

ON THE THRESHOLD OF HADES: Necromancy and *Nékyia* in some Passages of Greek Tragedy

1. Presentation

First of all I'm going to focus on a fragment by Aeschylus that contains a 'pseudo-*katábasis*': it recreates the necromantic ritual performed by Odysseus in order to invoke the dead and penetrate into Hades, taking as reference Book XI of the *Odyssey*. Then I will deal with two *katabáseis* themselves, mentioned by Euripides, one of Orpheus and the other of Heracles, along with a 'project' of *katábasis* of the latter to take up Alcestis from Hades that, at the end, did not materialize ¹.

2. Aeschylus, fr. 273a *Psychagogoi*: a necromantic ritual at the gates of Hades

1. Introduction

The Aeschylus' tragedy called *Psychagogoi* or *The Spirit-Raisers* seems to be based on Book XI of the *Odyssey*, where the evocation is described, followed by the *katábasis* of Odysseus in search of Tiresias to get information about his future and return to his homeland ².

In the *Odyssey* the structure of the descent into Hades is complex because in its initial part it cannot be a *katábasis* strictly speaking, but rather a necromantic ritual performed on the edge of the world, at the gates of Hades, in order to lure the souls of the dead out of the place where they are,

1. For the *katabáseis* of these three heroes cf. J. L. CALVO MARTÍNEZ (2000).

2. This play is accepted as the first in a tetralogy formed also by *Penelope*, *Bone Pickers* and, as a satirical drama, *Circe*. All of them would have a plot consisting of Odysseus' return to Ithaca and his revenge on the suitors. The possibility that *The Spirit-Raisers* is a satyric drama has been argued (J. VAN LEEUWEN [1890], p. 72, n. 1), based on the tone of fr. 275, where a prophecy says that Odysseus will die because of a fish bone. But in the light of the rest of the fragments, especially fr. 273 which concerns us, that assumption seems inappropriate.

and find Tiresias' soul among them. It is from verse 568 onwards that souls stop climbing out, and Odysseus already seems to be in the depths of Hades.

Katábasis and necromancy are often closely related, because both represent a violation of the natural boundaries that separate the living from the dead and prevent them from communicating with each other. Furthermore, in the particular case of Odysseus, with the juxtaposition of both methods, he seeks a knowledge with which only the dead can provide him ³.

Fragment 273a of Aeschylus' *Psychagogoi* seems to describe the initial part of Odysseus' *katábasis*, consisting of the location of the place where the entrance to Hades is supposed to be. It also details the prayers and sacrifices that must be performed to invoke the souls and how they flocked together around him:

ΧΟ. Ἄγε νῦν, ὃ ξεῖν', ἐπὶ ποιοφύτων
 ἴστω σηκῶν φοβεράς λίμνης
 ὑπὸ τ' αὐχένιον λαιμὸν ἀμήσας
 τοῦδε σφαγίου ποτὸν ἀψύχοις
 αἷμα μεθίει
 δονάκων εἰς βένθος ἀμαυρόν.
 Χθόνα δ' ὠγγίαν ἐπικεκλόμενος
 χθόνιον θ' Ἑρμῆν πομπὸν φθιμένων
 [αἰ]τοῦ χθόνιον Δία γυκτιπύλων
 ἔσμον ἀνεῖναι ποταμοῦ στόματων,
 οὐ τόδ' ἀπορρῶξ ἀμέγαρτον ὕδωρ
 κάχερνιπτον
 Στυγίοις νᾶ[σ]μοῖσιν ἀνεῖται ⁴.

Chorus: Come now, stranger, take your stand
 On the grass-grown borders of the fearsome lake,
 Slit the windpipe in the neck
 Of this sacrificial beast, and let the blood run
 Down into the dim, reedy depths.
 Call upon the age-old Earth
 And Hermes of the Underworld, escort of the departed.
 And ask the Zeus of the Underworld to send up
 The swarm of souls from the night-shrouded mouth of the river
 The river whose offshoots is this body of water, gloomy
 And not fit for the washing of hands,
 Rising up from the streams of Styx.

(Trans. A. H. SOMMERSTEIN, *Aeschylus Fragments*, Cambridge, 2008.)

3. In the same way Aeneas wants to know his future. Other authors use the *katábasis* to explain the acquisition of deeper and more philosophical knowledge like Parmenides, Plato or Plutarch.

4. Köln Papyrus 125, col. II.

2. Comparison with the *Odyssey*⁵ and the Persians. The ritual of invocation

In the *Odyssey* (X, 516-537 and XI, 23-50) Circe shows the hero the way to reach the entrance of Hades and tells him that a hole should be dug there to make libations in it. Then he should slaughter a black lamb and a black sheep to attract the crowd of the dead souls with the smell of blood.

