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The Intensified Trajectory of Consciousness in Odysseus' Vision in Hades

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The winding path that led to this essay began with the traditional lore of an Ashaninkan shaman working in the Peruvian Amazon.

Towards the end of our year long investigation into the healing practices of the *vegetalistas*, as the indigenous and mestizo practitioners of rainforest medicine are known, we engaged in a plant *dieta* under the direction of one of the informants in Susana's dissertation research,¹ the *curandero* Juan Flores. One day, Flores tramped back to visit us during our solitary fast, and there the conversation turned to the mythic—and quite real according to him—beings that inhabit the Amazonian waterways. As Flores described the behavior of these *sirenas*, Robert was struck by the intriguing parallels between their seductive behavior and that of the Sirens described by Homer. Flores had never heard of the *Odyssey*, yet when given the story of Odysseus' ordeal in the orbit of their rapturous song, Flores nodded his head and said grimly, "That's them, alright."

It was then we began to suspect that the indigenous experience of the natural world, which has a marked universality among native peoples, might have an underlying, shaping influence upon Homer's narrative.

Along with familiarizing us with the cosmovision of the Amazonian peoples, our fieldwork also introduced us to the practice of shamanic journeying, which among Amazonian peoples, who live in an environment of extraordinary biodiversity, is often conducted in ceremonies utilizing *ayahuasca*, a psychoactive plant medicine whose name translates from Quechua as "vine of the spirits" or "vine of the dead."

There we were also struck by certain parallels between Odysseus' visionary descent into Hades and ethnographies of traditional shamanic practices among indigenous peoples worldwide, especially when supplemented by cognitive archeologist David Lewis-Williams' theory of the intensified trajectory of consciousness.

These parallels are suggestive of a deeper morphological relationship between Homer's narrative and the traditions of vision quest among the ancient, indigenous Mediterranean peoples (whose material culture is preserved in the Paleolithic cave sanctuaries), than is generally recognized. By viewing, as our main objective, just one episode in the *Odyssey*, the hero's visionary journey in Hades, from an ethnographic perspective, this essay hopes to open up more inquiry into the indigenous, and shamanic, background of the epic poem.

THE INDIGENOUS WORLDVIEW

WHAT MAKES plausible a deep affinity between the worldview of the ancient inhabitants of the Mediterranean, their descendants the Homeric Greeks, and indigenous peoples worldwide is a shared animistic perception. Such perception of a vital, sentient cosmos is, according to the eminent pre-historian Jean Clottes, expressed by traditional peoples in two marked ways: permeability and fluidity of consciousness. "Fluidity means the categories that we have, man, woman, horse, tree, etc., can shift. A tree may speak. A man can get transformed into an animal and the other way around. The concept of permeability is that there are no barriers, so to speak, between the world where we are and the world of spirits."² The *Odyssey*, on the surface, possesses rich examples of both these concepts.

Under the concept of fluidity, there are numerous episodes involving a variety of transformations of form, such as when Athena suddenly abandons her disguise as Telemachus' companion Mentor and (in the Fagles translation), wings away

“in an eagle’s form and flight” (Fagles, tr., *Odyssey* 3.416), leaving an amazed crowd of Achaeans in her wake. There is also violent animal-*becoming*, as in the transformation of Odysseus’ men into swine under the influence of Circe’s “wicked drugs” (*Odyssey* 10.259).³ There are episodes of shape-shifting, for example, when Athena changes Odysseus’ appearance into a beggar, where she “shriveled the supple skin on his lithe limbs, stripped the russet curls from his head, covered his body top to toe with the wrinkled hide of an old man and dimmed the fire in his eyes, so shining once” (*Odyssey* 13.493–96), and then shape-shifts Odysseus back into a younger man, “taller, supple, young, his ruddy tan came back, the cut of his jawline firmed and the dark beard clustered black around his chin” (*Odyssey* 16.196–98), stunning Telemachus into declaring his father must be “some god who rules the vaulting skies!” (*Odyssey* 16.206). As well, we see a sprinkling of what we might categorize as “cosmetic” shape-shifting throughout the narrative, such as when “over Odysseus’ head and shoulders,” Athena lavishes upon him “a marvelous splendor, yes, making him taller, more massive to all eyes” (*Odyssey* 8.20–22).

As a demonstration of the concept of permeability, Odysseus is seen many times communing or negotiating with spirits, whether Olympian like Hermes or Athena; divinities of the Earth and Sea, such as Ino, “a mortal woman once with human voice and called Leucothea . . . [who] lives in the sea’s salt depths,” (*Odyssey* 5.367–68) who protects Odysseus from drowning; more primordial figures like the Cyclops; or even Tiresias and the shades of the dead he encounters in Hades. Indeed, as we shall see, Odysseus’ style of knowledge-seeking, based as it is in an animate, sentient cosmos rather than the dead, mechanical worldview of modern societies, has some notable shamanic characteristics.

Of course, T. B. L. Webster long ago observed a similar permeability when he pointed out that for the ancient Greeks, a “cornland can be the goddess Demeter, navigable water the god Okeanos, or a growing tree a nymph.”⁴

This primordial experience was enshrined in the Greek idea of *cosmos*—of the “real as an harmonious, all inclusive whole,”⁵ which arose from the experience of the permeability of human consciousness to the sentience, the living presence, of the many beings of the world.

In an indigenous worldview, survival may hinge upon such permeability of consciousness. Much as in the Amazon, where streams can be sentient and shamans can sing for the phlegm of the *yacumama*, the great boa constrictor of the water, to enter your body to heal it, Odysseus, shipwrecked and swimming for the Phaeacians’ shore, can sense “the river’s god and pray to him in spirit.” Upon hearing Odysseus’ prayers, the river god “stemmed his current, held his surge at once and smoothing out the swells before Odysseus now, drew him safe to shore” (*Odyssey* 5.489, 5.498–500).

