

In *The Labours of Hercules*, the task of Hercules in Aquarius is the cleansing of the Augean stables. How does Hercules accomplish this? By the diversion of two rivers, Alpheus and Peneus. In the interpretation of the myth given in *Labours*, the rivers are symbolic of the Aquarian inflow of life and love into the mental, emotional and physical realms, as mighty torrents powering service to the whole. It is, in one sense, the Herculean task of the New Group of World Servers to enact this inflow. One of the most significant results of this service work in the world today is humanity's dawning realisation of the devastation that it has been inflicting on the other kingdoms in the three worlds, through its failure to understand and relate correctly to those kingdoms. As it happens, the rivers Alpheus and Peneus can be identified as real rivers, in the Peloponnese. And we can learn from their fate, and the fate of other waterways, lessons that are significant for the future of humanity's relations with all kingdoms.

Before we consider this, let's take a moment to reflect on what a river is. It appears a very simple question, and at first sight the Wikipedia definition seems to confirm this: "A river is a natural flowing watercourse, usually freshwater, flowing towards an ocean, sea, lake or another river. In some cases, a river flows into the ground and becomes dry at the end of its course without reaching another body of water." Yet contained within this simple definition are a few key terms, which give rise to the vast diversity of actual rivers and the complex ecosystems which they support. First, there is the term 'natural', itself a term that repays deep reflection; then, the word 'flowing', which alerts us to the dynamic, energetic, living quality of the river; and finally, that little word 'water', that simple substance which is, nevertheless, astoundingly complex in its nature and its behaviour.

It would take us too far afield to delve into all of the complex behaviours of water, from its operations within cells to its peculiar properties when subjected to extreme temperatures and pressures, such as within the giant planets of the solar system. What concerns us in the case of rivers is its ways of moving across the solid surface of the planet, interacting directly with the mineral and plant kingdoms. Even the hardest rocks can be worn away over time by the persistent flow of water across them, and the network of streams and tributaries of major rivers that are created often resembles the roots of trees, or the complex branching seen in lightning. And within the channel of the river itself, the researches of pioneers like Viktor Schauberg indicate that flowing water naturally seeks a spiralling motion. This motion, in combination with the differential resistance of the ground across which it flows, produces in turn a pathway across a landscape which mainly consist of curves. Because of humanity's preference for straight lines, this natural tendency has unfortunately met with much resistance and outright interference.

As an example of this interference, sadly we need look no further than the modern Alpheois: as noted in Wikipedia, "[T]he Alpheois of today bears little resemblance to the historical Alpheois. Much of it has been widened by damming; large sections have been straightened by embankments; flood control works have been constructed; water for municipal use and irrigation is diverted all along the course; some sections are used for gravel mining; and waste water, fertilizer, and pesticides pollute it from one end to the other."

This catalogue of human interventions in the Alpheois is a microcosm of the ways in which humanity has mis-handled its relations with the other kingdoms of the three

worlds. Instead of sensitive co-creative co-existence, there has been arrogant, careless exploitation, with little or no thought given to the long term. Another example of this lack of forethought with regard to a waterway lies close at hand in the Peloponnese.

The Corinth canal, which crosses the isthmus of Corinth, thus technically making the Peloponnese an island, was originally mooted as far back as classical times – at one point the Emperor Nero even personally broke the ground on the project – but it was only completed in 1893, after a number of false starts, and geological and financial problems. The vision was of a similar kind to that of other canals, like the Suez and the Panama – a shortened route for marine navigation. However, the canal, when built, was never very commercially successful, as it wasn't made wide enough to accommodate the large cargo vessels used nowadays. And the geological 'problems' (in inverted commas), relating to the limestone rock which the canal is carved from, have come back to haunt it, as a recent news report indicates:

“Work on reopening the Corinth Canal will begin in January 2022, Deputy Environment and Energy Minister Nikos Tagaras said on Thursday.

The 128-year-old canal has been closed to traffic since January after a series of landslides made it unnavigable.

The landslides filled the canal with an estimated 15,000-20,000 cubic meters of material.”
(1)

As if to emphasise how little has been learned from its history, this report concludes: “Tagaras said that due to the urgency in reopening the waterway, *the works would be exempted from an environmental impact study.*” (*emph. added*)

Before we continue, let's pause for a moment of silence, and then use the Affirmation of Love:

In the centre of all Love I stand. From that centre I, the soul, will outward move. From that centre I, the one who serves, will work. May the love of the divine Self be shed abroad, in my heart, through my group, and throughout the world.

