

Katabasis

Works exist in their own opacity. They are neither abstract nor figurative. Ambiguity comes from the liminal space of being at the borders of sleep and awakening. It is filmy, murky, thick, hazy, obfuscated, veiled; an endlessness without conclusion. A story with no exit.

Maya Balcioglu

We begin with what is in front of us. First principles. As babies we take in information and start to build a world that makes sense. Every day, every hour, is punctuated by moments of revelation. These can strike us with wonder -- what awesome capacity we have! -- or they can terrify and knock the breath out of us, bringing an end to the confidence we once had. We sink back and retreat, bearing the marks of what we have felt and seen, casting to one side what went before, assimilating and forgetting the violent destruction of our former selves. Eventually we start out on a new journey, a new search.

This tripartite process -- hopeful, confident progress; revelation/destruction; return and forgetting -- is a story with no exit. It is the task of art to perform violence, to rupture, and reveal. But the act of violence must be contained and enclosed; first by hope, then by oblivion.

A *katabasis* consists of a journey down to the underworld, to a realm that is neither like heaven nor hell. Those undertaking this journey go as seekers of love or truth, and the path is not smooth. There is, usually, a return. The collection of ancient Greek religious practices known as 'mystery cult' made a ritual form of a kind of *katabasis*. A journey down, or inside, or elsewhere; the revelation of 'mysteries'; and a return and reintegration of the initiate or journeyer into their community. They returned to their life before, but they may not have been the same as they were.

We do not know what it was like to experience the rituals of 'mystery cult'. It was forbidden to talk about what exactly went on as part of the ritual.

*Who is in the road? Who is in the road? Who
Is in the palace? Let everyone come out,
Keeping their tongues mute in holy silence.*

Euripides *Bacchae* 68-70

Words could not be used to describe what occurred; image, feeling, and memory provided the records while the initiates lived. After that, silence. But silence paired with imagination can be eloquent. *Rough, rigid fibres. Smooth, stiff skin. Frayed, hair-like remnants. Faded, soft fabric. Ash. Blood.*

Visiting an oracle was not so much an initiation, but it shared some components of ancient Greek cult experience. Along with the usual washing, sacrificing, waiting, it was a journey in search of answers, a moment of revelation, and then the journey home.

Those who came to consult the oracle at Delphi would not meet the Pythia, the priestess of Apollo, face to face. We do not know for certain what happened in the inner sanctum. However, some believe that she gave the basic elements of image and mood, fragments of visions brought on by some kind of trance. This was then honed and fine-tuned into poetic but purposely ambiguous statements by a specific group of the priests of Apollo, the

interpreters (*prophetai*). We see the same process here in the work of the artist; beginning with impulse and basic materials, then fine-tuning the work into riddling, humorous, ambiguous works.

*Loosen not the proffered foot of the wineskin...
Until you return to hearth and home*

Euripides *Medea* 679-81

If you attack the Persians, you will destroy a great empire

Herodotus *Histories* 1.54

Love of money and nothing else will ruin Sparta.

Plutarch *Moralia* 239

Of course, many famous supplicants to the Delphic oracle only realised too late the true meaning of what they had been told. Sometimes the meaning was all too clear, but it was unbearable. Held poised at the moment of revelation, they come undone. Or, suddenly feeling illiterate and ignorant they seek again for comfort, returning to where they started and vigorously affirming what they already thought they knew.

I.

ἡ ἀρχή (*hê archê*) -

the beginning, the origin
a first principle
an origin of a curve
a sum, a total
power, empire

The journey begins with something simple.

A step. A foot. A stitch. A drop of dye.

The infinite hope of the beginning of a journey or search can feel fantastic, heady, certain. It is so much easier to talk about this part of the story. Activity feels purposeful. We can look over our shoulder and see our footprints, the miles we have come, the things we have made, the things we have left behind. There is a potency in our certainty of potential. Progress is being made.

Slowly we start to find familiar signs and habits. We are learning. The dots join up. Patterns and schemes click into place. New words and new languages of environment, colour, behaviour, shape, matter, and mood become legible.

