

Hermes Negatively Polarised (1): Neoliberalism and the Information Revolution

(Part 5 of the Series:
'Alchemy and the Imagination')



[This article (part of a five part series) is based upon the draft of a talk delivered to the Bendigo Writers' Council and general public in August 2008 by Dr Ian Irvine entitled 'Alchemy and the Imagination']

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Image: 1/6 Hermes (Australian postage stamp).

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Author Bio (as at December 2011)

Dr. Ian Irvine is an Australian-based poet/lyricist, writer and non-fiction writer. His work has featured in publications as diverse as *Humanitas* (USA), *The Antigone Review* (Canada), *Tears in the Fence* (UK), *Linq* (Australia) and *Takahe* (NZ), among many others. His work has also appeared in two Australian national poetry anthologies: *Best Australian Poems 2005* (Black Ink Books) and *Agenda: 'Australian Edition'*, 2005. He is the author of three books – *Dream-Dust Parasites* a novel (written as Ian Hobson); *The Angel of Luxury and Sadness* a non-fiction book concerned with post-traditional forms of alienation/chronic ennui; and *Facing the Demon of Noontide*, a collection of poetry. Dr. Irvine currently teaches in the Professional Writing and Editing program at BRIT (Bendigo, Australia). He has also taught history and social theory at La Trobe University (Bendigo, Australia) and holds a PhD for his work on creative, normative and dysfunctional forms of alienation and morbid ennui. In his recent theoretical work he has attempted to develop an anti-oppressive approach to creative writing based upon the integration of Cultural-Relational theories concerning 'self in relation' with Jungian and Groffian models of the 'collective' or 'transpersonal' unconscious.

Hermes Negatively Polarised (1): Neoliberalism and the Information Revolution

What makes money numismatic is its numen, its aura, its mana. Money is mana. It's nothing else ... We're all agreeing to a consensual hallucination. None of the other ones work. Money accomplished what God could never do. God was supposed to be all powerful and yet purely spiritual, but only ended up being purely spiritual. Money, however, is purely spiritual and is all powerful. What is God? God is money, money is God. Money is our God.¹

Hermes is ... I suspect, behind the 'information revolution'. He is, we remember the god of crossroads and boundaries; of mediation and of communication.²

In November of this year I attended a series of lectures on Jungian psychology and mental health delivered by La Trobe University Literature academic David Tacey. His book 'Gods and Diseases'³ uses the work of Jung and Hillman to make sense of disturbing trends around mental health in contemporary Australian society. In particular he spoke about how unconscious the general public is about what the ancients would have instantly recognised as 'archetypal' patterns/traits belonging to particular deities.

Tacey also spoke about the concept of 'inflation' or 'negative polarisation' as discussed by Jung and Hillman. Inflation is a state where an ancient archetypal pattern comes to dominate either an individual's psyche or the psyche of an entire culture/civilisation. In his book there is a chapter about the 'national psychosis' that plagued Nazi Germany in the 1930s and 40s. Following Jung, Tacey links it to a negative 'inflation' of the archaic German storm god 'Wodan' or 'Wotan'.⁴

In his first talk of the series Tacey also said that in ancient understandings 'an unacknowledged or defiled God could turn wrathful/destructive'. In other words, if we are unconscious of (i.e. deny) the archetypal patterns shaping our world we risk being 'seized' or 'possessed' by them—i.e. other names for pathological 'inflation.'

Tacey's work may act as a lead in to certain aspects of postmodern culture that have long intrigued me. Interestingly he put me onto an article entitled 'The Charm of Hermes: Hillman, Lyotard and the Postmodern Condition', published in 1992 by another La Trobe academic—Bernie Neville (from the School of Education).⁵

In that article, Neville, also coming from the perspective of Jungian archetypal psychology, makes some striking claims regarding the specific archetypal energy presiding over Westernised societies during the postmodern phase. To Neville the God (or archetypal energy) is Hermes. Now as any true writer knows the Greek archetype Hermes, or Hermes Trismegistus (to the Medieval alchemists), Mercury or Mercurius (to the Romans) or Thoth (to the Egyptians) presided over writing and communication and knowledge transmission generally.

