

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).