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Viewed from a more abstract angle, we could say that rivers are natural embodiments of the principle of least resistance, or the Law of Economy, since water will inevitably seek to find its way from a higher to a lower point using the least possible energy. The Law of Economy is the major controlling factor within the three worlds, and therefore should regulate humanity's interactions with the mineral, plant and animal kingdoms. Unfortunately, what humanity has come to describe as 'economics' is very far from alignment with this great Law, principally because it takes almost no account of minerals, plants and animals as living, subjective participants in cosmic processes. Instead, humanity is enthroned at the centre as the measure and judge of value. This highly anthropocentric view is very slowly giving way to a more biocentric or kincentric perspective. We must hope that this re-direction of human thought towards a wider view is taking place in time for the avoidance of civilisational collapse. This needed shift in thought could be compared with allowing a river to regain its natural course after centuries of damming and canalisation, for a recognition of ongoing reciprocal participation between humans and

other planetary inhabitants, physical and non-physical, has long been a feature of indigenous cosmologies and economies.

As a river flows towards the body of water which receives it, whether an ocean, sea, lake or ultimately the ground (for some rivers, even mighty ones, don't reach the sea), it often naturally tends to broaden into an estuary. In a similar sense, we can imagine the flow of energy from the spiritual realms dispersing more widely as it enters into the three worlds, finding expression in a vast diversity of forms. This broadening and diversifying is something that should also apply to the human understanding and vision of rivers themselves: broadening in time, recognising the timescales over which interventions are appropriate to river systems and the ecosystems they support; broadening in space, recognising the whole watershed and length of a river, and thus the nature of it as a distinct entity; and broadening in the spiritual, moral, political and ultimately legal dimensions of what a river is and means to all those beings who share existence with it. Within the Ageless Wisdom tradition, the idea of lesser and greater devas who constitute the spirit of a place is well known. It would seem only reasonable to conclude that each river is the expression of a great devic life, composed of many lesser devas which interweave the fabric of their beings within the whole. There is perhaps some sense of this in the tradition of sacred rivers, such as the Ganges of India.

The Ganges is worshipped as the goddess Ganga, patron of purification, and immersion in its waters is said to remit sin. Ganga is said to be a consort to all three of the major Hindu deities, Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva – thus perhaps recognising the receptive role of the Devic evolution. According to Wikipedia, “Jawaharlal Nehru, a religious iconoclast himself, asked for a handful of his ashes to be thrown into the Ganges. ‘The Ganga,’ he wrote in his will, ‘is the river of India, beloved of her people, round which are intertwined her racial memories, her hopes and fears, her songs of triumph, her victories and her defeats. She has been a symbol of India's age-long culture and civilization, ever-changing, ever-flowing, and yet ever the same Ganga.’” This psychic identification between a river and a nation's people is certainly rare and remarkable. Yet at the same time, the contrast with how the actual physical river is treated is also remarkable. The Ganges is highly polluted, not least by sewage released from the holy city Varanasi, and the plan to tackle this pollution, the Ganga Action Plan, begun in 1985, has been described as a major failure.

The poet T S Eliot, when writing about the mighty Mississippi, describes it in divine terms:

“I do not know much about gods; but I think that the river
Is a strong brown god—sullen, untamed and intractable,
Patient to some degree, at first recognised as a frontier;
Useful, untrustworthy, as a conveyor of commerce;
Then only a problem confronting the builder of bridges.
The problem once solved, the brown god is almost forgotten
By the dwellers in cities—ever, however, implacable.
Keeping his seasons and rages, destroyer, reminder
Of what men choose to forget. Unhonoured, unpropitiated
By worshippers of the machine, but waiting, watching and waiting.” (2)

While it may be quite a while before humanity's recognition of the sacred in the animal, plant and mineral kingdoms, as expressed through rivers, achieves a better balance, there are at least some signs of progress in the social and legal field. In 2017, the High Court of Uttarakhand declared the Ganges River a legal ‘person’, and this is one example of a

growing trend to grant legal personhood to natural features like rivers. Another is the Act of Parliament made by the Australian state of Victoria, the Yarra River Protection (Wilip-gin Birrarung murrn) Act of 2017. Ourania Emmanouil writes:

