

Thoth, Sesheta, Ma'at, Hermes/Mercury and Postmodernity (PART 1)

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‘[Hermes] is frequently allied with what is frequently named the postmodern condition.’ **Antoine Faivre, *The Eternal Hermes***

‘The age of Prometheus may be as good as over. The Age of Hermes may just be beginning.’ And elsewhere: ‘... 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.’ More worryingly he writes: ‘When I suggest, then, that our society is suffering a Hermes inflation, there is a suggestion of pathology.’ **Bernie Neville (quotes taken from various articles)**

Part One: Introducing the Key Deities Driving Social, Cultural and Economic Postmodernism

A Question to Ponder: why should we bother studying the deities of long vanished civilizations? – what could they possibly teach us modern/postmodern humans smug at our scientific and technological achievements—our Promethean ambitions—and our apparent transcendence of superstition, religion, spirituality etc.?

This article, like many I have written about deities, ancestor figures, magical beings, etc. from various cultures, argues that old deities still provide important insights into the creative process, pathways to psychological wellbeing (and pathology) and clues about social wellbeing (and pathology). Unlike people of the ancient world, however, I have never met a God or Goddess in

person – so far as I know! Apart from a long-time fascination with these culturally constructed entities called ‘deities’—particularly polytheistic deities—I hold to the intuition that studying their antics via story, song, art, poetry, nonfiction, statuary, etc. is useful and enriching, perhaps even healing to us humans. More specifically, for the purposes of this article, I believe that Thoth, Hermes/Mercury, Seshet, Ma’at, and Hermes Trismegistus can give us valuable insights into the peculiar—indeed extraordinary—social and cultural circumstances prevailing in advanced Westernised nations at this point in the evolution or development of the species.

On the surface, the above apologia and statement of intent removes us from the original milieu of the deities under discussion. However, as the article proceeds I hope readers will begin to see the logic of the endeavor and enjoy the journey on offer. For better or worse, I approach Thoth, Hermes etc. from the perspectives of a modern human being, more specifically, a modern 1) writer and teacher of writing, also interested in 2) the psychohistory of humanity (from Jungian and transpersonal psychological perspectives); as well as 3) the New Sciences and their ability to assist the species to negotiate the special challenges confronting all of us in our time.

1. The Writer, Editor and Writing Teacher Perspectives

I am a published writer across various genres and, for many years, coordinated a writing program. Around the turn of the millennium it struck me with some force—whilst editing an online literary ezine—that the new communication technologies, particularly the internet at that time, were radically changing/mutating/destabilizing etc. almost all of the old cultural communication institutions—i.e. book publishing, libraries, universities, the music industry, literary and humanities journals, the film industry, newspapers, etc.—and in ways that were birthing new ways for creators, distributors and audiences to relate. From the very beginning, I felt the changes exhibited both positive and negative dimensions. The changes were so all-encompassing, rapid and historically significant, that they seemed to me to represent a fundamental creative response—something like an ‘emergent phenomena’—to the global species zeitgeist of the times. But how to capture in words the intuitive importance of these changes! No conventional academic discipline alone seemed equipped to explain adequately what was unfolding, why the transformation was occurring and where exactly these epochal changes might lead us as a species.

2. The Perspective of the Transpersonal Psychologist and the Usefulness of the ‘Archetypes’ Concept

I’ve also been a teacher of psychology interested in the impact of social and cultural changes on the health and well-being of individuals. I understood many years ago that the communication revolution would fundamentally alter—for good or ill—how we humans feel about ourselves, each other, society and the world around us.

I've long been interested in Carl Jung's ideas re: psycho-spiritual archetypes, and accept the idea that the polytheistic deities of old may be relevant to us today because they represent psychological types ('archetypes') that are fundamental in some way to our psychic and relational lives, but that operate beyond 'Classical' scientific (but maybe not 'Quantum' scientific) understandings of reality, mind, psyche, etc. Jung's analytic psychology stretched psychology's grounding in Classical science to the limits—due, in part, to his fascination with Alchemy, Gnosticism, Hermetism, etc. In three of his most important works, Jung placed Hermes/Mercury at the centre of his groundbreaking revision of Freudian psychoanalysis. His affirmation of traditional spiritual/mystical etc. systems that had supposedly been superseded and discredited by modern scientific psychology earned him a traumatic expulsion from Freud's, as it turned out, equally 'pseudo-scientific' (at least from the Classical scientific perspective) coterie.