In Aeschylus' fragments neither the libations nor the kind of animal that must be sacrificed are mentioned. However, special relevance is given to the blood of the victims (for example, putting the word αἷμα at the beginning of verse 5), because the blood is what will really attract the souls upwards. The text of Aeschylus could be considered a reduced version of the *Odyssey*⁶, but with an important difference: in this case it is not Circe, a magician on her island, who gives instructions to Odysseus, but the chorus of spirit-raisers in the site where the ritual should be performed. Perhaps that is the reason why in the *Odyssey* Circe proposes to open a temporary access to the Underworld through a hole dug in the ground for that occasion. In Aeschylus' play the pit is replaced by the reedbed of the lake⁷ into which the Underworld rivers flow and beside which the chorus is settled; it seems to be a group of "professional" spirit-raisers in a sacred place where these activities are usually carried out; this is suggested by the word σηκῶν, "sacred place", in verse 2.

Aeschylus speaks of prayers in honor of Ancient Earth (Χθόνα ὠγγύϊαν), Chthonic Hermes (χθόνιον Ἑρμῆν) and Chthonic Zeus (χθόνιον Δία). He insists on the root χθον- at the beginning of verses 7, 8 and 9 to characterize each of the divinities and to make clear that their domain is the Beyond, understood as a place that lies in the depths of the Earth. He also stresses this with the iteration of the verb ἀνίημι in verses 10 and 13.

The first prayer must be in Earth's honor, qualified with the epithet ὠγγύϊα. This epithet perhaps refers to the fact that from the beginning Earth

5. Detailed studies of the *Psychagogoi* with regard to the *Odyssey* can be found in A. KATSOURIS (1982, p. 47-51), Catherine COUSIN (2005) and also J. M. LUCAS DE DIOS (2008), p. 667-668.

6. Probably the text of Aeschylus has fewer details than the *Odyssey* because it is written in order to be represented, and some of the details could be staged but not explicitly mentioned.

7. In iconography the reedbeds are frequently associated with Hades, cf. e.g. *LIMC s.v.* Charon I, plates 33-41; *LIMC s.v.* Odysseus, plate 149. Also Pausanias (X, 28, 1), describing a painting by Polygnotos in Phocis, which represented the *katábasis* of Odysseus, says: "there is water that seems to represent a river, obviously Acheron, and reeds grow in it."

is the place that contains the world of the dead⁸. Therefore Earth could be understood here as the intermediary with whom Odysseus must first communicate to send his prayers and libations to the dead and to the gods of the Netherworld. The introduction of this divinity in the context of Odysseus' invocation of the dead seems to be an innovation of Aeschylus in opposition to the Homeric text⁹.

We can see significant parallels with the *Persians*' scene of invocation where the same gods are mentioned¹⁰. Here Earth acts as a channel of communication with the underground dead and gods, because she hides them in her womb and absorbs the libations Atossa sends them¹¹:

Ἄλλ', ὦ φίλοι, χοῦσι ταῖσδε νερτέρων
 ὕμνους ἐπευφημεῖτε, τὸν τε δαίμονα
 Δαρεῖον ἀνακαλεῖσθε, γαπότης δ' ἐγὼ
 τιμὰς προπέμψω τάσδε νερτέροις θεοῖς.

Now, friends, accompany these drink-offerings to the nether powers with auspicious songs, and call up the divine Darius; meanwhile I will send these honours on their way to the gods below, by letting the earth drink them up.

(Aesch., *Pers.*, 619-622, trans. A. H. SOMMERSTEIN, *Aeschylus I*, Cambridge, 2008.)

Secondly Hermes is invoked in his well-known role of *psychagogos*¹². Since this god helps the dead's souls reach Hades, he is invoked in this type

8. In verse 1036 of *Eumenides*, Aeschylus applies the same epithet to the depths of the Earth, even lower than the realm of the dead, inhabited by the Erinyes: γὰρ ὑπὸ κεύθεσιν ὠγγύιστιν.

9. Aeschylus himself mentions again Earth relating to the invocation of souls, but she is called Γῆ: *Pers.*, 219-220 and 523-524, and *Ch.*, 127, 399 and 489 in the invocations of Darius' and Agamemnon's souls respectively.

10. Aesch., *Pers.*, 629-630.

11. The big difference is that in the ritual of *Persians* the libations do not contain blood (they are of honey, milk, wine and oil, and braided flowers). D. OGDEN (2001, p. 171) considered the possibility that perhaps the bloody sacrifice was not an essential part of the necromantic ritual, although he also points out that the absence of such a sacrifice could be due to the difficulty of representing it on stage; against this, we observe that fr. 273a clearly mentions an animal sacrifice and the offering of its blood to the dead as main elements. Following H. D. BROADHEAD (1960, p. 305-309), I consider that this fact could be due to Aeschylus' intention to praise the spirit of Darius, who would heed the call of his wife without any animal bloodshed. Perhaps Aeschylus recreates this type of ritual by removing all traces of magic or superstition to make it more acceptable to the State religion.

12. We can find Hermes in this role in a multitude of texts; already in *Od.*, XXIV, 1-15; in tragedy there are noteworthy passages as Aesch., *Ch.*, 124, 621; Soph., *OC*, 1548; Eur., *Alc.*, 743. But Chthonic Hermes in Aeschylus seems to play the role of protector because he also promotes justice and revenge for the aggrieved souls, cf. Aesch., *Ch.*, 1, 727-728 and Soph., *El.*, 111. Cf. M. CASEVITZ (1997).

of necromantic rituals to help them follow the opposite way toward the world of the living.

