

The Twelfth Labor: Retrieving the Dog Cerberus from the Gates of Hell

For his final and most dreadful task, Eurystheus demanded that Heracles bring him Cerberus (Kerberos in Greek) the monstrous three-headed dog who guards the entrance to the underworld, ruled over by the god Hades. Cerberus is a true hellhound: not only does he have three suspicious and vigilant heads armed with slavering jaws, but his tail is a dragon and hissing snakes line his spine. His job was to bar the living from ever entering the underworld, while letting deceased souls in, but not out. There was to be no return from the afterlife.

Not only is the last Labor the most terrifying, it is also the oldest, which suggests that at one time it might have been the *only* Labor. It involves penetration into the underworld, or what we now call the unconscious, into territory normally off limits to living humans. Whatever the terminology, it's a vast, unknown terrain.

The spiritual quest is to explore the unconscious unknown and make it accessible to consciousness. When all is said and done, it is the only game in town, the essence of psychological evolution. As the philosopher Teilhard de Chardin so aptly put it, "The history of the living world can be summarized as the elaboration of ever more perfect eyes within a cosmos in which there is always something more to be seen." The unknown is an infinite treasury that we may delve into if we have the courage, or else the good fortune to stumble into it.

Those who dare to pass (or are thrust) beyond the gates of ordinary mentality are eternally changed, and not always for the better. Many do not return, or are ruined by the harrowing events they undergo. Going beyond the verge is a deadly serious business. But those who succeed enjoy an expanded ambit for their lives, including a blissful sense of enhanced freedom and mental clarity.

Entering forbidden territory with any degree of impunity requires special training. To make himself equal to the task, Heracles went to Eleusis, ancient Greece's secret mystery school.

Initiation into the esoteric Mysteries was a prized plum of Greek life, and undoubtedly contributed to the region's extended period of intellectual excellence and experiments in democracy. The exact nature of the ritual, which was offered for more than two millennia, was a closely guarded secret that has never been revealed. It is likely but not certain that a psychedelic substance was involved, but in any case the experience was claimed to elevate participants to the level of the gods and confer immortality on them. In the last Labor we learned of the close kinship between heightened awareness and immortality, and of the highly prized substances that were ingested to bring it about. Whatever the ritual entailed, it was essential preparation for Heracles to enter the depths of the Unknown, so it must have been significantly more absorbing than a purely academic exercise.

Being a foreigner, Heracles was not qualified for the Greater Mysteries, but because he was the benefactor of all humanity, the Lesser Mysteries were created especially for him. Such an honor would not have been accorded him if he were merely a bumbling buffoon, as currently portrayed. Dr. Mees speaks eloquently of the meaning of the initiation:

In order to qualify for the most dreadful of his Labours Herakles went to the sacred place of Eleusis, where he was initiated by the wisest of the priests into the Mysteries. Those who have a glimpse of light in the modern world should take the hint. People aiming at mastering the underground world of the soul should first dive deep in the esotericism of the Tradition. It need not be said that this does not signify a mere "sticking of the nose" into, or "tasting with the tip of the tongue" of, the traditional teachings. On the contrary. Not only the nose, symbolizing the rational faculty, and the tongue, symbolizing the faculty of feeling, but *the entire being* of a person should be immersed in the life-giving and purifying Water of Life of the Tradition. (iii, 210)

His total immersion in the Eleusinian Mystery gave Heracles the certitude and insight to enter the realm of the Dead while still alive. Normally this territory is impenetrable to the living. One of the most interesting aspects of this Labor is that it intimates how to get past our unconscious defenses, symbolized by the nightmare dog. Little is said about Heracles' time in the unconscious regions, either because it has been lost or because such an experience is bound to be subjective, so an explicit description would deaden its allusive value. Each entrant will gain insights according to their needs, capabilities and expectations. But getting in is a universal conundrum.

So, what did Heracles glean from his time at Eleusis? Psychologist Leo Zeff, who clandestinely used LSD as a therapeutic tool for many years with his patients, described the impact of a psychedelic trip in a similar way to Heracles' entry into the underworld:

Imagine a castle, a huge castle, very large. Many rooms, many turrets, many levels of it. There's only one way to get into this castle, and that's the front door. The front door is *solid steel. Impregnable*. You can knock on that door all you want. You can do everything you can to tear it down. You can't get it down. Every now and then you might somehow or other move it a little bit to get a glimpse of what's behind it, but that's all. There's no way, and you've tried every way possible to get into that castle. Which is yourself.