Jung's *modus operandi* was Hippocratic – he did not judge a system on its rational scientific credentials alone, but rather on its value to suffering individuals. Does it heal them? Does it allow them to make sense of their suffering?', 'Does it enliven their existence?' These were the kind of questions he was interested in. Given he created a psychology that fused Freud's insights with those of ancient Alchemists, Gnostics and Hermetists, in particular, I think that his approach (and therefore, in this article, our approach) might well have pleased the priests of Thoth and Seshet, as well as the many Alchemists down the ages who counted Hermes as a 'friend'. Likewise, Ptolemaic (i.e. Hellenistic era Egyptian) and Renaissance students of Hermes Trismegistus and the Corpus Hermeticum (e.g. Zosimos of Panopolis, Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, Cornelius Agrippa, Paracelsus, Giordano Bruno, etc).

3. New Science Ontologies and Metaphysics

As I have argued extensively elsewhere, the New Sciences reveal to us a universe with profoundly 'Hermesian' qualities (though in terms of a global cultures perspective the better term might be 'Trickster God qualities'). Those who have studied Quantum Mechanics, as well as theories arguing that the universe is in fact a multiverse—perhaps even a kind of vast 'quantum computer' generated (or simulated) multiverse—are less and less able to categorically defend Classical scientific ontologies (encapsulated most succinctly in the idea of The Billiard Ball—or Mechanical—Universe). Similarly, they are less and less certain that our Universe developed randomly such that its Universal Constants were set 'just right' for the creation of 'organic life forms' and—perhaps more importantly—'consciousnesses' that are capable of playing their part in the quantum level 'observation' processes that apparently collapse superpositional wave fields into particle-based matter realities. Whether something like 'deities' (i.e. Universe Creators, renamed as 'programmer consciousnesses' or 'quantum archetypes' for our age) are involved in the tricksterish Multiversal findings linked to a range of New Science theories and experiments is anyone's guess at present, though it is generally acknowledged that such questions are once again worthy of serious scientific investigation.

This article proceeds then, from the above three perspectives, but I am also very interested in what is happening to humans in the face of the Information Revolution, social and cultural postmodernism and the phenomenon of economic globalisation.

Readers might ask at this juncture: What on earth do Thoth, Seshet, Hermes/Mercury, Ma'at and Hermes Trismegistus have to do with 'postmodern', 'post-human', 'information age', 'late capitalist' etc. societies? Surely our societies are more economically and sociologically complex, more evolved, more *different* to the so-called elementary societies founded and maintained by the ancient Egyptians, Greeks and Romans. Surely, sociology, social psychology, cultural studies, politics, economics, philosophy and history are the disciplines we ought to be turning to if we are to better understand the main features of: a) the communications revolutions of the past 50 years; b) the nature of our personal experiences of social and cultural change; and c) the nature of the species pathologies we currently need to confront and overcome?

Granted, these disciplines or knowledge fields are indeed indispensable if we are to understand postmodern societies. However, many important insights are ignored when we look only to modern 'materialist' modes of thinking to explain all the dimensions of our postmodern situation

Tracking the Communication Gods Throughout History

So, in the spirit of the Trickster (a near-global archetypal entity displaying many traits linked to the 'Hermes/Mercury' figure/archetype/deity of ancient Greece and Rome), I want to engage—somewhat speculatively, to be sure—in a process of tracking down, from the ancient world into our own age/era, various mutations to 'domains of living/being/knowing/working' historically associated with the deities Thoth, Seshet, Hermes/Mercury and Ma'at.

Let us begin by briefly outlining the skills, knowledge, life domains, personality traits, vocational attributes, sacred objects, etc. traditionally associated with these deities.

