

Gods, demi-gods, heroes, anti-heroes, fallen angels, and
fallen arches

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La mythologie est une conque sonore au fond de laquelle on peut entendre remuer toute la civilisation. (Mythology is a sonorous seashell at the bottom of which all of civilization can be heard stirring.)

Richard Wagner et T  odor de Wyz  wa. 1885.
Revue Wagn  rienne, Paris, 14 (mars)

I come not to hear your discourse, but to see how my teacher ties his shoes.

Sanskrit proverb

Introduction. In this paper I should like to concentrate on two inclusive themes: (a) mythology as mirror of who we are, and (b) a definition of teacher. In doing so, I will provide a cursory view of mythological figures among us, as well as a discussion of the role of theater and drama, acting and teaching as one and the same, texts, oral communication, and a personal answer to a dilemma.¹

I. Figures from mythology adapt themselves to universal values and may serve as models of behavior. Consider the following possibilities: archetypes of some of us in the academy. Now never mind the cause of the punishment inflicted by the gods on those who fell into disfavor, though, curiously, a great number of those in hell happened to be teachers. In Greek mythology to be born is sinful enough: it is *amartia*. It is the stuff of tragedies. Let's look for a moment into blackest Tartarus, located at the fathomless bottom of the imagination, and contemplate the plights of some of those condemned to live there through eternity.

I see Tantalus, terrified by the prospect of a huge rock suspended precariously above his head posing a constant threat of crushing him, being unable to quench his thirst while immersed up to his throat in water, and trying to satisfy a ravenous hunger by reaching for fruit that forever eludes his grasp. And that, dear friends, has to be the mother of all punishments.

Now put Tantalus in a tweed suit or a skirt in a classroom, and he and she is as consumed by pain and unfulfilled desire as their brother in Tartarus. The classroom

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is the pool in which he is mired, and the fruit he seeks to capture is tenure. Before he was immersed up to his neck, he was told in graduate school that all that matters is publication. His sin was to have listened to this ill-conceived advice. So, he publishes: article, after article, after article, but has no time for teaching. Articles consume his interests: they can never be accumulated fast enough, they become the fruit of personal survival, and more and more publications, and less and less teaching, and fewer and fewer students, until there are none.

I can see Narcissus. Narcissus became so enamored with his image reflected in clear water that he is the personification of self-indulgence and vanity, condemned to gaze at his image through time unending. Other versions of the Narcissus legend include his being turned by the gods into a flower that bears his name and which, appropriately when the fullest consequences of his behavior are analyzed, means death. His narcissism renders him impervious to others: he is incapable of being touched or of touching others. He has withdrawn from the world, retreated in his undeviating rectitude, content in his isolation, inwardness, non-intervention, and abdication of the rights and privileges of responsible citizenship in the department.

I see Sisyphus, who according to Homer was the wisest and most prudent of mortals. On a pretenure class visitation, the chair of the department, Professor Odysseus, described the teaching style of Sisyphus: "I saw Sisyphus. He was suffering strong pains and with both arms embracing the monstrous stone, struggling with hands and feet alike, he would try to push the stone upward to the crest of the hill, but when it was on the point of going over the top, the force of gravity turned it backward, and the pitiless stone rolled back down to the level. He then tried once more to push it up, straining hard, and sweat ran all down his body, and over his head a cloud of dust rose" (Lattimore 1967: xi, lines 593–600).

The gods seem to underscore the fact that boredom, fulfilling chores in a robotic, mindless routine, is every bit as excruciating as the punishment Tantalus has to endure. The eternal rock is the yellowed, frayed, outdated notes delivered in a monotonous, bored drone. The end to the ordeal may be early retirement, when he realizes that his students wish more strenuously as the years pass that the rock will crush him.

