

HERCULES: MYTH, HERO, AND SPIRITUAL DISCIPLE

As we move into the Higher Interlude of this year, and welcome a renewed yearly cycle in Aries, when pure essential energy of Will pours into the very Spirit of the World, let us reflect on Hercules as a myth, and as the paradigm of the spiritual disciple, particularly in relation to this renewed cycle of initiatory activity.

A curious statement by H. P. Blavatsky is often overlooked: she said that the study of the hidden meaning in myths and legends had occupied the greater portion of her life. She was convinced that no mythological story has ever been pure fiction: each of them has an actual historical lining to it, and is a vehicle of certain universal truths being passed on.

So let me start with a very few words about some of the problems we encounter when we talk about myth. When we say "*I like mythology*", we generally mean, we like the stories about gods and heroes. We generally call "*mythology*" the whole body of stories developed by a culture, but in a more proper sense, mythology is the reflection on what myth itself is. Unfortunately, myth is a notoriously hard concept to define. In Greek, *myth* means simply "*story*". Modern scholarship has subdivided traditional tales into three divisions: myth proper, legend and folk tales. Myth proper would refer to traditional tales that have to do directly with supernatural beings and gods. The story of Hercules is a myth. In this threefold division, legend would refer to traditional stories rooted in historical facts, namely, with a kernel of historical truth. Robin Hood would be an example of a legend. All sorts of legends have accrued around truly historical personalities. There is no doubt that there was an actual George Washington, and yet many of the stories told about him, such as chopping down the cherry tree, or throwing a silver dollar across the river, those have more to do with the symbolic function people want him to fulfill in society; and this is equally valid for every nation of the world. So in a few centuries, all those historical heroes could become purely legendary. Finally, folk or Fairy tales are stories which are primarily entertaining, they often involve animals, talking animals, or even clever human beings. Little Red Riding Hood would be an example. For H. P. Blavatsky, however, *all* traditional tales, legends and myths, far from being naïve and childish stories, hide deep truths and even a core of factual historical events.

Another problem we encounter is the source of myth. Myth is originally a story told from mouth to mouth, but our only way to know myth is through literature, which is myth already frozen. Once a myth is written down, it becomes fixed, and it gives us an idea of that version being "*the*" myth. But myth doesn't work like this in any oral setting. If I ask every one of you to tell me the story of Little Red Riding Hood, I bet I would get as many different versions as there are people here now. That's how a living oral tradition works.

When the only access is through writing, we tend to assume that's the real and complete story, that happens to us with most books, by the way. If we think about Hercules, though we encounter the same problems, we are fortunate enough to have the Tibetan's rendering of the myth. Having a Master tapping the universal sources is indeed a rare privilege.

So myths are tales, stories, handed down from generation to generation. As we see, we are not concerned with the common conception of myth as a lie, as when we hear someone saying – say, *“love at first sight is a myth”*. Myth cannot be attributed to any one author, and it is set in the remote past. Myths convey a sense that things were quite different in the past, when gods and humans interacted more freely, and the order of the world was different, a “golden age”. We cannot find any trace of such “golden age” in historical records, but we certainly can in the Ancient Wisdom teachings, which tell us about those mysterious archaic times, when the Hierarchy was first established on earth. Hercules was already ancient for the Greeks themselves. For H. P. Blavatsky, the origins of the myth of Hercules is to be found, in India. The Secret Doctrine reveals that his incarnations occurred during the early Root-races, one of them as Krishna's brother, and according to the chronology of *The Secret Doctrine*, we are talking about millions of years ago. Later immigrants brought his worship from India to Egypt, so now we know where the Greeks took this myth from, and a corroboration of this statement is found in the *Vishnu Purana*. The real story of Hercules, we can surmise, has remained in the Archives of the Spiritual Hierarchy. But we know for sure that a series of stories about his deeds was passed on orally in ancient times; and within oral settings, all myths are true. It was a Sicilian guy called Euhemerus who in the fourth century came up with the idea that there's some historical truth underlying traditional tales. So when Alice Bailey, in *“The Labors of Hercules”*, calls the hero *“that great and ancient Son of God”* she is being *“euhemeristic”*, because she believes that Hercules really existed. However, as with Christ, or Buddha, or Krishna, and others, the important point is not whether they existed or not, but *their paradigmatic character*: that is to say, all the details of Hercules' dramatic and often amusing story seem to be applicable to modern aspirants, and serve as a model for the modern disciple on his path of spiritual unfoldment. This was another quality of myth often highlighted by Blavatsky.