Key Characteristics of Thoth, Seshet, Hermes/Mercury, Hermes Trismegistus and Ma'at

Thoth (ancient Egyptian deity)

Thoth was husband or father to the goddess Seshet, but he was also sometimes described as husband to the goddess Ma'at. He is a complex, self-created deity, most notably presiding over the activities of scribes and communicators/intellectuals/artists of all descriptions (which involved a role overseeing the effective functioning of ancient libraries, national institutions and educational institutions). He also presided over most forms of sacred and profane knowledge—i.e. proto-sciences like astrology, astronomy and alchemy, as well as communication disciplines like writing, literature, painting hieroglyphs, developing magical and mathematical formulae, etc. He was also associated with the ibis and the baboon, in particular (and is thus often depicted with

an ibis head and a man's body), and his cultic heartland was the religious complex at Hermapolis (named thus by Alexandrine times). He was also a moon god. As Egyptian mythology's psychopomp, he acted as guide to the souls of the recently deceased and also played a special role in the weighing of souls ceremony (along with Ma'at and Anubis) that supposedly took place in the underworld soon after death.

He was also considered a healer deity due to his activities: a) healing Horus for Isis; and b) soothing (through humour and story) a mentally ill goddess who had wandered into the desert. Scholars of ancient Egypt believe that the hundreds of thousands of mummified ibises sacrificed at Hermapolis over many centuries, represented offerings to Thoth (and perhaps Seshet) so that he might heal the sick or the loved ones of visitors, or might be able to provide auspicious advice/prophesy. He was also a 'messenger god' (i.e. between the Gods and the living, between the dead and the living, and also between ancient Egypt's political authorities and the common people) and mortals generally saw him as a trusted friend—so long as they had been scrupulous about following the laws of Ma'at. In the mythological stories associated with him, he also performed duties related to peacemaking and diplomacy.

Seshat/Seshet/Sesheta (ancient Egyptian deity)

Most often Seshet is described in the mythological sources as the wife—but also sometimes as the daughter or sister—of Thoth. She was usually depicted as a slim young woman wearing a seven leaved head-dress surmounted by a crescent moon and upturned horns. In her iconography she was often depicted wearing a leopard-skin dress that symbolized, some scholars believe, the starry heavens. This makes sense when we understand that two of the knowledge domains over which she presided were astronomy and astrology. She was also the primal (originating) goddess of writing and scribes, and her tools/writing technologies (e.g. papyrus, palette and other writing implements) as well as the system of hieroglyphs, testify to these roles. She was often shown holding or using a piece of string attached to a measuring or calculating device, indicating her architectural duties designing, calculating and overseeing the construction of sacred buildings/temples/monuments. Seshet was also considered to be the archetypal librarian and what we would now call 'publisher' but she was also, along with Thoth, a kind of educator and teacher of writing and all manner of knowledge systems. In certain old Egyptian texts, especially the late antique *Book of Thoth* (only recently pieced together and translated from myriad ancient sources under the title *Conversations in the House of Life*) Seshet is designated: 'Keeper of the House of Books', which is also termed 'the House of Life' and 'the Chamber of Darkness'.

When Thoth merged with Hermes (in the late Ptolemaic era) to become the legendary Hermes Trismegistus, Seshet and her world were slowly suppressed—though the definitive historical moment of her suppression was probably the murder of Hypatia on the streets of Alexandria by a Christian mob in the late 4th Century AD. The meditative quiet and internal 'vision making' skills associated with writing, reading, creative thinking, scientific calculations and the quiet of

libraries overseen by Seshet and her priestesses, were seen by the ancients as sacred states linked to sacred spaces. Of course, all educational settings—even into our own age—rely on fostering in students this very same 'quiet dreaming whilst awake' state. Equally fundamental to the vocation of the 'scribe/writer' was the deity's role as a kind of initiation goddess, i.e. into the scribal fellowship and the various inner sanctums of that vocation—something outlined quite comprehensively in the *Book of Thoth*. Put simply, Sesheta was a kind of Muse figure (or female teacher/wise-woman) suggesting quite specific psychological, erotic, social, cosmological and sacred epiphanies that were also linked to writing, reading and learning.

