

Thoth, Seshet, Ma'at, Hermes/Mercury & Postmodernity (PART 2)

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PART 2: How Have the Skills, Knowledge and Arts Domains Presided Over by Thoth, Sesheta and Hermes/Mercury Changed in our Time?

Our task in the second half of this article is to link the traditional knowledge domains/skills areas/life stage etc. presided over by our deities with recent developments in those areas and domains. In terms of their contemporary invisible (un)heralded influence, we're looking to track their influence on:

- a) The defining characteristics of postmodern cultural postures, e.g. through the contemporary distrust of ‘Grand Narratives’, as well as the ‘deconstructive’ language and sign system techniques associated with Derrida and his apostles.
- b) The various aspects (positive and negative) of the information and communications revolutions,
- c) Various positive and negative aspects associated with cultural globalization
- d) Various positive and negative aspects associated with ‘economic globalization’
- e) Various positive and negative aspects associated with the impact of postmodernity on human subjectivity in the face of subterranean ‘Hermesian’ influences, i.e. how we experience life, relationships, personal identity, our social self, etc..

We’ll experiment playfully with the notion that the various archetypal principles in question might be theorised as present—though unheralded, as it were—behind the changes and transformations we’re about to discuss.

A) Cultural Postmodernism has Several Major Strands:

Distrust of Grand Narratives

In our postmodern world, ‘either/or’ religions, ideologies, etc. easily become a source of enormous suffering. The authoritarian regimes of the 20th century committed many human rights abuses, and in their hands nuclear weapons and other weapons of mass destruction become a source of potential species annihilation. As the second half of the 20th century wore on, a general distrust of all ‘grand narratives’ emerged in Westernised societies. This distrust was

accompanied by widespread cynicism, feigned apathy and indifference, a sense of helplessness and, for many, ‘paranoia’ about elites of all descriptions. Distrust of ‘grand narratives’, however, can also be seen as a kind of Hermesian solution to the problem of toxic, authoritarian elites spouting monolithic political, nationalist, religious or ideological narratives designed to dehumanize and scapegoat specific groups deemed ‘threatening’.

DERRIDEAN DECONSTRUCTION: At the heart of cultural postmodernism is the philosophy of Jacques Derrida. Though it would take another article (at least) to describe exactly how Derrida’s method of ‘deconstruction’ can be described as ‘Hermesian’, we can at least summarise a few key elements.

There is a general warning in Derrida’s philosophy about the dangers of assuming that language—indeed any cultural communication or ‘sign’ system—is transparent etc. to the reality it attempts to reproduce/describe. At the heart of ‘deconstruction’ theory was a desire to heal/undo toxic language-constructed dualities that function by proposing an idealized, dominant components and a despised, inferior ‘other’ components. From the perspective of the Hermesian Principle, much Postmodern theorizing attempted to undermine texts (whether canonical or populist) that worked to dehumanize and oppress people. In theory the ‘life world’—or the lived moment, which Derrida saw as ephemeral and forever retreating from us—was believed to be primary over the—by definition—later, derivative attempts to represent it through sign systems (systems which he and others pointed out were hopelessly infiltrated with ideology-based attempts to contain and define for not altogether innocent purposes). Many human rights abuses, according to disciples of Derrida, are sanctified by the dehumanization processes unleashed by toxic sign systems.

NEGATIVES: 1) The international human rights agendas, so fundamental to the ‘close proximity’ world we’re describing, demand shared moral codes which are theoretically no longer possible due to the deconstructionist belief that all language or sign-based systems of representation are secondary and incapable of revealing ‘truth’ or describing ‘reality’. 2) Although authoritarian (truth-defining) ideologies, philosophies and religions were undermined by the deconstructionist manoeuvre, neoliberal and consumer capitalist trends were barely critiqued because the hyper-capitalist and globalized economic system of the late-20th century became strangely invisible when deconstructionist thinking dominated in Universities and critical cultures. Nevertheless, an important aspect of our era’s ‘negative polarisation’/ ‘inflation’ of the Hermes archetype, can be linked to the extreme capitalism of our time, and here we note profound transformations of ancient and pre-modern understandings of the roles, goals, purpose etc. of Trade/Commerce, Money, etc. The god of trade/commerce, capital and money has mutated almost beyond recognition in our time, and many of the implications of this transformation are negative.