This Sisyphus is a far cry from Camus's version of a Sisyphus who realizes that in this unreasonable world of deceit, the irrational, the absurd, one must struggle to create through action *une noblesse humaine*. He concludes that all is well. "*Chacun des grains de cette pierre, chaque éclat minéral de cette montagne pleine de nuit, à lui seul, forme un monde. La lutte elle-même vers les sommets suffit à remplir un cœur d'homme. Il faut imaginer Sisyphe heureux.*" ("Each particle of that rock, each mineral shard of that mountain-shaped darkness, in itself forms a world. The struggle itself toward the summit is enough to fill a man's heart. One must imagine Sisyphus as happy") (Camus 1942: 162).

And there is bold Prometheus—Shelley's Prometheus—"in addition to courage and majesty, and firm and patient opposition to omnipotent force, he is

susceptible of being; described as exempt from the taints of ambition, envy, revenge, and a desire for personal aggrandizement . . . the type of the highest perfection of moral and intellectual nature, impelled by the purest and truest motives to the best and noblest ends” (Zillman 1968: 37). Earth herself proclaims: “Subtle thou art and good; and though the Gods/ Hear not this voice, yet thou art more than God/ Being wise and kind” (Zillman 1968: 57). In a word, a colleague we would kill to have in our ranks. But, in his CV, Prometheus listed a brief but telling account of himself, admitting that he took the side of mankind, devoting his career to their cause. He gave them the forbidden fire, fueling their creativity and empowering them to lead productive lives. The tenuring committee took into consideration this contribution by this young Turk who dared oppose his senior colleagues and particularly Professor Zeus, chair of the department, and his achievement was downgraded to the status of being “morally acceptable, but academically questionable.” Tenure denied.

Today, because vultures do not hover over concrete jungles, Prometheus and his ilk suffer from bleeding ulcers, their guts eaten away by obstructionists among colleagues and administrators. And finally, there is Caligula. In his play *Caligula*, Albert Camus transforms the murderous third-century Roman emperor into a superior person, besieged on all sides by the forces of mediocrity, symbolized in turn by the closed ranks of the patricians. A confrontation ensues after Caligula assumes the role of Venus to further the awakening of his patricians. He explains his actions to Scipio, whom he favors.

Caligula: They do not understand destiny and that is why I made myself destiny. I assumed that stupid and incomprehensible face of the gods. . . .

Scipio, his interlocutor, responds: And that is what is called blasphemy.

Caligula: No, Scipio, it is dramatic art! The error of all these men consists in not believing enough in the theater. They would otherwise know that it is permitted to every man to play celestial tragedies and to become god. . . .

Scipio: Indeed, Caius. But if that were true, I believe that you have done what is necessary so that one day, around you, legions of human gods will rise up, implacable in their turn and drown in blood your ephemeral divinity.

Caligula, with a precise and hard voice: I imagine with difficulty the day of which you speak. But I dream of it sometimes. (Camus 1958: 97)

Caligula knows and states that “These people need a teacher who knows what he is doing.” And he has a mission, a responsibility to teach. Caligula’s quest for “the moon, happiness, or immortality” is all on one plane. To possess the moon, and he means “to possess” in the physical sense, is to attain happiness and immortality; to be happy is to possess the moon; to be immortal is to possess the moon. None of the three is likely of attainment. His sanity lies in the more difficult task, not of attaining the moon but of showing men of what they are capable. What a marvelous teacher! What a goal to uphold! When reason and logic fail, the theater allows one to assume any role and to perform any deed imaginable.

II. Now, to use the classroom as theater requires drama. But let’s make a crucial distinction: Classroom as “theater” is counterproductive. Etymologically, theater in Greek means, a place to sit, a place to see. We want classroom as drama, that is, drama from the Greek means, action, participatory action.

The preparation involved in teaching and acting should be long and arduous. Each craft requires mastering rigorous disciplines. Both professions communicate and inform. If the actor’s performance is to be compelling, he has to make a thorough search of his past and analyze his relationship to his role, his relationship to the roles played by others, his relationship to his environment, to the techniques of acting, and, most significantly, his relationship to his audience. The relationship to his audience is his first obligation because it nurtures all he does. He is in tune with the audience; he causes the emotional and intellectual reactions they experience; he paces himself according to the pitch of their involvement and intensifies it according to the direction of the drama. He draws his audience into his confidence by his virtuosity, and they rely on him to clarify the purpose of the meaning of the work. The work becomes a living entity, forcing its reality on their consciousness. To heighten his effectiveness, he fills his presentation with new insights and strives constantly to exert the greatest impact on the audience’s sensibilities. And thus, in many ways, the teacher is actor, and the actor is teacher.

