

The Hero and the Clown

Two ways to say *Yes!*

What a delight to describe all the hero's different aspects! He¹ charmingly attracts, inspires respect and admiration. He is everywhere: in odes, tragedies, novels and films. From Prometheus to James Bond, he haunts our imagination and fantasies.

The hero is always ready to take the challenges that life offers. He is not the only one. Someone else constantly says *yes*, and this other person is the clown. Both of them tell us the solitary and vain ways to belong to the world: the hero's folly and the clown's tragedy. Uh... sorry, the tragic heroism and the clownish folly.

The hero shouts his *yes* to life as a battle cry. He takes the liberty to build his own destiny against fate². The clown is also a *yes*-sayer. He acts spontaneously and aimlessly, no matter what happens. The essence of the hero's *yes* is different from the clown's. This contrast reaches the heart of our humanity.

The hero is ready to give up his life for his ideas. He is recognized as a remarkable character, because he is the victorious fighter—for a while—for the order and values of human civilisation over chaos and absurdness. The hero exists to make sense of life. He says *yes* to the fight for liberty against the overwhelming forces of power, either divine or human. He defends the greatness of human values in front of everything that threatens them, life included. This destiny's strength reveals his heroic nature and the greatness of his soul. The obstacles he encounters fortify his personality. Difficulties are a way to demonstrate his strength, intelligence and will. He represents the jewel of our societies and cultures. Through him, we reach the ideal, the half god-man.

The hero's *yes* is the will to escape the insignificant and boring human condition, to increase his power. In the turmoil of life, the hero chooses his direction. Although he knows his destiny, he still claims his freedom. His *yes* imposes and expresses his will. Through his actions, the hero regenerates the world's structure and orders victory over chaos.

The clown also faces obstacles in his daily life. His failures, however, are occasions to play and not to learn. The clown is not trying to become better. He is happy as he is, “not triumphantly riding a white horse, but standing with his pink knickers in his bathtub³.”

Numerous forms of expression of the clown's character exist over time. The clown and the hero I am referring to in this article belong to the arts. When we think of the clown, most of us imagine the red nose, the oversized shoes and the blunders. However, the clown has quite changed over the last forty years. The one I am referring to now is a contemporary form of clown, the one we call the *nouveau clown*. Far from the classical clown, he is based on simplicity and “blatant weakness.”

In the theatre, the character is a role played by an actor. That is why the word *character* does not describe the *nouveau clown*. The latter comes to life when the *character* fades away. The initiator of this clown's renewal was the famous French teacher, Jacques Lecoq. In 1956, he established the International Theatre School in Paris. According to Lecoq, “Research on one's own clown begins by looking for one's ridiculous side⁴”. Unlike the commedia dell'arte and theatre in general, the actor does not need to embody a character. Clown work is, instead, a

way to strip down. Through the study of clowning, the actor learns the “game of truth” as well as how to be on stage without playing a role. The stress is not on technical skills or the integration of a character as in the tradition of the classical clown. “With the clown, I ask them to be themselves as profoundly as they possibly can, and to observe the effect they produce on the world, that is to say their audience. This gives them the experience of freedom and authenticity in front of an audience ⁵.”

Through the *nouveau clown*, the clown is again understood as a direct and subversive state of mind. One night Pierre Byland⁶ confessed that he considers the clown has an excuse to reveal the human being. “I like him because he does not pretend. In his solitude he wants to be accepted and loved.”

The clown plays a minor part. He is the one who cleans the dishes, a disturber and outsider. He is the musician that the master has not invited. He is on the fringe of drama. He embodies a form of liberty: he has no image to protect. Free from morality and ideals, the clown is open to his surroundings. He resonates like a well-tuned instrument. He goes everywhere, following his own logic and does not bother fighting for his identity. The clown knows that there is nothing to be changed, that the world manages to work it out on its own. His *yes* has no ambition to rival the game of life. He does not care to be socially or politically correct. In that sense, he is a real anarchist.

As Enid Welsford says, “If we need to cover our nakedness by material clothes or spiritual ideals, are we so like the other animals? This incongruity is exploited by the Fool.”⁷

Through the eyes of the clown, every object or emotion becomes a universe of its own. He gets lost in his world and forgets why he was there. His actions are spontaneous and grounded in the present. They are disparate and fulfil his present urge.

The clown disturbs our references. He plays a fundamental role on stage, either theatrical or social, because he challenges our representations. He turns the world upside down and lets us look at it as a scaffolding and a stage setting. “If the fool’s show accomplishes this [replacing the light by which we usually understand and act], it does so less often by increasing our understanding than by freeing us from its demands.”⁸

Who are you? Do you know where you are going? If so, how do you go there? These questions require a clear and specific knowledge. We need it to make sense of our life. The clown, however, questions it. “The human life is frightening, always and ever making no sense: a fool can be fatal to it.”⁹ The questions about life do not belong to the clown, and that for different reasons: on the one hand, his incessant appearances/disappearances define his life and on the other hand, he has no fixed reference or moral sense. Questions such as “where are you going” or “how do you want to live your life” have no direct connection with life. A living body does not need to ask how to live in order to go forward. It just lives. In the same way, the sensorial environment forms the clown’s world. The clown does not ask how to go; he just goes. And he will never question his repeated failures: he knows. His knowledge requires no rational argumentation.

To conclude, I would say that on the one hand, there is the hero’s *yes*, which responds to our desire and willingness to make sense of life. On the other hand, the clown reminds us that the possibility of saying *yes* to life lies in the fundamental confession of our own ridiculousness. Choosing one would undermine the other, and at the same time, a part of ourselves. To say

yes to everything that forges our social and cultural identity is essential. To say *yes* to the fleeting life is vital. Those two *yes*'s challenge the human being, since he is as much the creature of the earth as a product of its civilization.

¹ Both the hero and the clown are masculine and feminine. To simplify the reading of the text, I will use the masculine to refer to both.

² André Bonnard, *La tragédie et l'homme*, Ed. de l'Aire, Lausanne, 1992.

³ Emmanuel Gallot-Lavallee, *Le clown Céleste*, Les Deux Océans, Paris, 2006.

⁴ Jacques Lecoq, *Le corps poétique: un enseignement de la création théâtrale*, Actes Sud-papiers, 1997, p. 154. *The Moving Body: Teaching Creative Theatre*, Routledge, NY, 2001, p. 145.

⁵ Jacques Lecoq, *Le corps poétique: un enseignement de la création théâtrale*, Actes Sud-papiers, 1997, p. 157, *The Moving Body: Teaching Creative Theatre*, Routledge, NY, 2001, p. 149.

⁶ Producer, actor and teacher. He worked with Jacques Lecoq on the creation of the *nouveau clown*.

⁷ Enid Welsford, *The fool*, Faber and Faber, London, 1935, p. 318.

⁸ William Willeford, *The fool and his sceptre: a study in clowns and jesters and their audience*, Northwestern University Press, USA, 1969, 4th ed. 1980., p. 50.

⁹ F. Nietzsche, *Ainsi parlait Zarathoustra*, 1886.