B) The Information Revolution and Seshat, Thoth and Hermes/Mercury

A plethora of technological developments can be related to the intensification of the Hermes archetype (or principle) in our time.

Let’s take a moment to list just some of the major information technology inventions and devices impacting cultural life since the 19th century: stamps/postage systems, cameras, radio, movie

theatres, television, the personal computer, the internet, the telephone (especially mobile/smart phones), e-book readers, video and DVD players (now giving way to online streaming sites), electronic sound playback devices (and sound recording devices) of all descriptions, radars, satellite television, Skype, 'social media' apps/software and sites of all descriptions, high-powered telescopes and other astronomical technologies, etc.

These technologies have altered traditional communications and knowledge transmission occupations of all descriptions—e.g. librarians, writers, booksellers, astronomers and cosmologists, historians, musicians, teachers, university academics, visual artists, etc. Some of the new technologies have even given rise to completely new vocations—e.g. web designers, app designers, electronic games designers, bloggers, ezine editors, online journalists, online teachers/lecturers, etc. Tracking both the emerging occupations and mutating older ones associated with the knowledge and skills domains traditionally linked to the old deities under discussion here, may help us work out the social and cultural impact of what is unfolding in our time under the auspices of the ancient 'Hermesian, etc. Principle'.

There is no doubt, for example, that these new technologies have worked to transform self/identity, as well as to alter and revisualise relationships—whether with one's own community/ society or with other peoples and cultures around the globe. These transformations are occurring not just in our work places, but also in private domains e.g. our home life, our leisure time activities, and so on. The New Media technologies appear to bring us closer to people who are otherwise geographically removed from us (and there is no doubt that, up to a point, they can make us feel 'connected' to like-minded people, as well as to distant family members and friends). However, at the same time, the new media technologies seem to make these 'connected relationships' strangely 'disembodied' and 'abstract'. Many of us start to see these more abstract, disembodied relationships as viable short and long-term substitutes for physically embodied i.e. physically present relationships—often to our great cost.

POSITIVES: These new technologies obviously open us up to new experiences and the vast cultural riches not just available in our own locale or nation, but also internationally, and, in the case of stored cultural knowledge, from just about every human culture that our earth has ever supported. The new Universal Library, i.e. The Internet, for example, is accessible 24hrs a day and in electronic form offers millions of books, articles, webpages, blogs, podcasts, videos, art images, etc. to us either for free or, generally, at very low cost. The same technologies have sometimes aided mass democracy movements in many countries, by giving citizens access to suppressed/censored knowledge and information that authoritarian regimes previously managed to keep secret from their citizenry—witness the use of mobile phones and the internet in the Arab Spring, as well as the controversies surrounding the Wikileaks revelations via the internet.

NEGATIVES: there are as many negatives as positives to these new technologies. Many of us are afflicted by the following maladies: information overload; noise and trivia overload; feelings of disembodiment; feelings of being overwhelmed with traumatic news from overseas; the sense that we no longer absorb information in deep ways (i.e. we surf and flit about the WWW and are merely 'charmed' and 'distracted' by the sources we engage with); and feelings of excessive 'hybridity' leading to feelings of 'derealisation' and identity fragmentation. Many modern people are also struggling with New Media addictions of various types: e.g. video game addictions; online betting and/or shopping addictions; social media addictions; phone and tablet use addictions, porn and dark web addictions, etc. Likewise, noxious ideologies travel just as quickly

as life-enhancing ones, and of late there has been increased publicity about online terror groups, paedophile rings, bullying rings, conspiracy theory groups, information and money hacking organisations, etc. Shadowy figures on the so-called 'Dark Web' have more or less direct access to many unsuspecting households (and thus to alienated/disenfranchised or just plain vulnerable people) all over the planet. As New Media technologies force old style cultural distribution networks to transform or perish, older institutional checks and balances on corporate, political and criminal power excesses are often rendered inadequate. Technological transformations seem to move too fast for protective political and legal institutions to keep up.

C) Hermesian Influences on Cultural Globalisation: the Concept of 'Identity Hybridity'

Identity Hybridity: Postmodernity, in many Western societies, has been identified with the rise of pluralism, multiculturalism, tolerance of 'difference', etc. Also, it has been linked to the growth of cosmopolitan nation states and cosmopolitan megacities around the world. Since the world seems to shrink due to 'Hermesian' travel and communication technologies, conflicting worldviews inevitably come into closer proximity with each other, heightening the risk of wars and other types of geopolitical and intra-national conflict.