Chthonic Zeus is a way of referring to Hades as the almighty god of the Underworld. This term in tragedy only recurs in Sophocles¹³. It might be an euphemistic way to refer to the god of the Netherworld without naming him directly, but stressing his great power. It may even reflect a tendency to the syncretism of the gods in the figure of Zeus¹⁴.

Aeschylus also gives more details regarding these invocations to the gods: he speaks on the one hand of invoking (ἐπιτεκλόμενος) Earth and Hermes together, on the other of asking ([αἰ]τοῦ) Chthonic Zeus to allow the crowd of souls to get out of Hades. This seems to imply a hierarchy: both Earth and Hermes will help the dead to ascend, the former because they are contained inside her and the latter due to his activity as a *psychagogos*, while Chthonic Zeus must grant those souls permission to break the natural order momentarily and communicate with the living. Zeus is the only one who rules over the Underworld. So also in the *Persians*, first the three gods together are prayed to so that they help and allow Darius to leave the Underworld, and then only Hades is begged to grant his permission:

Αἰδωνεύς δ' ἀναπομπὸς ἀνίει,
Αἰδωνεύς,
οἷον ἀνάκτορα Δαρῖᾶνα.

May Aidoneus release him and send him up, Aidoneus, the godlike ruler Darian!

(Aesch., *Pers.*, 649-651, trans. A. H. SOMMERSTEIN, *Aeschylus I*, Cambridge, 2008.)

3. Description of the entrance to Hades

The entrance to Hades is located beside a lake. Aeschylus' text uses the term λίμνη to refer to it and qualifies it as φοβερά, emphasizing its relationship with the realm of the dead. Many other passages mention the lake of

13. Soph., *OC*, 1606 and fr. 269C Radt; other passages in which Chthonic Zeus appears as designation of Hades are Paus., V, 14, 18; *OH* 41, 7 and 70, 2; Nonn., *Dion.*, XXVII, 93; XXXVI, 98. There are many other texts in which Hades is called Zeus, but not with the epithet χθόνιος; they use other qualifications instead. In the Aeschylean corpus we can find for instance: τὸν γάιον, τὸν πολυξενώτατον, Ζῆνα τῶν κεκμηκότων (*Supp.*, 156).

14. This identification between Zeus and Hades by Aeschylus reaches its maximum expression in fr. 228 where he makes Zagreus son of Hades, understood as another facet of Zeus.

Hades¹⁵, but we can highlight some verses of Euripides, where we find an allusion to the *katábasis* of Odysseus. It is a prediction by Cassandra:

Ὡς δὲ συντέμω,
ζῶν εἶς ἔς Ἄιδου κάκφυγῶν λίμνης ὕδωρ
κάκ' ἐν δόμοισι μυρί' εὐρήσει μολῶν.

To cut my story short, he will go down alive to Hades, and when he has escaped the lake water, he will go home to find countless troubles in his house.

(Eur., *Tro.*, 441-443, trans. D. KOVACS, *Euripides IV*, Cambridge, 1999.)

Euripides summarizes Odysseus' *katábasis* in two extremes: to enter Hades alive and to exit, also alive. He only mentions the lake as the main element of the Underworld.

The lake described by Aeschylus is fed by a river, the Acheron, which might become an underground stream along its course. Odysseus pours animal blood in the lake so that the river carries it to the dead. At the same time, those souls could rise through the mouth of the river, as a gate of Hades, where it joins another river of the Netherworld. Aeschylus says that this stream is an arm of the Styx. It is very likely to be the Cocytus, a river of Hades, which Homer also mentions. He uses words that fit Aeschylus' description of it:

Ἔνθα μὲν εἰς Ἀχέροντα Πυριφλεγέθων τε ρέουσι
Κώκυτός θ', ὅς δὴ Στυγὸς ὕδατός ἐστιν ἀπορρώξ,
πέτρῃ τε ζύνεσις τε δύο ποταμῶν ἐριδοῦπων·
ἐνθα δ' ἔπειθ', ἦρωες, χριμφθεῖς πέλας, ὡς σε κελεύω,
βόθρον ὀρύξαι ...

There into Acheron flow Pyriphlegethon and Cocytus, which is a branch of the water of the Styx; and there is a rock, and the meeting place of the two roaring rivers. Then there, hero, draw yourself close, as I bid you, and dig a pit ...

(*Od.*, X, 513-517, trans. A. T. MURRAY, *Homer Odyssey I*, Cambridge, 1995.)

Aeschylus seems to retain Homer's "river map" of Hades, but he simplifies it by excluding the Pyriphlegethon.

