THE DEATHS OF SISYPHUS: STRUCTURAL ANALYSIS OF A CLASSICAL MYTH

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Abstract: As punishment for deceiving death, Sisyphus must endlessly roll a rock up a hill in Hades, only for it to roll back down. A structural analysis reveals the connections between the punishment and the crime, and demonstrates that the interpretation of myth resides in the operations of thought, not in particular contents.

Résumé: En punition de tromper la mort, Sisyphe doit rouler sans cesse un rocher au haut d'une colline aux enfers, seulement pour qu'il roule toujours en bas. Une analyse structurale révèle les rapports entre le châtiment et le crime et démontre que l'interprétation du mythe réside dans les opérations de la pensée, pas dans des contenus particuliers.

In Greek mythology, Sisyphus was the king of Corinth condemned by Zeus endlessly to roll a rock up a hill in Hades, only to have it roll back down. This image of the hill and rock has been central to Sisyphus "from Homer to Camus" (Halton 1975), and has given rise to many interpretations: historical, astronomical, sociological, philosophical, etc. It has even found a place in popular speech, being commonly used to signify a tiresome and seemingly endless task. Actually, as will be shown, the repetitive aspect of Sisyphus' punishment is much more important to these varying interpretations than is his suffering. I want to make it clear at the outset, however, that it is not my intention to evaluate these other theories but to pursue a line of inquiry of my own. What interests me about Sisyphus is the question: What did Sisyphus do to deserve the punishment he received, i.e., how does the punishment fit the crime? I wish to "demystify" the hill and rock by showing how they operate in a narrative context.

At the same time, the analysis has certain limitations. It makes no claims about the origins of Sisyphean lore, whether such origins lie in Greek history, psychology, or society. Perhaps more disturbing to scholars is the fact that the textual material is derivative in the sense that I do not return to

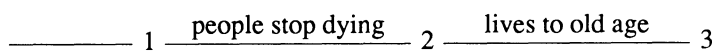
Anthropologica XXX (1988) 87-93

original Greek literary sources (although the material has been provided by classicists). Nevertheless, these weaknesses should not detract from the strengths of the analysis: it will be shown that the hill and rock are fully intelligible in terms of the story provided and that the methodology is applicable to other contexts and investigations of the problem.

It was apparently Sisyphus' crime to deceive death twice.[1] The following version is given by Grant and Hazel (1973:368):

> When Sisyphus founded Ephyra [Corinth], he established the Isthmian Games there in honour of Melicertes, whose body he had found and buried there; and he fortified the neighbouring high hill of the Acrocorinth as a citadel and watch-tower. One day he caught sight of Zeus as he was carrying off the river-nymph Aegina, daughter of the river-god Asopus and of Metope; Zeus took her to the isle of Oenone, where he ravished her. Asopus gave chase, and asked for information from Sisyphus, who promised to tell what he knew, in return for a spring of fresh water on the Acrocorinth, which Asopus immediately produced (the spring of Pirene). Zeus was furious at Sisyphus' disclosure, and punished him by sending Thanatos (Death) to take him off to the house of Hades. Sisyphus, a master of cunning, somehow tricked Thanatos, bound him, and threw him into a dungeon, with the result that mortals ceased to die. Then the gods, disturbed by this abnormal phenomenon, sent Ares to release Thanatos, who came looking for Sisyphus once again. However Sisyphus had given his wife, the Pleiad Merope, careful instructions what to do in such an eventuality: she left his body unburied and made none of the customary offerings to the dead. Thus Sisyphus tricked Hades, for that god was so angry at Merope's neglectfulness that he, or his wife Persephone, allowed Sisyphus to return to the upper world to punish Merope and make her bury his body. On returning to Corinth, however, Sisyphus did no such thing, but resumed his life and lived on to a great age in defiance of the gods of the Underworld. It was felt to be because of this impiety, quite as much as for his tale-telling about Zeus, that his shade was punished in Tartarus after his death. For he was forced to roll a great stone eternally up a hill; when he had nearly pushed it to the top, it always rolled down again to the bottom.

It is important to notice that the deaths are not equivalent. Sequentially, we are given the following arrangement:



However, it may be supposed that the first death comes to Sisyphus prematurely. Thus, the first death refers (postpositionally, as it were, in the diagram) to the too short life, the second to the too long life, and the third to old age. Furthermore, the development is not linear. Between a life which is too short (an early death) and a life which is too long (immortality), the myth settles on old age.