Hercules is without question, the *“greatest hero of all”*. “Hero” is a Greek word which is so far from the modern concept of a Hollywood hero. Among other characteristics, heroes (and this goes only for classical Greek mythology) are born from a male god, and a female human, symbol of the essential duality of Spirit and matter, or life in form. Hercules' father was Zeus himself, his mother, a woman called Alcmene. Unlike other heroes like Theseus, who was primarily associated with Athens, Hercules was a *“Pan-Hellenic hero”*, because he covered and was claimed by most of the known world. He reached even to the land of the dead, Hades. He was attributed the foundation of oracles, the Olympic games, healing altars, and even Mystery Schools. A cross-cultural hero who travels long distances,

founds spiritual or healing centers and bridges the gap between cultures may truly be seen as symbol of the world disciple whose field of service encompasses the whole planet. In ancient times he was worshiped both as god and as hero: he was divine, and at the same time deeply human. In Greece the sacrifices and rituals offered to a hero differed substantially from those offered to a god. Greek sources sometimes highlight his beastly aspects, and some authors like Aristophanes even mock Hercules, presenting him as a drunkard with an ill-tempered and violent personality. But at the same time, the Greeks recognized no greater hero, and he was even worshiped as a god.

Hercules was one of twins, he being the son of Zeus himself, his brother Iphicles that of Amphitryon, a human father. Hercules' first noteworthy deed was when the goddess Hera sent two snakes to kill him in his crib, and the baby, instead of being frightened, strangled the snakes with his bare hands. In artistic representations his brother Iphicles is shown cowering off on one side of the crib. Hercules would eventually kill his half-brother, his earthly shadow, again, a symbol of becoming a unity. One-pointedness is an important quality in a disciple. Hera drove Hercules mad more than once, and in one of these episodes of madness the hero kills his own children by his wife Megara. This is, according to Alice Bailey, a symbol of that burning aspiration which drives a beginner on the Path to lose all sense of proportion and madly sacrifice everything for his ideals and goals, as he understands them. The sources agree that it was as atonement for this crime that the Oracle of Delphi tells him that he must serve his cousin Eurystheus for twelve years, who sets him twelve labors each of them to be performed in one of the zodiacal signs. The Pythia also promises him that if he succeeds to accomplish his labors, his reward will be immortality. Eurystheus king of Mycenae had purposefully been caused to be born before Herakles by Hera, so that the hero may eventually be a slave to him, so Hera is out to make trouble and make life difficult for him even from before the day of his birth. Hera hated Zeus's sons by other human females, but in the sources she is shown to have a particular detestation for Hercules. His birth name was Alkeides, and the name Herakles was given to him by the Oracle. Given Hera's hatred for the hero, it may seem odd that his name "Herakles" mean "the glory of Hera". However, the matter becomes clearer when we think that Hera represents the soul who submits the disciple to all kinds of tests and challenges. So Herakles or Hercules adopted this name as he recognized his mission of expressing the glory of the soul, so the name of the soul becomes his name. In other words, Hera's hatred is a symbol of the soul on its own plane imposing on the aspiring human personality all kinds of tests and challenges, thus exposing all the dark aspects until the human hero succeeds in manifesting forth the power of his innate divinity.

In order to accomplish this, certain sacrifices must be made. So as it mostly happens in myth, murder and death become a *symbol*, the victims being those aspects of the lower nature the disciple must deal with and eventually sacrifice. The spiritual disciple is in some way a warrior, a hero. Hercules murdering his music teacher is a metaphor of

reaching the stage of trusting his own capacities and standing on his own feet. The only teacher he did not kill was the wise centaur, half-animal, half-human, symbol of duality, and one may guess why. The duality of the Fixed Cross pervaded all his life: he was alternatively a hero and a slave, powerful and *powerless*, ill-fated but he achieves immortality, he is the unfortunate hero, and the fortunate god, he is both masculine and feminine: he is a super-macho masculine hero, but when a slave to queen Omphale he dresses in women's clothes and performs women's tasks. The anthropologists suggested that cross-dressing in myth is a trace of ancient rites of initiation. So many different stories cluster around Hercules, that it has been extremely difficult to construct a unified coherent picture of the hero. However, scholars today believe that it is in the integration of polar opposites that the central nucleus underlying this myth is found.

