

Myths and Classics

Why Myths and Why the Classics?

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We grow up in a crazy, jigsaw puzzle world of myriad stories and characters—some to be taken with high seriousness, others meant for mere entertainment, or so it seems. For me, there was Dumbo and Scheherazade, Hansel and Gretel and Mighty Mouse, Aladdin and his Lamp and Odysseus with his long journey home to Penelope—read by flashlight under the blankets, or a chair by the window on a rainy day, or broadcast on Saturday mornings on a small black and white TV. This was my imaginary congregation of cast off children and wonderworking heroes; there were countless more, but to what end, or purpose? Nobody told me; they were just there.

And then, again in my world, there something else—stories bound in black leather, laid out in numbered verses, and printed on thin-leaved pages edged in gold—stories of Creation and Exodus, of Moses and Miriam, of an unusual king born in a barn and executed on a cross, parables of the Good Samaritan and the Prodigal Son. From Mighty Mouse to Moses to Jesus—that just about sums it up. But for good measure, I also had stories of golden plates and angels in America to throw in to the mix. And somehow, by an ad hoc process of osmosis, I was supposed to make sense of it all. It was all a swirling stew mixed up in the bowl of my brain.

But then several things happened; when I was still young, before I left Zion for Babylon, I began to see and hear references to the mythic stories I grew up with all around me: she's opened a real Pandora's box; he had the touch of Midas; a neighbour's car was called a Mercury; he flew too close to the sun; her story is a real odyssey; he was lost in a labyrinth; it was like something out of 1001 nights; a family disaster down the street was a real Greek tragedy—and suddenly it was as though I had a set of magical keys that fit locks and opened doors into a secret adult landscape. I knew these stories, ancient characters and references. And when this happened, my world felt deeper and richer with meaning, and it was as though I found myself part of a human story—with plots and characters and profound moral texture—that went back thousands of years, connecting me with situations and people long ago and far away—and as close as the threshold to my neighbour's house, the stifled inner workings of my own family, and

the daily labouring world of adults trooping off to work. I felt a kinship and sympathy for them: adults in the 20th century, and those in remote times, that to this day is hard to describe.

Something else happened and this was a shock. I came to see that myths and mythic tales weren't made up, just-so stories created for entertainment. They were laden with values and profound worldviews. The people in the past who told and cherished them, and passed them on down through the generations, weren't just low-brow primitives fit for the scrap heap of some kind of history marching ever progressively upward to enlightenment (in spite of what Ken Wilber may think). And come to think of it, and this was a spooky, unsettling thought for a young person in a totalizing religion: what did that mean about the stories and cast of characters in the pages of those gilt-edged, black leather bound scriptures I read from along with all my church-going folk on all the Sundays of my childhood and youth? Myths. Not false or untrue, not made up fictions, merely. But something else and far more profound.

Myths are stories which manifest aspects of a cosmic order which give meaning and orientation to human life. They often take place at the time of creation or key primordial historical events which reveal the essential structure of reality. In so doing, they forge powerful links of meaning and purpose between the human family and nature and between individuals and their ancestors; they can express a saving power that can transform human life; and through the deeds of heroic and flawed mythic characters—courageous, tragic, noble and messed up—they provide inspiring and cautionary archetypes and patterns for human action.

For example, the Genesis account depicts a creative deity surveying everything he had made, and pronouncing the natural world as “very good”—which told me that the world was not some passive storehouse for us to plunder and pollute and not some fallen prison from which so-called higher spiritual beings must escape; rather, this world was something to value, protect and savour. Enslaved people in the Americas, by means of identification with the mythic story of Israel's exodus from bondage in Egypt, could powerfully condemn the whole charnel house of slavery as contrary to the will of a liberating god—and this in spite of all the laws, and naked power and time-honoured customs of their captors and masters; and through the eyes of lived experience and faith, they saw themselves and acted out as protagonists in another chapter in the mythic history of the struggle for freedom.

In the midst of the Nazi Occupation of France, when the temptation to despair, cynicism, totalitarian violence or indifference must have been stifling and overwhelming, the young philosopher and writer Albert Camus turned to the myth of Sisyphus to think and feel his way through to a lucid call to personal and moral responsibility. No matter how onerous one's fate, pushing an immense rock up the mountain over and over again, the struggle to raise the stone towards the heights, with clear-eyed fidelity to the task, Camus concludes, is enough to fill a person's heart with silent joy.

It would be an impoverishing, tragic mistake to regard myth as an inferior mode of thought which can be cast aside when human beings have attained the age of reason. It isn't an early attempt at objective history; it doesn't, or shouldn't claim that its tales are facts. Rather, myths and our ability to access and "translate" them are enduring achievements of the creative imagination that can serve to transform a fragmented, tragic, overwhelming and all-too-superficial world, help us to glimpse new possibilities, attest to and confirm our deepest commitments and give us examples for concrete action and change.

