

Setting the Stage

I have felt a call to restore the honor of Hercules, the Roman name for the Greek Herakles, now known more commonly as Heracles, a mythical gentleman who has fallen far from favor in the so-called rational world of modernity, but who embodied the progressive ideal of humanity for many centuries. His degradation since the Renaissance parallels the paradoxical plunge into brute ignorance that is the shadow side of the Age of Science, and now that we are tentatively emerging from its disenchanting thrall (with some severe setbacks at the moment), it is high time to attempt to reinstate the meaning of what Heracles once stood for.

The ancients had a lot of critically important, well thought-out ideas about life they wanted to disseminate in their present and hoped to share with the future. The myths they constructed to accomplish this were much more than a conglomeration of cute pictures and amusing stories. They thought long and hard about how to communicate with other civilizations that were likely to be remote in both time and language.

The Greeks were cognizant of the fleeting nature of true civilization, moments of glory separated by long stretches of mind-numbing ordinariness. They well knew that periods of peace and justice were ephemeral, but that the desire for them burned passionately in every honest human breast. They wanted to link up with those distant souls, who might even be themselves in new incarnations, who knows? They wondered what the universal archetypes are that can bridge the gulfs between the brief peaks of civilization we are able to establish, and what would we need to know that would be most helpful to us, no matter what conditions we might find ourselves in?

Their solution took the form of myths. Myths are information packets with universal-enough imagery to transcend local limitations. If a period of history doesn't understand them, they cease to have value and are lost. We live in such an age, and there have been many such ages since the myths were composed.

Fortunately their meaning can at least be partly resurrected by anyone anywhere, through an act of intelligent contemplation. The myths speak to us directly, and do not depend on officially vetted interpretations, which are often far from helpful. Because there is almost nothing available in our time to help us decode the myths of Heracles, I have gone into them through my own act of imaginative penetration, which has been surprisingly rewarding. Each of the Labors turned out to convey incisive spiritual import, presented in a unique perspective that epitomizes the dawn of humanity's collective wisdom, as far as we know it.

The most surprising thing I have learned since I accidentally began this exegesis of Heracles is how little the ancient myths are understood—more, that humans have so lost touch with their traditional wisdom that the archetypal foundations of the psyche depicted in it are by and large considered trivial and hardly worth a passing glance. The future is all about roaring ahead into a technological wonderland in search of salvation, or at least surcease from sorrow. Rather than acknowledging the miraculous essence of existence and actualizing our innate potentials, as Heracles once did, we are hell-bent on abandoning ourselves and becoming something or someone else.

From the perspective of our wise elders, such brash escapism is nothing more than an old tragedy dressed up in modern garb. We would be better served to get to know the vast potential lying untapped in our unconscious. The Labors of Heracles are a teaching tool to show us how we might go about it.

Heracles had to perform his Labors because of a tragic failing of his own. In a fit of insanity he killed his wife and children, his immediate family. For most people our psychological faults have the most grievous impact on those close to us, and to set things aright we must recover our sanity by wrestling with those very faults and neutralizing them. Heracles' success with the Labors brought him immortality, which is an exalted state of mind rather than eternal bodily life. He did die later, as we shall see.

To humans, the world is viewed backwards, as a reflection of our awareness, as if in a mirror. We are loving beings born into a more or less stressful and dangerous environment, mesmerized by our reflections and projections in the mirror of life into turning away from our core nature. Often a substitute self appears in the mirror before our eyes: a chimera or mirage embodying our hopes, promising to lead us to safety. And so we reach out endlessly toward the insubstantial phantoms that play over the surface of our days. Few realize that what we are really seeking is already in us, and the reason we can never find it is that we are looking in the wrong direction, away from who we are.

The only two sources I found that understand this in relation to Heracles' Labors—both extremely obscure—have made up the bulk of my insight gathering, other than my own meditations. They are the three stupendous volumes of *The Revelation in the Wilderness* by Dr. G.H. Mees, surveying the vast universe of ancient myths with a keen eye, and the slim tract *Sacred Mythoi of Demigods and Heroes*, by the editors of The Shrine of Wisdom, in England, which affords some excellent insight on Heracles and on myths (or mythoi) in general. I have quoted from both at some length because their tone is very different from my own.

Dr. Mees points out that the absence of meaning in understanding myths is nothing new—it has been lost for millennia. Yet there is hope:

In classical Greece the meaning of Greek myth had been all but forgotten, so much so that Hesiod and others who are our sources of information on Greek myth, did not themselves know their meaning. Hence occasional inconsistencies are met with, as the entertainment value of the myths as dramatic tales sometimes developed at the expense of symbolic meaning. But, nevertheless, at the hand of the symbolic keys, the meaning of the myths nearly always stands out sufficiently clear. (iii, 211-12)

Mees teaches that the power of myths is that they speak to us on multiple levels: physical, emotional, logical and intuitive, corresponding to the elements earth, water, fire and air. The harmonious combination of all the elements results in spiritual catharsis, bringing us to the quintessence or fifth realm, corresponding symbolically to akasha or space. Part of the poverty of modern readings of myths is that they focus only on the physical and rational aspects, almost entirely omitting any emotional, intuitive and spiritual implications. Mees regretfully notes how far myths have fallen in our time, in his Introduction to *The Key to Genesis*:

Modern man has so completely forgotten what a myth is, that the expression “it is a myth” is now being used to denote something of baseless imagination or nonsense.