“This shift away from an instrumental or propertied understanding of the river is significant. It comes after decades of advocacy by people who love the river, shifting relations between the state and First Peoples and inspiration from legal developments in Aotearoa/New Zealand. It signals a movement towards a much older knowing of the river. This new law calls the river by its ancestral name, Birrarung, and invokes the river’s kin in Woi-wurrung language, In doing so, it makes apparent a much older law and set of legal relations. The Birrarung Act tells an old story about keeping the Birrarung and its relations alive. It is the first time that settler law on the Australian continent has been written, in part, in an Aboriginal language, and has invoked ancestral beings. The preamble to the Birrarung Act speaks of the lawful relations that hold in balance Birrarung and its kin: Bunjil, the great eagle creator; Waa, the crow who is protector; the Kulin people made from the earth; Palliyang, the bat creator of [women] who came from the waters of Birrarung. Outside of the Birrarung Act, knowledge of these connections is held in and passed down through Dreaming stories.” (3)

When we consider how rivers can symbolise a natural pattern of flowing energy, seeking the pathway of least resistance across a landscape of possibility, then we can perhaps refine our understanding of humanity’s role in helping create the planetary antahkarana. We know that, in the spiritual realms, there is a vast reservoir of spiritual energy waiting to be utilised, to flow out into the three worlds. We could call these the spiritual headwaters; and humanity’s role, in building the antahkarana across the higher mental sub-planes, could be likened to creating the aqueducts and the river channels that can allow this to happen. In a way, this is a re-imagination of the famous quote from the prophet Isaiah, ‘Prepare a way for the Lord, make his paths straight’, transforming it into ‘Prepare a way for the Avatar, make the channels of distribution natural’, so that the right energies reach the right places in the right way. Humanity’s love of the shortest and simplest path needs to become more nuanced into recognising the path of least resistance – and most cooperation and co-creativity – within the three worlds. We can ask ourselves – how did Hercules achieve his goal of re-direction? Was it by simply digging a ditch? Or is it more likely that he intelligently and sensitively recognised the natural contours and systems that would allow him to achieve his goal, and worked with them? The popular image of Hercules has tended towards that of a strongman; but the esoteric understanding recognises that this strength is the strength to serve others.

This recognition, that the actual way in which one truly serves may not fit the conventional understanding of what is ‘good’, is echoed in the discussion of the Law of Service in *Esoteric Psychology* Vol.II. For example, we read:

“Service is frequently regarded as an endeavor to bring people around to the point of view of the one who serves, because what the would-be server has found to be good and true and useful, must necessarily be good and true and useful for all. Service is viewed as something we render to the poor, the afflicted, the diseased and the unhappy, because we think we want to help them, little realising that primarily this help is offered because we ourselves are made uncomfortable by distressing conditions, and must therefore endeavor to ameliorate those conditions in order ourselves to be comfortable again. The act of thus helping releases us from our misery, even if we fail to release or relieve the sufferers.

Service is frequently an indication of a busy and overactive temperament, or of a self-satisfied disposition, which leads its possessor to a strenuous effort to change situations, and make them what he feels they should be, thus forcing people to conform to that which the server feels should be done.” (p.121)

The latter comment, about “forcing people to conform”, is once more reminiscent of the way in which humanity has persistently forced rivers to serve human needs, without regard for the needs of other kingdoms. True service, the spontaneous outflow of the soul’s energies into the three worlds, requires a deep soul understanding of the whole context within which the service takes place, a context which will include the souls of beings other than human. As our understanding of what it means to live as a soul expands, so too will the horizon of our capacity to serve, until we reach the ultimate goal of world service. The energies of Aquarius are uniquely tuned to this note. So let us turn now to the task in meditation of aiding this inflow of Aquarian energies. Our seed thought is, “Water of life am I, poured forth for thirsty men.”

1. www.ekathimerini.com/news/1173472/work-to-reopen-corinth-canal-to-commence-in-january/
2. T.S. Eliot, *The Dry Salvages*, from *Four Quartets*.
3. Ourania Emmanouil, *Kinship: Belonging in a World of Relations* Vol.3 (Partners), “Listening to a River’s Law”, pp.24-5.