As I set out into the world, understanding myth in this way became very important to me—a source of insight, appreciation and solace; and it also brought me a heap of trouble. Speaking of that last one on the list—think about: if myth is a story, or stories which make manifest some aspect of the cosmic order, and if all kinds of people and cultures had their myths, their notions of the deep structures and truths about the world, then the scriptures I grew up with, the total landscape they painted, the heroes whose paradigmatic actions were preached as archetypes to revere and embody—all of that must be said to include the mythic. They weren't lies, they weren't just primitive superstition, but neither were they literally true accounts of objective history, nor scientific facts about nature and the cosmos.

And that became a problem as the religious community I grew up in devolved in its understanding and use of its founding, paradigmatic myths. Once appreciated as figurative and metaphorical, religious leaders began to insist scriptures were literal, authoritative, and binding root and branch; the outcome for many was a tragic closing down of the mind and a circling of the wagons; for others, a drawn out process of struggling to cope and accommodate or of estrangement and breaking away. (And here I am.)

But before we get too congratulatory: seeing the world through a mythic lens, appreciating the imaginative power of human beings to create and sustain myths can also have corrosive, alienating *and* empowering impact on the way we see and experience many of the myths of our own times: the unseen hand of capital and the inerrant superiority of unfettered markets?—myths; Marxist dialectical materialism and withering away of capital?—myths; evolutionary naturalism as *the* explanatory paradigm for all the myriad phenomena of the world?—myth; the inevitable progress of human rationality toward a utopia through demystification and technology?—myth. Mormonism—ditto. Unitarianism—you guessed it.

Useful or baleful fictions they may be, and it's absolutely the case that myths can be used by those in authority to oppress. Seeing the mythic structure and impulse behind the facades of what's supposed to be inevitable, inerrant, as capital T truth—is both a burden and a gift. But how to appreciate the wheat from the chaff, the librating from that which harms, reality from mere artifice, the ethical from that which degrades; truths from b****s****? “By their fruits ye shall know them”.... *And it's here, I guess, where I want to talk about “the classics.”* I told you that I was introduced to stories from ancient Greek and Roman classics when I was a kid, and of the thrilling experience of how they ushered me into the some of the mysteries and secrets of the adult world. But that was when I was a child: seeing, thinking and feeling all through a glass darkly.

The classics re-emerged for me, and in a far different way, in a beginners' class in university when I was learning German. As an aid to learning the language, we read from a collection post World War II German fiction. What was striking to me was the deliberate simplicity of the writing: short sentences, humble words. I think that after decades of rhetorical abuse of the language by a murderous totalitarian regime, it was if the only way to rescue the very words people used and wrote was to carefully utter only that which could name concrete things honestly, stripped of pomp or pretention or harm. Some of the readings, I noted, also referred to stories and characters from Greek and Roman classics: tragic plays, epic poems of war and its trauma; the struggle to return home and rebuild a decent life in the wake of catastrophe.

I began to read more post-War European literature in earnest, and discovered there, too, a striving for words absent of bombast, slogan and euphemism that are the stock-in-trade of anti-

democratic, totalitarian propaganda and the regimes which traffic in it. We see it in the poem by the great Polish writer Zbigniew Herbert that we read in today's meditation. In the hands of modern writers like Herbert, the world of classical antiquity and its literature played a crucial role in clearing away the vast rubble of vile lies that filled people with self-pity, lame excuses, martial zeal, self-righteousness and that stigmatized whole classes of people; language that shut down mind and heart.

It makes me think of what Confucius called the "rectification of names"—the task to know and use the proper designation of words; "for if names be not correct," Confucius wrote, "language is not in accordance with the truth of things." And if that's the case, he concluded, "people do not know how to move hand or foot." In a world that traffics in terms like extraordinary rendition, collateral damage, and quantitative easing, we could use a good dose of Thucydides, who as Herbert writes, did not whine in self-pity, accuse his subordinates, or plump himself in faux heroism, but said simply: "he had seven ships/it was winter/and he sailed quickly"—though too late to raise the siege at Amphipolis, for which he paid the price. Why the classics? To help us cut through the fog of BS and find words "in accordance with the truth of things."