Neville's essay set me musing again on an essay by Peter Lamborn Wilson concerning Hermes, Hermeticism and historic mutations to the phenomenon of money entitled

¹ Peter Lamborn Wilson, 'Hieroglyphics and Money' in *Civil Disobedience: Poetics and Politics in Action*, p.284-285: Coffee House Press, 2004. Essay first published 1998.

² Patrick Harpur, *The Philosopher's Secret Fire: A History of the Imagination*, p187-188, Penguin, 2002.

³ David Tacey, *Gods and Diseases*, Harper Collins Publishers, 2011.

⁴ Ibid, Chapter 8.

⁵ Bernie Neville, 'The Charm of Hermes: Hillman, Lyotard, and the Postmodern Condition', *Journal of Analytical Psychology*, 1992, 37, pp337-353.

'Hieroglyphics and Money'. The two essays together constitute a fascinating alternative take on important phenomena related to postmodernism, in particular economic globalisation, postmodernist philosophy and aesthetics, and information age communication developments. More importantly they represent an alternative critical perspective on these phenomena that has been neglected by secular leftists of all descriptions, who tend to look to Marxism and Western Marxism in order to make sense of the various of advanced capitalism. Indeed if we look at contemporary economics, for example, through the eyes of Neville and Wilson we note a strange alliance between contemporary socialists and capitalists that would otherwise go un-noticed—both participate in the 'consensual hallucination' that Wilson refers to (see opening quote of this essay).⁶ To put the point differently, both are afflicted, though in slightly different ways, by what in this essay will be referred to as 'the Hermes inflation'—both see 'money' and 'information' as materialist, sociological or cognitive phenomena, that is to say as 'disenchanted' or 'desacralised' phenomena.

In his ground-breaking 1992 article on Hermes and postmodernism Neville wrote: 'I wish to argue in this paper that the image and energy which shape the postmodern condition are a specific archetypal image and energy—those of Hermes, god of thieves, travellers and scholars.'⁷ Elsewhere he wrote that we are leaving the age of Prometheus (i.e. where science acts as a utopian tool capable of correcting all the world's ills) and are entering 'the Age of Hermes'⁸ which, in-turn, he links to the much vaunted but little understood phenomenon of 'postmodernism'.⁹ According to Neville, however, because the Hermes archetype/energy is unacknowledged (denied) we are experiencing a state of 'Hermes inflation' (or what I would term 'negative polarisation').¹⁰

As has been discussed in earlier articles in this series, the ancient archetype of Hermes (also Mercury, Mercurious, Thoth, etc) as herald of the Gods presided over disciplines and technologies like writing, public speaking, the humanities (Liberal Arts), humoral psychology, primitive economics, teaching, etc. However, in our age a plethora of technologies and cultural mutations could also be related to the Hermes archetype. In terms of communication technologies (and software applications) we would have to list television, radio, the personal computer, the internet, the telephone, e-book readers, video and DVD players, stereo systems of all descriptions, satellite television, Skype, You-Tube, Facebook and other 'social media' software, etc, etc.. In terms of knowledge disciplines post-structuralism and deconstruction are archetypal Hermesian activities that these days permeate many other disciplines. Certain schools of psychology¹¹, the entire disciplines of economics and

⁶ Wilson, op cite, p.287, says something similar when he writes, '... applying the Hermetic critique just to coins as images allows us to come up with a whole economic theory that stands alongside of, for example, the Marxist or Anarchist analysis of money.'

⁷ Neville, op cite, p. 345.

⁸ Ibid, p.345, 'The age of Prometheus may be as good as over. The Age of Hermes may just be beginning.'

⁹ Compare William Doty, as quoted in Antoine Faivre's *The Eternal Hermes*, p.67, '[Hermes] is frequently allied with what is frequently named the postmodern condition.'