Hermes/Mercury (ancient Greek and Roman deity):

Hermes was one of the most popular ancient Greek deities. In terms of his personality, the myths reveal a charming, friendly, slightly untrustworthy (in some respects due to his reputation as a playful thief), athletic, wise (beyond his years) deity associated with abundance and wealth, physical and mental well-being (e.g. he was the God of psycho-spiritual—rather than physical—healing), good-luck (and lucky finds), and guilt-free sexuality—we recall the 'herms' associated with him often featured erect phalluses ('ithyphallic' is the joyless term given to this phenomenon by archaeologists). He was also seen as the messenger of the gods, the God of trade, the God of athletes and, most importantly for our purposes, the God of deep knowledge (which encompassed skills in and/or dominion over: verbal eloquence, various systems and technologies of communication, deep wisdom—linked to his mastery of magic, alchemy, divination, philosophy and numerous proto-sciences—and the domain of education. His mastery of oral literacy later expanded to encompass mastery of written literacy. His key sacred objects were: his magic wand or herald's staff (*caduceus*) that featured two copulating serpents; his winged sandals (*pédila* or *talaria*) and his winged helmet (*petasos*); his magical purse/bag; his cloak of invisibility; the herms (or *herma*) that littered the ancient Greek countryside; the moon; and the element of mercury (which underpinned the role he played in all stages of the alchemical process). Another important object associated initially with Hermes but later swapped with Apollo, was the tortoise shell lyre. In some legends Hermes invented this type of lyre but didn't value overly the beautiful music it could produce. He also has other legendary and mythological associations with music through his son, Pan—deity of the *pan flute* and, more generally, rustic music.

Importantly, he was also the god of boundaries and in-between spaces—i.e. the 'interstitial regions' between apparently impermeable, solid, structures of all kinds. As a consequence, he was sometimes depicted as an 'hermaphrodite'. In this sense he became the god capable of merging all dualities into new, better functioning, structures. Dualities such as young / old, body/ mind, male / female, life / death, sanity / madness, etc. were reconciled under his influence. We might best understand his role as divine psycho-pomp, or conductor of the souls of the dead, in light of his interstitial and boundary-crossing characteristics. He was also, for the most part, a non-aggressive deity, and was only very rarely associated with violence, war and other forms of

interpersonal conflict. His ‘divine epiphanies’ involved: eloquence in discussion/dialogue, mastery of diplomacy (especially exchanges related to inter-state and interpersonal conflict situations), healing related to the torments of the soul/psyche, business-related undertakings and flashes of intellectual and artistic inspiration and brilliance. He was, therefore, a God presiding over various forms of creativity—hence the numerous depictions of him in the company of the Nine Muses.

The key text from the ancient world describing Hermes is *The Homeric Hymn to Hermes*, though he also appears in many other ancient texts. Initially a rustic god, he eventually became a key Olympian associated with the successful functioning of ancient Greek society. Beloved of urban tradespeople, he was also believed to exude a democratic aura (due to his humour, charm, friendliness, sexual adventurousness and levelling/democratic tendencies).

Although the epiphanies related to Hermes undoubtedly had an interior ‘vision inducing’ element—as per Thoth and Seshet—the primary meditative state associated with him was that brought on by walking, exuberant physical activity (e.g. dancing, running or sex), long-distance travel). We’re talking about a pleasant kind of ‘light trance’. In terms of the archaeological evidence, the more disciplined meditative stillness associated with reading, writing and painting were not associated with Hermes until much later in his development as a deity.

Historically, many scholars have merged Hermes with Thoth, but to my mind this leads to many problems. French philosopher Jacques Derrida, near the end of his analysis of *The Phaedrus*, commits this sin in a passage that begins:

‘Sly, slippery, and masked, an intriguer and a card, like Hermes, he is neither king nor jack, but rather a sort of joker, a floating signifier, a wild card, one who puts play into play ...’¹

Towards the end of the passage Derrida explores the deity’s association with science and learning:

‘Thoth is never present. Nowhere does he appear in person. No being-there can properly be *his* own ... [...] Every act of his is marked by this unstable ambivalence. This God of calculation, arithmetic, and rational science also presides over the occult sciences, astrology and alchemy. He is the god of magic formulas that calm the sea, of secret accounts, of hidden texts: an archetype of Hermes, god of cryptography no less than of every other ‘graphy’ ... The god of writing, who

¹ Derrida, ‘Plato’s Pharmacy’ in *A Derrida Reader: Between the Blinds*, p.122, edited by Peggy Kamuf.

knows how to put an end to life, can also heal the sick ... The god of writing is thus also a god of medicine. Of 'medicine': both a science and an occult drug.