Aeschylus' fragment does not say anything clear about the description of Hades and how the souls of the dead linger there. But the adjectives and expressions that he uses seem to describe a very similar situation to the one Homer recreates: as we have already said, when describing the lake Aeschylus uses the adjective φοβερά, thus implying that the lake is a scary and chilling place. Moreover, as we can infer from the term νυκτιπόλος,

15. Other examples in tragedy: Soph., *El.*, 137 and fr. 523; Eur., *Alc.*, 253, 436, 902 and fr. 868.

darkness reigns in Hades. Regarding the dead, Aeschylus presents them as a swarm of bees, ἔσμός¹⁶, because of their speed and abundance when they go up drawn by the blood of the offerings. Perhaps this could be a reflection of how Homer refers to the souls of the slaughtered suitors as a flock of bats flitting around and screaming (*Od.*, XXIV, 1-15). Aeschylus also calls the dead ἄψυχοι, a term that alludes to their status as “inconsistent heads”, shadows that have lost the powers they had alive¹⁷.

3. Two *katabáseis* in Euripides: Orpheus and Heracles

In the Euripidean *corpus* the *katabáseis* of two different heroes appear: one of Orpheus in verses 357-362 of *Alcestis*, and another of Heracles in search of Cerberus in verses 601-613 of *Heracles* and in fr. 371 (Kannicht). All of this besides the possibility of descending to Hades in search of Alcestis stated in the homonymous tragedy (v. 850ff.). In all these cases the *katabasis* is “real” because the hero goes down to Hades in person.

1. *Orpheus, a descent in search of his wife*

The first literary reference to Orpheus’ *katabasis* is in verses 357-362 of *Alcestis*, and it is also the only evidence in Greek tragedy:

Εἰ δ’ Ὀρφέως μοι γλῶσσα καὶ μέλος παρῆν,
ὥστ’ ἢ κόρην Δήμητρος ἢ κείνης πόσιν
ὑμνοῖσι κηλήσαντά σ’ ἐξ Ἄϊδου λαβεῖν,
κατῆλθον ἄν, καὶ μ’ οὔθ’ ὁ Πλούτωνος κύων
οὔθ’ οὔτι κόπηι ψυχοπομπὸς ἄν Χάρων
ἔσχ’ ἄν, πρὶν ἐς φῶς σὸν καταστήσαι βίον.

If I had the voice and music of Orpheus so that I could charm Demeter’s daughter and her husband with song and fetch you from Hades, I would have gone down to the Underworld, and neither Pluto’s hound nor Charon the ferryman of souls standing at the oar would have kept me from bringing you back to the light alive.

(Eur., *Alc.*, 357-362, trans. D. KOVACS, *Euripides I*, Cambridge, 1994.)

16. Sophocles uses a similar expression to refer to the dead in fr. 879 Radt: βομβεῖ δὲ νεκρῶν σμήνος ἔρχεταιί τ’ ἄνω (cf. A. B. COOK [1895]).

17. A study of the terms νυκτιπόλος and ἄψυχοι in this fragment can be found in A. HENRICHS (1991), p. 187-192. For ἄψυχοι, cf. also H. LLOYD-JONES (1990, p. 355), and for νυκτιπόλος in other contexts cf. Sara M. MACÍAS OTERO (2015).

Although the issue has been much discussed¹⁸, I think that in this first allusion to the myth it was already assumed that the end was unhappy and Orpheus fails to return his wife to life. However it is not a complete failure as he breaks the will of the infernal gods with his music so he can see Hades and what happens there: this allows him to return to the world of the living with a special knowledge. All these things make of him an ideal candidate to be considered the founder and transmitter of the beliefs and doctrines on which Orphism rests.

The playwright briefly lists the obstacles that Orpheus overcame with the power of his music to enter Hades: first he had to beat Pluto's dog, Cerberus. He is inside Hades, but by the doorstep, because he is the guardian who must prevent the entrance of strangers and the exit of souls. We see it also in Sophocles:

Ὡ χθόνιαι θεαὶ σῶμά τ' ἀνικάτου
θηρὸς ὄν ἐν πύλαισι
ταῖσι πολυξένοις εὐνᾶσθαι
κνυζεῖσθαί τ' ἐξ ἄντρων
ἀδάματον φύλακα παρ' Αἴδα
λόγος αἰὲν ἔχει.

O goddesses of Earth, and you, form of the invincible beast which, fame ever tells us, have your bed and growl from your cave in the gates passed through by many strangers, a guardian not to be subdued in Hades.

(Soph., *OC*, 1568-1573, trans. H. LLOYD-JONES, *Sophocles I*, Cambridge, 1994.)

Secondly Orpheus has to face Charon, the boatman rowing souls across the river of the Underworld in exchange for a payment. In this text Hermes is not mentioned. It is Charon, together with Thanatos as we will see later, who is the closest figure to the role of the *psychopompus* god. Even in verse 361 the epithet ψυχοπομπός is applied to him, and when Alcestis sees the moment of her own death approaching she says that it's Charon who calls her:

18. Virgil and Ovid present an undoubtedly tragic end: Orpheus with his music convinces the infernal gods to take his wife from Hades. He, however, fails in the last moment by violating the only restriction imposed on him. Given that the *Alcestis* text, in the same way as other later texts, does not detail the explicit end of the mythical episode, some scholars have argued that it is a tragic ending and belongs to the oldest nucleus of the myth (known in the time of Euripides), while other critics have thought that the tragic end is a subsequent modification, possibly invented by a Hellenistic author which served as a basis to the stories of Virgil and Ovid; so, the earliest testimonies would refer to a "happy ending" in which Orpheus would have dragged his beloved wife's away from death. Cf. Sara M. MACÍAS OTERO (2008, p. 47-64) for a more detailed study of this issue.