The sky is also alive, animate with intelligence, in the indigenous worldview. This is seen numerous times in the *Odyssey*, for example, when Telemachus gets an instantaneous response to a question he poses: “At his last words, a bird flew past on the right, a hawk, Apollo’s wind-swift herald—tight in his claws a struggling dove, and he ripped its feathers out.” As with the Koyukon, an indigenous group of the Northern tundra, who “listen attentively to subtle nuances and variations in the calls of local birds” and assume “that nature is all aware, and that the sounds made by animals are at least as meaningful as those made by humans,”⁶ at this curious sight a prophet, correctly interpreting this message from the natural world, takes Odysseus’ son aside and says, “Look, Telemachus, the will of the god just winged that bird on your right! Why, the moment I saw it, I knew it was a sign” (*Odyssey* 15.498–590, 15.594–97).

This reciprocity with what anthropologist Frédérique Apffel-Marglin calls the “non-human and other-than-human communities”⁷ is woven throughout the narrative of the *Odyssey*, yet so subtly that the reader can easily pass it by unawares, especially when related to the vegetal realm.

The experience of permeability of human and plant consciousness is a cross-cultural motif among indigenous peoples. As her Ojibwe grandmother described to anthropologist Barbara Tedlock, “the ability to hear plants sing and converse with them is what defines a *mide*—a shaman, a person of spiritual power who heals with sacred plants.”⁸ Among the *vegetalistas* of the Peruvian Amazon, relations with plants can be of such intimacy that a practitioner may be granted a song, which “represent[s] a transference of the spirits of each plant, with all their knowledge and theriomorphic and anthropomorphic manifestations, into the body of the shaman.”⁹ Such conversing with the anthropomorphic manifestation of a plant spirit is given a solid illustration in the episode with Circe, where Odysseus encounters Hermes at the precise locale of the apotropaic plant *moly*, which he requires to break Circe’s spell. As is typical in the dreams of shamans seeking a remedy, Hermes gives Odysseus exact instructions on how to use the plant and even harvests it for him. This episode also illustrates how, in an animistic cosmos, the potency of a plant may lie in “the physical plant itself, or the physical plant as a substrate of magical power, or the spirit of the plant, acting independently of the physical plant.”¹⁰

Of course, in other indigenous perspectives like that of the Huichol, the *moly* may serve as a cosmic portal through which the spirit of Hermes manifests—as in the abduction of Persephone through the narcissus blossom by Hades. The essential point here is that the *moly* is an intersection between the spiritual, human, and vegetal realms as experienced within a state of permeable consciousness.¹¹

In the indigenous worldview, therefore, Hermes’ manifestation in the locale of a powerful medicinal plant is nothing to write home about. In our time immersed in the cosmology of the Amazon rainforest, for example, we came to learn about the plant chacruna, a spirit who manifests as the queen of the forest and whose consciousness runs through all the waterways beneath and through the jungle canopy. Often depicted as a crowned goddess, it is she who confers visionary power and reveals subtle knowledge of the rain forest environment.¹²

As ethnobotanist Kate Harrison explains, while there “are many approaches to recognizing this ‘plant spirit’ in different indigenous cultures, all are characterized by an attitude of deep reverence,” much as Odysseus expresses when he states, “Dangerous for a mortal man to pluck from the soil but not for the deathless gods. All lies within their power.” (*Odyssey* 10.339–41). In a way analogous to the mushroom, whose real vegetal being can extend for miles underground, the plant is only the visible aspect of a much greater being. Indigenous cultures “view each species as possessing a distinct spirit or of being a spirit that has dressed itself in matter and taken on a certain form and appearance and chemical signature.”¹³

The great ethnobotanist Richard Evans Schultes summed up this phenomenon: “Shamanism depends in great part on the supernatural powers resident in certain plants. These resident divinities are organic chemical constituents that allow mortal man to communicate through visual, auditory and other hallucinations with the spirit world.”¹⁴

While the most obvious example of the permeability of human/plant consciousness of the *Odyssey* occurs in the Circe episode, a more elegant one, to our minds, repeatedly enters like a leitmotif with the olive tree—sacred to Athena. If we allow the olive tree its traditional role as a manifestation of Athena’s spirit, its sheltering, protecting role in the poem may not be accidental. For example, when Odysseus, having made shore after surviving a shipwreck by Poseidon, must find shelter from men and wild beasts he finds, in a grove not far from shore, two entwined olive trees, “sprung from the same root, one olive wild, the other well-bred stock. No sodden gusty winds could ever pierce them . . . so dense they grew together” (*Odyssey* 5.527–32). Since the “gentle olive tree” is sacred to Athena, but not the “wild olive of Olympia,” whose uncultivated condition Walter Burkert¹⁵ associates with the realm of Poseidon, we can see how, beneath this frontier marker between the wild and the civilized, between the realm of Poseidon and Athena, Odysseus can bed down safe from wild beasts and allow Athena to shower sleep upon his eyes.

Homer's use of the same species of tree, the olive, as the central column of Odysseus' bedroom in his ancestral home in Ithaca, constituting the immovable frame of his bed, gives additional support to this interpretation. As Odysseus relates, "There was a branching olive tree inside our court, grown to its full prime, the bole like a column, thickset. Around it I built my bedroom . . . I shaped it plumb to the line to make my bedpost, bored the holes it needed with an auger, working from there I built my bed, from start to finish" (*Odyssey* 23.214-17, 23.222-24). This is presumably the bed in which Penelope lies sleeping when Athena sends her a phantom messenger to assure her of Telemachus' safety, informing her "She has power—Pallas Athena. She pities you in your tears. She wings me here to tell you all these things" (*Odyssey* 4.931-33).

