

Hermesian Poetics: Creativity in a Post-modern World

(Part 4 of a 5 part series:
'Alchemy and the Imagination')



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

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

Hermesian Poetics: A Tentative Model for Post-modern Creativity?

‘Deconstruction is inventive or it is nothing at all; it does not settle for methodical procedures, it opens up passageways, it marches ahead and marks a trail ... Its process involves an affirmation, this latter being linked to the coming - the *venire*’ - in event, advent, invention. But it can only make it by deconstructing a conceptual and institutional structure of invention that would neutralize by putting the stamp of reason on some aspect of invention, of inventive power ...’¹

The goal of this article is to tie together some of the strands of thought introduced in the first three articles of the series. The first article explored various ancient creativity archetypes as well as the kind of ‘poetic’ each engendered. The same article then moved on to a brief summary of key concepts in what was referred to as ‘spiritual alchemy’. The second article attempted a brief archaeology of the figures of Thoth, Hermes/Mercury, Hermes Trismegistus and Mercurius - paying particular attention to both the transmutations and fundamental continuities evident in the archetype. The third article looked at the alchemical and hermetic foundations to Jung’s analytic psychology with a focus on the therapeutic technique he developed known as ‘active imagination’.

This fourth and final article will discuss the way in which the various archetypal principles related to Hermes (both classical and alchemical) might be theorised as present - though present behind the scenes, as it were - in certain key features of what is these days known as ‘post-modern culture’. Two aspects of that culture in particular are worth examining in terms of the ‘Hermesian principle’. Firstly, I want to suggest that aspects of the ‘deconstructive’ agenda associated most obviously with French philosopher Jacques Derrida display distinct alchemical/Hermesian traits (though of course there are crucial differences). The second, perhaps more conspicuous aspect of post-modern culture I want to highlight, one that displays traits the ancients would have instantly associated with the world of Thoth-Hermes is technology based, i.e. an aspect associated with changes/transmutations in communications technology. The comparatively recent innovations associated with the internet and other global communications technologies will thus be briefly examined and summarised. The current move from a ‘print’ based culture (i.e. paper books) to a digital e-book/telecommunications culture, for example, surely indicates fundamental alterations, transmutations, perhaps evolutions, to the knowledge/ language/ communications

¹ Jacques Derrida, ‘Psyche: Inventions of the Other’, in *A Derrida Reader: Between the Blinds*, p.218., edited by Peggy Kamuf.

spheres of human social organisation. The extent to which these transmutations can be described as ‘Hermesian’ (rather than say Dionysian, Apollonian, etc.) is a question worth posing.

This article proposes that if we fail to acknowledge the influence of the latest incarnation of ‘the good thief’ we risk losing a vital historical dimension to the basically anti-oppressive, anti-authoritarian program associated with intellectual postmodernism. In such a climate post-modern critical culture (intellectual and creative/artistic) in tandem with the new communications technologies risks losing its bearings, and may easily degenerate into what may be described as a cult of permanent ‘dissolution’ (in the alchemical sense of all ‘*solve*’ and no ‘*coagula*’) aimed, not unlike the mechanisms of the hyper-capitalism, at dissolving *all* notions of structure and the real (both in the cultural domain and in the world at large), both life-sustaining and apparently oppressive. Indeed, as the theorist Frederick Jameson has argued, neo-liberalism and cultural postmodernism have at times acted in tandem as twin aspects of a new, more or less Western secularist, neo-colonial agenda.

Though the quote that opened this article demonstrates Derrida’s commitment to a constructive, affirmative ‘deconstructionism’ a plan for the exact way in which such a process might unfold in the cultural sphere (and elsewhere) remains only sketchily plotted by deconstructionists. In terms of the of old alchemical catechism some deconstructionists seem content to indulge in what we might term ‘*solve et solve et solve ... etc.*’ (i.e. ‘dissolve and dissolve and dissolve, ... etc.’).

