

Of Men Going Down: Masculinity in the Age of Sex Panic and Poisoned Solidarities

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Abstract At the origins of men's work was katabasis, a man's descent when struck by love, grief, and the mourning of an absent father. Recently, the work veered towards defensive notions of masculinity, a reaction to the emergence of woke capitalism, the politics of injury and the poisoned solidarities between sections of feminism and the evangelical and political Right.

Key words: men, katabasis, #MeToo, poisoned solidarities, sex panic.

Katabasis

And anyone who has a heart, wouldn't they turn around and break it?
And anyone who plays the part, wouldn't they turn around and hate it?
(Reed, 1970)

Every man who falls in love falls down, slips up, goes under, undergoes the affirmative masochism of a being-in-love divorced from the ubiquitous grip of narcissism. He becomes 'feminized' not "because he is inverted but because he is in love" (Barthes, 1979, p. 14). He is no shrewd speculator, man-about-town, reactionary hipster hungry for green credentials, toying with veganism and diversity while remaining a corporate swindler through and through, mistaking larceny for daring, rape for passion, a manicured beard for manliness, eventually designing a paranoid spaceship to the indifferent stars.

The man in love is the one who no longer hunts and journeys but waits. He waits for the beloved. In any man, Roland Barthes tells us "who utters the other's absence, *something feminine* is declared". The man who waits and hurts because of waiting is "miraculously feminized" (ibid, p. 14). Waiting for the beloved while feeling their absence is akin to the practice of meditation. There is no guarantee in either case that the longing will be allayed.

I miss your soup and I miss your bread,

and a letter in your writing does not mean you are not dead. (Francis, 1988)

The man in love is ashamed when he is lucky at cards for he then wonders if he is a cheat. A man in love invites a magnificent *catastrophe* – a word of Greek origins whose etymology (overturn) suggests close affinity with subversion (overthrow) – which may shield him from the exhausting superficiality of “coteries, ambitions, advancements, interferences, alliances, secessions, roles, powers” (Barthes, 1979, p. 17).

Personal experience of men’s work, first as a participant in the early 1990s, and later as a facilitator, alerted me to a disturbing trajectory. At its origins, men’s work, the influential mythopoetic work of Robert Bly, James Hillman, and Michael Meade (1993) had at its core *katabasis*, from the Greek *Katá* (down) and *Báino* (go), representing the necessary process of a man’s *descent*: a ‘going under’, a journey to the land of mourning (the mourning of absent fathers the world over, the mourning of one’s own sense of direction and purpose as a man) which alone could prevent and/or cure the onset of unremitting melancholia. In its original meaning, *katabasis* is not allied with any of the notions prevalent today in a culture permeated by neopositivism. It is not resilience, that equivocal term popularized by Positive Psychology and eagerly embraced by neoliberal culture at large. It has little to do with the trauma industry and its reductive understanding of attachment theory and addiction. Finally, *katabasis* is not allied to a *politics of injury* which classifies individuals and entire communities on their trauma alone rather than their ambitions and their humanity (Estes, 2019).

Psychotherapy in a tragic key

Katabasis is a term rich in meaning: Socrates used it when referring to his journey away from Athens to the port city of Piraeus. He might have used it when going down on the young men infected by his dangerously virulent love of wisdom, or *philo-sophia*.

Katabasis also denotes, among other things: a sobering of tone from the shady peaks of cunning rhetoric; the sinking of the sun or the wind; a military retreat and, crucially, a journey to the underworld. In the men's work of the 1990s, it often meant a journey to the land of sorrow, of eating ashes, of suffering on one's own skin the irremediable limitations of being a mortal body laden with the pressure of having to perform as a 'real' man. It retranslated and condensed several ancient mythologies – Egyptian, Mesopotamian, Greek, Roman, Japanese – and fused them with contemporary anxieties. It felt crucial at the time that this delicate and often painful process be experienced first-hand, with the help of a mentor or a group of men engaged in creative ritual space, in storytelling, in the communal expression of poetry and of personal struggle, rather than vicariously, through dependence on someone else's wisdom, including the tender and fierce wisdom of women. Descent, going down, going under: the notion of katabasis implies that there may be considerable value in failure – a counterintuitive, even countercultural position particularly at a time when the archetype of the 'loser' is more reviled than ever in a culture hooked on ascensional success. There may be considerable value in the experience of defeat, as many writers have testified, from Christopher Hill's seminal study of Milton (Hill, 2017) to T.J. Clark's reflections on the contemporary Left (Clark, 2012), to Aeschylus (2009) who invites compassion for the Persians defeated by the Athenians.

