

Rethinking Sisyphos

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THE ANCIENT TALES connected with Sisyphos, a mythical and historical Corinthian king, present factual and interpretative contradictions to a greater degree than is usual in the case of Greek myths. The discussion of the various versions of the mythical tale concerning Sisyphos thus inevitably involves examining some problems of interpretation that illuminate the nature of mythical tales in general. My argument is that, in the myth of Sisyphos, we have an expression of the inseparability of natural and ethical phenomena, that this inseparability exists in most important myths, and that, in the case of the Sisyphos myth, the natural and the ethical worlds are connected in the notion of irreversibility.

I will try to sketch my own position with regard to myth. My interest in myth is of long duration and endurance, and has been rekindled in the activity of writing poetry and fiction. The writer is possibly an enlightened myth-maker in the modern world. Thus telling stories serves, even now, the function of inventing new *mythos* as well as demythologising current beliefs.

Although it is important to remember that mythical tales have their origins in time and place, and are often associated with geographical locations and distinct topographies of a place, purporting to establish the unique historical or chronological identities of places and people, they are also—and for this reason to be distinguished from other kinds of tales—meaningful in widely different locations, situations and times. This is emphasised in Claude Calame's view: 'C'est en effet essentiellement quand disparaît le crédit accordé à leur vraisemblance que les récits semblent devenir des mythes'¹ Thus the historical foundation of mythical tales—which is argued in the Euhemeristic rationalist allegorising—does not have a bearing on them as myths, even though the validity of their verisimilitude might otherwise be accepted. Many myths may be based on a historical fact but that is not the reason why they are myths. Friedrich Prinz has shown in his study (Prinz 1979) that almost every Greek city had its own foundation and succession

1 Calame 1990:18.

myth, that is, a set of tales that functioned as myths, in the life of the community over a long period of time. Thus we expect some degree of symbolic and ritualistic element to operate in tales that we call myths. Myths link two separate worlds together and express this link, which otherwise might not be evident, through symbolic representation.

Mythical tales are mostly transmitted to us in the written form, and, when a sufficient expanse of time has elapsed, in the literary form. Both in myth and in literature, however, there exists a level of meaning which goes beyond the literal meaning. Admittedly myth does not limit its function to literature. Myth is rather a form that exists in the very foundation of culture; and our criticism of culture, our *Kulturwissenschaft* is, in the first place, a criticism of myth. Therefore we can inquire in which particular ways myth, as an archetype of all narration, can explain the social and cultural function of stories and story-telling.

What is interesting from the point of view of this inquiry is the long perspective within which the differences and transformations can be studied—not only with regard to story-telling patterns but also with regard to the various definitions of myth. Even though there may not exist any essential discontinuity between the schemes of meaning in ancient mythologies and their more recent re-enactments, the dimension of continuous interpretation opens up a network of relations that indicate a large element of variability, transactional procedures and contradiction.² When we call myth an inexhaustible symbol we must remember that the inexhaustibility becomes manifest only in reception, in the course of time and interpretation.

Sisyphos is a cultural hero, but also a convict in Hades, an obsessive and heroic labourer, who is, along with the successful adventurer Odysseus, the most European of ancient Greek mythical figures. The compulsion to work is the same as the compulsion to die, to be closer to death, every morning, every time, by commencing a renewed effort. The repetitive pattern is the singular feature in all the tales concerning punishment in the Underworld, but in Sisyphos it is worth special attention. There is an interesting and complex correspondence between the stories before and after dying. The mythical tales concerning Sisyphos while he was alive belong to the oldest layers of Greek mythology. They relate to the foundation of Corinth and its area over a long period of time. Despite the historical basis, there is no original version—although we might speculate about their provenance. The relation to Corinth is a *topos* in itself which already implies interpretation but might help us to explain some specific features of the myth.³