Learning gives way to a sense of mastery. Even if we are not already-knowing, then we believe we are soon-to-know. Now we are able to move upwards from our foundations. We can more actively organise the landscape that meets us. The world of then and the world of now becomes clearer.

Scholars today still look back to the 'Classical' period (around 480 to 323 BCE) of Athenian history with awe. It was during this time that Athens organised itself, moving away from its 'archaic', monarchical structure and towards an imagined future of democratic equality. The journey to a fairer, more 'civilised' political structure brought order and permanence in the form of established temples, new courts of justice, laws and democratic decrees inscribed on stone. The *stoichedon* was preferred for writing down these decrees; letters neatly arranged in a grid without spaces or punctuation.

W	H	A	T	G
O	E	S	O	N
F	O	U	R	L
E	G	S	I	N
T	H	E	M	O
R	N	I	N	G
T	W	O	L	E
G	S	A	T	M
I	D	D	A	Y
A	N	D	T	H
R	E	E	L	E
G	S	I	N	T
H	E	E	V	E
N	I	N	G	

Some Greek myths seem to chart an arc of progress and 'civilisation'. Chthonic deities are overpowered and succumb to the might and threats of newer gods -- Zeus and Apollo above all. The natural world still stayed allied with these older, often female, deities; the furies and the snakes that were born of blood. They were absorbed and controlled through ritual and the occasional sacrifice. Even time was reshaped by the twin governing powers of culture and politics. As expressed in art, theatre, history, and poetry, time became linear, and the circularity of seasonal, aristocratic time was shunned. Competition in society encouraged Athenians to prize whatever was new and seemingly innovative. Even amid political setbacks, energy and hope propelled the city forward. A sense of mastery transformed into actual mastery and the power of empire.

The natural materials of plant and skin, papyrus and, later, parchment were utilised in the pursuit of progress and subjected to the scribe and his ink pot. The wild oral traditions of epic poems like the *Odyssey* were made (relatively) stable through the process of writing them down, fixing them in ink. Versions of the epics that do not conform to the standard version of the text are still called 'wild' texts by scholars. Plays that had been circulating and changing, added to, or reshaped for new performances and reperformances across the Mediterranean and as far as Olbia on the Black Sea, were disciplined into a textual form and used by the canny politician Lycurgus to shore up Athens' own cultural capital.

Generations of students and scholars have felt invigorated by piecing together this journey of progress, constituting themselves and a sense of their own potential in the process. The ancient and modern worlds have been and still are intimately connected, the one shaping and giving energy to the other. The means of communion? Earth for archaeologists and stone for epigraphists. But for many of us, our ancient and modern selves have come into being through the minute study of works contained on papyrus and parchment. We began our own

journeys of discovery to find the truth in antiquity through the acquisition of skills and mastery that allows us to read these texts. This journey is one that can be just as thrilling.

The work of decipherment and publication continues and will continue: a labour of love as well as a labour of organisation. There is always the excitement of the chase. Open a box of unpublished papyri, and you never know what you may find... Your new papyrus may offer you unknown Greek poetry; it may offer unique evidence for the inflation of donkey-prices at the height of the Roman Empire.¹

A student's progress in deciphering the fragments of papyrus in ever more novel ways goes hand in hand with the ancient Athenian's pursuit of progress.

The drop of dye makes its way in fits and starts. It lengthens, stretches. It leaves a trail.

Do we need to be reminded of the smooth and rough violence that accompanies such progress? That which is subdued in the pursuit of a goal does not disappear. Even as Athens seethed with progress and its democratic project, the myths and stories celebrated in its festivals pointed to this tragic irony, the illusory lure of leaving chaos, illiteracy, and ignorance behind. The exhilarating journey towards truth, or desire (or both) does not quite silence a certainty; that ignorance and chaos endure.

*

Oedipus sets out on a journey. He is a young man and filled with a restless energy. From a young age he has had to contend with a devastating injury to his feet. The difficulty he must have had walking seems to have spurred him on with greater drive for discovery, attempting to transcend his corporeal limitations and seek for greater knowledge. A drunk man at a party had told him his father is not his biological father. His parents deny it. He is going to the oracle at Delphi to ask for an answer.