NEW HERMESIAN TRAVEL TECHNOLOGIES: As the ancient God of travel (especially inter-regional and international travel), most technological developments related to long-distance and high speed travel fall under the dominion of Hermes (he of the winged shoes and winged helmet). Let us list some of the major Hermesian 'travel-time reduction' technologies of our era: airplanes and jets (of all descriptions), helicopters, hovercraft, hang-gliders, luxury liners, space craft (including notions we have of 'UFOs'), speed boats, rapid transit trains, cars (especially racing cars), buses and motorbikes. These technologies make organic travel (e.g. walking, horses, etc.) partially obsolete. Such technologies also make the world seem smaller, due to the huge reductions in travel time they achieve.

POSITIVE ASPECTS: Due to cheaper and more efficient international travel, as well as other and globalizing technologies and trends, people increasingly visit and live in many different places during their lives. As a consequence, many people have developed 'hybrid identities' that represent a mixture of the multiple cultures they've encountered. This identity hybridity has long been identified as a positive Hermesian trait, since we are less likely to reify, objectify or scapegoat people from societies and cultures we've interacted with via travel, migration and/or (Hermesian) communication technologies like the internet, social media, mobile phones, online gaming, etc. The simplified (and thus easily dehumanized) 'threatening other' becomes humanized and complex due to our first-hand interactions with people different to us.

NEGATIVES ASPECTS: Shallow, money-dominated ways of relating to others can easily develop in the face of 'excess hybridity' (and pathologies like culture shock, identity diffusion and derealisation may proliferate). Postmodern Hermesian hybrid identities are often trade/commerce, work and tourism focused. Often, the interactions are mediated through New Media information technologies. Consequently, shallow ways of relating to other human beings can easily develop, since 'hybridity' often begins with the 'fly in, fly out' relational shallowness associated with jet-setting celebs, package tourists, international business people, social media friendships, etc.) Depth in relationship is easily eschewed in favour of 'temporary relationships'.

D) HERMES and ECONOMIC GLOBALISATION

Modern developments to money, particularly the ways in which digital money interacts with the new global communication technologies, also represent recent transformations to domains traditionally linked to Hermes, God of Trade and Commerce (and also, we note, to the ancient domains presided over by Thoth and Seshet). Indeed, the modern bank, which is gradually phasing out paper money (as well as gold and coins) 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 and loan markets). Obviously, the spread of hyper capitalist economic models globally (we note that economics was traditionally a domain of Hermes) has been paralleled by the spread of New Media communication technologies—satellites, mobile phones, the internet, television, etc.

POSITIVES? An age in which Hermes dominates is, inevitably, an age of economic innovation. Expansion of trade assisted ‘cultural postmodernism’. In an ideal world our supermarkets are full of cheap high quality goods from all over the planet. The Hermesian spirit in theory, and as linked to capitalism, fuels innovation, adaptation, efficiency and economic growth that should generate more collective wealth for all. It is a self-evident fact, however, that this has not occurred for billions of the world’s people—thus this area of Hermesian postmodernism is the most problematic. When Thoth and Seshet oversee economic exchanges/communications (as in ancient Egypt) we usually witness a ‘steady/balanced state’ economic system based upon resource sustainability and a focus on the well-being of all the people, i.e. economic innovation would not be an end in itself. Other aspects of life besides money and trade would be honoured. Clearly, in our age, in the West at least, Hermesian economic dynamism dominates—for good or ill.¹

NEGATIVES: An article entitled ‘The Charm of Hermes: Hillman, Lyotard and the Postmodern Condition’, published in 1992 by Bernie Neville, and another by Peter Lamborn Wilson entitled ‘Hieroglyphics and Money’ point to the way Hermes might be negatively polarised through economic systems. The two essays together constitute a fascinating alternative take on economic globalisation, in particular. Through the eyes of Neville and Wilson we see an alliance between contemporary market economy socialists and hyper capitalists—both participate in the ‘consensual hallucination’ that Wilson refers to.² Both are afflicted, though in different ways, by ‘the Hermes inflation’—i.e. both see ‘money’ and ‘information’ as merely materialist, sociological or cognitive phenomena, that is to say as ‘disenchanted’ or ‘desacralised’ phenomena. Here is how Neville describes our age:

¹ The Marxist insight (first articulated in the *Paris Manuscripts* of 1844) that capitalism represents an attempt to subject all elements of both our personal and social worlds to market forces (resulting, as Marx described it, in various forms of alienation/estrangement specific to capitalist societies) can thus be read, from the perspective of archetypal psychology, as a kind of prophesy concerning our current Hermesian ‘inflation’. The neo-liberal economic ideology of the postmodern period (as espoused most vehemently by Von Hayek and Friedman and implemented most effectively by Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan) clearly announces a negative inflation of the aspects of the Hermes archetype associated with micro and macroeconomic first principles.