The first step is to shake loose the chains of fear and inhibitions that keep us ensnared. Most mediocre men, as Madame de Staël states, are slaves to the event and do not have “the force to think higher than the fact.” Man justifies his fate in an attempt to live “in peace with it.” In a moment of rare humanity, he accuses the mirror, forgetting—as a Spanish proverb would have it—that we, not the mirror make the grimaces.

Rigorous training will permit the teacher to elaborate a technique that will ultimately release his or her own personality and give body to the uniqueness of the individual. What applies in acting also holds for teaching. Stanislavski waited until he was sixty years old before he would commit to paper his methods. “*J’ai besoin d’une théorie, renforcée d’une méthode pratique, bien vérifiée par l’expérience. La théorie pure, sans application, n’est pas mon affaire.*” (“I need a theory, reinforced by a practical method, truly verified by experience. Pure theory, without application, is of no concern to me”) (Meyer 1975: 13).

III. But let's hear advice that we may choose to ignore at our peril. In my travels and lectures and workshops throughout the world, three basic truths were constantly confirmed by thousands of students. At the conclusion of each session, I ask one question: *What do you seek in a good teacher?* The students were of different ages, political bent, socioeconomic status, religions, and philosophies, but their answers are essentially identical. Although the responses were not in the same hierarchical order, all agreed on three basic qualities:

- A teacher should be enthusiastic, totally committed to his or her task, and thoroughly convinced of its worth.
- A teacher should be the same person in and out of the classroom, an identity—a lucid, identifiable personality fashioned not by rhetoric but by action.
- A teacher should respect his or her students by treating them as equals, by sharing knowledge, by appreciating their humanity, by demonstrating a sincere conviction that they possess an intrinsic worth and that they are capable of achievement.

The classroom, like the theater, is not a natural setting in itself. For it to function and for the teacher to be free of the restraints of his or her past and free of the restraints imposed by the artificiality of the classroom, *the teacher has to learn to create virtual reality*. In that sense, language study is a route to maturity. Obviously, gymnastics alone will not produce learning, in the same way that a frenetic conductor cannot always evoke the best performance from his orchestra. A combination of vitality and virtuosity enables maximum achievement. The teacher must be supple. Suppleness is a symbol of life itself.

IV. It is often difficult for a teacher to put a script to work, say, as an actor would the text of a play. Even good actors may suffer from bad material. The damage is lessened significantly in the theater, since actors' audiences are not obliged to study or remember scripts that bomb. The script assumes a different value in the classroom: it is the *point de départ* for the teacher and the *point de repère* for the student.

Here too we encounter problems: I was criticized for featuring an irritable railroad clerk, an impatient chauffeur de taxi, and the mugging of an old man in a grammar as anti-French propaganda (Rassias 1992). Clearly, one would never visit a country in which such aberrant behavior is described in a textbook. We need a reality check here! No muggings in Paris? No muggings in New York?

If these are typical reactions by teachers to life itself and to realism in the classroom, it is of small wonder that we cannot hold onto our students. Above all, students want to relate to real situations, to the truth. They have been raised on instant truth: television brings natural and man-made disasters directly into the living room. Students have seen the world in living color, and we often portray it in

black, white, or depressing gray. They know that the world is not neat and pretty, and any attempt to portray it otherwise reduces our credibility and, indeed, makes language texts collections of anodyne cultural anecdotes—almost a return to featuring quaint provincial costumes.

Language texts are most often inhabited by flat, cut-along-the-edges personages who come unglued the minute you try to stand them up. Textbook families are usually happy and clueless natives who inhabit an idyllic desert isle marooned forever where, finally, no one really cares a damn if they are ever heard from again.