Thoth/Seshet, Hermes and Hermes Trismegistus: Key Differences & Developments

- The traveler, athlete and commercial/economic functions linked with these old deities are to the fore with Hermes/Mercury ('Mercury', for example, is the origin of the words 'Merchant', 'Mercantile' and 'Merchandise'), and certainly the traveler function stayed with him after his mutation into Hermes Trismegistus (in Hermetism). The athlete function, however, fell away completely during the convergence of these two archetypes in Ancient Roman times, and the commercial function was severely curtailed and funneled into alchemical endeavors, which were primarily proto-scientific rather than commercial. Also, Seshet and Thoth were not really traveler god archetypes—though Thoth did 'get around' Egypt a bit. The myths describe him making various trips into the desert. Nevertheless, Thoth was never really a deity of roads/pathways, and in-between/interstitial/liminal places, in the way that Hermes was, and Thoth and Seshet do not appear in art and mythology as athletes (though Seshet was said, by some, to preside over dancing). Similarly, Thoth and Seshet's influence on commerce was indirect i.e. through their influence on the bureaucratic infrastructure of the Egyptian state—which was very dependent on scribes and their mathematical and record keeping (accounting?) abilities.
- Hermes' fitness, speed, flight, etc are all 'mercurial' characteristics absent from descriptions of the more ponderous ibis (Thoth) who flies infrequently and clumsily and stays inactive for long periods of time (reading/meditating/calculating?). From what little we know of Seshet, she was more often associated with plants than with animals—though, if she was associated with the hemp plant, as some have suggested, we might speculate about the 'visionary flight' associated with ingesting that plant (which was, however, as often used for medicinal purposes as for inspirational and religious purposes in ancient Egypt). This association may bring her into fragile alignment with the busy/speedy/mercurial etc. Hermes—though nowhere is she conceived of as a traveler god *per se*. Since Hermes Trismegistus was described as simultaneously both young and old, some of Hermes' 'swift moving' traits passed over to the legendary alchemist-magician, though overall he took on more of the traits of the slow moving ibis god (Thoth) than the wing-footed god (Hermes) after the two gods merged in the last centuries of the first century BCE.
- Olympian Hermes also had a thievish/roguish/tricksterish element that nominally put him at odds with all conventional moral codes (though Normal Brown in his book *Hermes the Thief* argues that there was a kind of socialistic and egalitarian dimension to Hermes'

thieving—evident even from ancient times—that in fact worked to reinforce Greek moral principles much as the Ma’at concept did in ancient Egypt. Hence the idea of ‘Hermes the Good Thief’ (prototype for Robyn Hood perhaps?). Nevertheless, Thoth (as well as Egyptian scribes, generally) operated under the dictates of the goddess Ma’at (she of the peacock feather, which assisted in the weighing of souls after death). In some accounts Ma’at was Thoth’s wife. It seems that Seshet’s functions were also influenced by Ma’at; so much so that she occasionally seems to merge with Ma’at when depicted carrying out duties alongside Thoth. In some accounts Ma’at is Seshet’s sister.

- Thoth also exhibits humour/charm/friendliness in more limited capacity than Hermes, who, as stated earlier, exhibited these traits in abundance, practically from birth. Thoth, however, was certainly a friendly deity, known to exhibit tricksterish traits, especially when caring for the mentally ill or those exhibiting destructive passions. Hermes Trismegistus comes across, for the most part, as more similar to Thoth. He seems more burdened, for example, with an older man’s sense of social responsibility. Seshet’s personality is less delineated, but, as with Thoth, her long association with government administration, libraries, reading, painting and other inward states of silent contemplation, perhaps limited, to some extent, the free expression of any extrovert traits she may have had—though the archaeological evidence suggests high sociability, given she presided over the construction of temples and other important public buildings. She was also associated with dance in some accounts.



- With Hermes Trismegistus (as encountered in the Hermetic literature) the polytheistic version of Hermes/Mercury seems to age and become more stately and responsible, and less athletic. Also, he is less charming, less rustic, less commercial, less of a traveler, less sexual and less of a thief. (Perhaps he becomes a little more boring!) He also seems to read and write books more frequently and becomes more of an educator/teacher—in short more responsible

and burdened by his many vocational roles. Basically, he seems more like Thoth, but with no evidence of links to sacred animals like the ibis or baboon. The defining Egyptian myths associated with Thoth were also dropped (and a new cosmology—closer to monotheism—was developed). We also note the complete deletion, after the triumph of monotheism across the Roman Empire (i.e. after the ascent of Christianity as the Imperial religion), of Thoth's two millennia long scholastic and creative partnerships with female deities such as Seshet and Ma'at.