¹⁰ Ibid, p347. 'When I suggest, then, that our society is suffering a Hermes inflation, there is a suggestion of pathology.' He repeats these assertions in 'Rogers, Jung and the Postmodern Condition' published in R. Stipsits and R. Hutterer (eds) *Perspectives Psychotherapie*, Wuv. Universitätsverlag, Vienna. 1992, 172-198. An extension of his reasoning also occurs in the article 'Out of Depth and Treading Water: Reflections on Consciousness, Culture and New learning Technologies', published in the *Journal of Integral Studies*. On p.10 of the internet version of the article we read '... the postmodern condition may be construed as an inflation of the late 20th century European consciousness (wherever it is found) by the image and energy of Hermes ... I have argued that post-industrial society is caught in a Hermes fantasy.'

¹¹ In a later article on Hermesian trends in contemporary psychology and psychotherapy Neville lists 'humanistic psychology' and 'Jungian psychoanalysis' (including the post-Jungians e.g. Hillman) as

accountancy, and the so-called computer sciences are also eminently Hermesian. As the ancient god of travel, of course, most technological developments related to high speed travel also fall under his dominion, particularly hot air balloons, airlines of all descriptions, helicopters, hovercraft, hang-gliders, and space craft of all descriptions (including notions we have of 'UFOs'). However, speed boats, rapid transit trains, cars (especially racing cars), buses and motorbikes perhaps also fall under his dominion due to the way they make organic travel (e.g. walking, horses, etc.) obsolete whilst disturbing the 'air element' so fundamental to the Hermes archetype. We may thus locate 'Hermes inflated' at the very centre of Modernist Futurism in particular. Modern developments to the 'technology' of money, particularly as the new money (digital money) interacts with the new global communication technologies also comes under the domain of Hermes. Indeed the modern bank, which is gradually phasing out 'image reliant money' (gold, coins and notes) for digital/electronic money is at the very heart of recent manifestations of Hermes, as are the stock-markets, foreign exchange markets, and other aspects of international finance (e.g. insurance, loan markets, etc.). The ubiquitous phenomena associated with the flow of global capital also represent manifestations of Information Age Hermes.¹² In returning to the ancient Hermes archetype for a moment we note that he also presided over athletics, dreams, certain agricultural activities and over the transmission of souls to the underworld after death.

Neville also states that in the postmodern 'cultural intensification' of the Hermes archetype, two particular phenomena become almost definitional to his manifestation: 1) the phenomenon associated with the Information Revolution,¹³ and 2) the ideology behind economic globalisation –i.e. 'neoliberalism', 'economic rationalism', or, what Kevin Rudd recently referred to as, 'hyper-capitalism'. From the perspective of archetypal psychology these phenomena represent mutations to the Hermes archetype – however unconscious of this fact we are in a secular civilisation. Neville describes our situation as follows:

'The information society is guided by the fantasy of the marketplace, in which exchange is an end in itself—a fantasy of deregulation, free interchange, the commercialisation of knowledge, the elimination of 'noise' from communication, and the replacement of social relations based on bonds of family or loyalty by social relations which are loose, temporary, and freely traded. In the marketplace the temporary contract is rapidly taking the place of the permanent institution. The contracts, the linkages, become more important than the people, who are

manifestations of the Hermes archetype. I would also list the entire transpersonal school of psychology (especially the work of Stan Grof) as well as narrative psychology. See Neville, 1992, 'Rogers, Jung and the Postmodern Condition'. Note: only extreme forms of narrative psychology could be said to manifest the fundamental elements of the Hermes 'inflation' we are discussing here.

¹² Op cite, Wilson, 2004 reflects upon the ancient historical connections between Hermes and money. Particularly interesting are his meditations on the US dollar—still the default currency determining global exchange rates and therefore a fundamental aspect of global trade. Neville also comments on the mutations op cite p. 345 'We find the heavy beauty of the gold bar and the crisp tactility of the banknote replaced by the displacement of a few molecules on a strip of computer tape.'