Ὅρω δίκωπον ὄρω σκάφος ἐν
 λίμναι· νεκύων δὲ πορθμεύς
 ἔχων χεῖρ' ἐπὶ κοντῶι Χάρων
 μ' ἤδη καλεῖ.

I see the two-oared boat in the lake. Charon, the boatman of the dead, his hand on the boat pole, calls me now.

(Eur., *Alc.*, 252-255, trans. D. KOVACS, *Euripides I*, Cambridge, 1994.)

Originally Hermes seems to be the only god responsible for guiding the souls to Hades; so says the *Odyssey* which even describes his route (*Od.* XXIV, 1-15), without ever mentioning Charon. Later, perhaps towards the end of the 6th century BCE, the figure of the boatman¹⁹ was added and combined with Hermes: the god would not lead the souls to his goal inside Hades anymore, but he would guide them at the initial step between the world of the living and the dead to the Acheron where the boatman is waiting to row souls across. There are no references to this figure neither in Aeschylus nor in Sophocles, but Euripides and Aristophanes already include it, changing to some extent the more aristocratic, eschatological ideology of Homer. Little by little the figure of Charon grows in importance until he completely replaces Hermes as we can see in the funerary iconography: Hermes used to appear as an intermediary leading the deceased from their gravestones to Charon's boat, but at some point the representation of the god disappears and Charon is represented right beside the grave²⁰.

Hermes may be omitted by Euripides because he has already anticipated the subsequent trend towards replacing Hermes by Charon, or perhaps because the playwright didn't consider the god as an obstacle for Orpheus: Charon is the one who must take the souls to their destination, once Hermes has left them under his care; he must also avoid intrusions like that of Orpheus and prevent souls coming up to the world of the living. In this sense his function is similar to Cerberus'.

Finally, the gods of the Underworld are the most important obstacle that Orpheus must overcome. Euripides mentions Persephone and Hades avoiding their names: she is called daughter of Demeter and he husband of the former. The playwright even stresses the figure of Persephone over Hades by referring to him with that periphrasis, as if he were the "King

19. Pindar is the first who mentions a "shrill boat from Acheron", and the name of Charon for this character first appears in a fragment of the *Minyas* transmitted by Pausanias, X, 28, 2 (*Minyas*, fr. 1 Bernabé). In iconography, the first representations of this character are also dated around 500 BCE: a cylinder of Frankfurt and a piece of phormiskos of Tübingen. Also the painting of Polygnotos that Pausanias described in the passages quoted above (n. 7). Cf. F. DÍEZ DE VELASCO (1990) for more information.

20. The painter of the square is the last to represent Hermes Psychopompus, from that moment the god is replaced by Charon, cf. F. DÍEZ DE VELASCO (1995), p. 50.

Consort". In the necromantic invocation of the *Odyssey*, Odysseus must pray to Persephone and Hades so that they let the soul of Tiresias out; also in Orpheus' *katábasis* these gods are the ones who must give their permission to bring the soul of Eurydice back, although in this case the hero succeeds thanks to his music, not to his prayers. The big difference is the fact that Orpheus does not intend to raise a soul temporarily, as Odysseus does to obtain some information, but he wants his wife back completely, in body and soul, in the world of the living.

2. *Heracles and his two katabáseis*

Two passages mention Heracles' descent to Hades in search of Cerberus: the first is the fr. 371 (Kannicht) of the satyric drama *Eurystheus*²¹. Although its plot cannot be specified in detail, it might focus on the last of the hero's works, the *katábasis*²²:

Πέμπεις δ' ἐς Ἄιδου ζῶντα κού τεθηκότα,
καί μοι τὸ τέρθρον δῆλον οἶ πορεύομαι.

You will be sending a living man into Hades, and not a dead one; and the end towards which I make my way is clear to me.

(Trans. Ch. COLLARD - M. CROPP, *Euripides VII*, Cambridge, 2008.)