Heracles’ Labors

In order to become a hero—Greek for spiritually realized being— Heracles was assigned twelve impossible tasks. Not all writers gave the labors in the same order. Apollodorus (2.5.1-2.5.12) gives the one I and many others use:

1. To kill the Nemean Lion.
2. To destroy the Lernaean Hydra.
3. To capture the Ceryneian Hind.
4. To capture the Erymanthian Boar.
5. To clean the Augean Stables.
6. To kill the Stymphalian Birds.
7. To capture the Cretan Bull.
8. To round up the Mares of Diomedes.
9. To steal the Girdle of Hippolyte.
10. To herd the Cattle of Geryon.
11. To fetch the Apples of Hesperides.
12. To capture Cerberus.

Mees and others have them in reverse order of the zodiac:

- 1 Lion – Sagittarius
- 2 Hydra – Scorpio
- 3 Boar – Libra
- 4 Hind – Virgo
- 5 Birds – Leo
- 6 Girdle – Cancer
- 7 Stable – Gemini
- 8 Bull – Taurus
- 9 Mares – Aries
- 10 Cattle – Pisces
- 11 Golden Apples – Aquarius
- 12 Cerberus – Capricorn

Sacred Mythoi's order:

- 1 Mares – Aries
- 2 Bull – Taurus
- 3 Cattle – Gemini
- 4 Hydra – Cancer
- 5 Lion – Leo
- 6 Boar – Virgo
- 7 Stable – Libra
- 8 Birds – Scorpio
- 9 Hind (Stag) – Sagittarius
- 10 Cerberus – Capricorn
- 11 Girdle – Aquarius
- 12 Golden Apples – Pisces

Many of the monsters and mythical beasts that Heracles is sent to master are said to be devastating the countryside. In spiritual terms this means that unless we deal with our negative proclivities, they cause disasters to our environment, psychic as

well as physical. Left alone they continue to raise a ruckus. But by Heracles overcoming them and taking them to the king—the wise seat of judgment, or the witness—they cease causing trouble.

A number of the monsters are associated with Ares, the god of war, which tips us off to their role in conflict. That they are tamed or killed symbolizes thorough neutralization of their negative powers. Dr. Mees expounds on this in his exegesis of the Book of Genesis:

The 26th verse tells us that the Spiritual Man should rule the lower functions of his psyche. He should have dominion over the fish of the sea, symbolizing the lower emotional or erotic life, and over the fowl of the air, symbolizing the lower aspects of the spiritual life.... Further he should have dominion over the cattle, symbolizing the higher, creative, emotional life. Cattle yield milk. Milk is in many traditions symbolic of “the stream of consciousness” and of the nourishing properties of the Motherly Moon-Sphere. It yields cream, universally a symbol of the Quintessence or Ether. The “chrism” of Christianity is a form of this “cream.” The words are even etymologically related....

Man must have dominion “over all the earth.” [In other words] Man must rule the urges in his lower mind.

Finally man must have dominion over “every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth.” This has reference to the libido manifesting physically or with regard to the material plane. (The Key to Genesis, 68-9)

While I will be interpreting these myths as psychological scenarios, *Sacred Mythoi* does the same based on occult spirituality. It should not be too difficult to discern the connection. Here’s how the booklet presents the general outline of the Labors:

Although his famous Twelve Labours are more or less familiar to the majority of students, yet probably few have undertaken

the work involved in their full interpretation. It is evident from their nature that they symbolize in some manner the tasks which the Soul must accomplish in order to gain liberation from the entanglements of the mundane realms of Form and Sense. [These and Hercules' other ordeals] may be regarded as relating to the circumstances of the Soul's descent into Matter and its ultimate progress through the supermundane realms to the glory of final freedom and conscious immortality. (11)

The perverted human will misuses the force of Providence through selfishness, ignorance, or other reasons, and thus produces all manner of abnormalities. These are symbolized by the monsters and inordinations which Hercules has to overcome. (13)

The Meaning of Myths

Symbols are archetypal images that can transcend their period of history to communicate their message. They don't have to depend on interpretations by any intervening person or institution, which is quite fortunate, since the meaning of most of the symbols from humanity's distant past have been lost or seriously watered down. Ancient initiates of the secrets of so many rich traditions have died without heirs. Even where there is a hierarchical lineage still in existence, degeneration and perversions of the traditions have made their interpretations dubious if not downright contrary to their original intent.

It is a Herculean labor left to concerned individuals in every era to revivify the mythic symbols with fresh understanding, taking into account the suggestions of currently popular opinion without being blinded by them. This is certainly the case with the Greek myths, which are now viewed mainly through the unsympathetic lenses of modern science and religion when examined at all. Christianity has recently been blessed with discoveries of some ancient scrolls that bypass thousands of years of revisionism, but

such “acts of God,” while extremely fortunate, are exceedingly rare. When they do happen, the discoveries reveal all too clearly that the present day institutions bear little or no resemblance with the aims of their founding philosophers.