2 Durand 1979, Liszka 1989, McCormack 1976.

3 Bethe 1967, Langridge-Noti 1996, Simonsuuri 1986, 1999.

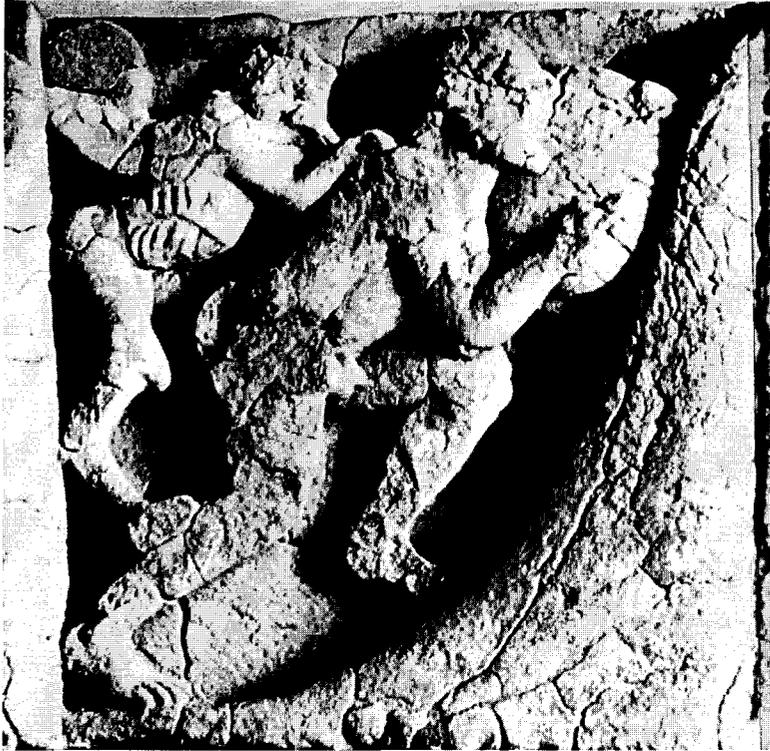


Fig. 1. Sisyphos rolling the stone, with Erinyes (?), the oldest pictorial representation of Sisyphos. Focē de Sele, metope of the Heraion (the Temple of Hera). Ca. 560-550 BC Paestum Museum

The story of the myth of Sisyphos, an Aeolian king, is preserved in its fullest form in the Renaissance mythographer Natalis Comes (*Mythologiae* 1551, 1567), who collects the main variants and tries to tie them together, claiming thus to reveal the ‘occult secrets’ of the tale;⁴ however, his account draws on a great number of ancient sources such as Homer, Apollodorus, Hyginus, Fulgentius, which are various and often contradictory, and, in addition, dating from vastly different periods, from ca. sixth century BC to ca. fifth century AD.

The oldest extant source is Homer, an overwhelmingly important authority in the ancient world. The *Iliad* (*Il.* 6.152-55) mentions Sisyphos of Ephyra (former name of Corinth, or the area in the Argolid), descendant of Aiolos (Αἰολίδης, *Il.* 6.154), the mythical king of the winds whose story is narrated in the *Odyssey* (*Od.* 10.179). He is said to be the father of Glaukos and grandfather of Bellerophon. We thus find Sisyphos in a kind of succession myth, as the *Iliad* associates him with the

4 Conti 1588:lib.1, cap.1. .

heroes of the Trojan war, and gives him the epithet κέρδιστος ἀνδρῶν (*Il.* 6.153), ‘that sharpest of all men’ (tr. Lattimore). Pindar in the 13th *Olympian Ode* also uses myth as history in giving a more profound corroboration for the victory of Xenophon of Corinth: Sisyphos was ὡς θεόν: ‘godlike’ and πυκνότατον παλάμαις: ‘cleverest in crafts’ (*Ol.* 13.53). There are references to Sisyphos’ cunning also in Theognis (Thgn. 702-12) and in a fragment of Hesiod’s *Catalogue of Women* (*Cat.* fr.10.43a.).

