

Hermes as God of Liminality and the Guide of Souls

Richard Stromer, Ph.D.

Hermes is a god who wears many masks: messenger of the gods, god of communication and commerce, trickster and magician, and, in perhaps his most mystical guise, god of liminality and guide of souls. It is on these last two roles of Hermes—as master of the in-between spaces we call “liminal” and as psychopomp guiding both the souls of the dead to the underworld and of the sleeping to the realm of dreams—that this essay will focus. The observations of some key psychologists, classicists, and other scholars who have commented extensively on the meaning and implications of these two interrelated roles of Hermes also will be considered.

In that context, Edward Edinger, the noted Jungian author, observes that Hermes role as psychopomp makes him a divinity of particular importance to those concerned with depth psychology. “He is the magician with the magic wand,” he writes, “and his ability to cross boundaries makes him a mediator between the human and the divine realm, or in psychological terms, between the personal psyche and the unconscious.” Edinger recognizes that since “depth psychology tries to relate consciousness to the unconscious depths and so repeatedly crosses the boundary between them, thus assuming the functions of Hermes,” Hermes is effectively the patron god of any psychology of depth. (31)

Karl Kerényi, commenting on the role of Hermes in the *Iliad*, observes that “the world of the *Iliad* is not the world of Hermes,” because most of the *Iliad* deals with unresolvable conflicts between warring parties, whether mortal or divine. In such a world, there is little room for a god who always seeks alternatives and clever means of finding the middle ground between opposing point of view. Yet Kerényi goes on to comment that “the entire final bittersweet book, in which the heroic world of the *Iliad* suddenly displays its unpredictable tenderness, stands under the sign of Hermes” (*Hermes* 36).

For Kerényi, there is great significance in the fact that Hermes activities in this last book of the *Iliad* are all set at night, beginning with the god's initial invoking of the darkness to facilitate his sudden appearance before Priam at the ford in the river. “It is the nocturnal aspect of his activity,” he writes, “the guidance along the ways that are dark, that enables us to appreciate the connection of Hermes with the spirits of the dead, the realm of death and its gods” (*Gods of the Greeks* 117). Walter Otto similarly notes that “the night is a world in itself” and “only through it can we fully understand the realm whose divine figure is Hermes” (118). I think it is important to point out, however, that night in the Hermetic sense is not simply the ordinary physical darkness that follows the setting of the sun each day (though Hermes often manifests himself in that setting). It is an inner nighttime of the psyche which Hermes invokes as he wishes, “the dark night of psychological crisis, when the light of day is eclipsed, the figures of the psyche stand out and assume another magnitude,” as Murray Stein notes (4). It is also important to remember that Hermes can bring on what we might call this sort of “night of the psychopomp” whenever, as William Doty observes “the soul is ready to relinquish its daylight preoccupations in order to regain the All, the continuity with all that has gone before and all that is to come” (136).

Related to this idea of Hermes as a god of psychic night is his role as the god who brings dreams to sleeping mortals. Arianna Stasinopoulos describes him as “the god who with his rod put men to sleep and sent them dreams, messages from beyond the border of everyday reality that illuminate our experience and bring eternity into time” (197). She goes on to add that Hermes, in his guise a bringer of dreams, was also called “the ‘psithyristis,’ a word which still in modern Greek means whisperer,” and acknowledges that this god “taught me to listen to the inner whisperings that tend to get drowned in the mind's cacophony, and to value and respect my dreams” (193). Because of this quality of Hermes, Otto notes that among the ancient Greeks, “he was remembered with reverence after a significant dream” (115).

In addition to his role as the bringer of dreams, Stein reminds us, “Hermes is the magician who is able to lull the defenses to sleep and also to alert them and wake them up to danger” (35). Clearly, we see the god engaged in this guise in the last book of the *Iliad*, both when he puts the Greek guards to sleep in the midst

of the dinner preparations and when he arrives before dawn to wake the sleeping Priam and warn him of the need to depart with haste back to Troy. In a similar vein, Ginnete Paris notes that a modern psychologist uses this aspect of the hermetic “with a patient whose problem is psychosomatic” when “he puts the problem to sleep (lowering defense mechanisms) in order to root it out” (98).

For James Hillman, for whom dreaming is inherently related to a descent from the conscious realm into psyche's underworld, it is Hermes “chthonic aspect from which comes the dream activity” (50). That observation brings together the images of Hermes as bringer of sleep and dreams and his more famous role as psychopomp, the guide of the souls of the dead to the underworld. Because of these dual roles, Christine Downing reminds us that the ancient Greeks “kept images of Hermes in their bedrooms and petitioned him to send them sleep but not death” (55). Similarly, suggests Doty, “perhaps we all, like persons in antiquity, ought to arrange our beds so that they faced the statue of Hermes, the *Oneiropompos* / Guide of Dreams,” because “learning from the dreams, presumably one learns something about Hermes as *Psychopompos* / Guide of Souls (into Hades) as well” (131).