This is by way of admitting that while I have studied several sources regarding the meaning of Greek myths, the interpretations I am offering are not sanctioned by any official imprimatur. In most cases, scholars have been content to relate the stories without probing for hidden meanings. This is fair enough, as it allows everyone to draw whatever inspiration they can from them, and no one can ever be completely certain what the originators had in mind or even who they were. But it is clear to some of us that the stories have special significance; that they are brimming with implications. They speak to us directly in our hearts. Great art was ever thus.

In this series on Heracles I have done nothing more than what each of you might do with any myth or other work of art, given the time and inclination. I first read several versions of them and simply absorb them for a while. Initially they often strike me as ordinary stories with no particular meaning, but then I sit with them for a while and just muse about them. Later I’ll go for a long walk in the woods, and at some point ideas will start boiling up about the implications of the story. Each insight produces several more, in a kind of information cascade.

Whenever I had a flash of insight I jotted it down, and when what I jotted looked good after a few days reflection I didn’t throw it away. Before long the features began to coalesce into a coherent narrative, which several times brought me to an incandescent realization of deeper meanings. At those times I felt as if I was receiving rare wisdom from a remote and long-neglected source.

This is what we are supposed to do with myths: permit our well-primed unconscious data banks to pour out their understanding into our consciousness. By sharing what I’ve discovered—inescapably personal and different from the next person’s version—I hope to stimulate a similar “corpus of

discovery” in whoever is interested in doing the same kind of mining. The last thing I want is to replace the adventure of digging with some fixed platitude that kills the whole business.

To a degree it is actually a blessing that so many of the ancient stories have come down to us without being Bowdlerized by didactic interpretations, which poison so much of the purity of the ancient tales in so-called “living” religions. Our task is to be the disciple to the myths’ guruhood: if we ponder and learn from them, they will shed light into our psychic darkness. This being the case, perhaps I am doing a disservice by sharing my own insights, but I do it in the spirit of bringing the dead back to life. My conclusions should not be taken as gospel, but only as a jumping off place for further explorations, by you.

With this in mind, let us examine the overall myth of the Labors of Heracles. First off, Dr. Mees, that wizard of mythology himself, reminds us “It is significant that the name Herakles, Latinized as Hercules, means ‘renowned through Hera’. The Consort of Zeus represents the Mother-Goddess of the Moon-Sphere. Her garments were said to shine like the summer sea and she wore jewels like the stars of heaven... She was said to be the fairest of all the Goddesses, even fairer than Venus.” (ii, 78). Such a special hero is not likely to have been intended as a buffoon for comic relief. His name alone tips us off that there is deep water here. The rare and curious book, *Sacred Mythoi of Demigods and Heroes*, agrees:

Heracles... signifies “Hera’s Greatness and Glory.” ...
Hercules, as her glory, is the symbol of the ultimately triumphant Soul; while the ordeals through which he emerges successfully are the types of the experiences which all souls, consciously or unconsciously, undergo in their struggles for perfection. (11)

Sacred Mythoi sets the tone for using myths for spiritual enlightenment with a quotation of Proclus, (fifth century CE), from his Apology for the Fables of Homer:

He who has established Intellect (Spirit) as the leader of his life, such a one will most opportunely participate in the illuminations concealed in mythoi; but he who is devoid of instruction cannot safely engage in their speculation.... Mythoi inspire the hearers in an all-various manner to the investigation of Truth; attract us to arcane knowledge; so that we are not content with superficial conceptions and apparent probability, but are impelled to penetrate the inner significance of the mythoi, to explore the veiled purpose of their authors, and to survey the natures and powers which they intended to signify to posterity by means of such mystical symbols. (5)

It seems that once upon a time people understood that myths were far more than merely entertaining stories. Yet Mees and this anonymous tract are the only sources I've encountered that provide a meaningful exegesis of the Labors of Heracles. Here's how the booklet sets the stage:

In the legends and mythoi of all nations there appear great characters, heroes, demigods and immortals, who stand out for all mortals to behold as the personification of sublime ideals, profound truths and grand purposes. (1)

According to the Mythos, Hercules was given the choice of a life of pleasure and ease, or one of virtue and service, and, like all great Heroes, he unhesitatingly chose the latter. This is the original expression of the Soul's inherent elective power, by which it makes the Great Choice. For every son of God is originally free, although when united with the body of the Mundane World, the memory of this pristine freedom becomes dim.

And since it was to be his to make manifest the inherent strength and greatness of the human Soul, it becomes more explicable why Hera should persistently oppose Hercules rather than assist him in his labours; for the Soul's own greatness is made manifest in the manner in which it overcomes obstacles by its own latent powers, rather than by the way in which it triumphs when co-operating with other powers.

Thus, Hercules is indeed a Hero of heroes. (12)

The Interpretation of Myths

The value of myths may be greater when they are not understood by the conscious mind so much as allowed to speak to our deeper selves. Conscious manipulation interferes to a greater or lesser extent with the purity of the symbolic message, so at the very least we should acknowledge the supra-conscious impact of what we hear or read. As Karen Armstrong, the historical chronicler of God, puts it, "In order to work effectively, a symbol has to be experienced as a direct link to the more elusive and transcendent reality to which it directs our attention."