As an antidote to such an inversion of the stated intentions of many post-modern progressives I want to briefly outline the main features of a poetics capable of retrieving and/or adapting both the Hermesian notion of correspondences (between individuals, the animate cosmos and human social formations), *and* the deconstructive (postmodernist) agenda of dissolving inflexible (oppressive/ authoritarian) language codes and sign systems as a method for neutralising oppression in the social and political spheres. Bernoulli, in 1935, described the ancient alchemical idea of ‘correspondences’ as follows (paraphrasing ancient alchemical texts): ‘The earth is the mirror of the heaven, and conversely.’² In a later passage he elaborated on the statement: ‘[The] animation of the heavenly bodies runs through the whole of alchemy. This is primitive thinking if you will, for we no longer believe that stone, metal, dead wood are animated. But for alchemy the stone has life, the metal has a soul.’³

In our endeavours we will return at intervals to this idea of ‘correspondences’ as

² Bernoulli, Rudolf, p.312 (1935) of *Spiritual Disciplines*, essay: ‘Spiritual Development in Alchemy.’

³ Ibid, p.312.

well as to Jung's understanding of the role of the imagination in personal and cultural life - particularly his belief that the imagination contributes flexibility and adaptability to the psyche as individuals seek to align experiences in the external world with archetypal projections originating in the collective unconscious. Unlike Jung, however, this developing poetic will emphasise 'relational' dimensions to both personal and collective versions of the unconscious. Here, in some respects, we'll be reviving a way of thinking located at the very heart of ancient alchemy and attached, since classical times at least, to the archetype of Hermes in his many manifestations. I will argue that such an adapted/evolved poetic grants writers and artists (perhaps even psychotherapists) fascinating insights into the transpersonal dimensions underpinning all creative endeavours. To say this for creative activities is to suggest similar dimensions to all manifestations of culture.

An adapted 'Jungian-Hermesian' poetic, once merged with an adapted 'deconstructive' approach, has, in my opinion, much to offer writers in an age of excessive individualism (a feature of which is the 'cult of celebrity' itself, in turn, an aspect of modern hyper-capitalism). Such a merged poetic invites a commitment to ego diminishment through acts of literary social service, understood in part as a commitment to political engagement which aims at reiterating the role of the arts and the imagination in any quest for personal and social balance/integration. I am convinced, in all this, that the Hermesian archetype or principle is no friend of oppressors wishing to project their unresolved 'shadow' stuff onto those less powerful than themselves.⁴ It is precisely the phenomenon of oppression, in all its subtle and less subtle forms, that I would like to place most urgently in the 'alembic' created in the wake of our proposed new 'poetic'. Hermesian poetics is inherently 'political'. Another dimension to the Hermes archetype (and thus to Hermesian notions of creativity), one that also interested Jung, is the archetype's long association with psycho-spiritual healing.

Writing as Pharmakon: Pharmakon as Poison, Drug, Remedy or Scapegoat

The more progressive advocates of cultural post-modernism have long been attempting a kind of alchemical 'dissolution' (the most well known term is 'deconstruction') of the Western cannon (in literature, philosophy, sociology, psychology, art, etc.). At the heart of this many-faceted phenomenon is a language based, i.e. linguistic, attack on all forms of authoritarianism. That the authoritarianism that births endless atrophied, dehumanising, oppressive 'paradigms' or ways of seeing the world - i.e. 'grand

⁴ Interestingly, as Kerényi notes, antiquity has left us only a handful of depictions, among many thousands, of Hermes acting in an aggressive manner.

narratives' (Lyotard).⁵

At the heart of Derrida's deconstruction of Western metaphysics, indeed of the origins of Western philosophy's 'truth' telling claims, is a work entitled 'Plato's Pharmacy' ('La Pharmacie de Platon'), 1972⁶. In the work Derrida analyses Plato's discussion of the origins and worth of writing as contained in the *Phaedrus* (and elsewhere). The deities Nebu/Nabu (the Babylonian scribe god), Thoth (the Egyptian scribe god), and Hermes/Mercury, figure prominently in the text. By Derrida's analysis of Plato's text, the technological and psycho-spiritual changes associated with the invention of writing - heralded in the first instance by mutations to the Thoth-Hermes archetype in particular - coincided with the waning of mythological ways of thinking which in turn made possible the more rational and individualistic kind of thinking that underpins later Western philosophy.

