

Childhood and Society

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Labyrinths of Childhood

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I do believe that the paradoxical nature of a “discourse” regarding childhood is well worth dwelling upon from the very start. The term ‘childhood’ (or ‘infancy’) refers to a lack of voice and, undoubtedly, denies a vocal performance closer to the logos than the phone, as is the case with animals and newborn children. The condition is, therefore, a transitory one and, in some ways, one which is unable to retain an inscribable statute within the “order” of “discourse”. This paradox, however, has never hindered - and should, indeed, never hinder - the speculative and cognitive attention granted to childhood. On the contrary, the “will to know” all about childhood seems to have been wholly unrestrained over the years. The following quotation, from Foucault, aims to bring to mind the close ‘knowledge-power’ bind by means of which the French philosopher, in his unique manner, studied society and decoded its many problematic issues. In any case, in order not to make this quotation from Foucault appear far-fetched, I will limit myself to remarking that, in accordance with the classical meaning given to the term by Ariès in *L'enfant et la vie familiale sous l'Ancien Régime* (Paris, 1960) in the early Modern period, childhood was a privileged object for those knowledge-power connections as well as for the relative “standardization” strategies which Foucault concentrated on in his analysis of Modernity, especially in the fields of medicine and psychiatry, where classification and definition of the object immediately implied panoptic power and dressage of the subjects.

In his lecture dated March 19th 1975 at the College de France,

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Foucault asserts:¹

Childhood as a historical stage of evolution, as a general form of behaviour, comes to be the main instrument for psychiatric standardization. By this, I mean that it is only through childhood that psychiatry has been able to take possession of adulthood in its integrity. Childhood has led to the principle of generalization in psychiatry; in psychiatry as elsewhere, childhood has constituted a snare for adults².

And further on:

You will therefore comprehend why and how psychiatry has so persistently poked its nose into the domain of childhood. It is neither concerned with adding yet another notch to its already considerable attainments, nor does it wish to conquer a further tiny fragment of existence which had escaped its control. It has, on the contrary, sought out the instrument for its own possible universalization.

Having clarified these few points, I now aim to take for granted the inadequacy of the *logos* regarding childhood, and to investigate an area that is traditionally considered to be in opposition - that is, the *mythos*. I am firmly convinced that it is always possible to create fruitful bivalent trajectories that lead constantly towards each other. To proceed, that is, from myth to reason and from reason to myth, in order to dismantle the one while building up the other, and vice versa.

Thus, it may well be useful to observe the way in which myths constitute the prototype for that narrative strategy which the most recent pedagogical studies warn us not to set aside. From a historical and anthropological viewpoint, myths have long been associated with an evolutionary stage of society, often compared to childhood itself.

The myth I have selected is central to the research that the French scholar of Greece, Jeanmaire, in the late 1930s dedicated to the *kouroi*³, that is to say, to the young citizens of the Greek *poleis* who attained full citizenship after having passed, with merit, from a

1. M. Foucault, *Les anormaux: cours au Collège de France, 1974-1975*, Gallimard, Paris, 1999; It. transl. *Gli anormali. Corso al Collège de France (1974-1975)*, Feltrinelli, Milan, 2000, pp. 260-286.

2. The translation into English of this, and of the following quotations, are mine.

3. H. Jeanmaire, *Couros et courètes. Essai sur l'éducation spartiate et sur le rites d'adolescence dans l'antiquité hellénique*, Bibliothèque universitaire, Lille, 1939.

transitory to a definitive age: the myth of Theseus. What the sociologist Jeanmaire, in his exploration of the ancient world, was endeavouring to demonstrate was that this myth constituted the relatively late result of a political re-elaboration – carried out in classic Athens – of a ritual undercurrent rooted way back in ancient times. It is neither the time nor the place for us to investigate whether or not myths date back to rituals, and we can wholly accept the hypothesis whereby narrative discourse and ritual practice are destined to provide reciprocal interpretation. Suffice it to notice that the rituals Jeanmaire deals with – of which Theseus is the belated result – are the rites of initiation which children were forced to pass through in order to reach adulthood.