¹³ Others have also pointed to this connection, see Patrick Harpur *The Philosopher's Secret Fire*, p. 186-188 (Penguin, 2002). 'Hermes is ... I suspect, behind the 'information revolution'. ... If we revere him he gives us hermeneutics, insights and wisdom; if we do not he deceives us through messages that seem true but are really false. ... Hermetic revelations become literal signals from satellites above to cables below, whose transmissions criss-cross the globe, growing faster and more garbled by the minute ...' Paul Levinson in *The Soft Edge: a Natural History and Future of the Information Revolution* (1997, reprinted 1998, Routledge) also discusses the relationship between Hermes-Mercury and the information revolution (p.52-53) Levinson draws particular attention to the alliance of communication and speed (both ancient Hermesian characteristics) in the information age.

after all, interchangeable. The consciousness of the marketplace permeates all areas of life.’¹⁴

Many people these days might view some of the quoted phenomena as indicators of widespread social and cultural pathology—i.e. our society is sick in some way. From the perspective of analytic psychology we could say that the Hermes archetype has ‘inflated’ (has become ‘negatively polarised’), in specific areas of modern society. These more negative (shadow) aspects to the archetype are thoroughly canvassed in other sections of Neville’s essay—and remember he is writing in 1992 decades before the economic catastrophes of recent years:

‘We have seen paper entrepreneurs become cultural heroes, 20-year old foreign exchange dealers (selected for their gambling instincts) become obscenely wealthy, educational institutions pouring out a flood of economists and accountants, and rural and manufacturing industries brought to the edge of destruction as company directors gambled with their assets. The consequences have been catastrophic, for national economies, for public morality, for countless unemployed, and for the political system.’¹⁵

Clearly unrestrained economic and social Darwinism, with its insistence on heightened interpersonal competition, is seen by Neville as an aspect of the ‘Hermes inflation’. Unrestrained capitalism, from this perspective, might be seen as indicative of a social and cultural pathology. I tend to agree but a Western Marxist perspective remains useful—neoliberal economics in particular represents an attempt by political and economic elites to secure and maintain power in the face of changing social and cultural circumstances. Neo-liberalism promises liberation to all but delivers, in historical fact, only to the few. When Hermes becomes aligned with economic and informational oppression we note a profound inversion of his earlier more positive manifestations—historically Hermes was something of a democrat, a leveller of artificial social hierarchies and a thief for the greater community of beings (Robin Hood being one of his manifestations).¹⁶ The current oppressive turn may well

¹⁴ Neville, 1992, op cite, p339.

¹⁵ Ibid, p.347. R. Lopez-Pedraza, also deals with a range of ‘shadow’ aspects to the Hermes phenomena in his book *Hermes and his Children*, Spring Publications, 1977. The emphasis, however, is on sexual matters (given the book’s focus on psychotherapy). From a cultural (rather than individual) perspective he links the prevalence of pornography in postmodern culture to Hermes, particularly the myth concerning the discovery of Aphrodite’s relations with Ares. In that myth Hermes states his desire to swap places with Ares in order to make love to Aphrodite in front of all the other gods. (p.66) Jung also discusses aspects of the shadow side to Mercurius in ‘The Spirit Mercurius’ Part IV of *Alchemical Studies*. The closest he comes, however, to discussing mass projections of the negative side to the archetype involve certain ambivalent comments he makes about the alliance of Hermes-Mercurius-Wotan with materialistic science (i.e. with a desacralized Prometheus, if you like). In talking about a folk tale concerning the freeing of Mercurius from a bottle by a boy, Jung writes (p.203): [The boy] was totally unconscious of what might follow if this turbulent spirit [i.e. Mercurius] were let loose upon the world. The golden age of alchemy was the sixteenth and the first half of the seventeenth century. At that time a storm bird did indeed escape from a spiritual vessel which the daemon must have felt was a prison ... The alchemists were all for not letting Mercurius escape. They wanted to keep him in the bottle in order to transform him.’ Jung’s sense seems to be that the scientific revolution of the Early Modern period can be understood as the moment the genie was let out of the alchemist’s bottle. The implication would be that at the heart of modern science is ‘Hermes untransformed’, that is Hermes negatively polarised. Please note neither Jung nor Lopez-Pedraza discuss the kind of Hermesian cultural pathologies discussed by Neville and, from a non-Jungian perspective, Wilson.

¹⁶ Favire op cite (p.67) writes: ‘Hermes is the anti-totalitarian God *par excellence*.’ See also Norman Brown’s *Hermes the Thief* (p.101), ‘[Hermes] was the patron of the lottery ... and lottery was one of the characteristic institutions of Greek democracy ... the extensive use of lottery in the selection of Athenian public officials was the supreme expression of the democratic principle of the absolute

indicate the presence of other inflated archetypal energies seeking to capitalise, as it were, on the knowledge transformations (with accompanying technologies) unleashed in the 'Age of Hermes'.