Then added to this praise, Sisyphos is also an inhabitant of the Underworld. There is no mention how Sisyphos got there in Homer. The *Odyssey* relates the story of the punishment of Sisyphos in the Nekyia-sequence, in which Odysseus visits the Underworld.⁵ Odysseus sees Sisyphos, ‘suffering strong pains,’ in *Od.* 11.593-600. Homer gives the myth a highly stylised literary treatment. He describes Sisyphos in the company of Orion (*Od.* 11.572-75), Tityos and Tantalos, the legendary offenders in the Underworld, and rather petty criminals, compared to Sisyphos.⁶

The reference to the punishment of Sisyphos in a fragment of Alcaeus (ca. 612-596 BC) is likely to be earlier than the one in the *Odyssey*: in a drinking song Alcaeus mentions Sisyphos, an Aeolian king, having gone to Hades twice, ‘for all his cunning’ (Alc. fr. 38A LP)—in this context a laudation. Pherekydes of Athens, the historian (first half of 5th century BC), gives some reasons for the punishment: first, because Sisyphos revealed to Asopos that Zeus had raped his daughter, Aigina, and secondly, because Sisyphos defeated death twice. When Sisyphos finally died, his punishment was to roll the stone in Hades so that he would not escape again. (*FGrH* 3, fr.119).

It is the passage in the *Odyssey*, admittedly, that has been the focus of attention in the very scarce scholarly literature on Sisyphos. No full-length study exists, and the only two articles devoted to Sisyphos, namely, by Samuel Reinach (1903) and by Christiana Sourvinou-Inwood (1986) are separated by almost a century in time and intention. I shall discuss these later.

In the *Odyssey*, Odysseus encounters three convicts guarded by Minos in Hades: Tityos, Tantalos and Sisyphos. We also know of a lost illustration of this passage by Polygnotos, the wall-painting on the walls of a *lesche* (possibly a club-room) in Delphoi, dating from the 5th century BC, as described in lengthy detail by Pausanias in the 2nd century AD (10.31.10). There, however, only Sisyphos and Tantalos are mentioned. James Frazer in his commentary to Pausanias associates Sisyphos with ‘the legendary history of Corinth,’ with its three distinct strains of

5 The passage is considered a later than early 6th century interpolation. Wilamowitz-Moellendorff’s attribution of it to Orphic sources (1884) has since been rejected: Apthorp 1980.

6 Tityos, present in Homer, is replaced by Ixion, and sometimes the Danaids: Oakley 1995:781-87.

settlers, the Ionians, the Aeolians and the Phoenicians. Sisyphos, son of Aeolus, was a mythical representative of the Aeolians.

Thus it is evident that Corinth, 'Ephyra,' and its location have something to do with the punishment as well. Modern excavations in Corinth by the American School, under the direction of Carl Blegen in the 1930's have confirmed the existence of fortification walls from about 1200 BC, but which were left unfinished at the time when the decisive invasions by the Dorians took place. The excavations (with Pausanias as an initial guide) have also uncovered inscriptions on a piece of marble, bearing the name of Sisyphos, in Greek letters of the Roman period.⁷

The idea of the Acrocorinth is first presented by the French archaeologist Samuel Reinach, in what has remained the only archaeological study of Sisyphos. The article is a highly interesting example of positivist erudition as well as Euhemerism.⁸ Reinach argues that Sisyphos was a real, historical character—as Pausanias tells us—who originated in the Corinthian Isthmus, who was founder of the Isthmian games—as Pausanias also tells—and the master-builder of the Acrocorinth. Therefore, according to Reinach's theory, myths are mutilated history, and Sisyphos in Hades figuratively rolls the colossal stone towards the peak of the Acrocorinth. In this ritualistic theory of myth, the meaning of the Sisyphos myth becomes a representation of the astonishingly difficult task which was attributed to Sisyphos.

But we must investigate further. Reinach's approach to myth presupposes from the outset that a historical base exists; it makes an hypothesis into a fact, and denies, moreover, the essential feature of mythical narratives, that is, their power as symbols and their capacity to generate new meanings in historically unrelated contexts.⁹

II

The idea of the two incompatible orders, the human and the divine, the world of limit and of no limit, are fully explored in the myth of Sisyphos.