Oedipus sets out on a journey. He has been 'cheated' by the Delphic oracle of an answer about his parentage. Instead he has been presented with a revelation that he will have sex with his mother and murder his father. Afraid of enacting such a terrible deed and hoping to avoid the menacing prophecy, he does not return to Corinth, his home until now, but takes a different path away from Delphi, away from Corinth, towards Thebes.

Oedipus in both these journeys has a false sense of moving forward to a specific goal, of progress in knowing himself better. With each journey he has a sense of his past and a sense of where he will get to. He trusts in his innate intelligence and his ability to learn. At Thebes he conducts a rigorous investigation into who murdered their former king, Laius. He sets out his lines of enquiry. More and more loose threads begin to emerge; who was the man Oedipus himself struck down at a place where three roads meet? Who was responsible for the awful mutilation of a baby's feet? Who rescued that baby, left exposed on a mountainside? And who took the child into their home? He cross-examines his witnesses one after another, and the threads begin to coalesce, to overlap and mingle, to tie together in a neat arrangement. The truth has been waiting all along, an old fire smouldering behind each line and question. We can see the dark spread of ash, but he cannot.

Poor feet of Oedipus.

¹ From *City of the Sharp-Nosed Fish* by Peter Parsons.

Just as important in this myth is the figure of Jocasta. Her beginning is earlier in an act of creation, the bearing and birth of Oedipus himself. This has been forbidden by the Delphic Oracle but brought about anyway, such is her husband Laius' drunken commitment to propagate the family line. Her child is taken from her and she must comply with both the prophecy and her husband's later attempts to leave his mistake in the past and move them forward to a new future. The violence of moving on leaves its traces.

The drop of dye has travelled its course and is meeting its moment of resistance. Gravity has pulled it this far. It stops and is held, the surface of the droplet taut, suspended, held by a meniscus of exquisite fragility. We are about to begin act two.

II.

τελέω (*teleo*)

I fulfill, accomplish

I bring to an end

I pay what is owed

I become an initiate, perform sacred rites

I die

or

Revelation/Destruction

A surfeit of insight pools, like ink in the crevasses of a papyrus' fibres. It sends glints and mischievous shards of light back out, blinding us.

It is harder to write about this bit.

Semele, youthful and pregnant with a new god, was eager to see her rapist, Zeus. He consented, but showed himself, at his wife Hera's behest, in the form of a thunderbolt. When Dionysus, her son, returns home to Thebes, he visits the place of revelation.

I see here by the palace the tomb of my lightning-slain mother and the ruins of her house, smouldering with the still-living flames of Zeus's fire: thus Hera's violence against my mother lives on forever.

Euripides *Bacchae* 6-9

Psyche, a soul tormented by not knowing who her husband was nor who came to her bed each night, schemed to discover who this figure was. She hides a lamp, lets the light blaze up. The moment she sees him, Love himself, she loses him and is lost.

Agave, mother of Pentheus, and aunt of the god Dionysus, has accomplished a violent, terrifying, and awesome act of dismemberment. She holds the head of own son in her hands, believing it to be the head of a lion that she has hunted and killed on the mountainside. Her ecstasy dissipates and as true sight and understanding floods in, she recognises what she has destroyed.

Oedipus at last recognises his own murderous self and immediately must put out his own eyes.

*...he extracted the long golden pins
which fixed her robes; and then he lifted them
and stabbed them in the sockets of his eyes.
And as he did, he cried that they should see no more
the sort of evils he had suffered and had done,
but that in future they should stare in darkness
at the ones that they should not have seen,
and fail to know those that he'd longed for.*

Sophocles *Oedipus Tyrannus* 1268-74

The Aristotelian idea of 'catharsis' would seem to provide a neat framework for understanding the chaos and wild justice of Greek myth and Greek tragedy. At the moment of revelation, hapless humans are burned, grimly cleansed of the pollution that is life. Audiences are not shown the violent acts directly, but are told of what has happened off stage and left to imagine the way the sharp point of gold pierced the eye's vitreous body or the double-edged sword cut through skin and flesh with a satisfying squelch. In the audience we are meant to be cleansed of our fears, our own near-misses -- how close we were to seeing true evil! But the story has ended, the play is over, and we are safe. We have been purified of the true evil we have been shown.