Much of Derrida's discussion of the *Phaedrus* centres on ambivalences associated with the Greek term *pharmakon*, which at a critical point in the text is used by 'Theuth' (a version, most likely of Thoth) to describe to Ammon (King or the Gods or God of Gods) the socially positive uses associated with the new technology of 'writing'. Derrida points out that the term 'pharmakon' had multiple meanings all of which were subliminally present to the ancient Greek mind and were closely associated with the concept of magic/sorcery (both black and white). More specifically he says that the term 'pharmakon' could be translated as meaning, simultaneously, 'remedy/medicine', 'drug' and 'poison (he does not mention 'scapegoat'). Modern translations, steeped, according to Derrida, in the 'either/or' consciousness in part instituted by the Thoth inspired 'writing revolution' tend to translate the term as 'remedy', a mistake according to Derrida since such a translation obliterates important ambiguities present in the original choice of terminology. What occurs is a simplification, for the benefit of later Western philosophy, of the impact of writing on culture at a seminal moment in Western history. Near the end of his analysis Derrida, in an extraordinary passage concerning Thoth-Hermes, states of the god (and thus of the instabilities Derrida sees as latent in the then new technology of 'writing'):

'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

⁵ In truth the West has been undergoing this process since the 19th century (Nietzsche, Darwin, Marx, Freud, Joyce and many others have all made eminently 'mercurial' contributions).

⁶ The article appeared in Derrida's book *Dissemination*.

card, one who puts play into play ...'⁷

Towards the end of the same passage he writes about 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 ...'

Finally, Derrida states, "The god of writing, who 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." Here-in is a clue to Derrida's own 'deconstructive' goals. In a sense the technique of 'deconstruction' (of tracing multiple meanings within texts, i.e. the promotion of polyphonic, rather than monophonic, writing/reading encounters) might be viewed as a kind of cultural 'medicine', a remedy, a pharmakon, if you like ... but there is no 'pharmakon', according to Derrida, without acknowledgment of the 'poison' - in the authority of 'King of Kings'? In the technology of writing presented to that very same 'King/Father'?

Here is not the place to attempt a detailed analysis of every aspect of Derrida's fascinating response to the *Phaedrus*, rather it is merely my intention to point out here the importance of Derrida's analysis to the development of key principles associated with his 'deconstructive' theory - itself a key theory associated with cultural post-modernism. 'Deconstruction' is an eminently Hermesian/alchemical activity. Derrida himself comes across as something of a theoretical trickster with his cryptic, performative writing style and his love of pun and play. But the trickery (from the perspective of the inflexible, highly rationalist, philosophical and scientific authorities that would critique him), veils a profoundly anti-oppressive, and thus to my mind, socially constructive goal. As a student of the history of writing Derrida, like Thoth in the *Phaedrus*, surely used all the gifts associated with the Hermes principle - great learning, trickery, eloquence, even thievery of a sort - to limit the egotistical claims to power of what we might term the 'authoritarian Father' - the fascist, the ideologue, that

⁷ Derrida, 'Plato's Pharmacy' in *A Derrida Reader: Between the Blinds*, p.122, edited by Peggy Kamuf.

is fundamentalists of all descriptions intent on inscribing their own view of life into the flesh and psyches of others. In many of his academic postures and pronouncements Derrida is profoundly 'Hermesian' in orientation - in the sense of being mischievous, democratic, polyphonic, intent on offering/administering the bitter intellectual remedy, the bitter 'pharmakon' that intoxicates even as it undermines metaphysical and other claims to absolute truth. Derrida's reading of the Thoth-Hermes innovation of 'writing' - and all the arts and sciences that accompany its rise to cultural prominence - clearly acknowledges, though in characteristically Derridean style, an otherwise unacknowledged subterranean Hermesian dimension to cultural post-modernism.

