The Burning Deck, Parts I & II

Wisdom of the Ancients

by Peter Dreyer (September 2023)

As a substitute for the newborn Zeus, Rhea offers Kronos the Omphalos stone wrapped in a cloth, Attic red figure *pelikē* attributed to the Nausicaa Painter, 460–450 BCE.

The boy stood on the burning deck,
his back was to the mast.
He would not move an inch, he said,

till Oscar Wilde had passed.
But Oscar Wilde, that wily bird,
he rolled the boy a plum,
and as he stooped to pick it up
[ta-tum, ta-tum, ta-tum …] —Anon., after Felicia Hemans

Inscribed by an unknown hand on a wall in the lavatory of a Shaftesbury Avenue pub, where I found them, these lines are surely the finest parody of Hemans's much-parodied poem "Casabianca" (1826), and they offer striking metaphors: the deck = the world; the boy = us; "Oscar Wilde" = civilization/culture; the plum = art, music, poetry …

Felicia Hemans (1793–1835) captured an important image, however. The "deck," which is almost everywhere bursting into flames today, it seems, was already shedding sparks in the Napoleonic era, and it had been flickering since antiquity, when forests in Greece, Anatolia, North Africa, and the Levant were hacked down to build the warships in which men sailed to far-off places (like Troy) to murder, rape, and enslave their fellow human beings. A Greek city-state, Corinth, invented the trireme—called "the guided missile of the day"—as early as the seventh century BCE (Thucydides 1.12.4–13.2), and much bigger warships—quadriremes and quinqueremes—came into use in the Hellenistic era. The Romans copied these, using a shipwrecked Carthaginian polyreme as a model.

Although regarded throughout the long history of Hemans's poem as the epitome of British courage, the original boy on the burning deck was actually the son of the captain of the French republican warship *L'Orient,* blown up in the 1798 Battle of the Nile by Horatio Nelson's British Royal Navy. It took thousands of trees to make such a ship—around 6,000 reportedly went into building Nelson's flagship, HMS *Victory*. England's oak forests had been exhausted, and timber suitable for to

building battleships had to be obtained from the Baltic and North America. Decks were burning all over the world.

In the early 1600s, around the time Queen Elizabeth I died, Francis Bacon (1561–1626), a lawyer struggling for political patronage in the dog-eat-dog world of Tudor/Jacobean privilege, produced a work he titled *De sapientia veterum,* explicating thirty-one Greco-Roman myths. Translated into English by Arthur Gorges, it was published in 1609 as *The Wisdom of the Ancients.*

“Upon deliberate consideration. my judgment is, that a concealed instruction and allegory was originally intended in many of the ancient fables,” Bacon writes—if not, he objects, they are simply ridiculous! The myths are poetry, however, and Bacon admits: “I profess not to be a poet.” The opposite of a poet, Yeats supposes, is an opinionated man, and Solicitor General, Attorney General, and, finally, Lord Chancellor of England Francis Bacon, Lord Verulam, Viscount St. Albans, may have been one of the most opinionated men in English history. His opinions are evidently still cited in London’s Inns of Court. A contemporary, Dr. William Harvey (who discovered that blood circulates), put it bluntly, saying: “He writes philosophy like a Lord Chancellor.”

Composed by unknown poets millennia ago to lampoon the injustices and absurdities of a world in which sickness, death, war, and slavery were ever-present realities, these fables were meant not only to entertain but, by satirizing them, to help people confront and endure horrors they could not avoid. Kafka would have understood. Bacon just didn’t get it, however, and his interpretations are what one might expect from a rising lawyer (king’s counsel in 1604, solicitor general in 1607). Quite possibly, Bacon didn’t even write the explanations himself. He is known to have employed others to work up his ideas, Thomas Hobbes, the future author of

Leviathan (1651), among them—and perhaps men like Ben Jonson, Kit Marlowe, and Shakespeare.

The myths come down to us from antiquity in multiple, contradictory versions. I have condensed them into anachronizing sonnets, borrowing only a few words here and there from the Bacon/Gorges text (in quotes if I've remembered). To make a round number of myths, I've added one of my own, "Bacon, or, A Legend," no. 32. Since they were never the creations of a single author, they should not "be read first as a sequence, one voice running through many personalities," as Lowell asks for his *Imitations*, but rather as a plurality. Each stands or falls on its own, and they can be browsed. Some, I confess, are still a bit too Baconian for my liking (e.g., no. 16, "Zeus Suitor, or, A Cuckoo"), but what you gonna do!