² 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.’

‘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 after all, interchangeable. The consciousness of the marketplace permeates all areas of life.’³

The following more negative (shadow) aspects to the social manifestations of the Hermesian principle are also described:

‘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.’⁴

Unrestrained capitalism, with its insistence on heightened interpersonal competition, is seen by Neville as an aspect of the ‘Hermes inflation’—it promises liberation to all but delivers, in historical fact, only to the few. When Hermes becomes aligned with economic oppression we note a profound inversion of his more archaic, positive manifestations as god of inter-tribal trade where he was something of a democratic leveller of artificial social hierarchies, as well as, occasionally, a thief for the greater community of beings.⁵

³ Neville, 1992, op cite, p339.

⁴ Ibid, p.347. R. Lopez-Pedraza, also deals with a range of ‘shadow’ aspects to the Hermes intensification in our age 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—and pays particular attention to 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 point seems to be that the scientific revolution of the Early Modern period can be understood as the moment the scientific materialist 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.

⁵ Faivre 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 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

The publishing and media industries, as well as the world of adult higher education, are two areas greatly impacted, recently, by the economic aspects of the Hermes ‘inflation’. This is because 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). Here in Australia, public educators in the creative arts, humanities, social sciences and 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. Neville, writing of the Hermes inflation in postmodern culture, wrote: ‘We find education, health-care, therapy, law and the arts turned into commodities whose only value is their market value.’⁶

He speaks elsewhere of the essential meaninglessness we feel when bureaucratic processes emptied of content come to dominate organisational cultures. Process overtakes substance and traditional (Thothian?) notions of ‘exchange’ (especially trade based on mutuality) give way to frantic impersonal exchange—exchange for the sake of exchange.⁷

Finally, as Merritt notes in his work on ecopsychology and Hermes, economic innovation alienated from other life pursuits eventually fuels environmental collapse. Hermes ‘inflated’ (or ‘negatively polarised’) leads us, step by step, into a global environmental crisis.

D) HERMES AND PSYCHOLOGICAL WELLBEING IN OUR TIME

There are undoubtedly many positive aspects for individuals attached to the ‘Hermesian intensification’ we are here identifying with the special conditions of postmodern society. The increasingly global perspective of billions offers intellectual freedom of a sort since the dictates of ‘localised oppressors’ are often overshadowed by billions of close at hand (i.e. on the WWW etc.) critical voices unimpressed by the justifications of any particular local dictator, oppressor etc.

Most of us also experience access to wider relational networks featuring people from all round the world (via mobile phones, social media, travel, etc.) than people of earlier ages experienced. For many of us this has led to an expansion of consciousness fuelled by the vastness of the world wide web, television, etc. In theory, greater freedoms ensue as oppressors everywhere struggle to control information and censor uncomfortable truths and facts about their usually self-serving actions. In theory we also become more tolerant as we interact with people from diverse cultures, places etc.—manifestations of oppression, are, theoretically, challenged at every turn. We also learn to scan information quickly from numerous sources and at great speed. In theory we become more informed, intelligent, knowledgeable. The social dimension to postmodernity also sees us travel more to take up personal and vocational opportunities—in theory facilitating greater ‘personal growth’. All of these trends are profoundly Hermesian as well as being self-evidently linked to the utopian narratives to do with ‘subjectivity’ in our postmodern age.

Given the horrors of the 20th century, it is no small achievement for Westernised societies to have strengthened significantly notions of universal human rights and to have legislated so

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.

⁶ Neville, op cite, p.345.