Sisyphos is reported (by Apollodorus, Pausanias and Hyginus) to have deserved his punishment of futile toil for having revealed the secrets of the gods and for having outwitted Thanatos by breaking his promise to return to the Underworld. In addition, he challenged natural order by building the Acrocorinth. The crimes of Sisyphos were those of breaking the taboo and involved *hubris*, and the ensuing punishment was the most horrendous, manual labour without result.

7 Blegen 1930:20-28.

8 Reinach 1903.

9 Detienne 1981, Blumenberg 1971, Burkert 1980.



Fig. 2. Sisyphos(?) wearing chitoniskos, chlamys, sandals and pilos, and holding a horn, steps up to lean over a pithos in the ground. Goats on either side. Above Poseidon, Amphitrite, Nereus, Asopos, Hades and Pan. Bell-crater H 5982 by the Meleager painter, ca. 390 BC Martin von Wagner-Museum der Universität Würzburg (Photo: K. Öhrlein, with permission)

However, it must also be seen as reflecting the nature of the crimes. At this point I want to refer to the article by Christiane Sourvinou-Inwood, 'Crime and Punishment: Tityos, Tantalos and Sisyphos in *Odyssey* 11' (1987), being the only recent investigation of the theme.¹⁰ Concentrating on the Homeric passage (*Od.* 11.593-600), the article distinguishes the mytheme of Sisyphian cunning vis-à-vis Hades and thus conquering Thanatos. Sourvinou-Inwood analyses the implications of this ruse (*i.e.* of omitting burial) in pre-fifth-century context, thus separating it from the later beliefs concerning a shade or a spirit returning among the living with demands of recompense.¹¹ Thus in her analysis, too, the transgression of the cosmic order is the reason for the punishment. But she focuses only on the violation of the natural law of death and ignores the other aspects of transgression which are equally present in the mythographical tradition and reflect the ensuing

¹⁰ Sourvinou-Inwood 1986, and 1991:16-17.

¹¹ Sourvinou-Inwood 1986:50f.

punishment. She interprets the myth, therefore, as a representation of the movement of ascending to the world of the living and descending to the world of the dead, which is reproduced in the reciprocating, up-and-down motion of Sisyphos' stone.¹² The stone as a headstone maybe? However, this interpretation presents a problem, ingenious though it is. The Homeric passage, as has been pointed out, is an interpolation, maybe an early Hellenistic one, and the symbolic projection cannot be but a partial answer to a genuinely polysemic myth.

The polysemic nature of the Sisyphos myth is attested by the literary tradition. Ancient literature teems with references to Sisyphos; his name is proverbial by early classical times, yielding new word formations, verbs and nouns. Sisyphos is the subject of numerous satyr plays; Aeschylus deals with Sisyphos in the Prometheus cycle. The satyr play *Δραπέτης* (Runaway), deals with Sisyphos escaping Death, and the play *Πετροκυλιστής* (Stone Roller), focuses on Sisyphos's punishment in Hades. Sophocles and Euripides and other playwrights also have written plays on Sisyphos, but all are lost.

What is interesting is the fact that in ancient literature the ambiguity of the character of Sisyphos is often used as a stylistic device. He is both the wise one and the trickster who has conquered Thanatos. No wonder Socrates wanted to see him after his death, as Plato mentions at the end of the *Apology* (41a-42a.), drawing on the various traditions concerning afterlife. In the Homeric conception of the underworld, Odysseus sees only the most famous Greek heroes, Sisyphos among them.¹³ Plato evidently thought that Socrates's death sentence was unjust, and he gave Socrates a chance to remember a proverbial hero, not unlike himself, who had outwitted Thanatos. Sisyphos is thus both the tragic hero and an anti-tragic character, since he overthrows death, and to escape death was considered so unnatural that it was ridiculous. Thus the ritualistic base of tragic feeling inherent to early Greek conceptions of the afterlife was destroyed.

