

Hercules: The Conquest of Duality

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In my last presentation I introduced the subject of Myth, and I dealt with Hercules as the paradigm of the spiritual disciple. You are all invited to read it!

Hercules, like most heroes, is the son of a divine father and a human mother. However, Hercules is considered the greatest *culture hero*: the sources show him bridging the gap between cities, founding healing and spiritual centers and clearing the lands from dangers; He may truly be seen as symbol of the world disciple whose field of service is the whole planet. At one point in his life, the Oracle of Delphi tells Hercules that he must serve king Eurystheus, who sets him twelve labors, each of them related to one of the zodiacal signs. The Pythia, the priestess of the Oracle, also promises him that if he succeeds to accomplish his labors, his reward will be immortality.

According to mythographers, the labors of Hercules fall into two categories. Six of these labors, consisting mainly in the capture of dangerous animals, are performed within the boundaries of Greece; whilst the undertakings of the second group lead the hero outside Greece, throughout the world in all directions. We should also note that the tasks in both Gemini and Pisces include the Underworld, the land of the dead, being Gemini the test which involves the farthest wandering. His third labor consisted in collecting the golden apples from the sacred tree growing in the garden of the Hesperides. Hercules passed throughout the land seeking the tree, but he did not find it. A wise man, Nereus, was sent by the Teacher to give a helping hand, but Hercules failed to recognize the messenger and the truth his words embodied. Having found nothing upon the northern way, he turned towards the dark south. He encounters Antaeus, the serpent (a giant in other sources), who repeatedly defeated the hero, until he realized that the only way to overcome the dragon was to seize it with both hands, and lift it high in the air. He then meets Busiris, the arch-deceiver, who enthralls him with the delusion of false wisdom, saying: "My truth is right, and all other truth is false". The beloved teacher bound the hero to an altar for a whole revolution of the Sun. He broke his bonds when he remembered what the wise Nereus had told him: "*Truth is within yourself*". Hercules continued his search and wandered far, until he hears the cry of Prometheus, who had been chained to a rock by Zeus. He was moved by his agony, caused by a vulture plucking at his liver. Hercules forgot about his search and learnt the lesson of Service. Finally, a rumor from a passing pilgrim led the hero to his goal. But the sacred tree once again faded from mind as he saw the giant Atlas toiling under the weight of the world on his shoulders. Hercules lifted it off onto his own back. Almost as a miracle, the load rolled off Hercules' back and as he opened his eyes he found his brother Atlas holding the golden apples. The three maidens who kept guard on the sacred tree approached him, placed apples in his hands and reminded him of his mission to go forth and serve. The task was fulfilled.

The “Hesperides” were three nymphs whose function was to keep guard on the garden of the gods and the golden apples that the goddess Gaia offered as a wedding present to Zeus and Hera. The gods fed on these apples, so they are mythically seen as “givers of youth and immortality”. Such magic apples appear in popular traditions of other nations, and the Greek poet Pindar spoke of such apples growing in Elysium, the Island of the Blessed. This myth is so rich in meaning. “Hesperis” – the name of one of the maidens – means “Evening star” in Greek astrological texts and refers to a heliacal phase of Venus, the esoteric ruler of Gemini, when seen on the western horizon once the sun has set. It is considered a star of initiation. One interesting fact is that one of the maidens was called “Erythia” (meaning “red” in Greek, and pointing to the setting sun, and therefore related to the idea of life after death: the sun sets and therefore periodically “dies” in the western horizon, stained red with his blood). A deep and interesting connection with the 12th labor in Pisces here emerges: Erythia is also the name of the island of Geryon, the capture of whose cattle Hercules must undertake, in order to get the “the jewel of immortality”. So one is left wondering what these “Western adventures” mean. Hercules is here conquering death, and it is not a coincidence that after his apotheosis, when he is transfigured into a god, he marries Hebe, the goddess of youth. The adventure of Gemini and Pisces relate Hercules to the conquest of the land of the dead. A famous Italian mythographer has shown the relationship of Hercules with healing centers and hot springs. Those caves filled with vapors were considered to be entrances to the underworld. One of the most ancient traditions recalls that the main function of Hercules was to face death and win immortality.

As all disciples, Hercules has to conquer glamor and illusion while being on the physical plane. Antaeus is a serpent, but in some other sources he is a giant, the son of Poseidon, god of the waters, and Gaia, the earth. He would challenge all passers-by to wrestling matches and was invincible as long as he remained in contact with the ground. In wrestling matches opponents are overcome by forcing them to the ground. The only way to defeat Antaeus was to lift him up in the air. He is thus the symbol of astralism and lower psychism, which the disciple must lift high into the mind realms. The power and spell of blind aspiration and the search for a master on the physical plane is suggested by Busiris, who enchains the hero to his limited and narrow vision of truth. We might as well ask ourselves how many times along the Path we have metaphorically been bound to an altar. How many Teachers have we found along the way, who claimed to be initiates, and the custodians of truth? It was Nereus who first came to Hercules, whispering words of true wisdom. Nereus is the symbol of the higher self, and later, of the teaching Master. A real Master will not be concerned with the petty personal details of the disciple’s life, and will give but hints, clues, and disappear, so that the disciple finds the way by himself.