The second passage is verses 606-621 of *Heracles*:

HP. Δράσω τάδ'· εὖ γὰρ εἶπας· εἴμ' ἔσω δόμων.
χρόνωι δ' ἀνελθῶν ἐξ ἀνηλίωιν μυχῶν
Ἄιδου Κόρησ <τ' > ἔνερθεν οὐκ ἀτιμάσω
θεοὺς προσειπεῖν πρῶτα τοὺς κατὰ στέγας.
AM. Ἥλθεσ γὰρ ὄντως δώματ' εἰς Ἄιδου, τέκνον;
HP. Καὶ θῆρά γ' ἐς φῶσ τὸν τρίκρανον ἦγαγον.
AM. Μάχηι κρατήσας ἦ θεᾶσ δωρήμασιν;
HP. Μάχηι· τὰ μυστῶν δ' ὄργι' εὐτύχησ' ἰδῶν.
AM. Ἥ καὶ κατ' οἴκουσ ἐστὶν Εὐρυσθέωσ ὁ θῆρ;
HP. Χθονίασ νιν ἄλσοσ Ἐρμιῶν τ' ἔχει πόλισ.
AM. Οὐδ' οἶδεν Εὐρυσθεὺσ σε γῆσ ἦκοντ' ἄνω;
HP. Οὐκ οἶδ', ἴν' ἐλθῶν τάνθάδ' εἰδείην πάροσ.
AM. Χρόνον δὲ πῶσ τοσοῦτον ἦσθ' ὑπὸ χθονί;
HP. Θησέα κομίζων ἐχρόνισ' <ἐξ > Ἄιδου, πάτερ.
AM. Καὶ ποῦ 'στιν; ἦ γῆσ πατρίδοσ οἴχεται πέδον;
HP. Βέβηκ' Ἀθήνασ νέρθεν ἄσμενοσ φυγῶν.

Her.: Your advice is good, and I shall take it: I shall go into the house. Since I have come up at long last from the sunless realms of Hades and Persephone, I shall not refuse to give my first greeting to the gods within the house.

21. Cf. N. C. HOURMOUZIADES (1974); W. STEFFEN (1975); N. PECHSTEIN (1998), p. 145-176; F. JOUAN, H. VAN LOOY (2000), p. 133-141.

22. R. KANNICHT (2004), p. 419.

Am.: Did you really go down to the house of Hades, my son?

Her.: Yes, and I brought the three-headed beast up to the light.

Am.: Did you master him a fight, or did the goddess give him to you?

Her.: In a fight: my luck was good since I had seen the Mysteries.

Am.: Is the creature in the house of Eurystheus?

Her.: The grove of the Underworld Goddess and the city of Hermion are keeping him.

Am.: And does Eurystheus not know that you have returned to the upper world?

Her.: I came here first to learn how things stand.

Am.: Why were you so long beneath the earth?

Her.: I brought Theseus back from Hades, father: hence my delay.

Am.: Where is he? Has he gone off his native land?

Her.: He has gone back to Athens, glad to have escaped from the Underworld.

(Trans. D. KOVACS, *Euripides III*, Cambridge, 1998.)

In both passages Euripides puts the *katábasis* in the words of the hero himself, but at different moments of the myth: the reference in *Eurystheus* is previous to the descent into Hades; this is suggested by the verbs in future (πέμψεις) and present tenses (πορεύομαι). That would be the answer that Heracles gives Eurystheus once he finds out what his last work is. In contrast, in the passage of *Heracles* the protagonist briefly describes how he carried out this exploit already concluded.

In the *Eurystheus* fragment the expression ζῶντα καὶ τεθνηκότα (“alive and not dead”) is remarkable, because through this antithesis it is stressed that we are facing a *katábasis*. Heracles, alive, descends into Hades and, once the aim of his trip is achieved, he is expected to return to the world of the living.

In the text of *Heracles*, one of the most significant points is verse 613 (τὰ μυστῶν δ’ ὄργι’ εὐτύχησ’ ἰδῶν), because Heracles connects the *katábasis* with the contemplation of some initiation rites²³. In my opinion, there are two ways to interpret the words of the hero:

1. Heracles could refer to witnessing the rites of the initiates in Hades. Since nowhere in the sentence is clearly stated that this takes place before his *katábasis*, it could be understood that the sight of these rituals occurs as a result of it; those activities of the initiates would be among many things that could be seen in Hades. There is a papyrus of the University of Milan (*OF* 713 IV) which represents Heracles angry with the δαδούχος of Eleusis on account of his refusal to initiate him. Heracles says that he has been already initiated in the most genuine initiation rites, because when he went

23. The *katábasis* of Heracles and his process of initiation are studied also by Daniela COLOMO (2004) and N. ROBERTSON (1980).

down into Hades, he could see what really happens there, whereas the mysteries of Eleusis are only a simulation of that:

[Λόγοι Ἡρακλέους κωλυομέ[νου μν]εῖσθαι τὰ Ἐλευσίνια.

[Πάλαι μ]εμύημαι· ἀποκλεί[εις τὴν Ἐ]λευσῖνα καὶ τὸ πῦρ [τὸ ἱερόν,] δαδοῦχε, καὶ φθο[νεῖς νυκ]τὸς ἱεράς; Μυστήρια [πολὸ ἀ]ληθέστερα μεμύημαι. [± 5]ον φέρεις. Τὸ δὲ πο[νηθὲν π]αρ' ἐμοῦ νύκτα μοι [ποιεῖ ἱερ]άν. Ἐγὼ δέ σοι πολλὴν [± 5] εἶδον, ἐγὼ τῶν ἀφα[νιστῶν π]λησίον διὰ νυκτὸς [ἐσκόπ]ησα τὸ πῦρ πόθεν [± 5] τῆ Κόρην εἶδον [καὶ τὴν μητέρα τὴν Δήμητραν].