But Aristotle is forcing us into act three already. To say that we are cleansed and purified is to pack away the truths of the revelation. To reconstitute our dismembered selves. To forget what we have seen.

III.

Disowning Knowledge

Forgetting is a release. A release from tension and from the impossible burden of holding on to what we have seen.

Sophocles' last play, his *Oedipus at Colonus*, shows us an old man in search of his final resting place. His hollow eye sockets bear witness to the violent acts and self-destruction in his past. And yet, Oedipus is angry once more. He has built for himself a new, blameless history. *It was the pleasure of the gods... you could not find any fault to reproach me with...altogether ignorant of what I was doing and to whom I was doing it.*

We embrace our flabbiness and sink into comfort. We draw a blanket, faded and worn, a silent witness to what has happened, around us. The warmth it provides is only temporary, of course.

We do not achieve complete oblivion. Flashes of memory and of recognition remain. We leave signs for ourselves. A red thread back through the labyrinth. Crumbs on the path to be seen only by moonlight. The names of mythical figures are paradigms of nominative determinism. What must Jocasta have made of the man named 'Swollen Foot' (for this is what the name Oedipus means) when he arrived in Thebes? Would she remember her own son's feet, mutilated to assure immobility on the mountain side, or so they thought.

Just as is true in the pursuit of progress, violence attends the act of forgetting.

When Agamemnon returns home from Troy, he is welcomed by his wife Clytemnestra. She declares she is happy to see her husband. She makes no mention of how he sacrificed their daughter, Iphigenia, on a beach in Aulis. He slit the young girl's neck as an offering to the gods. Apparently it was the only way to secure good winds and safe passage to Troy and their war. Clytemnestra insists that he, the great conqueror of Troy, cannot possibly place his foot on the bare earth. Rather he must tread on the most precious of cloths they have in the house, fine fabrics dyed reddish-purple. This dye was created by intensive labour, crushing hundreds of thousands of mollusc shells to release the purple *murex* ink. Clytemnestra's invitation to her husband is to re-enact symbolically the destruction of his house and its riches, just as he had destroyed their greatest treasure, their daughter Iphigenia. Agamemnon shows no sign of remembering how he destroyed the wealth of his house before. He does not remember the kind of woman he married when he shoots off a put-down in response to her welcome address: *Your speech was like my absence. Too long.* However, keen to make his final return home, he agrees, reluctantly, to the request. With each step on the fabrics he suppresses the memory of that moment on the beach at Aulis, when he truly saw himself and what he was capable of. We, and Clytemnestra, know as he makes his way from chariot to his long-awaited bath, that he is a dead man walking.

These scraps of cloth want to be read. They laugh and taunt us, feeling our ambivalence at beginning another journey, another attempt to become literate in living. We know now what we might find down that path.

When you approached the sacred precinct of the oracle at Delphi, inscribed above an entrance way you could read the injunction 'know yourself' (*gnôthi seauton*). It's a nice idea. Just as is true in the pursuit of any knowledge it is a circular journey, replete with violence and one that is, ultimately, never complete. This is the story with no exit. We search, we suffer violence, we forget.

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Further Reading

Sophocles Oedipus the King and Other Tragedies. A new verse translation by Oliver Taplin
(Oxford World's Classics, 2015)

The Oresteia. Adapted by Rory Mullarkey from the original by Aeschylus (Methuen Drama, 2015)

Euripides Bakkhai. A new version by Anne Carson (New Directions, 2015)

Democracy. A life, Paul Cartledge (Oxford, 2016)

Disowning Knowledge, Stanley Cavell (Cambridge, 2003)

Suffering Under The Sun, Edith Hall (Oxford, 2010)

The Classical Debt: Greek Antiquity in an Era of Austerity, Johanna Hanink (Harvard, 2017)

City of Sharp-Nosed Fish. Greek Papyri Beneath the Egyptian Sand Reveal a Long-Lost World, Peter Parsons (Phoenix, 2007)