⁷ Ibid, p. 349, ‘Hermes is quite happy with groundlessness ... His winged feet never touch the ground.’

comprehensively against so many forms of systematised oppression – trends linked to the intensification of the Hermes archetype in our culture. Likewise, awareness of one's 'personal shadow' (Jung) allied with deep awareness of the sentience of others, are fundamental gifts of Hermes the mediator. Similarly, the sexual revolution had positive dimensions for significant numbers of people, and this is to be expected during an era of 'Hermesian intensification'. Historically speaking, Hermes was not a prudish deity, being disinterested in 'erotic monotheism', and—if we take the evidence of *The Hymn to Hermes* at face value—those under his influence typically oppose sexual hypocrisy of all descriptions, as well as all forms of sexual puritanism (perhaps this explains the endless revelations in our age concerning the abuse of children and other vulnerable minorities in the care of priests, teachers, sports coaches, community leaders etc.).

Similarly, his generally non-violent nature means that an age in which his energies intensify is likely to see less explicit interpersonal violence (especially, less violence towards women and children).

NEGATIVE POLARITIES/INFLATION: If an unacknowledged intensification of energies associated with Hermes is indeed in progress, we might also, however, be able to connect certain trends related to distinctively modern psychological and spiritual maladies.

- The need to acquire and then quickly discard endless 'shiny objects' is an inherently Hermesian phenomenon—though in negative aspect. Hermes, as God of trade, economics etc., traditionally buys and sells or barter objects in a zone—a symbolic *interstitium*—between tribes/cultures/nations. As Brown notes in *Hermes the Thief*, however, Hermes often has only passing attachment to the objects he sells. They represent a means to another end altogether—connections/trade, for the sake of connections/trade. In terms of 'maladies of the subject', surface and façade ('the charm of Hermes') predominates, instead of authentic depth—the self is easily objectified and turned into a 'relationship product' among tens of millions of other products. This can lead to anxiety, emptiness, narcissism and other nefarious maladies.
- The Hermesian intensification may also have led us to a widespread denial and distrust of stable notions of identity (which are dismissed as 'essentialist'). However, what happens when we destabilize the identities of tens of millions of people? Can we really handle—as individuals and as societies—extreme 'hybridity'? The psychological maladies of 'derealisation' and 'fragmentation' are, perhaps, the other side of our postmodern 'hybrid utopia'.
- A key component of the Hermesian intensification is 'moral relativism' (i.e. criticism and dismissal of all universal truth claims). What else would we expect from the archetype that has to 'trade' with and 'mediate' between a host of warring 'realities/ paradigms/ perspectives'? However, can we really handle extreme moral ambiguity and relativism in our day to day lives? What are the consequences of the collapse of age-old moral codes that kept earlier societies stable (if imperfect)?
- A key feature of our age is 'cynicism' about everyone and everything – this is allied with an ironic view of society and self also composed of skepticism and distrust (and bordering, at times, on outright paranoia). However, what are the consequences of such widespread life postures? Withdrawal from others and loss of innocence—which leads to loss of joy and fear of commitment to anyone or anything—may be the consequences.

- The modern workplace promotes endless ‘labour market flexibility’—a predictable imperative for any age undergoing an Hermesian ‘inflation’. Nowhere else is ‘relationship’ more clearly articulated in terms of economic valuations. Many postmodern workers are routinely dehumanized as barely tolerated ‘organic factors of production’ called upon to perpetually reinvent themselves in order to compete with inanimate factors of production (particularly computers and machines). The mania for numbers, statistics, competition etc. typical of any God of trade and commerce reduces (i.e. ‘reifies’) living human beings to balance sheet negatives—‘costs’, ‘liabilities’, etc.⁸ As stated by Neville ‘everyone is on the way to somewhere else’. Long-term service, loyalty, commitment, devotion etc. to a workplace are discouraged—indeed, these former vocational ‘virtues’ are increasingly re-categorised as ‘vices’.
- The modern Western mania for travel/tourism as a means to ‘escape’ mundane existence can also be understood from an archetypal perspective in terms of delusional fantasies associated with the general inflation of the ‘traveler God’ archetype. Most modern tourists and travelers seek to purchase their own world (reality) only slightly transformed when they travel—like Hermes ‘their feet never *really* touch the ground’ (Neville, adapted) when they ‘travel’.
- Many of our global elite enact the Hermesian ideal of ‘relationship at a distance’ (or ‘relationship on the move’). The ‘jet-setter’ life is sold as everyone’s ideal lifestyle—‘success’ is increasingly measured in terms of one’s capacity to engage in relationships wherein the cherished other (lover, parent, child, friend, sibling, etc.) lives many thousands of kilometres away—‘relationship at a distance’ ensues (increasingly mediated by, you guessed it, Hermesian communications technologies, e.g. Skype, mobile phones, email, facebook, etc.). ‘Relationship at a distance’, however, may not satisfy our primordial need for embodied presence. Such relationships thus involve a degree of unacknowledged ‘trauma’. This unhealthy ideal is giving rise to a range of uniquely postmodern pathologies: ‘fragmentation of self’, ‘derealisation’ (our sense of reality being eroded by too many other realities) and ‘unhealthy narcissism’.⁹
- The methods by which we begin, maintain and terminate relationships are also becoming heavily infiltrated by Hermesian technologies and ways of thinking. Social media sites like RSVP, Facebook and Linkedin promote the notion of global relational networks (underpinned, of course, by Hermesian technologies) and cater to (but in the process transform) specific relationship needs¹⁰. The human nervous system, however, can only cope with so many friendships (relationships) consequently our ‘cyber friendships’ and