"Cassandra, or, Prediction" is first in Bacon's sequence—presumably because it was Cicero's epigram on Cato the Younger, which he quotes in it, that prompted him to write the book in the first place. That position is counterintuitive, however, and I have put my version, "Cato and Cassandra, or, Talking Heads," in twelfth place (in part 2). "Ouranos [Bacon uses the Latin "Cœlum"], or, Beginnings" more logically comes first.

As epigraphs to parts 2, 3, and 4, I use "risqué" limericks by the British poet Christopher Logue, CBE (1926–2011),[1] which (like the Shaftesbury Avenue parody of Hemans's "Casabianca") seem to me latter-day equivalents, in their way, of the screwball, hellzapoppin fantasies of our ancestral Indo-European bards. Logue's unfinished epic *War Music,* composed for a BBC Radio program, modernizes and anachronizes parts of Homer's *Iliad,* and although our approaches differ substantially, his foreshadows my own in places, viz.: "Achilles speaks as if I found you on a vase. / So leave his stone-age values to the sky," Logue's Agamemnon admonishes the Greek warriors on the beach at Troy, where they have been

summoned for a pep talk by “Ajax / Grim underneath his tan as Rommel after ‘Alamein.”[2]

Part I

1. Ouranos, or, Beginnings

That dome of brass Sky, Heaven, Ouranos,
and girly Gaia, Earth, a goddess of grass,
having at it in their enormous bed,
parented a brood of sons, the Titans.
She being—she still is!—a world-class MILF,
their youngest, Kronos (aka Time), gelded
Sky with Leo’s sickle of stars, the pup!
Screwing Mother Earth himself henceforth, Time

swallowed the kids that happened to show up,
and absent Leo’s adamantine tool,
mislaid in the mulch pile or potting shed,
Auntie Rhea rescued Zeus when he was born,
by fooling Kronos with a diapered rock.
Forever over, such was the strange start of things!

2. Pan, or, Nature

A shaggy, goat-footed flautist with horns
that reached up to heaven, human above,
half-beast below, Hubris was his mother
and the Destinies his sisters. Beaten
by Cupid at wrestling, he met his end,
a scholiast reports, in the reign
of Tiberius, when a voice from the shore
troubled passing mariners saying so.

His wife was Echo, and their only child,
Iambē, or Banter, famous teller of tales,
was the paramour of Pentameter,
duke of Ellington, who promulgated
the first rule for poets on Parnassus,
“It don’t mean a thing if it ain’t got that swing!”

3. Typhonia, or, Rebellion

Zeus birthed Pallas Athena from his brain,
and Mom, captivated by her armored
mien, seeking similarly to concoct
offspring without a tarse’s intervention,
got pregnant with the help of mudlark Gaia,
a python’s egg, and Time’s chronic semen,
bunning the oven with me, Typhonia,
a rebel girl, just born to game the game.

Ripping the cables from His hands and feet,
I stashed them in my *Hermès* Welkin bag
(the rule of the Cognoscenti’s so neat!!),
but that mean wing-footed boy stole them back

and shitty Zeus dumped Mount Ætna on my head.
I’m down there yet—still cool, but good as dead!

4. The Cyclops, or, Ministers of Terror

Deafened by that hammering, blinded by
their conflagrations’ smoke, Zeus first consigned
the wheel-eyed wall builders to Tartarus,
or Hell. Then musing that they might as well
be put to understrap Health Care’s pious
work or contrive new thunderbolt *matériel*,
he had them slay for quackery some quack.

Even Mousie Apollo took a crack!

You may suppose them miscreant ministers,
bad in their nature, whetted by disgrace
and diligence done in official spite
at “private nods” and orders of the boss.
Condemned at last to confront retaliation’s
rage, they’ll meet their deserts one nasty night.

5. Narcissus, or, Self-Love

This stuck-up parvenu, contemptuous
of his fellows, comes with an adjective,
“narcissistic.” And with groupies—Echo
being the most faithful. Glimpsing himself
in a mirror, he fell madly in love,
so wild about his emergent icon
that just being there was a sensation
consecrated to self-admiration.

Loose cannon on any deck, Narcissus
rejects the huddled masses’ right to roam
to the beamish banks of “Here.” He’s Tory!
That was to be expected, no?
But the Supremish Court of Erewhon
(“Home of the Okay”) may deny certiorari.

