

## The Tenth Labor: The Cattle of Geryon

The tenth Labor appears to be somewhat less lucrative than its fellows, but I think we can tease out some worthwhile ideas. Inevitably we are working with only partial accounts, which isn't ideal. The original myths have long been lost.

The last three of Heracles' twelve Labors employ the symbol of three: Geryon is a giant with three bodies, the Hesperides are three nymphs dwelling in an Edenic garden, and Cerberus is a three-headed dog who guards the Underworld. Three generally signifies completeness, as the universe is often described in triplicate terms. Among other trinities, the Greeks had animals, men and gods; Indians, heaven, earth and the in-between; Semites, hell, earth and heaven; and science has its microcosm, everyday (experiential) scale, and macrocosm. In all systems, each of the three aspects has a distinctive parameter. The so-called "Holy Trinity" is another matter entirely.

The Greeks associated the west with death, since the sun sinks into the ground there, and all three final Labors are set toward the west, with the last being in the underworld itself. According to Dr. Mees, "With this [tenth] Labour the Mystery-stage of the Path is entered." (*Revelation in the Wilderness*, Vol. III, 200.)

As the king tried harder and harder to think up impossible tasks for Heracles to perform, he had to send him ever farther away from home. For the tenth Labor, Heracles literally had to go to the ends of the Earth. His task was to steal and bring back the beautiful red cattle belonging to the triple-bodied giant Geryon. In Dante's *Inferno*, Geryon makes an appearance as the Monster of Fraud in the depths of Hell. Geryon was not only a terrifying creature with a human face, but he employed the dog Orthrus, a two-headed brother of the three-headed hell-hound Cerberus, to guard his herd.

The stealing of the cattle was fairly straightforward, but the trips to and fro were convoluted and arduous. On his way there, Heracles had to travel through the Libyan desert. It got so hot that

in frustration he shot an arrow at the sun. Helios, the sun, thought “Aye, this is a cheeky fellow!” and gave Heracles a golden cup in appreciation. The cup was actually the crescent moon that the sun used every night to sail under the earth back from his setting place in the west to where he would burst out of the ground in the east. Heracles used the crescent moon cup to sail to mythical Erytheia, the island home of Geryon.

There is more than a whiff of psychedelic symbolism in this, along the lines of Prometheus, who puts in an appearance in the very next Labor. There I will make the case that the transmission is of higher wisdom, not merely news about rapid oxidation. In this Labor the divine fire isn’t stolen, it’s freely bequeathed to the supplicant. As with Prometheus, what’s received is only a spark of the original wisdom-fire: the sun continues to make it back to the East by morning even today. Heracles liberates Prometheus on route to his eleventh destination, hinting at the superiority of an open association with the divine over clandestine activity, but you have to get the goods one way or the other. Shooting an arrow, as we have noted elsewhere, indicates concentrated intent, and aiming at the sun symbolizes the highest spiritual aspiration, the universally acknowledged Source. Heracles was really cooking when he let fly, so it brought about a cosmic and essential result.

Arriving at the end of the Earth, where the Pillars of Hercules still stand, Heracles was immediately confronted by Orthrus and his handler, who he quickly dispatched with his club. When Geryon came to investigate, Heracles shot and killed him with one of his arrows dipped in hydra poison. This episode does strike one as “brawn over brain” and not much else. The only thing we might say is that after Heracles destroyed the hydra, the poison blood he took from it for his arrows symbolized learning from experience. The poison represented the dualizing tendency, and Heracles is now its master.

Once the dog and giant were killed the stealing of the cattle was easy, but the trip back was not. Heracles had many adventures herding the cattle home, with the goddess Hera throwing up

hardship after hardship. At one point, she sent a gadfly to scatter the cattle and it took Heracles a full year to round them up again. We can treat these setbacks as examples of the typical challenges that anyone meets in trying to accomplish a major undertaking. Suffice to say that Heracles was persistent in not giving up in despair, which is a tempting option when things go exasperatingly wrong in our endeavors.