A central theme, indeed, if one considers that in Van Gennep's *Les Rites de passage*⁴, one of the founding anthropological works, there is a clear reference in human societies of all times to the universal validity of this same ritual pattern, whose function is to render technically possible the passage from one level to another within the same biological and social reality. Van Gennep's scheme of rituals is made up of three stages: an entry, a beginning, which coincides with a distancing, a separation; an exit, an ending, which indicates re-entry into a group; and an intermediate stage, the most critical and dangerous one, based on the multivalent notion of border. This is ritually represented as the possibility of a space to be found *entre*, between and among adjacent yet non-communicating states: male and female; human and animal; life and death.

In the myth itself, Theseus is said to have founded Athens, and it is not by mere chance that the definitive laying out of Theseus' life-story dates back to the well-documented "biography", which Plutarch wrote at the beginning of his *Vitae* in the 1st century after Christ, together with that of Romulus, the founder of Rome.

Claude Calame's *Thésée et l'imaginaire athénien. Légende et culte en Grèce antique*⁵ examines the symbolic standing of The-

seus' deeds. Calame's detailed survey of the diversely interpreted sources supports the idea of a late-established myth, in which different narrative techniques and symbolic patterns overlap. All, however, re-examined in the new light that Athens radiated upon traditional social practices.

It is the political dimension⁶ in which this myth is rooted that brought me to select it, as this allows me to maintain the knowledge-power bind mentioned in my remarks, above, on the inadequacies of the *logos*.

Theseus' mother is Etra, Pelope's descendant, from whom the name Peloponnese derives, and his father is Aegeus, like the sea that washes her shores. Theseus is born of this encounter. His border quality can already be traced back to these dynastic, geographic, and genealogic references.

Aegeus, king of Athens, is struck by one of the worst tragedies that can befall a human being: he is unable to produce offspring and cannot, therefore, guarantee his succession. Aegeus goes to Delphi to consult the oracle of Apollo; he then goes to Tzene where King Pitteus interprets the message from the oracle and encourages him to lie with his daughter Etra. Before leaving, the king of Athens hides a sword and a pair of sandals under a rock and begs young Etra, should she give birth to a boy, to reveal his true identity and, whenever she feels that the child is old enough, to lead the boy to that self-same rock to see if he is strong enough to lift it and thus return to Athens and succeed his father on the throne.

Hence, we find the pattern of the rite of passage. Theseus is at once separated and removed from his rightful place – he is brought up as a child elsewhere, far from Athens. In order to return and take up his legitimate position as a sovereign, he will have to pursue a route that involves the crossing of a border, that which separates the Peloponnese from Attica.

Before we follow Theseus along his voyage of initiation, it is interesting to note the way in which the first stage, that of physical separation, comes to an end when the hero finds out about himself from his mother. This knowledge induces him to unbridle his

4. A. Van Gennep, *Les Rites de passage, étude systématique des rites de la porte et du seuil, de l'hospitalité, de l'adoption, de la grossesse et de l'accouchement, de la naissance, de l'enfance, de la puberté, de l'initiation, de l'ordination, du couronnement, des fiançailles et du mariage, des funérailles, des saisons*, E. Nourry, Paris, 1909; It. transl. I riti di passaggio, Bollati Boringhieri, 1981.

5. C. Calame, *Thésée et l'imaginaire athénien. Légende et culte en Grèce antique*, Payot, 1996.

6. See Christian Meier's works and more specifically his collected essays *La naissance du politique*, Gallimard, Paris, 1995, with reference to the political dimension of Greek culture from VI to IV centuries b.C.

power. This power is manifest both in his lifting up the rock, and in his firm decision, against the will of both his grandfather and his mother, to pass across the Isthmus of Corinth rather than take the shorter route by sea to Athens. Theseus, the bringer of civilization, chooses the more dangerous route, which will lead him through lands inhabited by monstrous beings, barbaric and brawny, which he duly faces and overpowers. Like Heracles, mythical hero of the seven labours who went before, Theseus manages to overcome the bandits he meets along his way by turning their own weapons against them. Time after time, he succeeds by using the same deadly strategies employed against him in a mirror-like inversion. In order to destroy whatever he meets, he has to become that which he encounters. Athenian imagery requires of its hero the ability to face the dangers that come of barbarity; it makes itself immune to these by having Theseus take on the features of each barbaric countenance he comes across. Monstrous disguises and animal masks, often worn by youths who are being initiated, constitute the ritualistic, recurring aspect of this narration, so frequently to be found in ethnographic catalogues.