And true to form, when Odysseus and Athena are finally revealed to one another upon Odysseus' arrival home on Ithaca, they promptly go and sit "by the sacred olive's trunk to plot the death of the high and mighty suitors" (*Odyssey* 13.426-27).

Since Odysseus deliberately established Athena's olive tree as the guardian of his sleep and the foundation of his marriage bed, it is fitting that upon first escaping the wild ocean haunts of Poseidon to the cultivated, humane land of the Phaeacians, he finds refuge in its sheltering embrace.¹⁶

From these brief examples, we can glimpse how the experience of indigenous communion with a living cosmos not only plays an integral role in the unfolding action of the poem, but also constitutes a clear depiction of the elements of fluidity and permeability characteristic of traditional cultures worldwide.

THE SHAMANIC CHARACTER TRAITS OF ODYSSEUS

EMBEDDED AS the action of the *Odyssey* is in an animate cosmos, it's not surprising that Odysseus displays certain behaviors characteristic of leaders in shamanic cultures.

For example, survival in the animistic worldview hinges on the ability to have clear, meaningful, and effective visions, a capacity Odysseus relies upon in his battle to free his enchanted men from Circe and in ferreting out the spirit of Tiresias in Hades. According to anthropologist Reichel-Dolmatoff, among the Tukano Indians of the Colombian Amazon, the shaman's "vision must not be blurred, his sense of hearing must be acute; that is, he must be able to distinguish clearly the images that appear to his mind while in a state of trance, and to understand the supernatural voices speaking to him."¹⁷

In addition, much as Odysseus displays a boldness of inquiry into the perilous regions of the spiritual topography he encounters, the driving force for the Tukano shaman is "a passionate interest in learning more and more about the powers he perceives in his vision . . . a truly intellectual interest in the unknown; and . . . the personal satisfaction of 'knowing' things which others are unable to grasp."¹⁸

Yet, beyond the insatiable curiosity Odysseus is celebrated for, episodes like his entering trance within the highly intoxicating, rapturous song of the Sirens share characteristics with the voluntarily undergone initiatory ordeal: his binding, exposure to the elements, and laying bare of his psyche to the penetration of supernatural powers. Among indigenous cultures, it is understood that "'shamanic death' and reintegration are necessary, for they lead to a stronger mental state, enabling the shaman to negotiate more effectively with powerful spirits."¹⁹

A charming illustration of Odysseus' mature animistic perception is shown in a little scene between the newly reunited Odysseus and his son Telemachus.

As they enter the darkened hall of the palace on Ithaca, Pallas Athena goes striding before them, lifting a golden lamp that casts a dazzling brilliance. "'Father,' Telemachus suddenly bursts out, 'oh what a marvel fills my eyes! Look, look there—all the sides of the hall, the handsome cross-beams, pinewood rafters, the tall columns towering—all glow in my eyes like flaming fire! Surely a god is here—one of those who rule the vaulting skies!'" (*Odyssey* 19.37–43).

Odysseus, that old hand dealing with spirits, has little tolerance for his son's visionary naïveté. He roundly rebukes Telemachus for his lack of control: "Quiet! Get a grip on yourself. No more questions now. It's just the way of the gods who rule Olympus. Off you go to bed" (*Odyssey* 19.44-47).

THE VISIONARY EXPERIENCE

ONE FEATURE of cultures whose worldview is grounded in animistic perception is the practice of otherworld journeying. Such journeying, as is illustrated in the *Odyssey*, is often utilized as a diagnostic method. Such visionary experiences seek to disclose the character of disease, for example, and to discover an appropriate remedy. They can also, as in Menelaus' ambush of Proteus, uncover the hidden causes of a series of unfortunate or tragic events.

There is strong evidence that Odysseus' narrative of his journey into the spiritual topography of Hades, while filled with the *pathos* and elevation of sentiment into noble feeling characteristic of the Homeric age, owes its narrative structure to this primordial practice. Yet, there has been little attempt to understand the structure and technique of his visionary journey in the light of anthropological accounts of shamanic practices.

When Odysseus arrives where the rivers of the underworld converge at a grove sacred to Persephone, he digs a trench into which he first pours drink offerings of milk, honey, wine, and water to the spirits of the dead, and then, slitting the throats of two sheep, summons the dead.²⁰

As the phantasmagoric mob surges out, Odysseus struggles to hold his ground and prevent them from drinking the blood. There is a sense of the realm of Hades bursting its confines, flowing with tsunami-like strength into the human realm. In Odysseus' activity we are witnessing what anthropologist Reichel-Dolmatoff describes as the Tukano shaman's "power of penetration," which allows entry into permeable consciousness while retaining individual charac-

ter and purpose: “a capacity to enter a trance and to undertake the magical flight that permits the *payé* to leave the biosphere and penetrate to another existential plane. A *payé* is at bottom a specialist in developing this rupture of levels in a spatial, ecstatic sense as well as in the sense of passing from one conceptual unit of time to another.”

“Such ecstasy,” Reichel-Dolmatoff concludes, “is equivalent to death.”²¹

Of course, death does not here imply cessation of consciousness—for indigenous peoples it can actually signify the intense, overwhelming heightening of it. Here Reichel-Dolmatoff is not only echoing the etymology of the Quechua word *ayahuasca* itself: *aya* signifies “ancestor, spirit, dead person;” and *huasca* “rope” or “vine” (*ayahuasca* is, therefore, translated as “the vine of the dead”), but also the traditional teaching on otherworld journeying given to us early in our apprenticeships with Juan Flores: “Ayahuasca helps us to die, because when we die, we encounter strong spirits. And in ceremonies with ayahuasca we may die and be reborn many times—we live, we die, we live, we die. And there are days when we encounter very strong spirits as well! So we have the opportunity to learn how to die with ayahuasca, to know death closely.”²²

Odysseus, at the grove sacred to Persephone, is coming to know death with just such experiential intimacy.