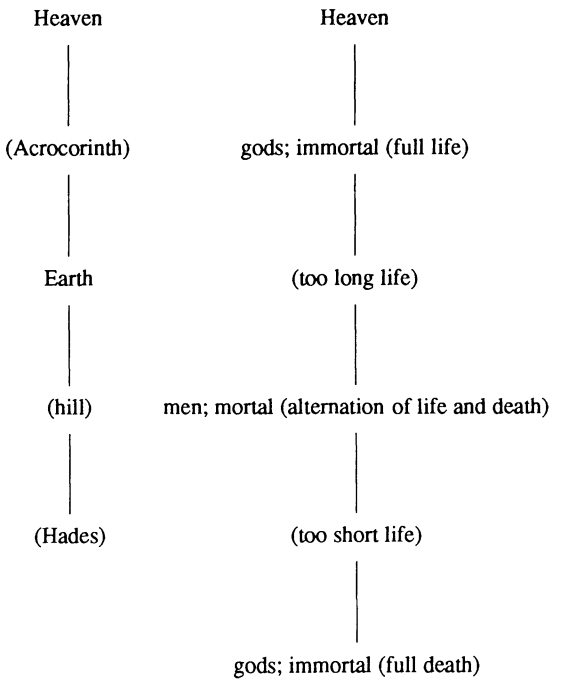
Now, unless one agrees with Harrison that Sisyphus' punishment "bears no relation to his supposed offence" (1908:609), it is necessary to show what the relationship is. In the first place, the hill in Tartarus has its counterpart in the Upperworld in the Acrocorinth (cf. Reinach 1903:171). It will be shown later to what extent these describe different distances. Nevertheless, one function of the image of the hill (and rock, which is rolled to the top and which rolls to the bottom) is to mediate the Upperworld and Underworld as high and low. The myth also establishes an equivalence between Upperworld and Underworld and life and death (this, too, will be modified later). In shifting from a spatial to a temporal order, rolling the rock up and down the hill can be understood as periodicity.[2] Of course, in terms of time (periodicity), the distances (up and down) are not equal. One direction can be defined as too short and the other as too long.

This is analogous to the problem of "limping" in the sense that Lévi-Strauss has given the term, originally in connection with Oedipus.[3] Whereas a normal gait expresses (as an anatomical signifier) the regular alternation of terms (such as life and death), limping shortens one side and lengthens the other (Lévi-Strauss 1974:464). For Lévi-Strauss, this implies that limping belies periodicity by, e.g., shortening death and lengthening life (see especially *ibid.*:461). The situation in Sisyphus is more complicated than this, but I introduce it in order to propose that rolling the rock up the hill and its rolling back down also expresses unequal periodicity. With the opposition initially between high and low and then between life and death, the hill and rock now encode unequal relations between life and death. More precisely, the "right distance" is established not as a relation between terms but as a relation between relations. For Sisyphus the task is to mediate, not life and death considered in the absolute, but the short life and long life (the two deaths or deceptions).[4]

An additional consideration is necessary. If the myth is viewed in terms of the difference (or distance) between gods and men as immortal and mortal, it can be seen not only that Hades is the inverse of Heaven, but that men and mortality are situated between the gods above and the gods below, between (in effect) a "full" or continuous life and a "full" or continuous death. It is not clear from the literature that in passing from Heaven to Hades the value of immortality is reversed. Nevertheless, in so far as Heaven and Hades correspond to extreme values of life and death, high and low, it would appear that the too short life situates man away from earth and closer to Hades, while the too long life situates man closer to Heaven. This is not inconsistent with the formulation given earlier, in that the too short life represents an excessive conjunction with death and the too long life an excessive disjunction. However, in passing from the scene of the crime above to that of the punishment below, the myth does not add together the distances between Heaven and

earth and between earth and Hades. The latter distance is a transposition as well as an inversion of the former (which is the meaning of the fact that the hill in Hades has its counterpart in the Upperworld in the Acrocorinth). Actually, it would be more correct to say that it is a condensation of the two. The situation at the end of the myth does not merely complete a syntagmatic chain but totalizes it as a paradigmatic set. It is by this process that the hill and rock become a metaphor rather than remain or function as simply a part of the story.