Why the classics? To break down categorical thinking, to fill the heart with understanding and compassion for the individual, and thus extend the borders of what it means to be an inclusive, saving community. The ancient story of Philoctetes, and the Greek play of the same name written by Aeschylus 2500 years ago, was embraced by the gay community during the heights of the AIDS crisis, and staged numerous times around the world. The Greeks were on their way to besiege Troy; Philoctetes was a renowned archer, but having sustained an excruciating wound on the voyage which festered and stank revoltingly, his comrades abandoned him on a deserted island. There he languished bereft of human kindness and community, suffering and alone for nearly ten years. The Greeks realized that they could not prevail over the Trojans without the wounded archer; and thus with new chastened eyes, they returned to Philoctetes. In recognizing their common humanity with the sick man and acknowledging his unique gift, those who abandoned Philoctetes set him free, cured him and thus themselves, and sailed with him back to Troy where his unique skill as an archer enabled them to turn the tide of battle.

Why the classics? To help us navigate the perilous passages of life. In one tale after another, a young person finds herself at the gates of adulthood. Childish things must be left behind; old ideas that have nourished her community for generations no longer speak to her. So she leaves home and endures death-defying adventures: climbs unassailable mountains, converses with spirits in the underworld, traverses dark forests filled with wolves and malign adults. And in the process she dies to her old self, and gains a new insight or skill which she brings back to her people.

Given a culture with few compelling rites of initiation, communities which sustain them, faced with bleak job prospects, unaffordable housing, and few sanctioned times, places and means to experience the transcendent—which inevitably gives rise to a whole crisis of meaning—it's no wonder that young people flocked to see Zach Snyder's movie *300*: the tale of the epic battle of 300 Spartans against the Persian army at Thermopylae where, though doomed and outnumbered, their courage and skill created an unshakeable bond of brotherhood. Our young people need classic stories of rites of passage to help them rise up, claim their place, and enter into the community of adulthood. And better versions than Zach Snyder's testosterone heavy, chest thumping *300*.

Why the classics? They give us stories and a discourse to help us weather times of extremity. This past year, I found myself reading the epic tale of *Beowulf* with acute need... with new eyes and sympathy for the raging, monstrous figure of Grendel, outcast and dispossessed, looking in from outside and the dark at the hale, happy thanes and their hero Beowulf in the torch lit halls of Heorot. Some things and times are so beyond the ordinary, that only classic stories seem equal to express and understand them.

For example, the poet Rachel Hadas relates the struggle of trying to coax her composer husband George, long-lost in the disorienting fog of dementia, into taking a shower. We take something like that so much for granted—but for her it was truly “a contest, a monumental struggle”—“heroic, strenuous, torqued and baroque,” and finds herself resorting to the classic Greek poet Pindar to try to convey something of its pathos and grandeur. “Hercules diverting a river from its course...Clytemnestra waiting by the tub with a bath sheet...the Danaids whose pitchers always leak,” she writes, “I am not any of these mythical figures, it is not the same

situation, and yet in the charged and strenuous atmosphere of this, yes, *heroic effort*, I can't help sensing their presences all around me.” (Hadas, “Pindar wrote...”, in *Times Literary Supplement*, 17 February 2012)

Their presences all around me—in extremity that kind of presence, erasing the distance of time and culture, of bringing our remote ancestors and their own enduring insights into the struggle and glory of being human, *I know*, can be profoundly comforting and meaning-making.

One last story...nearly seventeen years ago, our family traveled to Cormorant Island off the northeast tip of Vancouver Island to fish, enjoy the rugged beauty of the place and relax. It was one of several times of transition in our lives. Diana and I, with one of our children, decided to walk the circumference of the island. Hours into our trek, we came upon a cast away, hand-hewn oar, salt-cured and weathered gray. Hefting it up in my hands...and, how can I say it?: time and space dilated and deepened: I felt an ancient time, a remote culture and a classic story approach—“their presences all around me.”

It had taken Odysseus ten long years to finally reach home after the decade long siege of Troy, where at long last, after having rejected the offer of immortality by the goddess Calypso, he was reunited with his wife Penelope. Edward Mendelsohn calls this “surely the greatest and most moving tribute that any marriage has ever received in literature.” But I digress (or do I?).

One last task remained for Odysseus to perform. He had offended the sea god Poseidon; enmity ran deep. A truce between them would only be secured, Odysseus had been told by the seer Tiresias, if he carried an oar over his shoulder, walked inland deep enough to be asked by a passing farmer: “what’s that strange winnowing fan you’re carrying there?” On that spot he was to plant the oar in the ground, offer a tribute to Poseidon, and only then could he return home and be at peace.

I stood with the oar in my hand, my wife and child beside me. How long would it take for the enmity between god and me to come to an end? And when and where would we ever find home? I still have that oar and haven’t journeyed all the way to the end. But I am not alone—“their presences [are] all around me:” myths, classics and family. My world feels deeper and richer with meaning as a consequence; filled with a sympathy and kinship which connects me with those I love and with the human family.