Yet the risks Theseus runs do not come to an end when his journey is over. Once back in Athens, it seems that his own father is unable to recognize him. Behind the mask of the foreign enemy lurks the legitimate king. Only Aegeus' wife, Theseus' stepmother, is aware of the truth and thus tries to poison him during the banquet laid out to honour the foreigner. Just as Theseus is about to drink from the poisoned goblet, Aegeus notices his sword and recognizes him. And thus, the circle of knowledge regarding Theseus comes to a close: from father to mother, from mother to son, and back once more to the father.

It seems, however, that the recognition of Theseus is too narrowly confined within the family dimension, because 5th century Athens considers the integration into the *ghenos* – the father's recognition of his son – to be insufficient. The citizens strongly disagree with Aegeus' decision to place a foreign, illegitimate son upon the throne. They contest the assumption that mere blood descent is enough to make of Theseus the king of Athens.

Thus, we move from the family perspective to a far wider one: that of the *polis*. The myth of Heracles, at the root of the Theseus narration, is not satisfactory: Theseus needs to find recognition in

the eyes of the entire political community. The first part of the myth reconstructed by Plutarch can therefore be seen as 'stage one' of Van Gennep's scheme. The Athenians still see Theseus as a child, an enigma, an outcast. In order to be set in his rightful place, he has to undergo a trial: that of the 'crossing'. The trial Theseus chooses to undergo is lavishly symbolic. He decides to go to the island of Crete, to the town of Knossos, in order to fight against King Minos (the original meaning of the name seems to be "lord", "king"). The wise and cruel king embodies a different kind of sovereignty when compared to Aegeus. In competition, indeed, yet with wholly different characteristics inscribed within the non-political symbolism of the bull.

Just as his father Zeus took the form of a bull when he abducted and raped his mother Europe, a bull emerging from the waters is the message sent by Poseidon to Minos in order to win the disputed throne from his brothers. So beautiful is this bull in its wild strength that Minos refuses to sacrifice it to the Gods, as promised, and as the rite of entry most likely demanded. Annoyed by Minos' attempt to replace him and determined to punish him, Poseidon turns the bull into a furious, devastating creature. He also causes Minos' wife, Pasifae, to feel the insane desire to lie with the beast, and a hybrid is born of this union - half-king and half-bull: the Minotaur. If Minos represents "the other" Aegeus, then the Minotaur embodies the specular reflection of Theseus in his being the illegitimate son of a sterile king.

The symbolism of Theseus' second journey of initiation, as we have already mentioned, shows him still to be a child as he sets off with seven other boys and seven young virgins to be sacrificed in Knossos. It is in this manner, in a pact stipulated by Minos, that the Athenians must redeem themselves for having killed Minos' legitimate son, Androgenus (born of a man), at the end of a race he had won years before.

Theseus' task is to bring his young fellow citizens back home, safe and sound, thus putting an end to the recurrent and horrendous pact, now considered both abnormal and unlawful. Upon setting out, he disguises two boys as girls in order to dispose of greater strength at the right moment. According to Jeanmaire, this detail, provided by Plutarch, recalls the ritualistic custom of representing the lack of sexual distinction of the youths to be initiated through forms of dis-

guise that temporarily switch their sexual identity.

As is well known, Theseus vanquishes his enemy, the Minotaur, by following the thread of love given to him by Ariadne, the Minotaur's human sister.

However, in order to vanquish his enemy and reinforce his qualities, to overcome the trial as best he can and sacrifice the chosen animal, Theseus will once more have to face up to his enemy by taking on his gestures and, thus, gaining his knowledge.

Plutarch does not provide much help regarding this point; verbose elsewhere, here he laconically states:

"... he received from Ariadne, who had fallen in love with him, the well-known thread, he learnt how to make his way through the intricate passages in the Labyrinth and he killed the Minotaur.."

Heading back home with the other children, Theseus is ready to take over his father's throne. Indeed, involuntarily and from afar, he brings about his father's suicide when he forgets to raise the white sails as had previously been agreed. Despite this, he is acclaimed as king. To celebrate his heroic deeds, the most important Athenian civic celebrations are founded.

But what are the specific features of the risks that Theseus has to undergo in order to pass through the intermediate, critical, stage of his ideal ritual? Which border has Athens traced to separate childhood from adulthood? Why a labyrinth?

