

Hercules at the Gates of Leo, Libra and Scorpio

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Let us turn our thoughts once again to Hercules, whom we called last time, and for a good reason, *“the greatest hero of all”*.

We are so accustomed to classical mythology, that we may not see how unusual it is to have so strong an emphasis on heroes, as classical myth has. We see this as we compare Greek mythology with the mythology of other cultures, which do not have nearly so many heroes. Mesopotamian and Egyptian mythology are, by and large, about the gods. Gilgamesh is a notable exception to that. So why such an emphasis on heroes in classical mythology? As we said last time, “Hero” turns out to be a misleading translation of the Greek word *“heros”*, or at least the modern understanding of what’s implied by the word “hero”. “Hero” meant several things, but mainly it referred to a human with one divine parent. And here we have a clue, as to why Hercules is looked upon as a symbol of the disciple. The hero is a mediator between the world of the gods, and the world of humans. Heroes were meant to bridge the gap between gods and men, just as the disciple mediates between the world of meaning and the outer world of glamor. In this sense a new light upon the concept of the NGWS may emerge, this group mediating between Hierarchy and humanity. The sometimes erratic and violent behavior of heroes were meant to highlight that both natures, animal and divine, are struggling inside them, and their inner world is a battleground of forces which may include episodes of “madness” and lack of control, as Hercules had.

A “top-notch” hero has to prove his right to be king (a symbol of their divine nature finally assuming control), and for that, he has to submit to

different kinds of tests. There are a good many heroes in Greek myth whose stories fit a so-called "*Test and Quest pattern*", the pattern of an adventure story where a young man goes out and performs a set of deeds of valor. These tasks are the symbols of the challenges every disciple faces on the way, in order to symbolically "*slay his own monsters*" and thus become a true world savior. Each labor brings him a different recognition, and gradually fits him to function consciously in the world of souls.

The twelve labors Herakles performs are clear examples of this "*test and quest*" pattern. He undertakes these tasks which are characterized both by an increasing degree of difficulty as the labors proceed, *and* by increasing distances that Herakles must travel to perform them. Each one of the labors he undertakes would have been fatal for a normal human being. Hercules, not without some drawbacks, finally manages to successfully accomplish them all. Now, these 12 labors fall into three clearly recognizable groups. The first five take place in the Peloponnesus, the main and central area of Greece; it includes the labors of Cancer, Leo, Libra, Scorpio and Sagittarius. The second group takes place a little bit further away from the mainland, and it includes tasks performed in all cardinal directions: East, West, North and South. These are the labors of Aries, Taurus, Virgo and Aquarius. The final three take place in the far West, and seem to have to do with issues of death and immortality. Here we have Gemini, Capricorn and Pisces. Now, as you see, most Greek sources organized these labors in terms of increasing difficulty and distance. In which order these tasks are given on the path of discipleship, whether following this pattern, or according to the order of the zodiacal signs, or any other, I don't know, and I suppose it depends on individual cases.

Three labors from the first group are particularly relevant for us today: Leo, Scorpio, and Libra, the sign the sun is now passing through. Hercules must fight animals which have some extraordinary attribute

that makes them exceptionally difficult to overcome. According to the sources, the first labor of this group, was the killing of the Nemean lion. This lion is invulnerable to wounds, and its skin cannot be pierced by arrows or sword. The cave in which the lion is found has two openings, one leading into a dark corridor, the other into the light of day. Herakles blocks one of the entrances with piles of sticks, and then turns to face the beast. He chokes the lion to death with bare hands (in other sources he clubs it to death instead), and then uses its own claws to skin it, and after he has skinned the beast, he takes the lion's skin as his cloak, and this becomes his most recognizable attribute and art, Hercules normally carries his club, and wears his lion-skin cloak, and the cloak is often shown with Herakles' face looking out from between the lion's jaws, so the lion's head becomes the hood of his cloak.

The second labor performed within the mainland of Greece involves killing the Lernaean Hydra. Unlike the others, Hydra was a mythical monster, a snake with nine heads, one head was immortal, which made this creature difficult to slay. To make it even more difficult, whenever Hercules cut off one of the Hydra's heads, two more would grow in its place, so that the more he tried to kill this monster, the more powerful it became. He eventually realized that using weapons, such as the sword and the club, only resulted in the Hydra growing stronger. He finally decided to grasp the monster with his bare hands, knelt, and raised the Hydra up into the air. The monster, strong in darkness and mud, was exposed to the rays of the sun, and lost its power. Hercules cuts off the immortal head, and buries it under a boulder.

The Nemean lion symbolizes the powerful personality running wild and devastating the environment. When an integration of the forces that constitute the personality has been attained, the human being often becomes a difficult and trying person. Hercules, is a solar myth, namely, a narrative which we can in some way relate by analogy with the path of the sun through the heavens. He represents one of those sun-gods

who are struggling with the problems that will draw out the full powers of the soul. The Tibetan gives us a highly interesting interpretation of the cave with two entrances: The cave is the symbol of the pituitary body, an endocrine gland closely associated with the spiritual awakening. This gland has two lobes (symbolizing both openings of the cave), one of which the disciple must close before the higher mind can take control of the personality. He must use the opening which leads to the light.