Katabasis implies an embracing of the tragic dimension of existence, with the tragic understood as the profoundly enigmatic rather than mere horrific nature of existence. It implies appreciation of the wayward ways in which individual and collective destinies move.

It is removed from the current infantilization of human needs in the language of politics and in the language of psychotherapy alike. Taking on board the lessons of katabasis might mean constructing a psychotherapy in a tragic key rather than in obeisance to the dictates of so-called 'mental health'.

Against the patriarchy

The trajectory of men's work over the last three decades uncannily reflects the trajectory of psychotherapy as a practice and a culture. There is a world of difference between journeying to the underworld in the attempt to sanitize it and descending to that realm in order to learn. The initial stirrings of men's work were all about receptivity and humility or the depth of learning present in sadness, mourning and in the eventual loss of a naïve ideal of manhood. The general feel of the work also implied a naïve desire to dismantle the patriarchy – naïve because unaware of the wider implications of the necessarily homosocial nature of the work. Patriarchy is "the structured system of gender inequality that privileges males over women and others" (Hartmann, 1981, p. 14). It is constituted by relations between men with a material base which even though hierarchical, determine solidarity among men that allow them to dominate women (Sedgwick, 1985). Traditionally, the tacit intent of male bonding in a patriarchal society is to bolster heterosexism by repressing potential homoerotic desire and by interrupting the link between the homosocial and homosexual domains. While the men's work of the early 1990s at least allowed these insights to peak through, current manifestations for the most part trampled them defensively. It became all about controlling and managing those very same deep feelings.

I would go one step further: Katabasis is a necessary form of *self-destitution*, a finely honed technique of the self, a practice which in a Foucauldian sense, *constitutes* the self (Foucault, 1986).

Was the mythopoetic project doomed from the start? It would be ungenerous to say so, especially considering how useful and inspiring it has been at a crucial point in my life. To this day, I do find myself working with young male clients who have benefited from those insights and understood the confusion and sadness of their experience as a necessary step towards greater psychological maturity.

Perhaps mythopoetic men's work relied too heavily on the notion of the absent father, whose factual and/or symbolic re-enactment and restorative presence through mentorship and psychical/communal work could repair what did not need repairing in the first place. Perhaps excessive reliance on familialism meant that the project remained moored within traditionalist rather than transformative narratives. Yet the spark and inspiration experienced by those of us involved in men's work is undeniable. The rare, precious mixture of vulnerability and strength remains valuable. And it is miles away from what is taking place now in current manifestations of masculinity. The fact that a psychologist such as Jordan Peterson should nowadays be an inspiration for several young men, some of them involved in men's work, should give pause for thought. There are differences, as well as similarities between the men's groups of the 1990s and current incarnations. Let's have a look at the differences first.

Catastrophic development

In his book *Hölderlin and the Question of the Father*, Laplanche (2007) traces the poet's depression in Jena, during a crucial phase of his life, stating that while Hölderlin rightly

perceived the difficulties he experienced “in terms of maturation, of passage ... [his reflections are] completely permeated with Kantian philosophy” (p. 19), tarnished with a moralism and sternness that is evident in his letter to his brother of 21 August 1794 where he rather earnestly writes:

It is through incessant activity that one matures into a man, through striving to act out of duty, even if it brings little joy with it and appears a petty duty, one matures into a man; by denying one’s desires, renouncing, and overcoming the selfish part of our nature (p. 20).

While Hölderlin’s stance is reasonable (a degree of austerity certainly assists the passage to adulthood), his “Kantian legalism is a totally inadequate mode of expression for his thinking”: it is at variance with his own organismic proclivity “towards a much more holistic and naturalistic idea of individual fulfilment”. Kantian moralism, let alone “a too-narrowly conceived Kantian moralism” (Laplanche, 2007, p. 20) is inadequate in helping a man develop, and realise what Hölderlin in his letters repeatedly refers to as *Bildung*, the drive to give shape to oneself. Yet according to another great poet, Marina Tsvetaeva, even the notion of ‘development’ itself is suspect, for it “presupposes harmony” (Tsvetaeva, 1992, p. 148) Can there be, she asks, “a development which is – catastrophic? And can there be harmony when what we see is a soul being torn completely apart? (ibid).