THE INTENSIFIED TRAJECTORY OF CONSCIOUSNESS

BEFORE LOOKING closely at some key ethnographic parallels between Homer’s account and contemporary Amazonian shamanism, it is worth considering cognitive archaeologist David Lewis-Williams’ model of the transformations of consciousness which allow for otherworld journeying.

Lewis-Williams claims that such a capacity is hardwired in our nervous system, and in his work *The Mind in the Cave* he offers a neuro-physiological model for the process of entering that “mental vortex that leads to the experiences

and hallucinations of deep trance,” an entry he claims was psychologically indistinguishable for Upper Paleolithic people from their actual entrance into “the subterranean passages and chambers . . . the ‘entrails’ of the nether world,”²³ of the prehistoric painted caves.

According to Lewis-Williams, the ordinary spectrum of consciousness of *Homo sapiens* ranges from a waking, problem-solving orientation to dream and beyond the edge of the psychic world, unconsciousness, as expressed graphically in figure 1 below.

As we can see from Lewis-Williams’ schema, when shamanically intensified, consciousness takes a different fork in the road before entering the realm of hypnagogia. Rather than counting sheep or seeing dancing sugarplums, we begin to perceive “entoptic phenomena,” that is, geometrical will-o’-the-wisps that begin to dance before our eyes and “flicker,

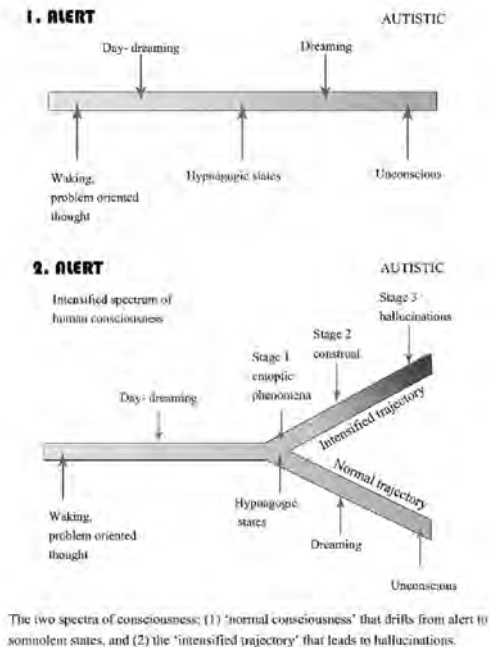


Figure 1. Lewis-Williams' intensified trajectory of consciousness.

scintillate, expand, contract, and combine”²⁴ to draw us on, just as the “embellishing images” of the prehistoric caves “blazed a path into the unknown.”²⁵

The great, barely differentiated troop of the dead that Odysseus first encounters in his visionary trance may be a narrative echo of such an entoptic phenomenon. The ancient Greeks used the word *eidola*, image, to signify the burnt out husks of once living humans—ghosts as substantial as the image we behold in our household mirror. The swarming, undifferentiated visionary content of brides, young bachelors, old men worn out with toil, warriors with blood-smeared armor, and maids crossed in love is typical of the kaleidoscopic visionary explosion that characterizes the initial stage, yet the emerging coherency of the vision indicates the onset of Stage 2, “construal.”

In the second stage of this intensified trajectory, rather than entering the dream state, “Subjects try to make sense of entoptic phenomena by elaborating them into iconic forms.”²⁶ A struggle to focus occurs, and “the brain attempts to decode these forms as it does impressions supplied by the nervous system in an alert, outwardly-directed state.”²⁷

This second stage appears to be marked by the appearance of Elpenor, a crewmember who had fallen to his death the morning of their departure and was left unburied in the main hall of Circe’s palace. Elpenor is still nested in the realm of the familiar for Odysseus, and his concerns are still those of the problem-solving mind: like the slain Patroclus in the *Iliad*, who appears to Achilles in a dream informing him he cannot cross the river and enter the Gates of Hades without burial (*Iliad* 23.81–91), Elpenor has not completed his transmigration, and still possesses the power of speech and recognition. He demands of Odysseus burial and proper funerary rites to fully enter the underworld, which Odysseus duly promises him.²⁸ In this way, we see Elpenor’s appearance as orienting Odysseus to the strange, new world he is entering while reminding him of how the concerns of his waking existence continue to play out in the land of the dead.

A similar function appears to be played by the arrival of Anticlea, the mother of Odysseus, who lingers void of speech

and recognition by the trench, drawn by the scent of the blood that, if she is allowed to drink, can restore her faculties of speech and emotional intelligence.²⁹ Although shocking and mysterious for Odysseus, her presence, once she has drunk the blood, will be orienting, revealing as it does valuable, objective information about his relations and the state of affairs on Ithaca. It will also teach Odysseus more of the laws of the land: you cannot, for instance, give the dead a hug.

It is the approach of the sage Tiresias, who appears boisterously making his way through the flitting and scurrying shades, that appears to initiate the movement out of construal, beginning Odysseus' full induction into Stage 3 of the intensified trajectory, "hallucinations."³⁰ The sage drinks the blood and, his mantic powers awakened, delivers his prophecy. This, of course, is the goal of Odysseus' journey, and at the interview's conclusion there is a palpable sense of chthonic depth in the narrative, of Odysseus being entirely taken up in his visions, completely "autistic," oblivious to his literal environs.

