

an ideal, peaceful Golden Age before the Bronze Age).

References to Greek concepts may come up in other areas of conversation too. A friend returning from a conference in Jubala might tell me this about her stay:

‘The conference last week was *under the aegis* of the Jubala government. Actually, it was quite disappointing. The conditions in the hotel were *Spartan*, and as you know, my *Achilles heel* is that I’m claustrophobic and can’t stand small lifts and easily *panic* when I’m in one. It was miles from the conference centre, and there was no hotel shuttle

bus. I had to join the *hoi polloi* in the Underground, which was like a *labyrinth*, so I arrived each morning feeling I had run a *marathon*. Still, it gave me a *tantalizing* glimpse of what life could be like there in other circumstances. And I did manage to buy a cheap *Omega* watch.

‘No, I’m not going to complain to my boss — it would only open a *Pandora’s Box*, and he’d probably start *hectoring* me.’

Either an etymological dictionary, or a dictionary of mythology will explain all the words and phrases in italics.



Sisyphus’ Task

‘Most people who look to dieting as a means of losing weight consider the whole process a rather *Sisyphian* experience. Just like old Sisyphus, dieters often find that their goal weight rushes away from them’. What has Sisyphus to do with the task of putting off weight?

In Greek mythology, Sisyphus was the king and founder of Corinth. He was notorious as the most cunning knave on earth. For his misdeeds, Zeus sent the god Hades to bring him to the underworld personally, for some severe punishment. With an ingenious trick, Sisyphus had Hades chained and locked up for many days. While the god of the dead was held prisoner, no one could die. The sick and old suffered. The world was in chaos.

Years after, when the paramount trickster was led forcibly back to the underworld, he was condemned to ceaselessly rolling a large rock uphill. Every time Sisyphus, by the greatest of exertion and toil, reached the top, the rock slipped from his hands and rolled down again, so that his punishment was eternal.

Hence we have the idiom ‘a Sisyphus’ task’ to describe a task that requires continual effort but never pays off. Similarly, an endless and fruitless task can be described as Sisyphian.

永劫

讀薛西弗斯推石的希臘神話，法國存在主義大師卡繆 (Albert Camus) 想到荒謬與反抗的對立：石頭推上去了又落下來，薛西弗斯卻沒有選擇，還得一次又一次把石頭往上推。這種無奈當然是荒謬的。他要自我解救，就要認定推石是生命的意義所在。從這個悲劇神話，卡繆看到荒謬的真相。

中國也有同屬苦役的神話：吳剛伐桂。唐代段成式《酉陽雜俎》：“舊言月中有桂……月桂高五丈，下有一人，常斫之，樹創隨合。人姓吳名剛，西河人，學仙有過，謫令伐樹。”故事大家熟悉不過，卻鮮有人深究吳剛所犯何事，要受如此勞役，更不要說去思索其中的深層意義。說一句天命難違就混過去了。



命運同陷永劫的神話人物，都是受到天譴，幹着徒勞無功的苦役，永無休止。但在東西方所引起的回響卻截然不同：一個是存在主義的悲劇英雄，一個千百年來只是死寂月宮裏的配角。這究竟只是中外欣賞神話故事取徑偶有不同，還是東西方思維取向根本就是同途而異趣？