Setting ‘naturalism’ against ‘morality’ does not imply that the former is devoid of duty, but that it entails a different responsibility directed at “knowing one’s own nature and needs, the necessity of ‘nourishing [one’s] heart and mind” (Laplanche, 2007, p. 20), rather than obeying the voice of an interiorized sergeant-major spouting categorical imperatives. These two wholly different forms of answering the inner necessity of becoming a man neatly represent in my view the difference between the early men’s work of the 1990s and contemporary men’s work. The mythopoetic work of Bly and others emphasized working with ‘soul’,

organism, naturalness. It echoed the ethos of a humanistic, archetypal psychology open to experimentation, exploration, and prone to its inevitable pitfalls. Contemporary men's work, on the other hand, appears to regress towards a self-punitive, moralistic call to duty, steeped in that very same patriarchal worldview which decades of psychotherapy worked so hard at deconstructing.

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I am down on my knees. A beating would do me a world of good (Walker, 2014)

The handling of a wrong in a community of men must begin with an acknowledgement of the iniquities done by the patriarchy, and with a genuine dismantling of the essentialist notion of 'man' which has ideologically and materially bolstered centuries of oppression against women and anyone who is different. Only then, a door may open to an exploration which may be emancipatory for men rather than reinforcing of the same tired and defensive narratives. There cannot be emancipation without a thoroughgoing questioning of identity – of an individual self as well as of a community – if one is to understand emancipation outside the jaded variations on the canon. These mostly rely either on congratulating oneself for being the rightful resident of abstract universality (the domain of the law and of liberal democracy) or to see oneself as part of a minority hungry for admission within the precincts of the ruling culture (the flip side of the same coin). Some of the narratives within contemporary men's work capitalized on the latter, presenting privileged, heterosexual white men as the oppressed minority – a feat of populist distortion with disastrous consequences in politics. The alternative to the ideological impasse is to conceive political emancipation of a group outside the confines of the self. It could be said that 'self' and 'emancipation' go together. "But the first motto of any self-emancipation movement is always the struggle against selfishness" (Ranciere, 1995, p. 65) – a statement that is both logical and ethical. "The politics

of emancipation is the politics of the self as another, or, in Greek terms, a *heteron*. The logic of emancipation is a *heterology*" (ibid). This is true of men's work as of any community or cultural/political movement whose guiding principles are emancipation (rather than defensiveness) and transformation (rather than superficial change).

Where are the most profound lessons learned from in the wider political sphere? From being able to listen to those who have undergone the injuries of history – "subjugation, domination, diaspora, displacement" (Ranciere, 1995, p. 48) – and by listening to the experience of the marginalized and the oppressed, learning to problematize any cosy allegiance to universalism. What is wrong with universalism? It is, paradoxically, *tribal* – the provincialism of the human overblown to cosmic proportions. Where are the most profound lessons learned from in the 'personal' experience of men? From being able to listen to the woes and struggles of women, trans, gay and non-binary people and in the process slacken the tight hold the yoke of male identity has on men. Where are lessons learned historically from within the psychotherapeutic tradition? From those who have edged towards the threshold of psychical turmoil and anguish. In all cases lessons are learned from outcasts. We should remember that "an outcast is not a poor wretch of humanity; outcast is the name of those who are denied an identity in a given order of policy" (Ranciere, 1995, p. 66). Another word for outcast is the one used by the philosopher and revolutionary Auguste Blanqui in response to the prosecution. When asked 'What is your profession?' Blanqui replied 'I am a *proletarian*'. How could an educated bourgeois like him, a student of law and medicine, the son of a local government official, claim to belong to the poorest of the poor? Because he became an outcast through being a writer, an activist and a prisoner of the state. Because his lifelong commitment was the subversion of an unjust social order. Becoming an outcast through political subjectivation is precisely what becoming a subject means, escaping subjection

through creative emancipatory participation to a collective project of subversion. Becoming a subject is to become attentive to the logic of otherness – to external others and to others within. It is a *heterology*. Subjectivization is not what liberalism and neoliberalism say it is: it is no mere declaration of identity. It implies refusal of the appellation given by the ruling order. It does not seek consensus because it does not presuppose relatedness nor mutuality. That does not mean there is no shared space, but this shared space is polemical, a place of necessary struggle and conflict in order to address a wrong. To forget this is to be either complacently naïve or complicit to injustice. It is to assert stupidly ‘all lives matter’ in response to ‘black lives matter’. It is to assert stupidly ‘men suffer too’ in response to the centuries-old suffering of women. The stupidity in question is structural, the result of the crisis of emancipatory politics.