The moral here is when we have a job to do, it is overridingly important to stick to it. There will always be unforeseen difficulties, and sometimes we feel like just giving up. We have to “take stock” and gather our energies back together in order to succeed. “Killing” our obstacles in a myth means overcoming them, which almost never involves actual killing. This Labor exemplifies persistence, a trait for which Heracles has always been admired.

A couple of additional ideas occur to me. First, both the oxen and their island are red in color, suggestive of sunset, of the sun sinking into the earth, toward Hades. Hell—often pictured as blazing red with fire—is the realm of duality. When we plunge into dual thinking, we forget our unitive Self that lives and breathes in the realm of light, and we must make our escape—a Herculean task—by learning how to withdraw from duality and regain our inner oneness.

The two-headed watchdog is the very picture of duality. Duality, with its seeming conflicts, engenders doubt, and spiritual explorations are often curtailed due to confrontations with doubts or other distracting forces. One of the first principles of spirituality is to hold your ground and not be deterred by hostility or scorn. When doubts rush at you, you have to neutralize them: kill them in a sense. If you merely beat them back, they will soon return, and with a vengeance! Sometimes they have to be forcefully put down, symbolized by whacking them with a club; at other times more subtle means do the trick. In any case, we have to be determined to achieve our objective, lest the guardians of the gate drive us away. This skill will serve Heracles well when he meets Orthus’ big

brother Cerberus, who stands at the borderline between the conscious and unconscious realms, welcoming entry into Hades but barring any return to the waking world.

The advice to “go with the flow” is important in meditation and creativity, but falls short in some other places. When the watchdog barks, the flow might urge us to flee the scene. Doing so indicates a lack of confidence in our enterprise. A certain amount of determination is required in spiritual life, so that we don’t wind up as just another complacent sheep in a strange fold. Nataraja Guru taught, “Follow anything wholeheartedly, and you will get the truth.” In his Isa Upanishad commentary, Guru Nitya Chaitanya Yati urges: “Even for the person who is well equipped, action is directly related to one’s motivation. One has to say, ‘I want. I should. I will.’” (21)

In this rather vague Labor, the *Sacred Mythoi of Demigods and Heroes* stands out with an excellent exegesis. It agrees that the guard dog Orthrus, whose name means “dawn-darkness,” is the guardian at the threshold of duality. Furthermore, “the Golden Boat of Helios or Apollo is like the divine impulse or will, which carries the Soul over the sea of objectivity.” Sacred Mythoi’s explication is as follows:

The task of Hercules in this Mythos may be expressed as that of gaining Prudence to prevent the force of Providence being perverted by dualistic imprudence. In other words, it is the Soul’s conquest over the limiting conditions of duality.

Providence is always good in its essence, but when participated in by secondary natures its force may be perverted or subverted, and thus, by the dual law of cause and effect, limitations and fetters are produced, which it is the labour of the hero-soul to remove.

Therefore, Eurystheus (the Inner Monitor of the Soul) bids Hercules go forth into the transient regions to gain control of the cosmic forces (oxen) which have been drawn down to the very last of things (Erytheia, the reddish land in the west, where

the sun sets), by the unsubdued, boisterous expressions of the threefold objective nature (Geryon), into whose keeping they have been given.

Before embarking on its quest the Soul must manifest its inherent power to control the fluctuating realms of duality, hence Hercules slays the two giants, Antaeus and Busiris, the adversaries who denote the reactional effects of the soul's outgoing operations; he also erects his two Pillars, evincing thereby the Soul's prepotency over all transient opposing forces and principles.

The Soul is unity-in-multiplicity, being one in its essence but plural in its activity, therefore it is able to produce duality and multiplicity from unity and yet also resolve them back again.

However, the divine urge is needed ere the Soul proceeds from its unific essence into diversity of action; Hercules, feeling the fiery influence of Helios, responds with a shaft of aspirational-prayer (arrow) to the Lord of Light, who gives the Soul the power (golden boat) to sail over the trackless seas of transiency to the far country.