⁸ There are signs that workers, perhaps having become savvy as to the cut-throat nature of the modern ‘labour market’, are themselves becoming ‘vocationally promiscuous’. It is common for Gen X and Gen Y employees to move from employer to employer as a strategy for climbing the corporate ladder.

⁹ Lasch’s descriptions of ‘unhealthy narcissism’ (i.e. ‘obsession with self’, but also, more worryingly, in the postmodern period, the need to hold together tenuous notions of self), as well as his argument that it has become epidemic in westernised cultures due to children routinely experiencing severe identity disruptions early in life, is thought provoking. If consumerism (as both personal and social phenomena) is, in part, dependent upon identity disruptions experienced very early in life (specifically at the ‘oral stage [Freud]’) then we have to look more closely at the link between the current epidemic of ‘unhealthy narcissism’ (i.e. our culture-wide individualism run amuck) and the growing phenomenon of ‘relationships at a distance.’ Neo-liberal ideology with its ethic of radical economic individualism begins to look like a pathological outgrowth of these developments.

¹⁰ In respect to the above list: the need for a mate, the need to maintain contact with friends and family, and the need to build a ‘vocational relational network’,

‘connections’ frequently lack genuine depth and long-term embodied connections and interactions are increasingly eschewed.¹¹

- Promiscuous and shallow Hermesian ‘sexual mores’ are increasingly presented to the public as forms of personal ‘liberation’, ‘freedom’, etc. The oldest extant versions of the Hermes mythos describe a voyeuristic element to the archetype but also a robust sexual earthiness that, when compared to the prudery and schizophrenia of patriarchal monotheistic sexuality, looks relatively healthy. What the archetype inevitably lacks, however, is ‘deep connectivity’ and ‘romance’.¹² The traveler God eschews romance because romance may lead to long-term attachment. If you are always on the way to somewhere else ‘attachment’ can easily become an irritating burden.¹³
- The body-image disorders so prevalent in our time (especially among young women but also, increasingly, among young men) may also be related to our rejection of depth in favour of the commodified, competitive, non-essentialist and shallow image—and here again, Hermesian technologies play a big part in spreading these maladies, since the model of the ‘perfect’ body/exterior (the ‘deep interior’ being more or less irrelevant to the God of travelers and trade) is everywhere apparent on the web, on television, in magazines etc. ‘Stable’ (read: traditional, boring) versions of the ‘self’ are to be superseded (discarded) in favour of new, contemporary models brought to us via the mass (Hermesian) media. Not surprisingly, anxiety levels skyrocket and depressive disorders proliferate among those unable to compete, change, up-date, make-over, *sell* themselves afresh with each new day.¹⁴
- The bureaucratic ‘data/fact flood’ of our current Hermesian inflation assaults consciousness in toxic ways—leading to an epidemic of cognitive hyper-activity that easily degenerates into stress responses and (Information Age) anxiety. For many of us

¹¹ Nevertheless, people become addicted to obsessively accumulating friends/connections etc. and feel anxious and depressed when their online friendship statistics fall below par. We are also being conditioned to feel anxious about being excluded from these cyber-networks and are told that we risk being seen as dated and behind the times if we fail to participate.