Carceral feminism

It is vital and long-overdue that misogyny dating back centuries is fiercely opposed and stamped out. Yet the poisonous solidarities (Lancaster, 2011) emerging over the last decade or so – between white mainstream feminism and the evangelical far-right, especially in the US, give pause for thought. In a recent book, Aya Gruber, professor of law at the University of Colorado, writes that when studying as a law student and looking at issues of sexual harassment and sexual crime she was caught in a dilemma: on the one hand, knowing that “gender crimes reflected and reinforced women’s second-class status”, she felt these had to be actively pursued and dealt with. On the other, she was “involved in public defence and anti-incarceration work and had come to regard the prison as a primary site of violence, racism, and degradation in society” (Gruber, 2020, p. 1). It was after becoming a public defender that she “witnessed first-hand the prosecutorial machine”. She goes on to say:

I felt a sense of disillusionment that the feminist movement I so admired played such a distinctive role in broadening and legitimizing the unconscionable penal state. As an academic, I was increasingly concerned that women's criminal law activism had not made prosecution and punishment more feminist. It had made feminism more prosecutorial and punishing (Gruber, 2020, p. 1).

As other feminist writers who drew on the legacies of Angela Davis and Beth Richie have pointed out¹, this prosecutorial streak did not *start* with *#MeToo* in 2017 but it did come to a crescendo around that time. Then as now, the assumption of what is often called 'carceral feminism' (from the Latin *carcer* for jail) is that women's safety can be ensured via state oppression and violence. What animates this kind of poisoned solidarity is *sex panic*, a particular form of fear which is rife both on the Left and the Right of political discourse. A sex panic is a social outbreak fuelled by the media and typified by the fear of innocence being endangered, an innocence habitually attributed to white women and children. An outbreak of sex panic usually requires the presence of the bad man, the predator – a loitering, changeable, social presence, a threat against which the righteous citizens can mobilize. The genealogy of this phenomenon is disturbing. It harks back to *The Birth of a Nation*, a 1915 film which glorifies racism and the KKK and which invariably depicts the bad man as black (Wypijewski, 2021). With every case of sex panic – including the priests scandal, the prurient interests in the alleged 'free and wild sex' going on in religious cults and the like, the same set of predictable reactions emerges, namely, huge media coverage; a simplistic narrative of good against evil which cannot be discussed, let alone questioned; collective permission given to indulge in the dreadful happiness of allocating blame – in short the very essence of resentiment.

In her persuasive, impassioned, and poetic book, investigative journalist JoAnn Wypijewski (2021) questions the omission of a critique of capitalism in mainstream feminist argument; she points out that in the US one in two black women love someone who is in jail and questions the swift verdict with which too many different behaviours are shepherded into the sexual abuse definition.

It would be wholly wrong to blame young activists and their sacrosanct anger for this upsurge of terrible enthusiasm, but Wypijewski doubts that in the victims' rights movements, the sympathetic aspect of the victim may disguise the real purpose of the campaigns, namely, *to affirm retaliation as a social good* – a sure sign of the spirit of revenge at work.

An important historical distinction has to be made between *Me Too*, a phrase devised by Tarana Burke, an American activist from the Bronx, and the hashtag *#MeToo* initiated by the actor Alyssa Milano. Burke worked for the last three decades with Black women and girls, survivors of sexual abuse, “talking about sex and life and violence and the hope for a measure of safety, pleasure, and power” (Brookes, 2018) in a climate of exploration, emotional support, and empowerment (Buna, 2020). The phrase was hijacked, according to Wypijewski, and turned into a meme in 2017 when many instances of sexual assault emerged in Hollywood. When Burke was invited by the great and the good to the Golden Globes, her first incredulous response, before eventually accepting to join Meryl Streep, Natalie Portman, Jessica Chastain and others and being hailed as the founder of the *#MeToo* movement was: “Why? I’m trying very hard not to be the black woman who is trotted out when you all need to validate your work” (Brookes, 2018). For Wypijewski, there is a difference between Burke’s work, dealing with “the mess of life” and its ambiguities, helping young women to talk about things they found difficult to talk about, and the “hammer” of *#MeToo* “used ... to exile the

accused but also, perversely, put the accuser in a box, denying their messy humanity as well”².

While Burke’s Me Too acknowledged interlinked harassments, including violence in the family, #MeToo created a series of Hollywood and courtroom performances driven by simplistic scripts and accusatory glee.

In a similar vein, deconstructing the sexual panic around paedophilia which threatened the life of an innocent gay male teacher and colleague, Roger Lancaster pointed out:

Less about the protection of children than about the preservation of adult fantasies of childhood as a time of sexual innocence, sex panics give rise to bloated imaginings of risk, inflated conceptions of harm, and loose definitions of sex (Lancaster, 2011, p. 2)

Sex panic is defined by Wypijewski as “a social eruption fanned by the media and characterized by alarm over innocence imperilled” (2020). As with other moral battles, the routinely simplistic narratives position good against evil, and to those who are seen as evil anything can be done.

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