Fred Haas, a disciple of Swami John Spiers of the Narayana Gurukula, wrote a lengthy Foreword to Spiers' as yet unpublished book, *Pagan Europe*, elaborating on this point:

Mythos is a dynamic flowing (itself rooted in "history") of cosmic sacredness and spontaneous spiritual activity, proportionally representing and revealing the numinous presences and powers symbolized by gods and goddesses and lesser figures, frequently humanly represented. The *knowing* of a myth is in the meaningful experience of the individual. Myth is *read* like a work of art. It is a numinous structuring of reality with archetypal images which in turn are connected to the natural world as progression, but not as mere static progress.

Myth is not simply knowledge of some thing. It is much more. Its “rationale” is its pre-established trans-rationality. It is like a gigantic painting or symphony depicting a variety of elements which “reveal” their basic intentionality to each individual who does not willfully read *into* their mystic rubric, but gets *from*. (For instance, one does not listen *into* a symphony in a conceptual manner—unless, perhaps, if one is an academic musicologist; rather, one lets the symphony reveal itself, i.e. enter in.) One does not intellectually *think about* myth. Rather, one mythically thinks. A myth is a universal symbol, while a fact or a rationalized digested portion of a myth is but a note or notes in the mythic harmonic score.

One is not a myth maker, but a myth experiencer. Its “knowledge” is appreciation and deep felt experience, and because myth has no common ground with dogma, creed or catechism, its appeal is both sacred and profane, because it deals with the whole of life, itself being free from all sadomasochistic theological notions of sin and the accompanying “fear and trembling,” which belongs to dogmatic ecclesiasticism. (22)

Despite Haas’ passionate and insightful disquisition, I believe there is room for intelligent, educated listening, alongside the childlike openness that Haas champions. Knowledge makes the meaning even more dynamic and enlightening, as long as the openness isn’t lost. Taking his example of listening to a symphony, I love that type of music partly because I’m familiar with it and know something about it, where those who don’t know it might tend to shrug it off as of no value. While sophistication in the adult mind can block the appreciation that a child more readily brings to many forms of communication, it can also lead us past initial challenges to discover the riches hidden within them. Myths are like classical music in being “old fashioned” and not so readily appreciated as we might hope, so some encouragement is usually needed to give them a fair hearing. Encouragement is a very

important role for the intellect. At least it is easier to point out exciting details in a myth than it is to describe music and successfully convey its potency.

Esteemed child psychologist Bruno Bettelheim, in comparing fairy tales and myths, initially makes a distinction I don't think is wholly valid, but the conclusions he draws from the generalization are spot on. All the following quotes are found on page 45 of my edition of *The Uses of Enchantment* (NY: Vintage Books, 1977). He begins with the invalid distinction:

Myths and fairy tales both answer the eternal questions: What is the world really like? How am I to live my life in it? How can I truly be myself? The answers given by myths are definite, while the fairy tale is suggestive: its messages may imply solutions, but it never spells them out. Fairy tales leave to the child's fantasizing whether and how to apply to himself what the story reveals about life and human nature.

I'm confident that my exegesis of the Labors of Heracles, whatever its faults, shows that these myths aren't spelling out anything definite; certainly they are little understood and seldom explicated. Bettelheim is writing about children and their needs, so perhaps a better distinction is that fairy tales are for children and myths are similar teaching tools for adults. I like to believe that for adults there is much that can be learned by looking beneath the surface of both myths and tales. I recap this part of Bettelheim's argument because it underlines the value of vagueness, which is often underappreciated, possibly because it is a major fault in other types of writing, like journalistic reporting and social contracts. Spiritual insights bloom from suggestive teachings like analogies and parables, not to mention poetry, where the lack of specificity leaves plenty of room to apply them to a wide range of circumstances. What's more, the relatively unformed awareness of childhood thrives on imaginative tales and recoils from pedantry. Bettelheim continues:

The fairy tale proceeds in a manner which conforms to the way a child thinks and experiences the world; this is why the fairy tale is so convincing to him. He can gain much better solace from a fairy tale than he can from an effort to comfort him based on adult reasoning and viewpoints. A child trusts what the fairy story tells, because its world view accords with his own.

Whatever our age, only a story conforming to the principles underlying our thought processes carries conviction for us. If this is so for adults... it is exclusively true for the child.

Speaking of conviction, the oral presentation of a myth works best for children, if not trusting adults, because saying something implies approval, while merely reading it out makes its message sound like it is coming from far away, and is therefore open to doubt. Children intuitively recognize the difference between a rote presentation and a spontaneous, living performance.

Recent brain imaging studies have begun to unveil some startling and exciting truths about who we are, which continue to bring science and religion closer together. Alison Gopnik, in her article *How Babies Think*, in *Scientific American* magazine of July 2010, relates an experiment that we can now read as an examination of Bettelheim's take on the value of permitting people to think for themselves:

In other recent research my group found that young children who think they are being instructed modify their statistical analysis and may become less creative as a result. The experimenter showed four-year-olds a toy that would play music if you performed the right sequence of actions on it, such as pulling a handle and then squeezing a bulb. For some children the experimenter said, "I don't know how this toy works—let's figure it out." She proceeded to try out various longer action sequences for the children, some that ended with

the short sequence and made music and some that did not. When she asked the children to make the toy work, many of them tried the correct short sequence, astutely omitting actions that were probably superfluous based on the statistics of what they had seen.