¹² Huysmans (in *Against Nature*) and other 19th century decadents and aesthetes first described the consequences of this split—a compulsive desire for sexual extremes (‘sexual spectacles’) that ultimately exhausts the afflicted person sometimes destroying any possibility of relational integrity with a ‘real’ other. In the archetype’s negatively polarised manifestation, the ‘sex’ and ‘freedom/liberation’ aspect (which began with Freud and, forgive the pun, climaxed with the ‘sexual revolution’) easily mutates into mere sexual objectification, defined in terms of, paradoxically, ‘disembodied’ fantasy and compulsive acting out (e.g. ‘sex addiction’). The pornographic obsessions of millions of web-users is all of a piece with this development. Addicted to commodified (and highly mediated) sexual images detached from ‘emotional substance’ it is possible that excessive indulgence (a form of escape or diversion) routinely splits emotional connectivity from the physical aspects of the sex impulse leading to virulent psychological problems. Depressive disorders are a possible outcome for some individuals trapped in this version of the ennui cycle.

¹³ A non-puritanical, down-to-earth attitude toward sexuality would be at the heart of any Hermesian intensification (see Lopez-Pedraza’s work *Hermes and his Children* which deals with Hermes and sex). Sure enough postmodernism also spawned the Sexual Revolution as well as massive feminist gains wherein a more open attitude toward sexuality prevailed. However, Hermesian sexuality has a shadow side – Hermes inflated can lead to the wholesale commodification (and cheapening) of sexuality as the traveler, businessman god tends to avoid deep connections (love?) in favour of short-term functional sexual liaisons. Not surprisingly, the new media over which he presides sets up loveless sexuality – pornography, prostitution – as the norm and even as a sign of ‘liberation’.

¹⁴ Bombarded by these commodified images of perfect ‘relational products’ we increasingly submit to invasive procedures including surgery to alter the way we look. The body itself becomes an object/product/machine to be moulded, acted upon, etc. like everything else in our objectified and commodified social world. The social imperative is to constantly renovate and up-date our physical appearance and mental abilities.

the morning ‘email check’ typifies this ‘flood’ or ‘avalanche’ of essentially meaningless noise. Increased anxiety is the result as we struggle to keep up with the demands of a world in which Hermes is ‘negatively polarized’ as meaningless noise. ‘Cognitive complexity’ is on the rise in our postmodern world, but logic, reason, pure science and the idea of attaining an ‘holistic overview’ weild declining influences on social life and workplace cultures. The cognitive complexity of our era is Hermesian, and thus essentially ‘meaningless’ (at least in terms of older models of society that link information to ideals of social progress). Most of us are drowning in an ocean of background noise and PR sales spin. Older communication values linked to truth, trustworthiness, reason, logic, relational integrity and loyalty are not relevant to Hermes, God of trade, travel and interconnectivity for the sake of interconnectivity.

E) Hermes and The New Sciences

Modern fields of scientific knowledge, e.g. astrophysics, cosmology, astronomy, quantum physics, biosemiotics, robotics, computer science etc.—i.e. the key ‘new sciences’—dismiss and thus disenchant and desacralise the cosmological etc. insights associated historically with deities and legendary figures like Seshet, Thoth, Hermes, Mercury, Mercurius and Hermes Trismegistus.

However, we can still track the Hermesian intensification of our time into these realms, because as deities they presided over all forms of scientific knowledge. The Hermesian intensification discussed throughout this article is also an expansion of our physical apprehension of the cosmos that extends today into realms and dominions encompassing millions of galaxies, many of which contain millions—sometimes billions—of stars and perhaps many more billions of planets. The universe Hermes traverses (i.e. ‘mediates’ for us humans) contains exotic phenomena like ‘dark matter’, ‘dark energy’, ‘quasars’, ‘black holes’, ‘super novas’, ‘cannibalistic galaxies’ etc. So vast is this newly discovered domain that our sense of time and space expand way beyond the abilities of mere humans to conceptualise in meaningful ways—though it is the technologies, tools, thought processes, etc. of Hermes, Thoth and Seshet (i.e. their maths, geometry, language, computer language, etc. innovations, that underpin many of our remarkable new technologies) that we use to bring back evidence of these domains and that we also use in order to make sense of it all.

- Who else but deities/archetypes of the ‘in-between’ (the *interstitium*), i.e. figures who routinely move between worlds, could bring us news from the ‘many/alternate/parallel etc. worlds’ theorized as existent in the ‘Multiverse’? Also, who else is capable of crossing the boundaries and borders between worlds in order to bring us back hard sensorial evidence concerning the various dimensions theorized by the physicists who talk about String Theory, Anti-Matter Universes, Black Holes, etc?
- Who else but archetypes like Hermes can make sense of quantum physics where particles can be entangled with other particles at vast distances, and faster than the speed of light? Also, perhaps we need to look at the ‘Trickster God’ aspects to Hermes/Mercury to even begin to understand the apparently irrational laws governing the subatomic realms that modern physicists now routinely explore, i.e. a world in which particles (matter) obey the uncertainty principle and can thus, apparently, be in multiple places (maybe even

worlds/universes) at once, sometimes behaving like particles and sometimes behaving like waves depending on who or what observes them.