The writing and communications industries and the world of adult higher education are two areas I'm familiar with that have been greatly impacted by aspects of the Hermes 'inflation'. Indeed these aspects of culture are possibly at its epicentre given Hermes, in positive or negative polarity, is traditionally the archetype that presides over these areas (i.e. as god of writing/communications and God of learning/knowledge transmission). Neville, back in 1992, wrote: 'We find education, health, care, therapy, law and the arts turned into commodities whose only value is their market value.'¹⁷

Neville also speaks elsewhere of the essential meaninglessness associated with 'Hermes inflated'. In the postmodern period bureaucratic processes emptied of content come to dominate organisational culture. Process overtakes substance in a variation on Weber's insights related to bureaucracy, status and instrumental reason. Traditional Hermesian 'exchange' (especially trade based on mutuality) gives way to frantic impersonal exchange—exchange for the sake of exchange.¹⁸ We could go further, shallowness and in-authenticity come to dominate interpersonal relations and we note a growing sense of fragmentation and derealisation as more and more individuals are forced to adopt the lifestyle of the traveller (god)—never committing to one place, one world-view, one vocation, one significant other, etc. Other personal psychological dimensions to the Hermes inflation will be discussed in a later article of this series. For the present we merely note that a society based upon constant change is a society likely to transmit significant psychological and inter-relational pathologies to many of its citizens.¹⁹

Here in Australia, public educators in the creative arts, humanities and social sciences, not to mention our more astute journalists, media commentators, magazine editors, etc. are well aware of the less savoury side to market-based utopianism – especially after revelations concerning the greed of international business elites leading up to the global financial crisis. It is no secret that the VET sector in Victoria (following similar trends in other Westernised democracies) has been massively privatised in recent years. Universities and perhaps even public secondary schools, are set to receive similar treatment. Clearly, we are in the midst of a vast 'market' driven experiment in which publicly owned educational infrastructure—previously considered fundamental to social cohesion—is being systematically subjected to the rationale of the free market (to Hermes 'inflated'). Our two major parties are apparently united in promoting this particular brand of 'utopianism'. The consequences of commodifying educational opportunity – i.e. the citizen's access to VET and University level education, as well as the creative and critical arts – appear to be of little interest to these wide-eyed zealots of Hermes negatively polarised..

The market, however, is not designed to address the social, political and ecological instabilities that arise when the Hermes energy becomes negatively polarised in a culture/society. It is obvious now to many overseas, that unfettered neo-liberalism does not safeguard democracy, critical culture, civil society, arts culture, social cohesion or the health

equality of all citizens.' Brown also notes parallels between Hermes' desire to be equal to Apollo (as expressed in various myths) and the desires of the Athenian working classes to be seen as equal to their erstwhile masters. (p.44-45). Such insights suggest that any 'Age of Hermes' (including our own) would be, at least nominally, 'democratic'. What this democratic aspect looks like, however, when the archetype is culturally 'inflated' (or negatively polarised) is precisely our question.

¹⁷ Neville, op cite, p.345.

¹⁸ Ibid, p. 349, 'Hermes is quite happy with groundlessness ... His winged feet never touch the ground.'

¹⁹ For a summary of some of the key personal maladies associated with the postmodern stage see my chapter on 'postmodern ennui' in *The Angel of Luxury and Sadness*, Booksurge, 2003.

of the environment.²⁰ On the economic front the 'postmodern Hermesian seizure' has perhaps reached its natural endpoint. In Europe and elsewhere economic deregulation is now seen as the main cause of the financial mayhem affecting countries like Ireland, Spain, Italy, Greece, Portugal, the UK and the US. Among the tens of millions of people negatively affected by 'casino capitalism' there is a search for new economic, social and cultural paradigms. Other 'archetypal energies' besides the god of extreme capitalism (Hermes 'negatively polarised') will perhaps preside over that search.