Hermes Trismegistus appears in the *Corpus Hermetica* as a wise old man, i.e. a kind of a legendary guru, distributing unique epiphanies that later become fundamental to Gnosticism and even mainstream Christianity—epiphanies, of course, based upon reading, writing, learning and meditative self-reflection. In this form, he became a key figure in Hermetic thinking, in Alchemy, in the Medieval ‘High Magic’ tradition, also, arguably, in Gnosticism, and in all manner of later Arabic and western esoteric and mystic traditions.

In Renaissance iconography associated with Alchemy and the *Hermetica*, the older, wiser magician figure (Hermes Thrice Majestic) coexisted with revived youthful traits coming from Classical versions of ‘Hermes/Mercury’ (often renamed ‘Mercurious’). As a result, Hermes Trismegistus’s independence from female sacred archetypes (as articulated, for example, in the *Corpus*) never became complete. The late antique *Book of Thoth* describes a female figure (that seems to be Seshet) as fundamental to the training of scribes in the so-called ‘Chamber of Darkness’. The *soror mystica* figure, depended upon by male alchemists, was also, arguably, a Seshet or Ma’at (or even an Isis) re-imagining and we also note the role of the female archetype or principle of Luna in the Alchemical literatures of late-Medieval and Early Modern Europe. Likewise, Olympian Hermes’s associations with his mother (*Maya*), The Three Graces, Aphrodite and the Nine Muses, reappear repeatedly in association with alchemical, esoteric and later Humanist iconography and literatures—particularly during the Italian Renaissance.

- From the Renaissance to the advent of modern science in the Early Modern Period Olympian Hermes (and the female deities he was linked to), alchemical ‘Mercurious/Mercury/Hermes’ (as well as Luna, the Soul of the World and the remarkable figure of the *soror mystica*), Hermetic ‘Hermes Trismegistus’, Gnostic ‘Sophia/Zoe’, etc appear to swirl around together in a confused esoteric-come-protoscientific-come-humanist fog. Thoth, Seshet and Ma’at, however, were more or less completely unacknowledged during this period—at least as named deities.
- The archaic creative tension between the Thoth-Seshet duo (as male and female deities of writing, knowledge etc.) and Hermes (a tension that first emerged during the Greek occupation of Egypt in the late-first millennium BCE) suggests, I think, something very interesting about the historic development of the ‘creative’ and ‘critical arts’. Although Thoth and Seshet officiated during periods of dynamic cultural and social change in Egypt, they represented, it must be said, stability-oriented ideals of ‘creativity’, i.e. respect, if you like, for a life sustaining ‘Tradition’. On the whole they presided over cultural institutions from the centre (rather than from the peripheral, boundary or interstitial zones) of Egyptian society. Hermes, on the other hand—as a deity of boundaries, in-between places, back-roads, liminality, hybridity, travel etc.—suggested

more unstable, tricksterish, playful, disruptive, deconstructive, even, at times, revolutionary forms of creativity.

- This ancient tension is really a spectrum. Some historic periods benefit more from stability, conservatism, tradition, habit etc. other eras, as when the Persians and Greeks occupied Egypt, demanded adaptation, innovation, the birthing of new identities, new methods, new learning, etc.

I'd like to argue that the postmodern period—i.e. roughly the late 1940s to the early 2000s—should be seen as a period of Hermesian instability/ innovation/ hybridity etc (when looked at positively) rather than a period of Thothian 'traditionalism/ conservatism'. But I'd also argue that there have been significant negative aspects to our 'Hermesian Postmodern Era'. Thoth in negative aspect would be the driving force behind eras of 'cultural and creative inflexibility'—art/literature/ideas would change rather slowly under his influence, perhaps too slowly to assist societies subjected to fast-moving social, cultural and economic changes.