What happens on a trip is by some mysterious magic means this door is dissolved, and you have the opportunity to go in and explore that castle. Any place you want. You go in and you look around, and you find many, many wonderful places, strange places maybe, scary places and all that. You can go to the top and you can go to the bottom and you get a sense of what the totality of yourself really is like. As you come down, what happens is that the door somehow or other gets back up there. But that's all right, because you have a memory of what

possibilities are there and what you've experienced. The biggest experience that it brings to you is that it connects you with feelings that you've never been connected with before. They are now open to you. Not on the level or the intensity that you had in the experience but certainly much more than they ever were before.... You have really expanded your awareness.

Myron J. Stolaroff, *The Secret Chief: Conversations with a Pioneer of the Underground Psychedelic Therapy Movement*, Multidisciplinary Association for Psychedelic Studies (MAPS) Charlotte, NC. 1997, p. 47.

Zeff's steel door analogy closely corresponds with Cerberus, though it fails to convey the terror that effortlessly turns us away from the gates and sends us back to make the best of our mundane but relatively secure existence. Terrifying or not, both are insurmountable barricades that must somehow be overcome to gain entry into the mysterious realms. Could it be that the heroic effort represented by Heracles to take the dog away and bring it back corresponds to the melting of the steel door and its equally mysterious reappearance at the end of a trip? Quite possibly. King Eurystheus, being a ruler in the world of waking consciousness, was confident that the task would prove impossible, but he was in for a surprise.

Sacred Mythoi of Demigods and Heroes agrees that the key is for Heracles to get past the defenses each individual faces at the borderline between the conscious and unconscious worlds, what it calls the gnostic powers of the soul: its opinionative, rational and intuitive forces. "The gnostic powers of the Soul, while subject to the limitations of the Objective World, are like Cerberus with his vigilance and discrimination, his servility and cunning, his suspicion and narrowness, but at the same time his subjection to the rule of Pluto." (Pluto is another name for Hades.) So long as we are "on guard" we remain isolated in wakeful consciousness.

There has to be a kind of surrender of our defenses in order to enter the Beyond. This isn't simply an act of will, the ego has to be healed and strengthened first. Only if it is no longer fearful can it completely relinquish its defenses.

It doesn't seem too farfetched to suppose that if this Labor was indeed the original, Heracles himself may have been invented as a symbol of the Eleusinian Mysteries: a heroic substance or process which opens the door of the unconscious for a short time, after which it closes again. He was then put to use as a symbol for other aspects of the spiritual quest.

After his preparation in the mystery school, Heracles went down into the depths of the Earth, not knowing if he would ever be able to come out again.

There is no mention of the Dog being present when Heracles entered the Underworld. Because of his preparation in the Mysteries, it had already been overcome. There was literally nothing barring his way in any more. As he strode into the gloomy caverns, the souls of the dead fled like evanescent dream images. A couple of shades came toward him, but his sword passed right through them. Most of them ran away, because those who are spiritually dead cannot bear the sight of a vibrantly alive being.

Have you ever stopped to consider what 'shades' or 'souls of the dead' mean from a spiritual perspective? Shades are the anonymous people with no interest in spiritual reality, who pass the time "getting and spending and laying waste their powers," as Wordsworth would have it. They flit and flicker through an endless procession of undistinguishable gray days. There is no color in their lives. What they do has no impact on themselves or others, except occasionally to generate fear or revulsion. They are the living dead, busily trying to not stand out. T.S. Eliot observes them in his poem *The Waste Land*:

The Burial of the Dead

Unreal City

Under the brown fog of a winter dawn,
A crowd flowed over London Bridge, so many,
I had not thought death had undone so many.
Sighs, short and infrequent, were exhaled,
And each man fixed his eyes before his feet.

Heracles was unable to impact the shades with his sword. Sword thrusts are flashes of insight, which of course are not understood by those with no “ears to hear,” whose minds have not been attuned to interpret the messages. This is symbolized by Heracles’ sword passing through them without the least effect.

While in the forbidden realm, Heracles was able to rescue Theseus and no one else. Theseus represents the individual will, consigned to hell for its improper use. It is well known that the will can lead us either to perdition or salvation, depending on how it is employed. Heracles is the rectifying energy that brings the will back into the light of day, where it can be wielded intelligently. Other than Theseus all else in the underworld was dreams and phantasms. Our unconscious is filled with fantasies and detached imaginings, along with more useful talents, such as sensory processing, metabolic maintenance, and knowledge coordination.