Their business done, Odysseus seizes his opportunity to inquire how he can, "make her [Anticlea] know me for the man I am?" (*Odyssey* 11:165). Tiresias informs him that he can speak truly with any of the dead he wishes to—all he has to do is allow them to approach the blood and drink. This starts the long, famous series of interviews, beginning with his mother, conducted by Odysseus in the underworld, starting with reunions at the site of the trench but rapidly losing even a sense of physical locale to turn into transcorporeal voyaging and pure *seeing*.

According to Lewis-Williams, much like passing through the birth canal, in this third stage "many people experience a whirling vortex or rotating tunnel that seems to surround them and draw them into its depths,"³¹ emerging into full interaction with the worlds that lie beyond our ordinary consciousness.³²

The virtue of Lewis-Williams's model is its elegant simplicity. Yet it is a rough fit. For example, the vortex and its ancillary, shamanic flight, which E. R. Dodds describes as "the liberation of the shaman's spirit, which leaves his body

and sets off on a mantic journey,"³³ is certainly not a universal feature of trance states.

The native voice of a Huichol shaman gives another account of this passage into the visionary stage: "There is a doorway within our minds that usually remains hidden and secret until the time of death. The Huichol word for it is *nieríka*. *Nieríka* is a cosmic portal or interface between so-called ordinary and nonordinary realities. It is a passageway and at the same time a barrier between worlds."³⁴

What is certain is that a threshold is crossed, one that can be subtle or dramatic, where consciousness floats free of the gravitational pull of what Lewis-Williams calls "the problem solving mind" and reestablishes itself, after a brief stage of construal, in an expanded, visionary state.

As Lewis-Williams' model indicates, the visionary state could be characterized as a waking dream, reminding us of the meaning of *seeing* in the shamanic and ancient worlds: "In Greek as well as Latin—when the verb occurs in an emotionally charged context—[it] always means more than just 'to observe' or 'to witness' something; it means 'to experience,' 'to be involved in a meaningful event.'"³⁵ Similarly, among the Shoshoni of North America, such *seeing* is called *navushieip*, which denotes "both dreaming and waking." Like Odysseus in his vision of Hades, the Shoshoni as well "accord dreaming the same status as waking for the reception of information."³⁶

Upon immersion into the fathomless depths of the third stage, the subject experiences a profoundly meaningful participation in the vast, strange, and intensely beautiful sentience of the cosmos. Much as Odysseus eventually beholds the archetypal mythic figures of his culture in his trance: ancient queens, Minos, Orion, Tantalus, Sisyphus, and finally Herakles; the Tukano tribe, in their *ayahuasca* ceremonies, "see *yajé* snakes, the Master of the Animals who withholds animals or releases them to hunters, the Sun-Father, the Daughter of the Anaconda, and other mythical beings."³⁷

Visionary states are clearly distinguishable from dreams in that the *seer* in the intensified trajectory of consciousness is

not passive. Quite the opposite, entry into the depths of the third stage of the intensified trajectory of consciousness can involve a pitched battle.

We see this in Menelaus' own account of his entering the visionary stage of the trajectory to extract valuable information from the Master of Animals figure, Proteus.

Marooned and starving on a small island off the Egyptian coast during his return home from Troy, Menelaus and his men must ambush and interrogate Proteus in order to uncover the reasons for their misfortune. This "Old Man of the Sea" enjoys bedding down in deep hollow caves among his droves of seals, "like a shepherd with his flock" (*Odyssey* 4.464).

Much as among the Greenland Eskimos, whose shamans ambush and violently negotiate with the Mistress of Animals when a tribe is unable to find enough seals to eat and is threatened with famine,³⁸ Menelaus and his men prepare to seize Proteus. As was common among traditional hunters, they disguise themselves as animals, in this case donning freshly stripped sealskins.

The onset of the intensified trajectory appears to be marked by the arrival of the goddess Eidothea, anointing Menelaus and his crew with heavenly *ambrosia* to mask the fetor of the rotting sealskins. Soon Proteus, emerging from the sea, makes his rounds, counts off his fat-fed seals, and beds down to sleep. Menelaus and his men then spring their trap, and having pinioned him, must deal with the god's rapid-fire counterattack before the truth can be wrenched out of him: "First he shifted into a great bearded lion, and then a serpent—a panther—a ramping wild boar—a torrent of water—a tree with soaring branchtops—but we held on for dear life, braving it out" (*Odyssey* 4.512–15).

Finally, Menelaus and his men having navigated through the dancing layers of the entoptic and construal stages of the intensified trajectory, the god comes into focus and "burst out into rapid-fire questions: 'Which god, Menelaus, conspired with you to trap me in an ambush? Seize me against my will? What on earth do you want?'" (*Odyssey* 4.519–21).

Menelaus reveals his bad luck, and Proteus reveals, in turn, the etiology of Menelaus' dilemma, as well as the ritual that will allow him to sail home.