- Finally, as the physical sciences begin to embrace biosemiotic communication principles in order to explain basic biological interactions and functions, the nature of consciousness, the nature of illness, etc. who else but Hermes, Thoth and Seshet might preside over the fundamental biosemiotic communication protocols—or ‘life codes’ (DNA etc.)—that are apparently programmed into all forms of organic and inorganic matter such that any particular ‘matter formation’ knows how to communicate with every other ‘matter formation’ in the universe?

The main task at present is to heal the split between ‘matter’ and ‘mind’ that became central to the Promethean Age—i.e. the period in Western history extending from the 18th through to the middle of the 20th centuries. A science that doesn’t heal, or at least properly explain, this split may well breed scientific monsters. The New Sciences are, we might say, less Promethean (less certain, arrogant and authoritarian) and more Hermesian (mercurial, non-definitive, enigmatic, doubtful, etc.)—but this fact alone does not guarantee that the shadows and monsters unleashed by ‘the sleep of reason’ will return to their own particular corner of hell. Rather, we’re witnessing the ever-increasing commercialization and militarisation of scientific research, a trend accompanied by popular manias for ‘newness’ and ‘meaningless fads’. When we throw in the antiscientific rhetoric of corporate, religious and ideological/political interests (particularly worrying has been the assault on science conducted by the Far Right in countries like the US and UK), we begin to suspect that multiple scientific knowledge domains are in crisis and experiencing trust deficits among ordinary people. Sometimes the attack has involved the deliberate dissemination of misinformation by self-appointed, but frequently unqualified ‘experts’.

CONCLUSION: Thoth and Seshet and Reflective Meditation

I’ve argued that the past 60-70 years has been a period of social and cultural transition (marked by a profound ‘Hermesian intensification’) from the certainties (related to Progress) and arrogance of Western civilization in the 19th and early 20th centuries to a more self-reflexive, humble and perhaps nebulous stance. Classical science is morphing into something new and strange (perhaps announcing a post-human future?) and hyper-capitalism has reached an end game due to the global inequalities it has sanctioned, as well as the ways in which advanced Industrial societies have facilitated the destruction of the biosphere/environment—i.e. the planet’s primary life support system.

The technologies associated with ‘digital, Information Age Hermes’ feverishly demolish or, at minimum, radically transform, a range of previously dominant cultural institutions e.g. the newspaper industry, the publishing industry, the music industry, universities (and education generally), etc. ‘Postmodern 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 the Thoth-Seshet-Hermes-Mercury matrix of deities.

Whether life-affirming creativity and critical thinking will thrive, merely survive or be completely eclipsed in this emerging environment (at present there is the possibility that these

faculties will be forced to submit completely to ‘hyper-capitalist’ Hermesian contamination) is a question worth pondering. Certainly, it is important that anyone engaged in vocations overseen by Thoth, Seshet and Hermes/Mercury be equipped to fully understand—in order to influence and perhaps shape—the emerging direction of the species to non-traumatic, life-affirming ends. We are sorely in need of creative antidotes to the excesses of both European ‘modernity’ and the negative symptoms we’ve described here as part and parcel of the ‘Hermesian transition’ currently underway.

In this endeavour, we might hope that the more positive aspects to the Thoth, Seshet and Hermes/Mercury archetypes can aid us in our quest. Hermes was an imaginative, swift-footed, knowledgeable and friendly god when positively polarised—often mindful of the well-being of the social whole¹⁵. Likewise, the moral focus demanded of us by a figure like Ma’at, when allied with the reflective, meditative, creative faculties associated with Thoth and Seshet—states fundamental to all reading, writing, art creation and learning—may assist postmodern humanity to establish ‘steady state’ social, cultural and economic institutions free of the frenetic, feverish, distracted and anxiety-ridden creative energies circulating under the sign of our current (un)heralded (i.e. invisible/unacknowledged) and, certainly, untreated Hermes negative polarisation.

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