With other children, the experimenter said that she would teach them how the toy worked by showing them sequences that did and did not produce music, and then she acted on the toy in exactly the same way. When asked to make the toy work, these children never tried a shortcut. Instead they mimicked the entire sequence of actions. Were these children ignoring the statistics of what they saw? Perhaps not—their behavior is accurately described by a Bayesian model in which the “teacher” is expected to choose the most instructive sequences. In simple terms: if she knew shorter sequences worked, she would not have shown them the unnecessary actions.

This tells us, among other things, that creative thinking does not have to be taught. It is our true nature. Much of what passes for teaching is actually the suppression of our innate genius in favor of conformity, a tragic sacrifice worthy of an ancient Greek myth.

The two prongs of Gopnik’s experiment are like the difference between myths and fairy tales on the one hand, and pedagogical rationality on the other. The former encourage creativity while the latter suppresses it. Ideally the spiritual aspirant yogically synthesizes both approaches into a wisdom that is at once creative and intelligent.

The mystery of the magical thinking of children stands in contrast to the straightforward rationality adults are supposed to operate under—even though they often don’t—and the changeover is an intriguing process. Spiritual evolution echoes the transformation, as is made clear by reading between the lines of Bettelheim’s assertion:

[A fairy tale] directs the child's thinking about his own development without ever telling what it ought to be, permitting the child to draw his own conclusions. This process alone makes for true maturing, while telling the child what to do just replaces the bondage of his own immaturity with a bondage of servitude to the dicta of adults.

This is a key truth that should never be lost, but sadly we live in a world where it is often considered subversive to strive to escape from servitude. Moreover, it takes real expertise to offer just enough and not too much advice, so that listeners can draw their own conclusions. You might have noticed how it is mandatory in books and movies nowadays to point out the obvious, so that everyone can “get it.” To those who appreciate subtlety, such heavy-handedness is at the minimum extremely unartistic, if not counterproductive. I sincerely hope I haven't perpetrated a similar transgression with this exegesis.

I'm providing a rational interpretation of the Heracles myth, because it is territory that has been little explored. Bettelheim puts such myths on the side of rationality to begin with, but they really do speak to us in protolanguage—the language of nonverbal imagery. Some of their more prosaic pronouncements may have been added after the fact by pedagogues in the distant past, and this is surely true of fairy tales as well. I am well aware how didactic explanations run the risk of spoiling the inspirational value of a myth. My hope, beyond discovering the intricacies of these fascinating stories for myself, is to stimulate the interest of other readers for what is generally passed off as an archaic tale, and to offer some indication of their possible meanings. In any case I'm quite sure that no one would accuse me of being a mouthpiece for the status quo.... I think we should all have lots of creative fun!

The Debasing of Myths

Humans love to keep records, and tend to believe that what they are experiencing in the present is the high point of all history. So all manner of beliefs, from the worst to the best, have been handed down to us. Poisonous beliefs can be useful insofar as they demonstrate what *not* to do or think, and are not treated as divine dispensations to be adhered to. We can also be grateful that thoughtful truth seekers in the past did yeoman's work in preserving much of the best of ancient wisdom and discarding the junk. The task of interested truth seekers is to decode and make sense of this legacy. We can decide for ourselves what value the myths have, though they should be accorded the benefit of the doubt until decently understood. Somebody up the line—usually many somebodies—found them worthy of preservation, and took the formidable amount of time to copy them before they disintegrated, many times over.

I was delighted to discover Heracles had a place of honor in Renaissance philosophy. It turns out that only recently has he fallen from grace to become an object of derision, or at best an entertaining oaf. (The last section of this Introduction gives some examples.) This is a testament to the modern world's bottomless hubris and near total ignorance of the spiritual side of humanity's quest for wisdom. Heracles epitomized indomitable courage and tenacious determination to accomplish his tasks, qualities essential to spiritual progress. In a world where every problem appears to have a pushbutton solution, where a more efficient app is the key to success and real effort is considered tedious, such persistence seems quaint and unnecessary. Perhaps that is why we are witnessing an explosion of mediocrity: we have given our hearts away, a sordid boon!

I could chafe at the debased level of intelligence in the modern milieu, but I prefer to offer an alternative. The myth of Heracles is an untapped jewel waiting to be admired. I will strip away its veils to the best of my ability and let you decide for yourself how much austere beauty it reveals.

The birth of the so-called Age of Reason (Spiers calls it the “badly misnamed” Age of Reason) in the seventeenth century took place amid flames of persecution so egregious that honest people resolved to never again accept anything smacking of religion or any kind of unprovable belief. We can hardly blame them, considering the tragedies unorthodox thinkers were subjected to, and for that matter continue to be subjected to in the twenty-first century. Unfortunately, with maniacal torturers close on the heels of anyone who dared to disagree with them, the baby of high values was expediently thrown out with the filthy bathwater of uncritical, intolerant beliefs.

