall and cattle are my fee.

Tears Augeas apart and throws the pieces into the river, pulls the heavens down to earth, reaches for Hebe. Enter two Thebans before the marriage.

THEBANS He whom strangled the Nemean lion and beheaded the hydra

He whom caught the magic hind and the rampaging boar

He whom washed the stinking fleshpot, the stalls of Augeas

Hercules, son of Alceme, conceived in the bed of Amphitryon

Grinning. Not of Amphitryon –

They duck. Silence. Not of Amphitryon –

Yelling. Not of Amphitryon

Doer of the five great deeds, lend us your arm for the sixth.

Hercules rolls up the heavens and sticks it in his pocket.