Menelaus' ordeal has much in common with the Native American vision quest, where, in the intensified trajectory, "the dreams in which spirits appear are more vivid than other dreams; the Shoshoni say that they hold your attention and you cannot awake until they are over," and Proteus's rapid-fire transformations resemble aspects of shamanic, visionary experiences: "Visions may be mercurial: for instance, a 'lightening spirit' may appear as a body of water, then like a human being, then like an animal." In addition, "often frightening animals threaten suppliants, and they must brave them if their power-giving spirit animal is to appear." As Proteus becomes for Menelaus and his men, the spirit animal that finally reveals itself "will become the quester's animal-helper and source of his power."³⁹

Towards the end of Odysseus' own harrowing visionary journey, we are reminded that for shamans, "liaising with the spirits is not without danger, for transference between worlds is itself full of risk and there is always a chance that the shaman may not be able to reenter his or her own cosmic space,"⁴⁰

Eager as Odysseus is to continue his transcorporeal journey into deeper mysteries, he begins to lose control of his visions: "The dead came surging round me, hordes of them, thousands raising unearthly cries, and blanching terror gripped me" (*Odyssey* 11:723-25). In a panic that Persephone would send up a monstrous head or Gorgon's staring face from the depths, he wrenches himself out of a trance and hastens forth from the grove. Rushing back to his ship, Odysseus orders his men to cast off and set sail for the kind Sun and the land of the living, concluding his experience of the intensified trajectory of consciousness.

ETHNOGRAPHIC PARALLELS WITH THE AMAZONIAN SHAMANIC TRADITION

RELIGIOUS SCHOLAR Steve Beyer points out that "there seem to be three modes of interaction with the spirits: the shaman

can travel to where the spirits are—the classic soul flight; the shaman can summon the spirits to where the shaman is; or the spirits can enter and take possession of the shaman's body."⁴¹ Whereas scholars have studied the first and last of these modes extensively, there has been less research on summoning, which is the primary mode adopted by Odysseus and the one predominantly utilized in the Amazon.

Just as Odysseus takes his seat before the trench to order the coming of the dead and conducts interviews to gather the information he requires, a *vegetalista* shaman will summon the spirits to work as he directs them. In fact, among the titles given to such shamans is *banco*; that is, a "seat" or "bench."

For our informant, the *curandero* Juan Flores, a *banco muraya* is the master of the plants and animals on the land, and is accompanied by the *banco puma*, the spotted jaguar of the jungle.⁴² As the honorific *banco* indicates, Flores establishes the seat around which the spirits will congregate, summoning first the spirits of the land, including those of the medicinal trees and his ally animals; then of the water, for example, the giant boa, *sirenas*, and the black jaguar; and finally of space, like Jesus, Buddha, the Virgin Mary, the ancient Incans, and other doctor *curanderos*. Only then does he begin his healing work.

Beyer notes as well that, like Flores, his informants "do not explicitly go to the land of the spirits, nor do they interact with plant or animal spirits on their journeys, in order to heal their patients. To do that, they call the spirits to the place of the ceremony."⁴³

Yet these modes of interaction with the spirits are not mutually exclusive, and soul flight may occur at the conclusion of a summoning. Just as Odysseus does when his business is completed with Tiresias and his deceased kin, with traveling and *seeing* the mythic sights of Hades, *vegetalista* shamans may transcorporate after the ceremony's work is done. Then, "they journey to *see*—distant landscapes, far galaxies, vast hospitals, convocations of shamans. They do not travel on business."⁴⁴ And, as Odysseus or any good tourist does, they

often will recount stories of their journeys afterward.

Another important indigenous feature of the Hades episode is the overlapping, or rather, interpenetration, of physical and spiritual topography.

Odysseus must physically journey by abandoning his ship to the winds and currents of the sea to where the spirits are: a locale as remote and terrible as Persephone's grove, half in this world and half out of it, yet, like the lunar surface, accessible to mortals.

This is solidly in the tradition of the vision quest, in which the applicant attempts to make his or her consciousness permeable to the spirit realm, through physical or sensorial deprivation and by seeking out locales of special power to facilitate this opening.

As Flores related to us, "I like to find where the strongest spirits are so I can learn from them. Spirits like to live in the mountains and in the most silent places of the jungle. They don't like noise. So I would go to these places to learn from them and receive teaching, but the communication is by means of the plants, the diets—when one drinks *ayahuasca*, the spirits come to talk."⁴⁵

One such locale that Flores visited, deep in the jungle three days' voyage by boat from the town of Santa Rosa de Masisea, was accessible only once a day when a canyon opened in the mountain to permit entrance to a hidden lagoon. There, drinking *ayahuasca*, he sat and waited along with the others in the party until the sound of a deep throbbing in the waters heralded the arrival of a great vessel, a ship of iron, filled with specialists in medicine, emerging from the depths of the lake. Much as Odysseus seeks in his interview with Tiresias, Flores wished to "encounter the ancient doctors and *curanderos* that exist on the other side as spirits in order to converse with them, to find out how they saw me as a *curandero*. I simply wanted to learn. If they had not accepted me, I wouldn't have returned to this life."⁴⁶

In a progression similar to Odysseus' moving from interviewing the mortal deceased to a transcorporeal *seeing* of the

archetypal, mythic realm, Flores first encountered the great healers of the past from his tribe, the Ashaninka, and conversed with them. Then he saw the mythic *sirenas*, and, moving into pure *seeing*, beheld Manco Capac and Mama Ocllo, the first Incans to emerge from the depths of Lake Titicaca to bring the arts of civilization to humanity.

GIVEN THE ETHNOGRAPHIC evidence of the shamanic character of Odysseus' vision in Hades, we can offer some speculations on the nature of the archaic experience enshrined in Homer's poem.

A suggestion of that origin lies in the painted caves of prehistoric Europe, the oldest known of which date from 32,000 BCE, from whose ever-dark caverns come visions of subterranean theriomorphic and animal powers.