From the fragments of evidence from plays, histories, commentaries we learn the following:

- a) as Sisyphos made known to Asopos that Zeus had carried off and raped the daughter of Asopos, Aigina;
- b) the gods sent Death, Thanatos, to conquer him;
- c) but Sisyphos overcame Death, by tying him, so that men stopped dying, until Ares, the god of war, came to rescue Thanatos;
- d) but as Sisyphos was dying, the second time, he asked his wife Merope to omit his funeral rites so that he was able to persuade Hades, the ruler of the Underworld, to go back to earth;

12 *Ibid.*:52.

13 Brenk 1975, and 1976.

e) when Sisyphos came back to the world of the living, he did not return to Hades until Hermes summoned him and took him down.

In addition, we have the following mythemes:

f) Sisyphos stole the cattle of Autolykos, another master rogue and the grandfather of Odysseus;

g) Sisyphos, and not Laertes, was the father of Odysseus;

h) Sisyphos built fortifications.

The great number of different derivations given for Sisyphos establish the myth as organic and universal from the very earliest times. Still, why such a horrible punishment? We are dealing with the mechanism of personification which also operates in folktales. By the early fourth century, there are two types of qualities associated with Sisyphos. One concerns the ingenuity and benefactions of a cultural hero; the other has to do with his crime and punishment. The parallel myths are, I suggest, Prometheus, Tantalos and Odysseus. Tantalos had to support a stone, a crag of Mount Sipylus, Prometheus was tied to one. The stone is the implement of Sisyphos, the builder, and as it rolls down the completion of the task is forever frustrated.¹⁴ The word used to designate the weight of Sisyphos's stone is *κραταιΐς* (Hom. *Od.* 11.597), a *hapax legomenon*, but it appears in the *Odyssey* as a proper name for the mighty mother of the sea monster Scylla (Hom. *Od.* 12.124-25) whom Odysseus had to conquer.

The Homeric passage can best be seen within the context of the lengthy string of tales that Odysseus tells to his audience, the Phaeacians. As Segal (1968) and Vidal-Naquet (1983) have pointed out, these sea-faring people, Phaeacians, hold a strategic place between the two worlds of reality and fantasy.¹⁵ The story of the entry to the underworld is, moreover, a portrayal of the religious imagination of the early Greeks. Conceptions about afterlife were less explicit and less uniform than those about gods, and even Thanatos is not a fully developed figure in Homer.¹⁶ Yet, Homer emphasises the geography of Death, by describing the location of literal recompense—reward or punishment—and how to get there: by telling a story.

The story to be told, like the others connected with the Sisyphian cycle, has a philosophical as well as a fantastical content. Within the poetic space that reveals the myth of the human condition even in antiquity, the narrative offers a wide range of interpretation. In this story, the afterlife in Hades is presented as a

14 The Homeric motifs are found in folktales from all parts of the world, namely 1) unremitting torture as punishment, 2) revealing the secrets of a god, 3) magic object keeps falling down, Stith Thompson: *Motif-Index of Folk Literature*. Copenhagen 1957, Sisyphos: C420; C51.4; D1649.1; Q500-01.

15 Segal 1968:321-42; Vidal-Naquet 1983:46f.

16 Vermeule 1979:36.

straightforward, logical continuation of life on earth. There is an eyewitness, Odysseus, who observes the gruesome details without any moral comment and as if reporting a well-known tale. Although the reasons for the punishment of Sisyphos are not mentioned in the passage of the *Odyssey*, the punishment confirms its foundation in the total religious system of archaic Greece. As Persephone is childless, sterile, so the life in Hades is vain, without substance.

In Hellenistic and Roman literature, the religious and ritual base of the Sisyphos myth grows less significant but we still have the basic elements of the story. The symbolism of Sisyphos' crime and punishment becomes explicit for the first time in Lucretius. The passage (3.998-1000) reads as follows:

*nam petere imperium quod inanest nec datur umquam
atque in eo semper durum sufferre laborem,
hoc est adverso nixantem trudere monte
saxum ...*

Lucretius, in line with the allegorical interpretative tradition, decodes the moral content, which he then presents as the real meaning of the myth. The stone and the mountain top have a negative signification, they represent the futility of human effort. The banality of the desire that is never satisfied is emphasised rather than *pot-hos*, transcendence of desire. In Dante, too (*Inferno* 7.25-35) the crime and its punishment are equally banal. The idea that such an existence is vain, pointless, that Sisyphos is an 'imago hominis mundani' (Jacobus Masenius, 1650) will remain the standard interpretation of the myth of Sisyphos in the Renaissance and Baroque literatures, in Boccaccio, Ronsard, Opitz, Gryphius, and through the eighteenth century. Life and death are linked in continuity.