The Renaissance and the Romantic era treated the ancient myths as meaningful symbols, but in our time they have been seen as fanciful stories only; good for entertainment perhaps, but meaningless. When science subtracted meaning from existence, it initiated a rent in the fabric of holistic thought that we increasingly suffer from. Soul-demeaning images are seen as no different from uplifting ones—in fact, their positions are often reversed. No wonder there are regular explosions of officially-sanctioned hatred and violence!

The Revelation of Dr. Mees (1903-1955)

A colleague of Carl Jung, G.H. Mees of Holland, was one of the most eminent scholars of the traditional myths of humankind in the twentieth century. Somewhere in the 1930s or early 1940s he underwent a “revelation in the wilderness” in which he perceived links between all the various traditions of the ancient world. He became a guru in India with his own ashram, spent much time with his neighbor Ramana Maharshi, and penned three volumes detailing his vision. Eventually two small books focusing on the first book of Genesis were added. My own guru, Nitya Chaitanya Yati, became his disciple around New Year’s Day of 1946, and typed up the final manuscript of *The Revelation in the Wilderness* while living and studying at the Kanva Ashram in Varkala, Kerala.

They parted amicably in 1951. The essence of this halcyon period is recounted in Nitya's autobiography, *Love and Blessings*.

Dr. Mees—Sadhu Ekarasa to his disciples—is little known to the outside world, and his book on mythology is a neglected masterpiece. Dr. Mees lived outside the limelight, and the few chapters about him in Nitya's autobiography, *Love and Blessings*, are by far the most extensive record of his life to date. There is another brief memoir of his successor, J.J. de Reede, available at http://www.newlives.freeola.net/interviews/36_hamsa_johannus_de_reede.php. This quote from the de Reede memoir could have come straight from Dr. Mees' own mouth:

Tradition, including religion, used to serve a purpose... and it still does. But in those countries where tradition and religion have been reduced to superstition and have been thrown out, their children stand bare-handed under a naked sky and have to start afresh as in the stone-age.

In this sense, St. Paul said: We should serve [not] in the oldness of the letter but in the newness of the spirit. It's the newness of the spirit which can be rediscovered when we find the inner meaning of tradition and religion incorporated in the collective sub-conscious and popping out in our own personality. In that we can find guidance, because the sages who have rigged up ritual, mythology, mystic literature, tradition and religion knew how to reach us according to our individual temperament and have taken us in the direction of where we really wanted to go in the first place.

Mees has written a definitive assessment of myth in the Introduction to *The Key to Genesis*. The most important part is:

Unfortunately the meaning of the basic symbols of the ancient traditions of mankind has been long forgotten, even though some symbolic implications have been preserved. But knowledge of a few words of a language does not give

understanding and command of that language. As words only serve a useful purpose when they can be grouped together to form intelligent sentences, so symbols are only of use and interest in their interrelation. A symbol by itself, that is, taken out of its context, has only a very vague inspirational value, largely depending on its connection with the unconscious. A symbol grouped intelligently with other symbols in a myth, a ritual or some other tradition remaining over from more enlightened times, contributes to a lesson in traditional psychology which may contain, literally, a world of meaning.

Modern ways of teaching are predominantly rational and both follow from and contribute to the fact that the people of the present age exist psychologically in a state of departments, in which the various functions carry on a semi-independent life and are often at loggerheads with one another. But ancient ways of teaching were synthetic and syncretic, and made a simultaneous appeal to all the functions. The ancient traditional way of teaching was by myth. Mythological stories dealt with psychological problems and their solution, and appealed to the emotions, the function of systematic thought, the moral man and the intuition. They were “inspiring”, appealed to the function of faith and brought insight into the mystery of life. When they were recited to the letter or enacted, it was a good training for the perceptive function of the various physical senses. The purpose of myths was to bring all functions into play at the same time.

Modern man has so completely forgotten what a myth is, that the expression “it is a myth” is now being used to denote something of baseless imagination or nonsense.

This is the case—need it be said—because myths have been interpreted in a literalistic manner. Mythological personalities have been taken to be personified forces of nature, when, on the contrary, they represent aspects of the psyche which were clothed in natural attributes. This course was inevitable, for man has no other material to draw upon for his metaphors and symbols than nature, both

material and animate. Though modern man, in his literature and pictorial art, is ever creating new metaphors, decorating and illustrating types of men with attributes borrowed from nature, it has so far not seriously occurred to him that his ancestors in past ages not only did the very same, but carried it to the extent of an exact psychological science, which was, as I have shown elsewhere, world-wide.

Mees' "elsewhere" is *The Revelation in the Wilderness*.

Honoring Heracles

Although the Labors have not been closely examined for their spiritual value, anywhere that I could find, Heracles was not always a mere cartoon character. For a very long time, especially during the Renaissance, he was considered a prime example of excellence, even equated with Christ at times. Shakespeare himself, in *Love's Labour's Lost* (IV, iii) mentions our hero:

For valour, is not Love a Hercules,
Still climbing trees in the Hesperides?