There we find imagery that indicates a similar interpenetration of spiritual and physical topography as Odysseus encounters in Hades.⁴⁷ In Paleolithic peoples' descents into the subterranean realms, they also encountered an "immanent" world of spirit, one "interdigitating with the material world, as well as separate from it."⁴⁸ The traces of that world are the breathtaking art that adorns their caves. This visionary landscape of the spirit world was "given topographical materiality" in their physical passage into the depths of the caverns:

The sensory deprivation afforded by the remote, silent and totally dark chambers, such as the Diverticule of the Felines in Lascaux and the Horse's Tail in Altamira, induces altered states of consciousness. In their various stages of altered states, questers sought, by sight and touch, in the folds and cracks of the rock face, visions of powerful animals. It is as if the rock were a living membrane between those who ventured in and one of the lowest levels of the tiered cosmos; behind the membrane lay a realm inhabited by spirit animals and spirits themselves, and the passages and chambers of the caves penetrated deep into that realm.⁴⁹

As we've seen, embellishing images leading into darkness also characterize the shades of the dead that Odysseus encounters in Hades, where, much as the visions recorded in the Paleolithic caves, these images await restoration to life through the shaman's vital force, his capacity to *see*.

While the pioneering vision quests of the Paleolithic were most likely conducted in deep caves, over time, the walls became populated with iconography and subtly transformed into shrines. As the permeable consciousness of shamanic states became more ritualized and developed as a social function, Lewis-Williams theorizes that more and more truth value was given to visions received in the extremest depths, which suggests the social function of shamanic states lie somewhere at the origin of the myth of the underworld journey later celebrated by the ancient Greeks.

Clearly, Odysseus' account combines both Paleolithic, Neolithic, and Proto-Modern elements. Like Paleolithic people descending into the caves, he must travel to a sacred, wild, and remote locale where the human may interpenetrate with the spirit realm; yet as is fitting for an archaic Greek, his visions are of a more settled, agricultural, and humanly populated realm.

Like the dying off of the herds of wild aurochs and woolly mammoths, prides of lions, and shambling, solitary cave bears, first from the land itself and then from ancestral memory, the master of animals and other Paleolithic divine figures also receded, gradually anthropomorphizing into urbane human forms—albeit some still with hooves and horns and animal metamorphoses—in which we encounter them in the *Odyssey*.

Yet the remaining motif of primacy of depth, and the celebration of ascetic hardiness on the part of the shaman/priests to achieve it, suggests why Odysseus' feat of ferreting out Tiresias and bearing his prophecy back to the breathing, conscious world was so celebrated. Certainly, Tiresias himself is astonished by the achievement: "Royal son Laertes,

Odysseus, master of exploits, man of pain, what now, what brings you here, forsaking the light of day?" (*Odyssey* 11:102–4). It also suggests how the sanctified role of Tiresias, as the voice of oracular authority in the depths of Hades, could have evolved: the visions received in the greatest depths were given the most authority.

It would be fitting, therefore—millennia after the Upper Paleolithic creative explosion that we witness in sanctuaries such as Chauvet Cave, the material product of peoples for whom vision quests within the depths of the earth were foundational to their cosmovision—that this particular feature of the prehistoric oral tradition would find such a central position in Homer's poem.

NOTES

1. See Susana Bustos, "The Healing Power of Icaros: A Phenomological Study of Ayahuasca Experiences" (Ph.D. diss., California Institute for Integral Studies, 2008).

2. Werner Herzog, *Cave of Forgotten Dreams* IFC Films, 2010.

3. Candidates to achieve such effects in the hands of a pharmakeus such as Circe are opium along with members of the Solanaceae family, the famous narcotic plants of European witchcraft: mandrake, henbane, deadly nightshade, and datura. These plants which, according to Peter Furst in *Hallucinogens and Culture*, "have played a role in religion, magic, divination, sorcery, and medicine in different parts of the world since ancient times," (San Francisco 1976, 128), can create temporary memory loss and near complete suggestibility. At high doses, these plants, also held as sacred by many indigenous peoples of the Americas, are reported to cause animal-becoming or facilitate death-rebirth initiatory ordeals. There is a possibility such experiences lie at the origin of Homer's literary account, for when Circe restores the crewmen, "anointing them one by one with some new magic oil," they are "younger than ever, taller by far, more handsome to the eye" (*Odyssey* 10.433–37).

4. T. B. L. Webster, "Some Psychological Terms in Greek Tragedy" *Journal of Hellenic Studies* 77 (1957), 149.

5. Louis Dupré, *Passage to Modernity* (New Haven 1993), 5.

6. David Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous: Perception and Language in a More-Than-Human World* (New York 1996), 147.

7. Frédérique Apffel-Marglin, *Subversive Spiritualities: How Rituals Enact the World* (Oxford 2011), 487.

8. Barbara Tedlock, *The Woman in the Shaman's Body* (New York

2005), 133.

9. Luis Eduardo Luna, *Vegetalismo: Shamanism among the Mestizo Population of the Peruvian Amazon* (Stockholm 1986), 13.

10. Stephan Beyer, *Singing to the Plants: A Guide to the Mestizo Shamanism in the Upper Amazon* (Albuquerque 2009), 174.

11. This permeability is a feature of daily life among indigenous peoples. While “dieting” plant medicines in the deep jungle, Susana was repeatedly awakened in the middle of the night by a tremendous shaking going through her little hut, as if someone were yanking back and forth the poles supporting the structure. It was perplexing, since we weren’t in a seismically active region. The next day, Juan Flores pointed out the presence of several medium-sized Chullachaqui Caspi trees growing right behind the hut, and, laughing, said, “The Chulla Chaqui [a mischievous elf-spirit of the jungle whose botanical manifestation is the tree] came and played a trick on you last night!”

12. Robert Tindall and Susana Bustos, *The Shamanic Odyssey: Homer, Tolkien, and the Visionary Experience* (Rochester 2012), 61.

13. J. P. Harpignies, *Visionary Plant Consciousness* (Rochester 2007), 134.

14. Reichel-Dolmatoff, Gerardo, *The Shaman and the Jaguar: A Study of Narcotic Drugs among the Indians of Colombia* (Philadelphia 1975), xiii.