III

At what point did the tale become a myth, a mythical tale? We can observe some of its most frequent versions, the repetitions and the variations that have developed around the individual mythemes. That the myth tells, very early on, about techniques of dealing with desire, involving frustration, imperfection and achievement, seems to me to be a plausible frame of interpretation, and is confirmed by the fact that it is related to the sea-faring people, the Corinthians (Ephyreans) and to their efforts to conquer the primal forces of nature.

The connection with the myth of Aiolos is also significant (Hom. *Od.* 10.1-79) as the Aiolos cycle refers to the various techniques of magic and skill known to seafarers who combat nature for their living and, as the name of Aiolos emphasises, the mutability of winds and fortunes.

Moreover, in the context of Corinth, the element of water and its mastery intervenes in strategical points. Corinth is a double sea town, on an isthmus between the Saronic Gulf and the Corinthian Gulf—it borders on the Argolid, Boeotia, and

Phokis. The river god Asopos dedicates a spring to Sisyphos, in gratitude for his revelation concerning divine misdemeanours; the spring is named Peirene by Pausanias, but its mythical location seemed to have been much higher up than the present one in the centre of the city. Ino, who became associated with Sisyphos by marrying Athamas, his brother, was transformed into a marine divinity together with her son Melikertes, whom Sisyphos buried and honoured by founding the Isthmian games. The wife of Sisyphos was Merope, a Pleiad, thus being associated with the rainy season and the beginning of the sailing season as the constellation of the Pleiads rose. Within this context, too, the punishment of Sisyphos in dusty hell shows the story-teller's perfect sense of irony.

In the Homeric narrative, the myth of Aiolos operates on a level that also relates it to the individual psyche and its temperamental variability in the face of the unknown. The individual (internal) and the cosmological (external) levels are perfectly blended in the myth of Aiolos; and although the Homeric account of Sisyphos is very much shorter, it crystallises in a similar way the individual (internal) and the cultural (external) essence of a polysemic myth. The two myths therefore narrate, in a broad manner, the transition from nature to culture, from magic to science.

In the modern world imbued with technology, when all implements and objects for achieving certain ends become invested with special powers, the frustration of these ends, often material and sexual in nature, becomes similarly magnified, blown out of proportion. Jean Brun has claimed that Sisyphos is condemned to roll the stone, which is nothing other than himself.¹⁷ In the psychoanalytic interpretations—which to my mind go back to the allegorico-ethical interpretations practised by the Stoics—this notion is taken for granted.¹⁸

The modern conflict between experience of infinity and of limit and imperfection has been expressed in the art of Wolfgang Mattheuer (1970-1975), Rudolf Hoflehner (1966), Enzo Cucchi (1980-82) and Olaf Christiansen (1964), who have used the Sisyphos theme. The myth had an appeal for Marx, who frequently refers to 'Sisyphusarbeit der Akkumulation' when talking about Austrian economy or the Franco-German wars. Sisyphos again becomes a cultural hero. Marx's Sisyphos-worker submerged by the capitalist means of production is a cultural hero type; and so is the Nietzschean liberator of men from collective madness, the Sisyphos of the German writer Georg Strähler. Heiner Müller, in *Traktor* (1955/61, performed 1974) reverses the heroic cycle—his 'Traktoristin' is engaged in a meaningless activity. In the DDR the historical notion of continuously productive labour