Robert Emmet Meagher, in his book *Herakles Gone Mad*, (Northampton, Mass.: Olive Branch Press, 2006), though not dealing with the Labors, recognized Heracles' appeal down through the ages:

In all of Greek myth there was no hero more beloved than Herakles. He combined phenomenal strength and courage with generosity and goodwill. He was the stuff of which legends are made, a statue waiting to be cast. (xi)

The greatest of all the Greek heroes was Herakles, one of the many offspring of the famously philandering Zeus. More than his mightiness, however, what was most striking about

Herakles was his popularity. His cult was ubiquitous throughout the Greek world. Deprived of a locatable grave, he was everywhere. There was no place, and for that matter never a time, that he was not honored. The complex of his myths is so old as to contain fossils of far earlier Neolithic, perhaps even Paleolithic, figures—the shaman, traversing the corridor from life to death and back again; the master of the animals, slaying and subduing monstrous beasts; the primordial warrior taking on fabled opponents, such as centaurs and Amazons.... His popularity was not simply a matter of the geographical reach of his cult, it was also a matter of his vulnerability and appeal. For all his invincibility as a superhero, he led an exhausting, laborious life that ended rather miserably. His days were long and often thankless, and his pleasures mostly simple. There was nothing slovenly, decadent, or arrogant about him. He was a hero without airs or attitude. He used his privileges and power more often for others than for himself. Like Prometheus, he was a lover of humankind, and humankind loved him back. (37)

The influential sixteenth century mythographer Natale Conti wrote about a range of myths concerning Heracles in his *Mythologiae* (1567). His chapter begins:

Hercules, who subdued and destroyed monsters, bandits, and criminals, was justly famous and renowned for his great courage. His great and glorious reputation was worldwide, and so firmly entrenched that he'll always be remembered. In fact the ancients honored him with his own temples, altars, ceremonies, and priests. But it was his wisdom and great soul that earned those honors; noble blood, physical strength, and political power just aren't good enough. (566)

—Natale Conti, *Mythologiae* Book 7, Chapter 1, as translated by John Mulryan and Steven Brown (Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2006), vol. 2, p. 566.

Classical Scholar and Theater historian Kathleen Riley has written a book on Euripides' play, *Herakles*. According to Riley, the Renaissance envisioned Heracles as an ideal Christian, and occasionally even as another Christ. She admits that some writers interpreted the Labors as intellectual feats rather than physical exploits. She writes:

In his *Iconologia* (1593) Cesare Ripa depicts Hercules as a perfect fusion of the three constituent parts of heroic virtue: the moderation of anger; the tempering of greed; and contempt for strife and pleasure. Hercules' club accordingly symbolizes reason, while his lion's skin represents generosity of mind and the conquest of concupiscence.

In the late Middle Ages Hercules was viewed as a standard-bearer for the contemplative life.

Riley, Kathleen, *The Reception and Performance of Euripides' Herakles* (New York: Oxford University Press Inc., 2008) p. 93.

The weapons wielded by the Indian gods are symbolic of intellectual and spiritual accomplishments. Divine weapons are those devices—mainly rhetorical—by which problems in life are solved. For instance, a thunderbolt represents the intensification of energy to break through an impasse. A knife dissects a situation so it can be studied in detail, and it also separates the useful from the useless parts, in a process known as discrimination. A sword represents the way the intellect can cut through to the core of any issue. Heracles' club would then represent something like invincible determination, or as Kathleen Riley has it, reason.

Finally, count on Joseph Campbell to home in on the important elements in humanity's historic record:

To grasp the full value of the mythological figures that have come down to us, we must understand that they are not only symptoms of the unconscious (as indeed are all human thoughts and acts) but also controlled and intended statements of certain spiritual principles, which have remained as constant throughout the course of human history as the form and nervous structure of the human physique itself.

Briefly formulated, the universal doctrine teaches that all the visible structures of the world – all things and all beings – are the effects of a ubiquitous power out of which they rise, which supports and fills them during the period of their manifestation, and back into which they must ultimately dissolve. This is the power known to science as energy, to the Melanesians as mana, to the Sioux Indians as wakonda, to the Hindus as shakti, and the Christians as the power of God. Its manifestation in the psyche is termed, by the psychoanalysts, libido. And its manifestation in the cosmos is the structure and flux of the universe itself.

Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, Part II - “The Cosmogonic Cycle”; Chapter 1 - “Emanations”; Section 1 - “From Psychology to Metaphysics”.

My own take on the monsters Heracles defeats accords with Campbell's: they are not only the products of selfishness and stupidity manifesting as incredibly hostile external forces, they also reflect normal ignorance and the quotidian proclivities of human beings. Occult works tend to delight in playing up the good versus evil polemic. The Vedanta of India, on the other hand, treats this dichotomy as part of the overarching problem of ignorance awaiting the light of unitive wisdom. The monsters are our own latent powers unleashed. Still, the Western heroic tradition very much permeates much of world culture, using excitement and fear as goads for us to face up to the spiritual hurdles that for the

unmotivated loom up unexpectedly out of the darkness to keep them bound in their place. It is certainly possible as well that the original version of the Herculean myth has been inflated and “sexed up” over the course of time to enchant and entertain later generations. We’ll need to employ the sharp knife of discrimination to weed out those embellishments.

Heracles as Buffoon

Heracles’ star has been steadily plummeting since his high honor during the Renaissance. The modern taste for derision has had a field day with him. If you accept only the surface details, then Heracles is easy to sneer at. Moreover, weak souls have always tried to raise themselves up by putting others down.