Speeches by Herakles excluded from the celebrations of the Eleusinian Mysteries.

In the past I have already been initiated into the Mysteries. Do you shut up Eleusis and the [sacred] fire, dadouchos, and deny (me) the sacred night?! But I have been initiated into [much] truer mysteries. You hold [the sacred fire / torch (?)] but what [I had accomplished] myself [makes for me] the night [sacred]. I saw [...] you [...] great [...]. Close to the se[cret objects] all through the night [I be] held the fire / light, whence [it came out (?)], I saw Kore [and her mother Demeter].

(*P. Univ. Milano* I 20, col. 1. 18-31 = *OF* 713, trans. Daniela COLOMO [2004], p. 90-91.)

Several passages from the *Frogs* by Aristophanes can also support this argument: in verses 154-163, when describing the path that should be followed in Hades, Heracles mentions the presence of happy groups of initiates celebrating their rituals with chants and clapping:

HP. Ἐντεῦθεν αὐλῶν τίς σε περίεισιν πνοή,
ὄψει τε φῶς κάλλιστον ὥσπερ ἐνθάδε,
καὶ μυρρινῶνας καὶ θιάσους εὐδαίμονας
ἀνδρῶν γυναικῶν καὶ κρότον χειρῶν πολύν.

DI. Οὗτοι δὲ δὴ τίνας εἰσίν;

HP. Οἱ μεμνημένοι – [...]

HP. Οἱ σοι φράσουσ' ἀπαξάπανθ' ὧν ἂν δέη.
Οὗτοι γὰρ ἐγγύτατα παρ' αὐτὴν τὴν ὁδὸν
ἐπὶ ταῖσι τοῦ Πλούτωνος οἰκοῦσιν θύραις.

Her.: And next a breath of pipes will waft about you, and there'll be brilliant sunlight, just like ours, and myrtle Groves, happy bands (θιάσοι) of men and women, and a great clapping of hands.

Dion.: And who are those people?

Her.: The initiates. [...]

Her.: They tell you everything you need to know. They live right beside the road you'll be taking, at Pluto's palace gate.

(Trans. J. HENDERSON, *Aristophanes IV*, Cambridge, 2002.)

And also in verses 313-320:

ΔΙ. Ἔγωγε, καὶ δάδων γέ με
 αὔρα τις εἰσέπνευσε μυστικωτάτη.
 Ἄλλ' ἤρεμει πτήξαντες ἀκροασώμεθα.
 ΧΟΡ. Ἴακχ', ὦ Ἴακχε.
 Ἴακχ', ὦ Ἴακχε.
 ΞΑ. Τοῦτ' ἔστ' ἐκεῖν', ὃ δέσποθ'· οἱ μεμυημένοι
 ἐνταῦθά που παίζουσιν, οὐδ' ἔφραζε νῶν.
 Ἄιδουσι γοῦν τὸν Ἴακχον ὄνπερ Διαγόρας [οἱ δι' ἀγορᾶς].

Dion.: I did, and a most mystic whiff of torches wafted over me. Let's hunker down here and have a listen.

Ch.: Iacchus, Iacchus! Iacchus, Iacchus !

Xan.: It's just as I thought, master: the initiates he told us about are frolicking hereabouts. Listen, they're singing the Iacchus Hymn, the one by Diagoras [or "through the agora"].

(Trans. J. HENDERSON, *Aristophanes IV*, Cambridge, 2002.)

2. In most comments about this verse²⁴, Euripides is believed to include a brief allusion to the tradition that Heracles was initiated in Eleusis before his *katábasis*²⁵ as a preparation for it. Thus for example the participle *ιδών* has been understood as a veiled reference to the Eleusinian grade of initiation called *ἐποπτεία*²⁶.

It is impossible to choose between these two possible interpretations of Heracles' words, and it might be a deliberate ambiguity by the playwright.

On the other hand, we have an *Alcestis*' passage in which Heracles decides to take the heroine out of Hades. He has two options, to snatch her from Death, or, if he is unsuccessful, to descend into Hades and bring her up by force:

Ἐλθὼν δ' ἄνακτα τὸν μελάμπτερον νεκρῶν
 Θάνατον φυλάξω, καὶ νιν εὐρήσειν δοκῶ
 πίνοντα τύμβου πλησίον προσφαγμάτων.
 Κἄνπερ λοχαίας αὐτὸν ἐξ ἔδρας συθεῖς
 μάρψω, κύκλον γε περιβαλὼν χεροῖν ἐμαῖν,
 οὐκ ἔστιν ὅστις αὐτὸν ἐξαρήσεται
 μογοῦντα πλευρά, πρὶν γυναῖκ' ἐμοὶ μεθῆι.
 Ἦν δ' οὖν ἀμάρτω τῆσδ' ἄγρας καὶ μὴ μόληι

24. G. AMMENDOLA (1925), p. 65-66; Shirley A. BARLOW (1981), p. 151; G. W. BOND (1981), p. 218; H. LLOYD-JONES (1990), p. 174; J. M. LABIANO (1999), p. 161, n. 57-58.