Despite the 'correspondences' that emerge when we attempt to describe deconstructionism as a form of cultural alchemy designed to place both linguistic systems (indeed all sign systems) *and* the knowledge bases of a range of intellectual disciplines in a kind of analytic 'alembic' or 'flask' it is obvious enough that we can only take such correspondences so far. Clearly Medieval alchemy in its spiritual form was a *spiritual* system designed to align the self with transpersonal energies/dimensions, all be it outside the monolithic structures of the Christian church. Derrida's deconstructionism, on the other hand, clearly has its roots in Western secular philosophies even if only as an example of their most radical negation.

Despite this fact it is worth pointing out that key elements of the deconstruction agenda are paralleled in a range of pre-modern traditions. Similarly, as postmodern thinking generally teaches us, something apparently wholly 'present' in a discourse - in this case the idea of deconstruction - is often better defined by that which is absent, erased, obscured etc. (i.e. 'absently present'), or by reference to the entire system of ideas, etc. to which it belongs.

Derrida throughout his life was very tight-lipped about what might be achieved by those adopting a deconstructive perspective on social and cultural phenomena. In the rare instances in which he discusses an affirmative aspect to 'deconstruction' he tended to be vague, speaking of the emergence of another 'other'⁸ or of the need to promote cultural 'fluidity' (*solve ...*) as a means to avoid closure, inflexibility, etc. (*fixation/coagulation*). The quote that opened this article aligns deconstruction with

⁸ In *Ulysses Gramophone* Derrida spends a lot of time exploring Molly Bloom's interior monologue (at the end of *Ulysses*). He seems to locate in her final (interior) statement 'Yes I said yes I will Yes,' as well as in Joyce's mischievousness and love of play, a certain 'affirmative' posture towards life (and in Joyce's case, toward art/literature) that parallels his own attitude toward intellectual endeavours. *Ulysses*, is seen these days, of course, as a seminal post-modern novel, despite having been written at the height of 'literary modernism'.

invention to some extent, with ‘reinventing the future’, especially when Derrida states of deconstruction that ‘its *process* involves an affirmation - the *venire* - in event, advent, invention.’⁹ From hints dropped elsewhere in his work it seems likely that Derrida is here alluding to the so-called ‘second phase’ of deconstruction in which a conceptual duality composed of both a dominant and a despised element is, under pressure of deconstructive questioning, forged (becomes the subject of an inventive act) into something new and liberated. The ‘relational’ dimension to this process is thoroughly democratic, the despised ‘other’ is despised no more. Such an outcome does not exclude the possibility that new oppositions or dualities might emerge in the ‘process’ or ‘event’ of questioning/deconstructing ... the new state, however, would presumably also be open to deconstruction (purification?) ... and so it goes, procedure after procedure the sum of which resembles the ‘circulations’ associated with spiritual alchemy except that it is ‘signs’ in all their cultural complexity that are being placed in the alembic.

My own hunch is that anti-oppressive, philosophically ‘materialist’ goals fuel all the delightful posturing and question dodging, all the marvellously Hermesian linguistic performances one encounters in his writings. Such a position, it is true, might seem quite distant from the clearly spiritual or healing oriented goals of most Medieval spiritual alchemists. Nevertheless, when in ‘Letter to a Japanese Friend’, Derrida writes:

What deconstruction is not? everything of course.
What is deconstruction? nothing of course!¹⁰

we might be forgiven for reading into such gnomic comments certain Hermesian characteristics of expression encountered continuously in the alchemical texts of the 15th and 16th centuries whenever the authors alluded to the true nature of the ‘work’ (in particular the true nature of the ‘stone’). The coincidence doesn’t end there, the above comment is actually structured in a way that highlights certain ‘dualities’ of thinking - we are asked to ponder ‘everything’ and ‘nothing’ for example, and relate such concepts to deconstructionism. Specifically we are told that deconstruction is *not* everything and that *it is* nothing ... a comment worthy of a Zen monk, it is true, but also of an alchemist intent, as Jung well-understood, on reconciling opposites under the sign of Hermes/Mercury.