17 Brun 1981.

18 Bunker 1953, Caldwell 1990.

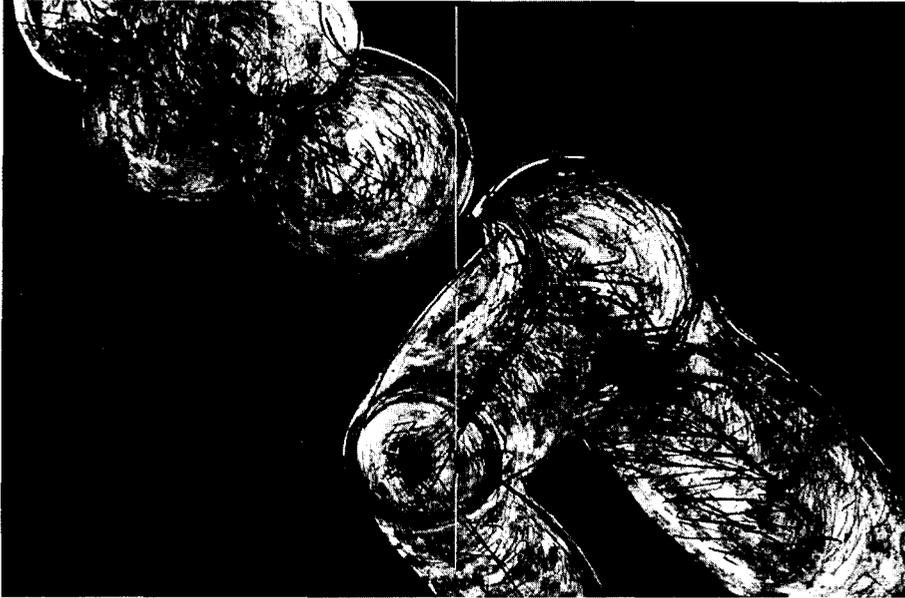


Fig. 3. Rudolf Hoflehner, 'Sisyphos kämpft,' in *Sisyphos-Hommage à Albert Camus*. Stuttgart 1966 (with permission)

being the key to human self-realisation was frequently illustrated (and used by artists with veiled irony) by the figure of Sisyphos.¹⁹

Camus, turning back to Homer and sweeping away centuries of interpretation and mythographical arachnomachy, defines a new heroic concept that is both universal and strictly bound to its time. For Camus, as for many existentialist poets and philosophers in France, Sisyphos is a symbol of the tormented, creative man. Camus' interpretation in *Le Mythe de Sisyphe* (1942), of which the titular short essay is one part, fully illustrates the existentialist principle that man has a capacity and responsibility to create his own world, and therefore that human existence is nothing other than this permanent creation where death and anguish form inseparable experiences.²⁰

Camus' idea that Sisyphos is a tragic hero, because he is aware ('conscient') of his situation relates his interpretation to the versions in early Greek literature where the knowledge and intelligence of Sisyphos were held in esteem. But Camus further emphasises that the only possible life is the conscious life of revolt, the ab-

19 Bernhardt 1983.

20 Camus 1981, Butor 1968.

surd life. The revolt lodges in a series of repetitive actions, a series of present moments which are linked together in a chain of similar situations.

The absurd is the choice where there is no choice. It is illustrated in the lives of four human types: Don Juan, the Actor, the Conqueror, and the Artist. Sisyphos is the one myth represented in ancient Greek thought which encompasses all these types. Camus therefore sees Sisyphos as a kind of prefiguration of the absurd hero, of the 'sensibilité absurde' which he studied also in *L'Étranger* (1941).

Camus' interpretation of the myth of Sisyphos is illuminating in the way it demonstrates the efficacy of misreading and the value of misreading for the survival of myths. Although the tragic hero works within the limits of time and space he can, according to Camus, both overcome and glorify the absurdity of his existence through voluntary and persistent effort. The conclusion steers away even more significantly from the matrix of ancient thought: 'La lutte elle-même vers les sommets suffit à remplir un cœur d'homme. Il faut imaginer Sisyphe heureux' (1981). This idea would have been inconceivable in the ancient world where the notion of retribution was inseparable from the conception of the tragic. It would have been inconceivable also from the point of view of the mythographical tradition, where Sisyphos represented a human being incapable of 'bonheur' or 'tranquillité.' We have here more than a new reading of a myth; it is, conclusively, an addition, a modern myth.