25. The first source that mentions Heracles' initiation in Eleusis, prior to his *katábasis*, is a fragment of Pindar (Pind., fr. 346 S.-M.= *OF* 716) which unfortunately is very deteriorated. However, we can read there the names of Eleusis, Eumolpus, Persephone and Heracles, along with the term *τελετάν*. Cf. H. LLOYD-JONES (1990). Apollodorus (II, 5, 12) offers the most explicit details regarding the initiation of Heracles in Eleusis; describing Heracles' last work he tells how the hero was initiated in Eleusis by Eumolpus. See also Xen, *Hell.*, VI, 3, 6 and Diod. Sic., IV, 25, 1.

26. G. W. BOND (1981), p. 218.

πρὸς αἵματηρὸν πελανόν, εἴμι τῶν κάτω
 Κόρης ἄνακτός τ' εἰς ἀνηλίους δόμους,
 αἰτήσομαι τε καὶ πέποιθ' ἄξειν ἄνω
 Ἄλκηστιν, ὥστε χερσὶν ἐνθεῖναι ξένου.

I shall go and look out for the black-robed lord of the dead, Death himself, and I think I shall find him drinking from the offerings near the tomb. And if once I rush from ambush and catch him in my side-crushing grip, no one shall take him from me until he releases the woman to me. But if I fail to catch this quarry and he does not come to the blood offering, I shall go down to the sunless house of Persephone and her lord in the world below and shall ask for Alcestis, and I think I shall bring her up and put her in the hands of my friend.

(Eur., *Alc.*, 843-854, trans. D. KOVACS, *Euripides I*, Cambridge, 1994.)

Finally, as verses 1140 and f. explain, the hero fights with Thanatos and wins, so Alcestis is returned to him; the *katábasis* is not necessary. But the most important thing is that the descent into Hades is suggested as a feasible solution to bring Alcestis to the world of the living. There is a parallel with Orpheus, who has been mentioned before by Admetus, as we have seen; here Persephone and her husband must also give their permission to let a soul out of their domains. The music helps Orpheus convince the gods; in contrast, brute force helps Heracles.

One of the most striking points of this Euripidean passage is the image of Thanatos²⁷: previously Homer, Hesiod and Aeschylus had characterized Thanatos as relentless, inevitable and hateful but, although he is presented as a personification of the death, he is a rather abstract divinity. However Euripides, and perhaps previously Phrynichus, provides him with a more popular character, maybe with a background of ancient folk-tale, and turns him into a tragic character who even appears on the scene in the prologue. His mission is to kill the one who must die (v. 49) and in return he receives a payment that is higher if the deceased is a young person (v. 55). He is armed with a sword to ritually cut the hair of his victims and drive them into Hades (v. 748 & f., cf. also v. 258 & f. and v. 871). Therefore Thanatos also replaces Hermes Psychopompos. Heracles' words in verse 843 seem to suggest that Thanatos often stops at the graveside to drink the sacrificial blood before carrying his victim to Hades. At that moment the hero grabs him with all his strength and will not let him go until Alcestis is given back to the world of the living. She has not been given to the gods of the Underworld, but she is between this world and the hereafter, next to her tomb, waiting for Thanatos to finish with the offerings and take her down.

27. Cf. F. DE RUYT (1932).

This image of Thanatos drinking the offered blood resembles the necromantic ritual of the *Odyssey* (v. 845) and the fragment of Aeschylus.

Conclusions

The Aeschylean fragment describes the previous process of *nekymanteia*, whereas Euripides' texts present *katabáseis* themselves, where the hero descends into Hades and returns to this world alive. The fact that we only have the first part of Odysseus' *katábasis* may be due to the circumstances of the transmission of the Aeschylean text. But Aeschylus might have deliberately removed the part of the *katábasis* itself to further rationalize the myth: he would have identified the descent into Hades with a magic practice well known in his time, and even placed it in the appropriate environment to put it into practice, a *nekymanteion*.

On the other hand, the motivations of the three aforementioned *katabáseis* are different: Odysseus wants to know how to return home, Orpheus descends for love and Heracles aims to show his power²⁸.

Each hero employs a different method to go down into Hades: Odysseus employs a necromantic ritual, Orpheus the persuasive power of his music, and Heracles his strength. Of the three, Odysseus seems to represent the most human hero because he does not use any superhuman powers, but a magical ritual performed at the very gates of the Underworld with the help of the chorus of *psychagogoí*.

Finally it should be noted how the traditional imagery is altered by Euripides in *Alcestis*: Charon and Thanatos appear instead of Hermes Psychopompus, two characters more related to folk-tale. At that time they begin to enhance their roles and finally, over the centuries, replaced the god. In the end only Charon remains as the personification of Death itself. Perhaps Euripides was *defending* a more democratic view of death, in which there are no favors based on class or wealth, as he points out in *Alcestis*' prologue (v. 57-59).

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28. Euripides innovates by altering the traditional chronology: the murder of Heracles' children is not the reason for the hero's works as atonement, but the murder occurs after those works.

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