6. The River Styx, or, Promises, Promises

The gods witness their oaths by the River Styx,
which meanders round the demon court of Dis.
For this form alone, none other but this,
is regarded as obligatory
and inviolable—cheaters are booted

from the pantheon of Olympus—
those risk the joys of Helicon's table
who don't swear as honestly as able.

Necessity, whose stand-in is the Styx,
a lethal stream that cannot be crossed back,
is bell, book, and candle to the mighty,
so moguls' pledges are best ratified
by Stygian oaths engaged in on its banks,
whose breeching even bullshit artists can't abide.

7. Perseus, or, War

Perseus was commanded by Athena
to behead the Gorgon Medusa, who
petrified the West, turning to stone all
who gazed on her. Her half-sisters the Greæ
sold her out, lending him their single tooth
and eye. Thus armed, he aimed at her image
in a mirror, severed her neck, and got
sharp-winged Pegasus from the gushing blood.

A hatchet man must demand from treason
an eye for information, and a tooth
to rumor, bite, and nibble at the truth.
Pegasus is fame, perish the reason!
Medusa's head is history's sigil,
the colophon to the stuff the victors scribble.

8. Endymion, or, Those Special Someones

> *"Pride in their port, defiance in their eye,*
> *I see the lords of humankind pass by."* —Oliver Goldsmith

Enamored of the shepherd Endymion,

the goddess Luna got it on with him
secretly (as always wise!), descending
to nigh[3] her nitwit sweetie in his sleep,
in a cozy condominium—complete
with swimming pool—in Erewhon. Woozy
and his woolly quadrupeds multiplying,
the herding gang all were green with envy!

The stellar few depend on *hoi polloi,*
who greatly enjoy them in REM slumber.
A yokel’s fondest dream’s to be the buoy
of some superstar that’s got their number.
Glad to be had—if not, in fact, eager,
your land is their land, according to Pete Seeger.

Part II

The Departure of Memnon for Troy, Black-figure vase, 550-525 BCE.

> *An avant-garde bard named McNamiter*
> *Had a tool of enormous diameter;*
> *But it wasn't the size bought tears to her eyes.*
> *'Twas the rhythm—dactylic hexameter![4]* —Christopher Logue (Count Palmiro Vicarion, pseud.)

9. The Giants' Little Sister, or, Fame

The Giants, seeded in Gaia by the garum
spilled when Kronos gelded his father Sky
(whose groans outraged the ocean, lust springing
from the foam), assailed the immortal gods
with red-hot trash bins and flaming barbells,
but were repelled with thunderbolts and slain.

To commemorate the death of these bums,
Earth fêted their fetid little sister, Fame.

Fame’s offspring, an insolvent lot, increase,
rebellious, wanting change, now only checked
by flashing lights and noise, their sole recourse
inventing seditious lies and slanders,
branded “fake news,” to libel, cheat, and rob
those called upon to civilize the mob.

10. Actaeon and Pentheus, or, Voyeurs

Actaeon, it’s said, saw Diana bare,
and she made a stag of him, whereupon
his own gang of hounds ripped him to bites.
Pentheus peeped at Bacchus’s sacred rites
from a treetop, whence the maddened women
dragged him down. Thinking him an animal,
they tore him bodily apart. His head
impaled, his mother paraded it home.

Did Actaeon profane Diana by chance?
Not true, they’d gone hunting together, pals—
he’d just hoped to know her better! Pentheus?
The tale’s been bowdlerized .The facts are wrong.
He’d importuned an ungendered party,
it seems, and “they” ripped off the poor chap’s …

11. Orpheus, or, Enlightenment

Delightful music calms the brutish breast,
it soften rocks and unbends the knotted
oak (not what Congreve mandates, you find
—but close). Orpheus pursues his bride to Hell

and wins her back with singing, but then quits,
loses her again, and sorry raves
to trees and rocks, annoying humankind,
who want him deconstructed, chopped to bits.

But what if Bacchus and those stonèd scolders
were the lusts and appetites, Orpheus.
Philosophy, his Eurydice maybe
its Stuff? Turned off by such detumescent
metaphors, that mob of maddened maenads,
like politicians and sausage makers, chose scraps.

12. Cato and Cassandra, or Talking Heads

Foretelling the Roman Republic's
ruin, Cato Minor tempted cruel Fate
"as though he lived in Plato's Republic
and not Romulus's shit."[5] Cassandra, too,
addressed the future. Some say serpents' tongues
licked a sense of Troy's fall into her ears.
Others, that it was a bribe, Apollo's
randy tit for tat, on which he reneged

when she shrank from "doing" a god: predict
though she might, she'd no longer be believed!
Locrian Ajax had her when Troy collapsed,
his snickersnee whipping Apollo's lyre—
for a bare bodkin may its quietus make
more ways than one—and doomscrolling's no fun!