The path of the sun in the heavens is a most beautiful symbol of the path of human unfoldment. Aries is the first sign of the zodiac. It is the sign of commencement. In this sign starts the path on which form is taken and prevails. However, after the human being is taken through many incarnations around the whole wheel of the zodiac, when form has been assumed in Cancer, the densest point of illusion has been reached in Scorpio, and the height of human and personal achievement is experienced in Capricorn, there comes a time when a reversal takes place. When the aspirant arrives at this final stage upon the evolutionary path, he is ready for the tests which will lead him to the full expression of his divinity. At this point is Hercules found in Aries, his first labor, little realizing the magnitude of his task. He is told that the Thracian king Diomedes, son of Mars, possesses a number of mares which were devastating the countryside and subsisting on human flesh. Eurystheus, the king, ordered Hercules to capture them. Having done so, he gave the horses to Abderis, his friend, to hold while he walked ahead, not realizing that those strong horses would trample Abderis to death. The mares escaped and Hercules had to start his labor all over again. He finally succeeded, though not without a failure.

Aries is ruled exoterically by Mars, and esoterically by Mercury. During the Wheel of incarnation, it is Mars, desire, which prompts to action. For the disciple, it is thought, ruled by the planet Mercury. Aries governs the head, and is the sign of the thinker. This is where Hercules, the newly-thinking disciple, begins his effort. The horse as a symbol stands for thoughts and intellectual activity. Plato, in his dialogue *Phaedrus* (sections 246a–254e), paints the picture of a Charioteer driving a chariot pulled by two winged horses. The Charioteer represents the soul, just as Krishna in the Bhagavad Gita; one horse representing rational impulse, and the other the lower nature, and the Charioteer tries to stop the horses from going different ways.

So, Aries brings us a very important lesson, which becomes especially relevant as we slowly come out of this pandemic. Hercules' first lesson was *to gain mental control*, as is the first lesson of every aspirant. For ages the mares of thought, wrong ideas and speech have been devastating our countryside, our environment. In a way, this swarm of uncontrolled

thoughts feed on humanity, just as the mares in Hercules' story subsisted on human flesh. This, until the disciple can say: *"I come forth, and from the plane of the mind, I rule"*. It is said that one of the first lessons we all have to learn is the tremendous power we mentally wield, and the amount of both good and harm we can cause through the horses of our mind. Hercules at first failed to realize the potency of thought, so he gave Abderis, symbol of the lower self, the mares to hold. So the questions that we can ask ourselves this month are: How do I use my mind? Are my thoughts contributing to uplift my environment? Are they thoughts of fear, or of hope? From the very start, the *Yogasutras* make us clear that the first step in the Science of Union is the control of the mind. We can thus see how closely related this first task is, with the work of Triangles, where we use the power of thought with the purpose of contributing to generate the triangular network of light, and transform human relations.

Hercules had a unique destiny: As the Pythia foretold, he conquered death, and reached his apotheosis: he was transfigured into a god as he was consumed by flames on Mount Oeta. After passing through fire and burning his mortal body, he joined the Olympians, a symbol of becoming a member of the Hierarchy of enlightened Beings. One may wonder if it is the destiny of man, to conquer death, even when he for eons has applied this life force to selfish ends.

Finally, as I said last year, all equinoctial and tropical signs in a way indicate a change of direction. Aries is the sign of beginnings. The energies which emanate from the Great Bear and reach us via Aries are said to be of tremendous power. These energies of life itself will eventually lead us to that moment of supreme freedom when the stone from the door of the sepulcher of the soul is rolled away, truly, a resurrection. As we see the world slowly emerging from this pandemic, let us project our path of light and service for this coming year, not forgetting that, as we are told, "hope" is the keynote of Aries. Thank you Kathy for letting me share these thoughts with the group. As we participate in the distribution of the powerful energies of the Full Moon, with the added energies of Venus in the heart of the Sun, I send you all warm greetings in hopes that this time may really be a powerful beginning, full of hope, for us all.

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