A Word About 'Ma'at'

As described previously, in some instances Ma'at was understood to be the wife of Thoth, at other times she was described as his sister. More fundamentally, she was conceived to be a general principle of life-affirming order—basically a rule-giver reminding citizens about the importance of following her moral codes—which were basically lists of virtues and behavioural norms designed to ward off the destructive chaos of Apophis/Isfet. Her peacock feather (her most prominent symbol) was part of the weighing of souls alluded to in the *Coffin Texts*—as well as various *Books of the Dead*—and this process was said to take place in the Hall of Ma'at. Her life-affirming admonitions, as embodied in codes of right behavior, etc. were also, importantly, applied to the behavior of the Gods, as well as—via the influence of Thoth and Seshet—the behavior of all the scribes/writers of ancient Egypt. *Ma'at* as an ethical concept (rather than as a deity) also has much in common with the Greek concept of *Themis* ('moral order/ justice/ law/ custom') which Hesiod (in *Works and Days* and *Theogony*) saw as under attack from the 'intelligent individualism' of his day—interestingly, this new brand of individualism, according to Norman Brown, was linked to Hermes by Hesiod.

A Note About the Concepts of Inflation and Negative Polarisation

As with Jung's Archetypes, polytheistic deities can tend toward both positive and negative polarities: We thus need to briefly discuss the Jungian concepts to do with the 'inflation' of an archetype and the 'negative polarisation' of an archetype. To Jungians like James Hillman and Erich Neumann, all archetypes (and perhaps deities) can become positively or negatively polarized when they possess or seize human beings and also when they become influential (i.e. as they 'intensify') in a society, nation, empire, etc.. Consequently, when we track the influence

of archetypes like Hermes/Thoth we need to be aware of both their likely positive and negative manifestations.

Negative Polarisations Arise When We Suppress or Ignore Archetypal Energies

A ‘negative polarization’, much like an ‘inflation’, is a kind of pathology or neurosis, specifically a ‘complex’, and it can result from: a) discrepancies between projected relationship ideals/needs and a reality that cannot fulfil those projected ideals/needs; b) from neglect/denial/suppression of the positive life lessons associated with the healthy manifestations of an archetype. An (un)heralded Archetype/Deity is ever in danger of becoming a ‘negatively polarised’ (or ‘inflated’) Archetype/Deity. Fail to honour Aphrodite/Venus for example and she strikes back through sexual neuroses and other pathological symptomology. Fail to honour the nurturing mother goddess, Demeter/Ceres etc. and a kind of inversion occurs leading to specific types of suffering. Fail to honor Hermes/Thoth/Seshet and what happens?

Postmodern Hermes: Key Writers and Texts

The writers who have tracked Hermes etc. from his pre-history to our postmodern times—writers like Deldon Anne McNeely, in *Mercury Rising*, Dennis Merrit in *Hermes, Ecopsychology and Complexity Theory*, Antoine Faivre in *The Eternal Hermes* and, perhaps most importantly, Bernie Neville in his essay ‘The Charm of Hermes: Hillman, Lyotard and the Postmodern Condition’ take various positions regarding the positive and negative aspects to postmodern manifestations of Hermes.

Neville is the most pessimistic of these scholars, outlining a full blown ‘inflation’ and ‘negative polarisation’ of Hermes in our time, linked to economic globalization and the information revolution. This inflation he also links to plagues of specific types of sociological and psychological maladies. He wrote: ‘I wish to argue ... 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.’² He also 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’³ which, in-turn, he links to the much vaunted but little understood phenomenon of ‘postmodernism’.⁴ 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’).⁵

² Neville, op cite, p. 345.

³ Ibid, p.345, ‘The age of Prometheus may be as good as over. The Age of Hermes may just be beginning.’

⁴ 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.’

⁵ 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

McNeely and Merritt, on the other hand, are generally positive and introduce the idea that Hermes may represent a way through the alienation and exploitation (of nature, etc.) that took hold with Classical mechanistic science, which they see as outdated and atomistic. They also believe that Hermes can play a positive, expansive, break through role in psychotherapy.

Another recent scholar, Faivre, develops some fascinating insights concerning the many manifestations—usually (un)heralded—of Hermes in the postmodern city, but, as far as I can tell, she is neutral about the archetype's ultimate value in our time.

It is worth noting—before we track manifestations of our chosen deities more thoroughly into our own times—that no one, to my knowledge, has explicitly linked Thoth and Seshet to social, cultural and economic trends unfolding in our postmodern age.

END OF PART 1

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R. Hutterer (eds) *Perspectiven 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.'

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