A historical moment and a cultural situation can thus redistribute the mythical content in novel ways. Myth appears to be a type of narrative that touches on several, not just one, of the contents of a given experience—individual, cultural, social, historical and cosmological. Given the differences between written and oral myths, any attempt to explain them through a reductionist, single frame of reference is doomed to failure. However, singular, imaginative interpretations may reveal certain specific aspects of myth, which even the most minute historical analysis may fail to capture, and thus help us to understand myth's complex theory of origins. As we go back to modern works, we should remember that the ancient myth was maybe in its conception a modern text once, a fragment of a story that was never completed.

Some final remarks. Within the value system of early Greek civilisation, it is highly probable that the type of the Sisyphos tale would end with the punishment of the hero. The same type is portrayed in the myths of Tantalos and Prometheus. The myth of Oidipous also ends with the destruction of the hero (his blindness), but finally the gods absolve him. His quest was for the knowledge that relates to power (to his identity) and he was granted that knowledge. In terms of the final end to the succession myth, however, the myth ends not only in blindness but in the total annihilation of his line.

The structure of the Sisyphos tale indicates that the protagonist suffered a similar fate. Sisyphos' quest was for the knowledge that relates to freedom, and more specifically to the freedom to reverse the natural order, to transgress the limits, and he was granted that knowledge—however, his story ended in the city of dust, in Hades.

There seem to be cognitive functions in myths, even though it may not be evident at first, as the cognition is buried under the disguise of metaphoric and polysemic language (as in poetry), as well as fragmentation of meaning in referentiality and intertextuality. Allusion and intertextuality are powerful mechanisms of literary tradition, and may in part obscure—and have obscured—from us the more fundamental nature of myths. Tradition can carry plenty that is simply false, and there is such a mechanism as a respect for tradition, too, that distorts the understanding of myths, and renders them into empty symbols.

But myths exist also as concretisations, not only as allusions. It is precisely because of their power to act as charts of thought that Greek myths have repeatedly been under attack in theological, ideological and philosophical controversies throughout the centuries. Thus we have in myth a verbal form that transgresses the notion of literature, a verbal form that is like a ritual and like a poetic text but is neither. What it resembles most closely, is a kind of code that acts as an instrument of self-understanding in culture.

In both archaic and modern societies, to the extent that myths are believed, they can be dangerous symbols which have the capacity of putting cultural values and cultural rules in jeopardy—since they also have the function of maintaining those values, rather in the way taboos do, dealing with the dangerous ground between human and divine.

With regard to the Sisyphos myth, it is interesting to observe, however, in what ways the patterns of interpretation remain constant even in widely different cultures and in different times. It seems that myth is not so much universal, as it is a symbol or a sign that can provide a unity of thought through centuries, manifesting its non-historical character in new historical contexts.

If, however, we want to presuppose that there is such a thing as an original myth, we would encounter difficulties. The great variability of local conditions, incidental occurrences, conscious elaboration, *i.e.* individual contribution, and a particular cultural framework, *i.e.* social contribution, would amount to such a mass of unpredictable features that it would be useless to deduce the original myth from them. We could, instead, think of 'mythical thinking,' recalling Lévi-Strauss' famous formula. Similarities in the myths of geographically and chronologically distant cultures could be seen, rather, as an indication of the fact that the number of stories is not that great. This is, paradoxically, an exciting prospect for creative

arts. Instead of looking into the origin of a myth, we might, as it were, look into myths that are perpetually in their origin.

The most judicious way therefore is to interpret the series of mythical tales that deal with the character of Sisyphos as a group of stories emphasising the fragility of human desire and the philosophical notion of irreversibility. They attempt to redefine such concepts both in the natural world with its natural laws of dying and in the ethical questions that have to do with human existence. This is in no way in conflict with the fact that the name is closely associated with the sea-faring Corinthians and their complex population history going back to Neolithic and early Helladic times.

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