In his interesting essay "La grue et le labyrinthe"⁷, Marcel Detienne provides the key we need. According to this brilliantly argued theory, the way in which the Greeks imagined the Minotaur's abode – created by Daedalus – was wholly different from the way we commonly represent a labyrinth. This, for us, is the interpretative challenge of that "aporaetic route" characterized by a great number of intricate passageways and crossroads, where "the longest route is enclosed within the shortest space". Yet the only available philological and iconographic representations substantiate Daedalus' maze through the use of two elements: Ariadne's thread and the dance of the crane. The latter constitutes the central part of the civic celebration that takes place at the end of the summer and mimes Theseus coming out of the labyrinth. "The dance is called *geranos*

7. M. Detienne, *L'écriture d'Orphée*, Gallimard, Paris, 1989; It. transl. *La scrittura di Orfeo*, Laterza, 1990, p. 5-18.

after the name of the bird, and is performed by more than one dancer, in single file [...] The indigenous critical explanations are very explicit: the dance of the crane mimes the act of coming out of the labyrinth as well as that of entering the Minotaur's dwelling". According to Detienne, in Greece the bird "is widely known for its circumspection and far-sightedness"; Aristotle claims that: "the crane flies from one end of the earth to the other, and connects the two most extreme points of the world" – the crane is able to find its way thanks to its "praiseworthy foresightedness".

"The very same circumspect far-sightedness allows both the bird to connect the two most extreme points of the world and the dancers in the labyrinth to link the entrance to the exit and to make the end and the beginning coincide".

But in the symbolism of Ariadne's thread, there is, however, a spiral, whose enigmatic secret, according to the myth, was only known to Daedalus, the architect. It is a curved space, winding around a central point, which can be crossed only in one single place by tracing a straight line which holds together, at the two extremities, both the beginning and the end.

"Daedalus's labyrinth spreads its meanders and ramifications within a conceptual field in which a certain type of journey naturally takes on the shape of a binding thread or string, and in which the action of binding mutually assumes the features of a crossing and of a linking route. Just like the dance of the crane, Ariadne's thread suggests the solution to the *aporia* of the labyrinth and masterfully includes the beginning and the ending within itself".

The town is no longer satisfied with a form of circular knowledge that sterilely winds around itself within the privacy of the *oikos*, or along the oft-repeated ritual paths. It demands that childhood come to an end and acquire a spiral knowledge which can rotate upon its axis while digging deep down into the animal-like aspect of man, only to then rise up to the opposite extreme, to sovereignty, without ever losing that straight line which links the two extremes.

In their conception of the labyrinth and of the Minotaur, the Greeks privileged the abstract idea of an aporaetic space, while leaving others to investigate the value of the centre or the entrance. They privileged a changeable space in which the intellect of those who are aware of both the straight line and the curve, the beginning and the end, can be seen in the flight of a

crane and in the spiral of an endless life.

We shall conclude by setting forth two possible scenarios and queries.

The first scenario is that of an Athens so taken up by the potentialities of this knowledge that it freezes the statute of the *kouros*, of which Theseus is the prime model, to the point of identifying with it. Indeed, what is the "chorus" if not a reflection of the spectators placed in the middle of the tragic action and, for this very reason, able to grasp the thread which, as it weaves along, dialogically links them together in their shared origin and in their political destiny?

This perspective would perhaps allow us to return to the Romantic view of the past, seen as the place of childhood. Not so much as an inadequate, transitory stage, but as a constructive itinerary, potentially ever-practicable, which would allow us to grasp, beyond the *aporia* of the *logos*, the significance of our existence by means of an elaborate symbolic awareness.

The other scenario implies the impossibility of grasping that thread which binds us to our childhood and, being able only to experience vertiginous falls, we would put ourselves in the position of not being able to communicate with ourselves and with our essential being.

The labyrinth can then become, just like in Dürrenmatt's *Minotaur* (subtitled "A ballad")⁸, a huge hall of mirrors, where the monster who dwells within us has to reckon with the sheer loneliness represented by the endless selves who docilely imitate him; carrying out the experience of being, so totally alone in his tremendous cry when giving and receiving death.

Or, yet again, like in one of Borges' short stories, taken from the *Aleph*, (*The King and the Two Labyrinths*), the labyrinth can become, far from a dialogical space - a place of thresholds - merely an indifferent desert. Where a dramatic passage is at stake, that towards a definitive state of aphasia.

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8. F. Dürrenmatt, *Gesammelte Werke*, Diogenes, Zürich, 1996; It. trans. Raccontti Feltrinelli, 2003, pp. 358-369.