13. Proteus, or, Matter

Poseidon's herdsman, Proteus knows secrets
of all kinds, but to learn them you must bind
him. Fettered, and seeking to free himself,

he shapeshifts to innumerable
forms and happenings. (Another Proteus
was a king in Egypt, and Helen’s host
when Paris took her phantom twin to Troy,
Hesiod says, but that’s different “matter.”)

Poseidon’s weapon’s the trident, symbol
of the big shebang—for he’s none other
than that sweetie Satan, cast out by Zeus
into the daily world that light reveals.
At noon, old Proteus counts his sea-calf herd;
then sleeps. So, then . . . Shut up and calculate!

14. Memnon, or, Presumption

Memnon, king of Ethiopia, Tithonus
and Aurora’s son, came from Africa
to aid Troy, his father’s city. Thirsting
for glory—only the best good enough
for him!— he fought Achilles one-on-one,
and thus, need it be said, died. Zeus sent birds
to grace his obsequies, and morning’s light
from his statue evokes a mournful hum.

Pausanias, who heard it, attests the noise
but in his day the statue was broken
in half—the myth says by the King of Kings,
Thingamajig. This sorry story tells
us little, beyond the usual end
of glory. Fame’s such a pathetic gig!

15. Tithonus, or, Too Much!

The immortal gods despised old age, but
Tennyson gives to Tithonus these lines:

> *The woods decay, the woods decay and fall,*
> *The vapours weep their burthen to the ground,*
> *Man comes and tills the field and lies beneath,*
> *And after many a summer dies the swan.*

As imitator, I clearly plead fair use—
no one could ever hope to say better!

Tithonus, seeking immortality,
forgets he will grow old, while his bride, Dawn,
remains forever young. “And all I was,
in ashes. Can thy love, / . . . make amends . . . ?” Yes!
Dawn does not reject him, Propertius says.[6]
Well, dear reader, how does that sound? Okay?

16. Zeus Suitor, or, A Cuckoo

Zeus as lover took many different
forms—in turn, a bull, eagle, swan, and a
shower of gold, but when he sought to get
it on with Hera, his predestined spouse,
transmogrified into a wet, weather-
beaten, affrighted, trembling, starveling
cuckoo bird: “a wise fable,” from, it’s said,
the “entrails of morality”—its guts.

The moral is this: in romance it’s wise
to avoid boastful tricks, which, to succeed,
call for dumb impressionability
in your beloved. S/he, if true-hearted,
is not to be won by conceited lies,
but rather by the tactics of inspired pity.

[1] Christopher Logue, *Count Palmiro Vicarion's Book of Limericks* (Paris: Olympia Press, 1956), nos. 43, 163, 181.
[2] Christopher Logue, *War Music: An Account of Books 1–4 and 16–19 of Homer's "Iliad"* (1981; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997, 24, 11. Logue died before he could finish this—*War Music* was his working title.
[3] Although *naai* (stich, or sew) is slang for "fuck" in Afrikaans, the homophonic verb "nigh" here is meant simply to convey the poetic sense of "to approach, or come near to."
[4] Of dactylic hexameter it may be said that it works well in Ancient Greek, Latin, Hungarian, and Lithuanian, but not in English. Still, some have tried it, notably Arthur Hugh Clough in his 1848 tour de force *The Bothie of Toper-na-fuosich*, from part 1 of which this is a sample:

> Bid me not, grammar defying, repeat from grammar-defiers
> Long constructions strange and plusquam-thucydidëan,
> . . . . . .
> . . . . . .
> Crossing from this to that, with one leg here, one yonder,
> So, less skilful, but equally bold, and wild as the torrent,
> All through sentences six at a time, unsuspecting of syntax,

which explains the lachrymosity of McNamiter's SO.
[5] " . . . loquitur enim tanquam Republica Platonis, non tanquam in fæce Romuli," Cicero writes in a letter to a friend of the Stoic Marcus Porcius Cato (95–46 BCE), called Cato the Younger (Cato Minor in Latin).
[6] See Sextus Propertius, *Elegies* 2.18A: 5–22: "Aurora didn't allow him to lie there lonely in the House of Dawn. . . . Climbing into her chariot she spoke of the gods' injustice" (www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Latin/PropertiusBkTwo.php#a

nchor_Toc201112269).

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