The hero made his way through the dream world to its ruler, the god Hades, and asked if he might take the Dog. It’s as if he wants to remove the defenses that keep consciousness from entering the unconscious. In a heroic state we might wonder why the unconscious is shielded from consciousness; it is so fascinating and enchanting. But it is too easy to lose yourself there, and to become confused. Consciousness needs defined limits for optimal functioning. Fierce as the Dog is, he has a benign role to play in protecting our simple souls from becoming disoriented or overwhelmed.

Asking permission from Hades—the landlord, so to speak—indicates that we need to have a respectful and humble attitude in our spiritual quest. We don’t just crash in and take what we want, we have to realize we are intruders in a sense, although the

“intrusion” is into our own true nature. The unconscious is governed by forces far more powerful than the ego, and will not relinquish them to mere intention alone. Plus, we should feel that the underworld really is part of our own nature. If we treat it with hostility, we become divided against ourselves. Therefore we must strive to remain on good terms with it.

Hades agreed to let Heracles take Cerberus, so long as he didn't use any weapons. This tells us that the way to defeat hostility is not with enmity, but by gaining understanding through directly grappling with it. As Dr. Mees puts it, “The Powers of Hell are not overcome by the Power of Hell; they are overcome by Charity, that is to say, Love and Giving.” (iii, 185) If we treat the psyche as alien territory to invade, it presents unassailable ramparts; only if we learn to ease into it with unguarded acceptance does it open itself to us, because in the final analysis it *is* us.

Heeding this directive, Heracles overpowered the Hell Hound with his bare hands, and took him firmly bound to Eurystheus. Seeing him arrive with Cerberus in tow, the king knew for certain he would not be able to defeat Heracles. Confounded by the hero's success, the guru/king gave up challenging him with any more Labors, and released him from his debt. Was he crowned and mitered, granted his own full recognizance as a realized being? We can only wonder. The myth leaves it to our imagination.

Heracles then returned the Dog to its station guarding the entrance to the underworld, so that those who got in could never get back out again. And Cerberus has never failed in his job since. Or has it?

It's only fitting to add an important passage from *Sacred Mythoi* here at the end of the myth, in honor of its profundity. (The gnostic powers of the soul are defined above as opinion, reason and intuition):

This labour of Hercules may be defined as that of gaining the power to withdraw the gnostic powers of the Soul from the

limiting regions of form and sense, and to elevate them to a consciousness of the supernal realms.

It is symbolical of that initiation which dispels the darkness of oblivion and the night of ignorance resulting from the Soul's attachment to the body, and introduces it to a vision of Reality.

It confers upon the hero-soul the power to pass into and out of the portals of objective life and death. As Prophyry affirms, there are two kinds of death—one according to which the body gradually dissolves and is separated from the Soul, but the other—called the Philosophical or Mystical Death—according to which the Soul voluntarily and consciously separates itself from the bondage and attachment of the body. This is signified by the ability of Hercules to descend into the domains of darkness and death and again to come forth into the abode of light and life....

The hero-soul, without the use of external or objective force, by the simple exertion of its own inherent prepotency, uplifts these [gnostic] powers into the Kingdom of Light, and simultaneously releases the personal Will (Theseus) from the consequences of its wrong use.

But since the Soul's mundane labours are not yet completed, the dog returns to its sentinel duty, which represents the normal emplacement of the objective consciousness. (35-6)

The fact that the modern world has come to treat Heracles as an impudent strongman is a measure of the hubris that has supplanted the wisdom of our ancient forebears. Replacing swagger (or its flip side, inhibition) with the dynamic openness of a sincere seeker of truth allows us to convert the Labors of Heracles back from an amusing entertainment into a cosmic instruction very much worth taking to heart.

I am deeply indebted to those who have sought truer meanings in the depths of the dark interior regions of archetypal wisdom, who have given me tacit assurance that I was on the right

track. Interestingly, the final Labor of Heracles paints a symbolic picture, vague though it may be, of how to direct our search into those very depths.

We have been led to think of Hades' realm as an afterlife, remote and unattainable, but then it has no significance for us; or else a place where all sense of purpose is lost, a colorless region, static and oppressive. Heracles demonstrates that the unconscious can be positive and dynamic as well as static and negative. It largely depends on the attitude we enter it with.

Those who feel dragged down by the demands on their liberty made by society may find themselves impelled to go beyond the normal bounds of everyday life to seek something truly rewarding. Doing so requires learning about aspects of life that are not revealed to everyone. Heracles demonstrates that, armed with mystical knowledge and a stout heart, anything is possible. The sky's the limit, and the sky has no limit.