Meanwhile, back in Australia, in education, in the media and in the arts neo-liberal and process oriented bureaucracy²¹ continue to hold sway, largely due to our good fortune in having dodged the worst aspects of the international financial crisis due to China's hunger for our minerals. In my own region i.e. Central Victoria, Australia, there are disturbing signs that we are becoming culturally impoverished due to the nation's ongoing romance with 'casino capitalism'. Higher education is increasingly contaminated by hyper-capitalism and a range of critical and creative arts disciplines are either being colonised or phased out altogether due to the market based rationale, i.e. they are considered unprofitable or vocationally irrelevant. The notion that the creative and critical arts in public higher education should contribute to the maintenance of civil society has been all but abandoned by politicians, curriculum writers, higher education managers and increasingly, under pressure from the greater society, by overworked and undervalued educators themselves. We have all too easily forgotten the many socio-cultural calamities (pathologies) that have afflicted a range of advanced societies in the 20th century. Hermes negatively polarised may well lead to disturbing new forms of market and communications driven authoritarianism.

The other key feature of the 'The Age of Hermes'—i.e. rapid developments in knowledge transmission technologies etc. (which are inherently democratic *and* capitalistic), continues apace at present. 'Digital Hermes' is perhaps best symbolised by the vast, almost organic, interactive information entity known as the world wide web. This global super-computer—some have even referred to it as a species brain—is surely the most significant recent addition to the knowledge transmission technologies historically associated with Thoth-Hermes-Mercury. The technologies associated with 'Hermes gone digital' feverishly demolish or, at minimum, radically transform, a range of previously dominant social and cultural institutions e.g. the newspaper industry, the publishing industry, the music industry, universities (and education generally), etc.

Whether creativity and critical thinking will thrive or merely survive given these economic and communications related imperatives (at present there is the possibility that they will be forced to submit completely to 'hyper-capitalist' contamination) is a question for the future. However, if the unrestrained 'neo-liberal' side to Postmodern Hermes is indeed drawing to a close it is all the more important that writers and creative thinkers are equipped to understand and perhaps shape whatever new paradigms are about to come into existence. We are sorely in need of a creative antidote to the worst excesses of Hermes negatively polarised.

In this endeavour we might hope that the more positive aspects to the Hermes archetype eventually aid the quest—for Hermes was also an imaginative, swift-footed, knowledgeable

²⁰ See Colin Cremin in *Capitalism's New Clothes*, p.3 'The twin crises of economy and ecology present us with the objective limits of a system that depends for its existence on the unrelenting exploitation of all resources, ecology, material and mental labour and everything that people in their unique ways, create.' Pluto Press, 2011.

²¹ Neville (op cite) summarises this aspect of the 'inflation' well (p345) 'We find process supplanting substance.'

and friendly god, often mindful of the well-being of the social whole (even in the act of thieving, which he originally carried out to further equity and democracy among the gods²²).

It is perhaps possible to see aspects of the Information Revolution in such a light and international economic cohesion will remain fundamental to global political stability given the globe's massive human population. Transforming the more problematic aspects of the inflation, however (without sliding back into what Jungians term 'Senex authoritarianism' – which is implicitly anti-democratic), perhaps begins with our acknowledging the existence of this archetypal energy pattern at the very heart of postmodernity. We are in the late stages of an inherently volatile process of cultural transformation ('alchemical' in many respects)—a transformation prefigured certainly by Nietzsche's famous statement about what he saw as an approaching re-evaluation of all values. The energy traditionally associated with Hermes (whether positively or negatively polarised) is currently pre-eminent in Westernised societies, however, the end goal of this dominance remains veiled in mystery. But what else would we expect from the swarthy, but charming god of back-roads, boundaries, magic, dreams, transformations, etc.?

²² See Brown (op cite pp.37-45) for comment on the changes to the archetype that occurred when Greek society transferred trade between regions from the 'boundary' to the 'agora' of the more hierarchical city-state. The theft aspect to Hermes may have begun in certain inter-village rituals that occurred at the boundary between peoples, in particular, rituals associated with 'silent trade'. Even in the Hymn to Hermes his thieving has a sacred egalitarian dimension that seems to hark back to the primitive phenomenon of 'silent trade' conducted in 'zonal' or boundary regions between political units.

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