15. Walter Burkert, *Greek Religion* (Boston 1985), 141.

16. Is it not also fitting that the staff which Odysseus utilizes to drill out the Cyclops’ eye is olivewood, considering that Odysseus already possesses a perfectly serviceable sword for the task? Contemplating it, Odysseus wonders, “Would Athena give me glory?” (*Odyssey* 9.355).

17. Reichel-Dolmatoff (note 14), 107.

18. Reichel-Dolmatoff (note 14), 107.

19. Miranda and Steven Aldhouse-Green, *The Quest for the Shaman* (London 2005), 15.

20. “That’s because he didn’t have ayahuasca!” said Juan Flores, bursting into laughter upon hearing this account.

21. Gerardo Reichel-Dolmatoff, *Amazonian Cosmos: The Sexual and Religious Symbolism of the Tukano Indians* (Chicago 1971), 126.

22. Robert Tindall, *The Jaguar That Roams the Mind* (Rochester 2008), 181.

23. David Lewis-Williams, *The Mind in the Cave* (London 2002), 209.

24. Lewis-Williams (note 23), 126.

25. Lewis-Williams (note 23), 209.

26. Lewis-Williams (note 23), 127.

27. Lewis-Williams (note 23), 128.

28. Elpenor may be a grim reminder of the role animistic predation plays in shamanic cultures, in this case the tradition of Neolithic human sacrifice.

There is a possibility, if we accept that the breadth and time depth of the *Odyssey* makes it akin to an archaeological site, richly strewn with the remains of far older oral traditions and prehistoric lore, that Elpenor originally was sacrificed to blaze the trail that Odysseus and his men follow into Hades. As anthropologist Carlo Fausto points out in "A Blend of Blood and Tobacco," his study of Amazonian witchcraft which appears in Niel L. Whitehead and Robin Wright, editors, *In Darkness and Secrecy: The Anthropology of Assault Sorcery and Witchcraft in Amazonia* (Durham 2004), 163, contrary to current New Age spiritualities, not all shamanism is "loving animism." Indeed, sometimes, "It is better understood as a predatory animism."

29. There are a number of indications in Homer that the blood offering restores egoic consciousness and memory of previous lives to the shades of the dead. For example, Achilles, speaking of his dream vision of the "phantom" of Patroclus, declares in the Fagles' translation, "So even in Death's strong house there is something left, a ghost (*psyche*), a phantom (*eidolon*), but no real breath of life (*phrenes*) (*Iliad*, 23 122–24). Similarly, Odysseus' mother, having drunk the blood, informs him that, when "sinews no longer bind the flesh and bones together—the fire in all its fury burns the body down to ashes once life (*thymos*) slips from the white bones and the spirit (*psyche*), rustling, flitters away..." (*Odyssey* 11:25–53). As T. B. L. Webster (note 4), 149, states, because "*Phrenes*, *thymos*, and *kradie* to a large extent overlap in Homer, a clear distinction having yet to be drawn "between emotional and intellectual activity," it has been suggested by E. E. G. and F. B. Jevons in *The Makers of Hellas* (London 1903), 294, that, "only by tasting blood do they [the dead] recover for a time full possession of memory and consciousness, although some degree of both they seem to have always, for many of the spirits invoked by Odysseus in the *Nekyia* recognize the hero before they have tasted the blood, of which all are eager to drink."

30. Lewis-Williams does not intend his designation of the third stage as "hallucinations," which in common parlance signifies to be mistaken, deluded, or mad, as normative. As he points out in an essay co-authored with Jean Clottes, "The Mind in the Cave—The Cave in the Mind," in *Anthropology of Consciousness* 9:1 (1998), 18, "The spectrum is divided up by each society or subculture in its own way. What passes for madness in one community may be esteemed as divine revelation in another. What is a vision to some people is, to others, hallucination."

31. Lewis-Williams (note 23), 128–9.

32. All of this should sound strangely familiar. Alice's drowsy encounter with the White Rabbit and subsequent fall down the rabbit hole into Wonderland might come to mind, the Pevensie siblings' entrance through the wardrobe into Narnia, or Neo's taking the red pill in *The Matrix*.

33. E. R. Dodds, *The Greeks and the Irrational* (Berkeley 1951), 18.

34. Joan Halifax, *Shamanistic Voices: A Survey of Visionary Narratives* (London 1979), 1.

35. George Luck, "The Road to Eleusis" *American Journal of Philology*

122, no. 1 (2001), 135–138.

36. Lewis-Williams (note 23), 167.

37. Lewis-Williams (note 23), 132.

38. Walter Burkert, *Structure and History in Greek Mythology and Ritual* (Berkeley 1979), 89.

39. Lewis-Williams (note 23), 167.

40. Aldhouse-Green (note 19), 12.

41. Beyer (note 10), 166.

42. Tindall (note 22), 209.

43. Beyer (note 10), 167.

44. Beyer (note 10), 167.

45. Tindall (note 22), 166.

46. Tindall (note 22), 167–68.

47. One might reasonably object that the leap from the flowing, highly naturalistic depictions of animals, geometric markings and shapes, bear skull altars, and occasional mysterious images of therianthropes in the Paleolithic caves to the cosmologically and historically sophisticated visionary content of Odysseus' archaic Greek vision is rather large. Yet, if we had the opportunity to send anthropologists among the people of the Upper Paleolithic, there is little doubt they would encounter a comparably rich and sophisticated cosmology, as well as ample empirical knowledge of their environment, among them.

48. Lewis-Williams (note 23), 214.

49. Lewis-Williams (note 23), 209.

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