However, the most remarkable episode of this story is by far the rescue of Prometheus. In this monumental intersection of myths, Hercules meets the Titan bound to a rock. Prometheus is said by Blavatsky to be “the most suggestive of all traditional allegories”, and many pages are devoted to the elucidation of this myth. In the Secret Doctrine, the Titan is made the symbol of the Solar Angel. Prometheus is not a hero. A

hero is half-divine and half-human, therefore a symbol of the struggling incarnated disciple. Instead, Prometheus comes from a lineage of gods who came into existence before the Olympian gods, therefore suggesting a primeval mystery. As the crucified god, he is the personification of the Celestial Man who incarnated in humanity. On the human level, he is the human soul, bound to the lower self. This myth hides the secret of the fallen angels, of the soul immersed in matter. Can we see how the mystery of “the Curse”, the fall into matter, is related to the problem of the mind and the opposites? In the Biblical Garden of Eden, the serpent gives the apple to Eve, and with its acceptance came the knowledge of the polar opposites, the problem lying at the core of Gemini. Venus, the esoteric ruler of Gemini, when a morning star, was called “Phosphorus” in Greek astrological texts, meaning, “The Light Bearer”. It should not be surprising that its Latin translation is “Lucifer”, the name of the mythical fallen angel.

Prometheus represents the planet Mercury, the exoteric ruler of Gemini, in Esoteric Astrology “one with the Sun”, the mind as a messenger, one with the soul, and above all, the *problem of fire*. As a matter of fact, the name Prometheus (meaning “forethought” in Greek) comes from a Sanskrit root meaning “to torment”, and “to stir up violently”, as if one were kindling a fire. Blavatsky explains that it veils the mystery of fire by friction, and therefore, of matter. This myth is of such depth that the mind finds itself dazzled by it. It is then no wonder that it is the disciple, Hercules, who faces and frees the Solar Angel tied to the rock of matter, and drives away the gnawing vulture of never-satisfied desire.

Hercules frees Atlas from the burden of the physical earth, thus becoming a server on the physical plane. In this act of self-forgetfulness, the burden vanishes. The fivefold search in Gemini makes Hercules conqueror of the three lower planes.

The eternal truth of the polar opposites, duality and the fall into matter are beautifully represented by the two brightest stars of the constellation Gemini: Castor and Pollux. These in turn personify and channel the energies of two major clusters of stars: The Pleiades and the constellation of the Great Bear, both groups of seven stars. The great mystery of the cosmic Christ upon the cross of matter is tied up with the relationship (already recognized in ancient times) between the stars of the Great Bear as the “husbands”, and the seven stars of the Pleiades, their wives, we are told. These two groups of stars represent the macrocosm, while Castor and Pollux can be seen as the microcosm. Castor was regarded by the ancients as mortal, and Pollux, as immortal; and in fact they match the astronomical fact that the brightness of Castor is progressively diminishing, whilst that of Pollux is waxing. In these two brothers lies hidden the secret of the resolution of duality. Gemini includes another important star as well: Sirius, the symbol of the universal soul.

The energies of Gemini bring “the resolution of duality into a fluid synthesis”. It governs the pairs of opposites, and preserves the magnetic interplay between them, we are told. So they bring us an important lesson: the fusion in consciousness of the polar

opposites, and the need for the disciple to register contact with the soul in his physical brain and waking consciousness. On this upcoming Festival of the Christ, as we approach the Gemini Full Moon, let us realize as well that this goal of fusion of the higher and the lower is inherent in The Great Invocation. In Gemini Hercules became a server on the physical plane. He was not told in what direction lay the garden. For this task, he had to search the whole planet, and pass through the luminous north, the dark south, east, and west, and – as we said before – even the underworld. He travelled alone, with nothing but a few hints, as any disciple does. He lost his way many times, as we all do, only to finally realize that he himself was the Path, that the truth was inside him. When he forgot about his goals in order to serve, he was never mistaken, because each act of service eventually revealed his next step ahead.

Can we now see that this particular myth is so rich in meaning, each character in the story conveying some lesson to be learnt? As we said, myths are the expression of universal truths, frequently veiled in symbolism. Hercules, that “ancient disciple”, is, or will be, the story of each one of us, who decides to tread this “Spiritual Path of the Hero”.