Finally, there is another way in which the Hermesian principle operates, almost

⁹ Jacques Derrida, ‘Psyche: Inventions of the Other’, in *A Derrida Reader: Between the Blinds*, p.218.

¹⁰ Jacques Derrida, ‘Letter to a Japanese Friend’, in *A Derrida Reader: Between the Blinds*, p.275.

invisibly, at the heart of Derridean deconstruction theory. The alchemists 'dissolved' matter and psyche-soul in the 'nigredo' phase in order to initiate a new self (with the help of an external supernatural agency) better able to integrate/learn from experiences of suffering. Faith in the 'work' implied faith in the existence, outside the ordinary world, of a condition (a way of being) beyond the principle of worldly suffering. To the alchemist 'nature' could be quickened by agencies from the spiritual beyond as a means to reduce suffering/disease etc. - many alchemists, it should be noted, were physicians.

If as I suspect, Derrida's deconstructionism is life affirmative in the sense of being anti-oppressive (however that term might be deconstructed!) the 'dissolution' process is not about mere entertainment or distraction. A new notion of subjectivity, of being in the world, is in the offing - will potentially coming into being - due to the application of deconstructive techniques. The implication, of course, is that the new subjectivity will have transcended or neutralised the suffering generated by closed, inflexible cultural codes (themselves backed by authoritarian institutional power).

Such a position parallels - though Derrida would no doubt deny it - the alchemist's faith in divinity as a place outside suffering that can work - through commitment to the 'opus' (*solve et coagula*) - to neutralise suffering on earth. Derrida's more secular 'alchemical' message (aimed primarily at notions of 'structure' in cultural texts): 'solve et ... solve et ...' suggests faith in the process of deconstruction as a means to transcend the suffering caused by oppression. Although he would not, of course, want to suggest a spiritual origin for the progressivist's urge to fight oppression - an urge that clearly opposes the observation that suffering (of which oppression is but a sub-set) is actually a permanent part of the structure of our cosmos - he does not in truth tell us exactly where this anti-oppressive urge originates. We can of course speculate: perhaps in the new 'other' subjectivity birthed by the 'work/event/invention' of deconstruction? Are we talking about a concealed Faustian (scientific?) element to 'deconstructionism' (i.e. founded on non-rational utopias of 'otherness') or are we perhaps talking about an unacknowledged, adapted-evolved and secularised alchemical-Hermesian subjectivity still to manifest in full in the world?

This latter line of reasoning, of course, would explain to some extent the anti-colonial currents evident in a Derrida inspired way of looking at culture and society - it might also explain the closeness of (apparently) 'secularist' deconstructionism to contemporary indigenous polytheistic, animistic etc. world views under assault, these days, from the scientific-rationalistic-capitalistic shock troops of 'modernity'. This assault, at present, also focuses on key social and cultural institutions within Westernised nations, as well as on the planet's entire life support system - i.e. what we humans label 'the environment'.

Like the environmentalist David Abram, in his book *The Spell of the Sensuous*, I

have my doubts that Derridean deconstruction is a sufficient foundation for a critique of the above nefarious trends. Abram, in pointing out limitations to Derrida's perspective on cultural sign systems, writes: 'We would do well ... to keep our thoughts and our theories close to this [i.e. the natural world] non-arbitrary ground that already supports all our cogitations.'¹¹ Abram's approach instead adopts theoretical tools developed by the phenomenologist Merleau-Ponty. Here is not the place to summarise and critique Merleau-Ponty's work, nor to discuss the implicit 'deconstructionist' elements to existential and phenomenological thinking (as well as the key differences between the two approaches). However, it is worth stating that Merleau-Ponty's ideas concerning the 'carnality' of language and communication systems generally, reminds us that any act of linguistic, ideological or semiological deconstruction is a human activity; it takes place against the backdrop of a planetary 'other', a life support system. It is also worth pointing out that fundamental life-support structures exist *within* the human psyche and *within* human communities - they exist whether we speak about them, are silent about them or attempt to deconstruct them.