The symbolism of the Hydra is no less interesting. Each of the nine heads of the monster represents one of the problems (lower desires, passions and tendencies of the lower mind) that beset those on the Path. These hindrances cannot be opposed by brute strength, but through the conscious expression of humility, courage and discrimination. Humility compels the disciple to “kneel down” and recognize his limits; courage is needed to attack the evil at the very roots of his nature; discrimination, to come up with an intelligent and dispassionate solution to the problem, which involves turning the focus of his mind as high as possible, rather than concentrating on the problem and fighting it, thus making it grow bigger. In order to be defeated, the monster has to be taken out of its natural environment. The tendencies it represents do not have to be “suppressed”; rather, they have to be “*lifted up into the air*”, that is, *transmuted* into something else. In classical Greece, Lerna was a marshy region of hot springs and a former lake near the east coast of Greece. This place was thought to be one of the entrances to the Underworld, and the ancient Lernaean Mysteries, sacred to the goddess Demeter, were celebrated there. As we said months ago, a peculiar relationship is said to exist between Hercules and hot springs, whose vapors were considered to be the sign of an entrance to the world of the dead. One of the most ancient traditions recalls that the main function of Hercules was to face death and win immortality.

Interesting ideas emerge as we consider the relationship between Leo and Scorpio. Leo, being the fifth sign of the zodiac, counting from Aries in the direction of the following signs, is also the eighth sign, counting backwards. It is thus closely connected with Mercury, who is esoterically called "*the Messenger at the Eighth Gate*", alluding to that Gate which the process of individualization opened up for mankind. Interesting to note, that Mercury, Hermes, was considered by the Greeks as "*Psychopomp*", literally, "*guide of souls*". *Psychopomps* are deities whose responsibility is to escort newly deceased souls from Earth to the Underworld. It will be no surprise then that in Gemini, ruled exoterically by Mercury, Herakles meets another serpent, Antaeus, which he also has to "*lift up into the air*" to conquer it; we have also said, when we dealt with the task in Gemini, that this sign is also connected with the land of the dead, just as Scorpio is. Leo is strongly related to Scorpio, whose numbers upon the zodiacal wheel are the same as those of Leo, being five and eight. The Dog-star, Sirius, home to the Great Lodge, is related both to Leo and Scorpio; and the enormous constellation Hydra, the serpent, can be found in the sky very close to the constellation Leo. We thus see how the picture of the heavens reflect these truths, as outlined by the Tibetan.

Both Leo and Scorpio reveal some recurring tests that the disciple encounters. "*Lions and serpents must be slain again and again*" – Hercules was told by the Teacher of his life, the myth tells us. On each turn of the spiral, age-old challenges assume newer - and trickier - appearances, until a final blow cuts off evil at its roots. This must be done, as Hercules did both with the lion and the Hydra, *with bare hands*. As Mabel Collin's inspirational book "*Through the Gates of Gold*" suggests, "*To hold silence amid the thousand cries of the senses, and then, stripped of all weapons take the deadly serpent of self and kill it, is no easy thing. It can only be done in the moment of equilibrium, when the enemy is disconcerted by the silence*".

The sign through which the Sun is now passing, Libra, the sign of equilibrium, seems to be the ground on which a first recognition of the Path takes place, and the decision to undertake the twelve labors is made. It is at this point that “the wheel is reversed”. When Herakles passed through the seventh gate of Libra, his task was to capture the Erymanthian boar. He is seen driving the captured boar by its hind legs, which is a symbolic representation of the soul directing the clumsy body. He rejoiced on the way, and everyone laughed at the sight. Humor and laughter were said to be part of the ancient Eleusinian Mysteries. In the story, Hercules is said to misinterpret the command to “*take time to eat*”, and indulged in a feast, drinking the wine which belonged to the whole community of centaurs. This event led to a battle which ended up with the death of two centaurs. Centaurs are creatures with the upper body of a human and the lower body and legs of a horse, therefore symbols of duality. Libra is about measure, balance and conciliation of duality. In this sense we can remember that the exoteric ruler of Libra, Venus, is the esoteric ruler of Gemini, the other sign in which duality is faced and integrated. The disciple, as she/he undertakes this task, must “*choose the way that leads between the two great lines of force*”, as its keynote reads.

Eventually, every disciple will “mount the fixed Cross of the Heavens”, reverse the wheel, step on the burning ground of Scorpio, slay the Hydra and exclaim: “*Warrior I am, and from the battle I emerge triumphant*”. These are the two keynotes with which we will be working during the next Full Moon periods. Thank you all. Next time we will continue our journey through other Gates of the Zodiac.