It is important that students know as much about themselves as possible. They should have the opportunity not only to fill their minds with knowledge, but also to be allowed to express their prejudices, sentiments, and other emotions. They should be at ease with themselves and be encouraged to articulate their innermost thoughts, to read and *understand their own book within*.

Oral communication is the key: at all costs our students must speak. Speaking is an integral part of our nature and it is through speaking that we learn a language, rather than learning a language in order to speak it. There is nothing new or unprecedented here.

Active use is the key to learning vocabulary. A word atrophies quickly not only when it is not used, but also if it hasn't been incorporated into the body of one's experience or needs. "Hearing words does not result in learning," St. Augustine pointed out in 389 A.D.: "We do not learn words we know; but we can not hope to learn words we do not know unless we have grasped their meaning. This is not achieved by listening to the words, but by getting to know the things signified" (Kelly 1969: 35). Comenius wrote in 1648 that "[a]ll things are taught and learned through examples, precepts, and exercises. . . . The exemplar should always come first, the precept should always follow, and imitation should always be insisted on" (Kelly 1969: 38–39). And in 1819, Lemare wrote: "When for the first time a child hears the sentence: 'Shut the door,' if he does not see a gesture accompanying the order, if he does not see it carried out immediately, he will not know what it means. . . . But if a voice from somewhere shouts, 'Shut the door,' and someone rushes up to close it . . . he perceives the sense of the expression he has heard" (Kelly 1969: 11).

V. I'd never taken a course in methodology and hadn't the foggiest idea of how to conduct a class. I asked him what the first thing was that I should do. After some deliberation, his answer was, "Make sure your fly is zipped." It was curious and cautious advice I soon discovered that I could not in truth follow. As I taught, I learned from experience. I found that I was denying my emotions: I had straight-jacketed myself into the preconceived world of who and what a teacher was supposed to be. I needed a battle plan: a way out of the mire of irresolution, of inaction, of conformity. Self-examination was mandatory. In the process, I would

establish a five-step framework to guide me. The five-step framework is the underpinning of a pedagogy, and is also a philosophy.

Know thyself. Examine the formation of crusts, containing the influences we experience through the years. The first crust envelops all family input: We are susceptible to all we see, hear, breathe, smell, and touch. We form our ideas on politics, religion, and general outlook. An innocent remark can be heard within our reach and it settles into the crust, then festers, then becomes cancerous and colors our outlook in a detrimental fashion. It may well be the source of most prejudices.

The second crust may be the most dangerous of the lot, for it is forged by peer pressure and sometimes determines behavior for a lifetime. We absorb all we can from our friends primarily and often principally to belong. Thus we dress like our peers, walk, talk, and even smell like them.

Then comes the career crust: That's where no chances are allowed, no risks, only safe ground thinking. We follow the established paradigm of success according to our jobs. Spontaneity, creative risk-taking—anything that threatens the security and predictability of performance is systematically discouraged.

Ultimately, our goal is to have students read their inner book, to teach them to read that inner book, wherein all is writ—the bad, the good—so that they won't be too quick in judging others by their covers.

Connect. We must provide appropriate materials to help the student connect linguistically, culturally, and philosophically with those with whom he would communicate. We have to connect with the environment, the materials we use, the purpose and focus of what we are doing, and *why* we are doing it. We seek authenticity and sincerity.

Special delivery system. A well-defined system will enable one to function as a whole person. It is an all-out assault on students' sensibilities. It is the classroom as arena for involvement, for empowerment, for action. The essential fact here is that, like good theater, the classroom experience must be *shared*. Above any other consideration, our first obligation must be the students. Similarly, truth and honesty must also frame the lesson and be taught with commitment to those principles.

Stage presence. The focus of all communication is the person with whom one is communicating. Here we shift our center of gravity so that the person being addressed is the center of all our attention. The goal is to make our audience feel their own "presence" and become the better for the experience. We prepare them for their presence on the stage of the world.