This can be stated more precisely. A composite picture, as described in the previous paragraph, can be presented as follows:



This emphasizes the intermediate positions of earth and men in respect to high and low and life and death. However, for Sisyphus to roll the rock to the top of the hill is more than to attempt to achieve the midpoint in this sense. On the contrary, as explained in the first part of the analysis, the hill in the Underworld expresses two distances rather than one. This is because the oppositions between the Upperworld and Underworld, the too long and too short lives, and the Acrocorinth and hill are not (as in the composite representation) all on the same level. The Upperworld and Underworld (the world of the living and world of the dead) are opposed as high, life/low, death; the too

long and too short lives are opposed as two relations between the Upperworld and Underworld (whether men spend too long or too short a time in the world of the living); and the Acrocorinth and hill are opposed, roughly speaking, as crime/punishment, which is a problem of relations between the too long and too short lives. Thus, it was maintained that between a life which is too long and a life which is too short, the solution chosen in the myth is old age.

In other words, the point of balance is the same as in the composite picture, but here the myth progresses (in a structural rather than narrative sense) from an opposition between the Upperworld and Underworld to increasingly complex relations between them. This partly explains the condensation mentioned earlier, since the hill is not just in the Underworld, nor does it simply mediate a full death and a half life–half death, but mediates relations between the Upperworld and Underworld in general. The Acrocorinth (in the Upperworld) can also be said to mediate the Upperworld and Underworld in this respect, but it is important to add that the Acrocorinth is one of the signifieds of the hill in the Underworld and not the other way around. The former is situated primarily on the syntagmatic level of the myth, whereas the latter is situated primarily along the "axis of selection" (Muller and Richardson 1982:13) as a paradigm of relations in the myth as a whole.

It should be emphasized that this discussion of life and death does not exhaust the significance of Sisyphus. However, it does illustrate the operations occurring at this level. Furthermore, it illustrates that myth does not reside in the objects of thought (content) but in its operations. Thus, some have tried to find in Sisyphus the rising and setting of the sun or the rising and falling of the waves, or even the "vain struggle of man in the pursuit of knowledge" (*Encyclopedia Britannica* 1911:161). However, the "roll" of the hill and rock is not substantive but relational. To substitute day and night for life and death merely shifts the periodicity elsewhere.[5] Similarly, Graves maintains that Sisyphus attempts to "substitute patrilineal for matrilineal laws of succession" (apparently a reference to Sisyphus seducing his niece, Tyro, in other contexts) (1957:II, 15; I, 217; cf. Reinach 1903:168). Aside from any relation to Zeus' sexual violation of Aegina in the beginning of the myth, this is merely a sociological variant of the solar formula. In Barthes' words, the problem is "not to reduce the Text to a signified, whatever it may be (historical, economic, folkloristic or kerygmatic), but to hold its *signifiance* fully open" (1977:141).

Notes

1. In this respect, it is of interest that the subject of Camus' own *Myth of Sisyphus* is also that of death. Thus, he declares at the outset, "There is but one truly serious philosophical problem, and that is suicide. Judging whether life is or is not worth living amounts to answering the fundamental question of philosophy" (1967:3).
2. Such transformations are common in mythology. For example, the proper distance

between sky and earth is frequently established as day and night.

3. Oedipus, whose name means "swollen foot" (similar connotations are found in the surnames of his father-line) and who solves the riddle of the feet (and cane) (Lévi-Strauss 1967:210-211; Barthes 1977:135; Jameson 1961:242), also cheats periodicity.
4. This contrasts with Leach's study of time and periodicity in the Greek corpus pertaining to Cronus. For Leach, the Greeks viewed time as an oscillation or alternation between discontinuous contrasts, whether they be day and night, life and death, male and female, etc. (1961:126-129). While the analysis of the hill and rock in Sisyphus agrees with this picture, it shows that such an alternation is elaborated into more complex forms, involving relations between relations and not just relations between terms.
5. In other versions of the solar theory, the rock represents the "sun, which, after attaining its highest point in the heavens at the time of the summer solstice, glides back again, only to begin its career anew on the shortest day" (Bianchi 1877:207-208). Significantly, this transformation of day and night into (unequal) relations between day and night (long day and short day) recalls that of life and death into the long life and short life.

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