It was in his role as psychopomp that Hermes was viewed with greatest awe by the ancient Greeks, who knew that without his guidance their disembodied shades would wander the earth eternally and – perhaps more frightening still – would leave them while still alive at the mercy of the lost shades of others. Much as they viewed Hermes in his role of psychopomp with a sense of awe, though, they generally did not fear him in this guise because of the gentleness with which he performed this terrible task. Writing of the scene at the end of *The Odyssey*, Kerenyi comments “gentle, his golden staff gleaming, Hermes appears even among the musty paths of ghosts. Here, too, he is named *akeketa*, ‘painless,’ since he does no harm even to these unfortunate souls” (Hermes 43). It's also important to note, in the words of Walter Otto, that “the Hermes who is linked to the nether-world by the significant epithet Chthonius may often enough appear to be a genuine god of the dead.” Nevertheless, as Otto is careful to remind us, “always [Hermes] reveals himself again as the guide” (114).

Viewing Hermes' role as psychopomp from the vantage point of depth psychology, Downing writes of her own experience that “it is as psychopomp that I have most often directly experienced Hermes” and describes Hermes as “the seemingly alien but unconscious longed-for pattern of energy that most often pulls me down into the underworld” (51). In that journeying into the underworld – which Hillman has advocated as essential for psychological wholeness—we must confront those darker aspects of our selves which we otherwise find ways of ignoring. “The task of guiding the soul into the underworld cannot be minimized or omitted from psychology,” notes Lopez-Pedraza, because “death is death – the always fearful opposite of life – in spite of the fact that our culture has systematically repressed what death is to the psyche” (92).

While these journeys to the underworld may grow to be voluntary, for most of us the initial foray is more likely to be against our conscious wills. Nevertheless, unlike the myth of Persephone and her abduction by Hades into the underworld, the image of Hermes as psychopomp relates to a different and more benevolent kind of descent into that nether realm. As Downing observes, “reflection of Hermes' role as psychopomp leads us to think about the underworld experience in a particular way, to ask: What is the difference between being guided to rather than abducted to the underworld?” (53).

The value of having Hermes as one's companion in the descent to the underworld rather than Hades is that the psychopomp's role is to guide us in whatever ways are required to learn the lessons which a knowledge of death brings to the living of life. “The Hermes image repeatedly enforces descents into personal and social underworlds of great power” observes Doty, “into realms where one is lost without a hermetic guide who can recognize the importance of going into the darkness willingly, the importance of hearing the significances of the deathly side of things” (134). Moreover, because Hermes, again unlike Hades, has the knowledge with which to bring us back to the daylight world of consciousness afterward, “he guides us to an underworld experience which is not limited to death, but makes everyday life more satisfyingly complex” (Doty 134).

As a part of that underworld experience, for example, through contact with our own mortality, we may learn “that we can never after all protect ourselves from having things happen to us, from chance, from

surprise, from the god” (Downing 54). More importantly, since we no longer are able to experience death as a communal experience, notes Lopez-Pedraza, if we look at solitary modern man's “desolation in the face of death from a psychology of depth, it has been to man's gain, because it provides him with the freedom to make death his own imaginative and intimate concern, to become better acquainted with his own images and emotions concerning death, thus enriching his psychic life” (93).

An aspect of Hermes' role as psychopomp is his unique ability to make the transition between the realms of the living and the dead, between the world of consciousness and the depths of the personal and collective unconscious. Because of his great skill at passing “in between” dimensions—whether these dimensions are physical, chronological, or psychological in nature – Hermes is also the god of all things liminal, all things transitional. “Ever a transitional figure,” Doty states with simplicity, “Hermes divinizes transition” (137). “He is there, at all transitions, marking them as sacred, as eventful, as epiphany,” adds Downing, and “his presence reminds us that the crossing of every threshold is a sacred event” (56, 65). As a result, she concludes, “our awareness of Hermes' presence opens us to the sacredness of such moments, of those in-between times that are strangely frightening and we so often try to hurry past” (56). It is just such a scene of liminality that Homer portrays in the last book of the *Iliad*, at the point at which Priam and his herald stop at the ford in the river between Troy and the camp of the Greek and meet Hermes approaching them from out of the sudden darkness. As James Redfield comments on this moment in the epic, “everything is dark and wrapped in mist. The journey is a rite of departure and crossing-over” (Redfield 82).

For myself, I think this last aspect of Hermes' role as guide of souls—his role as the guide into and out of those passages in our lives which are inherently liminal in nature—is the most powerful one. As someone who has been dealing for the past several years with the particularly momentous life passage called “midlife,” I have had considerable opportunity to experience this aspect of Hermes' energy. As Stein observes, “at midlife there is a crossing-over from one psychological identity to another” (3). As a consequence, he writes (and I concur), “in our reflecting on the midlife transition and the experience of liminality within it, the world of Hermes therefore immediately suggests itself as a mythic, archetypal backdrop” (8).

Just as Hermes leads Priam to the place where he will retrieve the corpse of his beloved son, the place “where death will be faced and grief will meet its maker,” as Stein described the scene, so too have I been confronted with knowledge of the dead places within myself and the need to mourn the passing of those aspects of myself. Equally importantly, as Stein also notes of this episode from the *Iliad*, “this encounter with death also brings consciousness of a dead past that needs to be buried” (36). I am now arriving at that place where I am able to allow the injuries of a constricted childhood to be laid to rest, to let these wounds finally heal and scarify, and finally begin to look to a future more whole and alive than I had ever imagined possible. As a result, I find myself in deep agreement with Doty, when he observes of Hermes' influence that “hermetically, one opens out endlessly, never closing down nor attaining the point of stasis, but always evincing anticipations of futures all the stories of the past have only begun to intimate” (137).

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