Postmodernity, of course, has many dimensions - French post-structuralist theory and global anti-colonialist theories (and movements!) are but two of those dimensions. In the next section we'll discuss a third dimension - though here again we can observe the unacknowledged presence of what in this essay I've been calling 'the Hermesian principle'.

Post-modern Culture 2: Hermes as God of the Internet and other Global Communications Technologies

The invention of television, radio, telephones, the internet and other global communications technologies can be seen as distinctly 'Hermesian' developments. Our current capacity to contact people elsewhere on the planet more or less instantaneously represents an evolutionary extension of the original Hermes and Thoth inspired gifts of language and writing. Such devices give us the capacity to communicate positively with people from different cultural backgrounds, political persuasions etc., thus, at least in theory, reducing the likelihood of conflict. Such technologies also allow us to access all the world's cultural heritage from the comfort of our own homes - this represents, again in theory, an acceleration of cognitive abilities. Behind such technologies we must surely see Hermes 'God of the Intellect (of the air)' and an expanded consciousness of worlds beyond the world our senses once conditioned us to experience.

¹¹ David Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous*, p.281 n17.

The profound transformations the ancient arts of writing and reading are currently undergoing have few precedents in human history. We have to look to the switch-over from oral culture to written culture in the Ancient Near East in the first millennium BC, or to the invention of the printing press in the Medieval period to get some perspective on the radical social and cultural changes our new 'writing' technologies may give birth to. If history is anything to go by, the current communications revolutions will give birth to new ways of thinking, new understandings of relationship perhaps even a new understanding of 'mind'. The famous new media analyst Marshall McLuhan argued as long ago as the 1960s that the new media of his day (radio and television) were dissolving what he labelled 'the linear mind' associated not only with book culture but also Post-Enlightenment, scientific and reason based notions of subjectivity. Each media form, he argued, affects us differently - which lead to the now famous statement 'the media *is* the message.'

One wonders what McLuhan would make of the profoundly 'alchemical' cultural transmutations unleashed by mobile phones, I-Pads, Kindles, the internet, Pay-TV, etc. At present cultural commentators are perhaps more aware of the way such technologies 'dissolve' willy-nilly older cultural structures - e.g. the print-based book publishing industry, the print-based newspaper industry, class based university learning, etc. are all under fire as I write - than the ways in which we might ensure that such technologies serve to underpin and affirm civil society in its eternal struggle to neutralise authoritarian, oppressive and destructive political tendencies. Currently, the communications revolution has its own logic (largely associated with late-capitalism with its addiction to 'distractions' and what some commentators term 'opiate institutions'). The maintenance of social and cultural 'health and wellbeing' is rarely discussed as we rush toward the Hermes inspired digital future. Whether some of the clearly democratic, interactive, 'choice' based, levelling and relational tendencies associated with some of the new technologies will be enough to avert the kind of media - i.e. propaganda - fuelled cultural calamities that unfolded with sickening regularity throughout the twentieth century is open to debate. It is however, worth noting (along with the sociologist Ellul) that all technologies, communications technologies included are double-edged swords - for every problem they solve they create one or more new problems. This is the Faustian side to our pact with modern science. The Hermesian principle, on the other hand, is suspicious of any man-made utopias based solely on materialistic philosophical presumptions. From such a perspective the question of just how such technologies might contribute to 'the work' as a process healing and of aligning the individual or collective soul with their archetypal possibilities is always a priority.