The slaying of the Guardians of the Oxen is only the first stage of this complicated Labour, which enables the Soul to release the cosmic forces; but when liberated they are not easy to control. All the resources of Hercules are called into play in the arduous undertaking of directing the forces back to their source through numberless pathways and in the face of manifold difficulties.

Even Hera opposes him, but since Hercules is "the Glory of Hera," as his name suggests, Her opposition is simply instrumental in educing further his latent powers, so that eventually the forces of which She is Queen are consecrated to Her Service, when the Oxen are sacrificed by Eurystheus.

The Mythos is readily interpreted in terms of Man, the Microcosm, and the full elucidation of all its details affords a portrayal of the extraordinary ordeals and experiences which confront the Soul when it aspires to elevate and transmute the

inherent powers and forces imprisoned in the very deeps of the body. (21-2)

Dr. Mees adds some insights, particularly about our theme of resolving duality into unity, which is the whole point of the spiritual path in the first place. Whether you call it returning to God, knowing the truth, merging with the Absolute, or what have you, “out of many, one” is the goal made explicit. By accomplishing this nearly impossible task, Heracles will open the way for him to enter the Greek version of the Garden of Eden next.

In his exegesis, Dr. Mees first addresses Heracles’ journey toward his goal:

From [Crete, Herakles] went to Libya and wrestled with the Giant Antaeos, a son of Gaea, the Earth. Antaeos obtained fresh energy and strength as long as he was in touch with his mother, the Earth. Herakles conquered him by lifting him in the air and pressing him to death. Antaeos represents the dynamism of materialism and corresponds to the Giant Muck-Calf of Norse Mythology. Materialism can only be overcome by lifting it up in the Air, the realm of the Spirit.

What a perfect image Antaeos is, of sublimating material actuality into its metaphysical reality! Next, the denouement:

Geruones [Geryon] possessed a herd of beautiful redbrown cattle and was a Monster with three bodies, three heads, six arms and six feet. His three heads and bodies represent the “schizophrenia” of the Fall... Geruones was killed by an Arrow in the center of his body, where the three trunks joined into one. This symbolism significantly hints at the approaching attainment of Advaita or At-onement. The three aspects of Geruones have a parallel in the symbolism of the Trident.

And some interesting details about the return journey:

Herakles returned with the cattle through Europe to Greece, everywhere meeting with new adventures. Hera, having had to give way before the Sun-Arrow, put more difficulties on the hero's Path. When the herd approached Greece, she sent a gadfly and scattered the cattle, causing Herakles much toil in "gathering the fragments." The fragments are scattered at the stage of the Heights of Manifestation, as we have seen in connection with the Tower of Babel and the Tower-symbol of the Tarot. Hera's gadfly is one of the flies of the Fourth Plague of Egypt, symbolizing gossip, idle, fickle and vain talk, and other forms of anti-social dynamism. They also symbolize, of course, anti-Traditional activity of a subtler nature. It is significant that one of the titles of the Devil is Belzebub, actually the Kanaanite word Baal Zebub, meaning "Lord of flies" .... Herakles managed to assemble most of his herd and to take it before Eurystheus.

Lastly, Mees muses about Heracles' challenge in herding the cattle:

The task of being a shepherd—of the lost sheep *within* and *without*—is a supremely difficult one, because the Shepherd represents Life and the esoteric Tradition, while the sheep live largely in accordance with the exoteric tradition of established religion and custom. (all Mees' quotes are from *Revelation in the Wilderness*, Vol. III. 200-3)

What has survived of the tenth Labor is a vague myth that paints an overview of the spiritual path, where Heracles confronts duality head on and resolves it to unity, afterwards learning to shepherd his personal galaxy of abilities in his chosen direction. It may well be that accomplishing all the previous Labors has made this supreme achievement possible. From here he has only the cosmic Garden ahead, with its "mind manifesting" fruits, and after

that to journey into the realm of Death, in which resides eternal life.