Senses and the emotions. The senses are the main source, if not the only source, of acquiring knowledge, and the emotions are the site where learning

takes place. Nothing is real unless it touches me and I become aware of it. Reality exists for us through feeling. We communicate what we have absorbed through our senses, but the world has to be grasped by emotions. I am defined by my emotions: I must know them, I must learn from them and through them. We remember best those things that touch us. Reality is in touch, in feeling, in being touched, in being moved. The mind alone is not capable of grasping the full nuances of a word or an act. The mind can only entertain what strikes it vicariously. The emotions provide the glue that contains thought. The emotions fuel the imagination, sustain its effort, exploit the potentialities of thought. The emotions are a powerful source for good. We strap its power and ride it headlong to our goal.

The emotions come from the heart, and their power may best be appreciated when we realize that the heart is the only part of the human anatomy that can experience the infinite: qualities such as love, respect, are not bound by time or space. The emotions and the senses together are the basic ingredient of “*la sensibilité*” (“sensitivity”).

We find the word throughout the eighteenth century, and particularly in the thought of the French eighteenth-century encyclopedist Denis Diderot. Diderot extolled naturalness in man, the destruction of sham, and the obliteration of the mask man consciously hides behind. He preaches relativism, freedom, and openness, and the salubrious nature of the emotions: “*Les passions sobres font les hommes communs*” (“Sober passions make for ordinary men”) (Diderot 1950: 4). And again, “*Les passions amorties dégradent les hommes extraordinaires. La contrainte anéantit la grandeur et l’énergie de la nature. Voyez cet arbre; c’est au luxe de ses branches que vous devez la fraîcheur et l’étendue de ses ombres.*” (“Dampened passions diminish extraordinary men. Constraint annihilates the grandeur and energy of nature. Look at this tree, it is to the luxuriant wealth of its branches that you owe the coolness and expanse of its shade”) (Diderot 1950: 5). Diderot would finally maintain “*une juste harmonie*” between passion and reason, but the place of passion is firmly established: “*Ce sont les passions qui mettent tout en mouvement, qui animent le tableau de cet univers, qui donnent pour ainsi dire l’âme et la vie à ses diverses parties.*” (“Passions set everything into motion which animates our representation of the universe, which, so to speak, gives a soul and life to its various parts”) (Diderot in Assézat 1876a: 217).

Diderot speaks of the sensations and how they determine mood and participate in the learning process. *La sensibilité* is an amalgam of physical, emotional, and intellectual states that releases full responses to stimuli (Assézat 1876b: 117–119). The net effect of this expression is the knowledge of our right to be who we are. The concomitant effect is the recognition of that right in others. Self-awareness precedes awareness of others and communication is possible. There are no longer any barriers between people, inhibitions are stripped away, and real learning takes place. One might say that the best learning is anti-intellectual!

VI. So, why do we teach? We teach in order to bring to life through language the tools God gave us to live, to connect, to share, to help. It is through the senses and the emotions that we must proceed to give to language learning a humanistic focus. I think of Kazantzakis (1958: 476) who writes, “Look, listen, smell, taste, and touch all things with all your heart.” Taken at face value, the sentence endorses a go-for-broke, all-out assault on life and all that it has to offer. It is rank carpe deism. But Kazantzakis would have us look deeper than the passive state suggests. It doesn’t suffice to merely look: we must see, see who we are and how we relate to others, see the strengths and weaknesses we have and how others share them. We must not just listen but hear; hear all that is going on within ourselves and others, hear what the world is telling us while we listen intently; smell the pollution and stench of death where there should be life; taste and go beyond our appetite to confront the tragedy of our time—children the world over dying at an appalling rate daily for lack of food—and finally touch; touch by understanding, by sharing, and, most important, touch in order to be touched to attain the full status as caring, sensitive people. The classroom should be the arena where constant proof of our humanity, the fact that we are all human becomes the sum and substance of all our efforts.

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NOTE

1. This paper is based on a lecture given at the TESOL convention in New York in 1998, in honor of Professor James Alatis.