In a bookstore the other day I peeked in a new book on Greek myths to see what it had to say about Heracles. What I found made me happy I have been digging into these myths in the way I have:

Heracles was the most famous hero of a particular type in ancient Greece: He was strong, confident, and courageous. But he was either thoughtless or dense. He solved problems with brawn, not brain; he slew person after person, army after army, monster after monster. He made mistakes and felt awful about them, but he never changed his ways, he never learned from his mistakes. Yet at times he seemed almost jolly. The Greeks revered him, but they laughed at him, too.

from *The Treasury of Greek Mythology*, by Donna Jo Napoli (Wash DC: National Geographic Society, 2011), p. 143.

This is typical modernist dogma: that nothing prior to the present paradigm has any meaning or significance, beyond allowing us to momentarily indulge in a ripple of pitying laughter before passing on to better things. Then there’s this:

Although Herakles' labors have multiple determinants and levels of meaning, a recurrent theme is his attempt to demonstrate masculinity and potency, to meet and overcome sexual challenges (e.g., the daughters of Thespius, the Amazon queen). (<http://www.greecetravel.com/greekmyths/argos8.htm>)

All I can say is, Heracles must be seriously embarrassed by the trivial way his labors have been interpreted in modern times!

There is a whiff of suspicion in a few of these sources that there may be more to these myths than meets the eye. The admirable site <http://www.greekmythology.com> well reflects the present day attitude:

Heracles (or Hercules) is best known as the strongest of all mortals, and even stronger than many gods....

Offsetting his strength was a noticeable lack of intelligence or wisdom. Once, when the temperature was very high, he pulled his bow out and threatened to shoot at the sun. This, coupled with strong emotions in one so powerful, frequently got Heracles in trouble. While his friend and cousin Theseus ruled Athens, Heracles had trouble ruling himself. His pride was easily offended. He took up grudges easily and never forgot them. His appetites for food, wine, and women were as massive as his strength. Many of Heracles' great deeds occurred while doing penance for stupid acts done in anger or carelessness.

It would be easy to view Heracles as a muscle-bound buffoon. Indeed, many of the Greek comedy playwrights used his character this way. Even among serious critics, he was often seen as a primitive, brutal, and violent man. There is much evidence to support this view; his weapon of choice was a massive club; his customary garment was a lion skin, with the head still attached; he impiously wounded some of the gods; he threatened a priestess of Apollo at Delphi when an answer to

his questions was not forthcoming. He created most of his own problems.

The view of Heracles shifted considerably over time. The early view focused on how badly he managed despite his obvious gifts. As time passed the focus shifted to his virtues. The Romans valued him highly as he best fit their idea of a hero. He eventually had a fair sized cult that worshiped him as a god.

If you read some of my interpretations, I think you'll find these notions of his imbecility baffling and embarrassing. After scouring the net, I did find one site that hinted at but did not explore very far into the possibilities:

Behind its outer meaning, Greek religion often hid an inner mystical tradition, and thus the labours could be interpreted as a symbolization of the spiritual path. This is particularly evident in an analysis of the eleventh, in which Hercules travels to a garden in which grows an apple tree with magical fruit, the tree of life, guarded by a dragon and some sisters—a parallel to the biblical legend of the garden of Eden where a snake encourages the use of an (unnamed) fruit tree, granting the knowledge of good and evil. The last three labours (10-12) of Herakles are generally considered metaphors about death.

(<http://www.hellenicaworld.com/Greece/Mythology/en/HeraclesLabours.html>)

However, beyond connecting the labors to certain constellations, the site doesn't provide any spiritual exploration. Basically, in every source I have examined, the bare outlines of the myth are repeated, but no one hazards a guess as to whether there is any symbolic meaning beyond the cover story.

Here is one more example of how the ancient pearls have been trampled in the mud of the Age of Hubris. Bestselling author of all time, Agatha Christie, in *The Labors of Hercules* (NY: Dell,

1968, p. 9), ridicules the romantic attraction to the classics that prevailed in the West not too long ago. At the behest of a priggish academic type enamored of the age-old romances, ace detective Hercule Poirot—himself named after Hercules—is perusing the Greek myths and thinks:

Take this Hercules—this hero! Hero indeed? What was he but a large muscular creature of low intelligence and criminal tendencies!... This ancient Hercules probably suffered from *grand mal*. No, Poirot shook his head, if *that* was the Greeks' idea of a hero, then measured by modern standards it certainly would not do. The whole classical pattern shocked him. These gods and goddesses—they seemed to have as many different aliases as a modern criminal. Indeed they seemed to be definitely criminal types. Drink, debauchery, incest, rape, loot, homicide and chicanery—enough to keep a *juge d'Instruction* constantly busy. No decent family life. No order, no method. Even in their crimes, no order or method!

“Hercules indeed!” said Hercule Poirot, rising to his feet, disillusioned.

To a materialist, virtually all the wisdom of the ancients is nothing more than tedious superstition and unscientific speculation. But, as I have rediscovered in scrutinizing Heracles, myths are like the Absolute itself: hiding in plain sight, waiting patiently to be noticed for the treasures they safeguard. Feel free to take a look.