The 'Hermesian Principle' as Affirmative Postmodernism

Behind the twin forces for change/transmutation in the cultural and social spheres discussed

above—i.e. the communications/media revolution AND post-modern ‘deconstructive’ philosophies—is surely an impulse we could identify with the ‘Hermesian Principle’ if not the various archaic deities belonging to the Hermes matrix discussed in Article Two of this series. Let’s summarise then some of the key elements emerging from a possible merging of deconstructionist thinking, Hermesian/Alchemical traditions and revised Jungian notions of the alchemical and Hermesian elements to ‘active imagination’:

1. Inspiration in Personal Relationships (Muse/Soror and Poet/Writer):

Hermes/Mercury is the most useful writer/artist archetype for what I’ll call the emerging ‘inter-relational’ concept of the arts and literature. The *Rosarium Philosophorum*, like other crucial alchemical texts, uses marital imagery to describe the progress of the alchemical work. In simple terms, unrest between lovers gradually turns into genuine harmony between lovers prior to the birth of the ‘hermaphroditic child’ (Mercury in another form). Though of course there is much else besides going on in alchemical literatures, this imagistic relational grounding, Sol and Luna, tallies well with the ancient experience of creativity as an alliance between Muse and Poet/Artist. Campbell understands this well when he writes:

‘... the work of the alchemist was intimately personal, and where it involved the cooperation of an actual woman in the mythic role of *regina, soror, filia mystica*, the relationship was necessarily, because of its psychological dimension, deeply personal and exclusive.’¹²

The ‘soror’ or female helper (alchemist?) appears often in alchemical art from the 15th to 18th centuries; often as an independent and magically potent figure in her own right. Interestingly, however, monolithic heterosexuality was not seen as the only way to attain to the ‘Stone’. The Mercury of the alchemists was, at times, seen as both male and female; ‘our hermaphrodite’ as the alchemists called the mercurial figure that emerged after the *coniunctionis* of the ‘nigredo’ stage of the work and reappeared repeatedly right through to the ‘rubedo’ stage. Indeed in the creation myths associated with alchemy (drawn to some extent from Platonic and Neo-Platonic sources) ‘original man’ is androgynous, the original hermaphrodite, i.e. beyond the opposites (male/female in this case) associated with alchemical/hermetic/Gnostic versions of the fall. Jung saw the hermaphrodite as an indication of a man’s ability to integrate his unconscious female anima, or, for a woman, her ability to integrate her unconscious male animus—in short, an indicator of open communication channels between the ego, the personal unconscious and the collective unconscious.

Hermes, I believe, would be eminently open to feminist perspectives on the world.

¹² Campbell, J. *Creative Mythology*, p.267.

Kerenyi has excavated the god's associations with Hecate and a range of other powerful Greek deities including, in pre-Olympian times, deities he takes to be derivatives of the great Goddess of archaic European matriarchy. Hecate, of course, was a powerful Goddess of magic (among other things) in her own right. Does their dual depiction - Hermes and Hecate - in much archaic iconography suggest to us a creative syzygy archetype useful to modern female artists and writers?

2. The Hermetic Writer as Servant of the Community of Souls: Although the Hermetic path is proto-existential in many respects, we must also remember that Hermes and Mercury were profoundly social, indeed downright gregarious entities. Hermes was the God of trade, though his idea of trade was a very long way from the impersonal, exploitative trade associated with advanced (secularized) consumer capitalism, which encourages individuals to accumulate great wealth at the expense of others in the community of souls. It can be argued that Hermes as messenger god and traveler between worlds (a truly 'internationalist' being), also as divine 'mediator' between warring camps, represents an important archaic ideal of community, real community as against oppressive community. This transformative peacekeeping role is often expressed via marital or intra-familial symbolism in the alchemical tradition. Hermes is a political God in the most down-to-earth sense, inevitably therefore his eloquence, the technology he invented (writing) and his close association with cultural pursuits, along with his role in psycho-spiritual healing informs us that we are dealing with a deity whose essential character promotes social cohesiveness rather than social discord. Hermes-Mercury thus tends to 'dissolve' obstructions and inflexibilities in the *polis* or in individuals in order to heal, to suture the wounds associated with personal and collective conflicts.

This element to Hermes' personality is metaphorically associated with the observed behaviour of 'mercury/quicksilver'. Mercury acts upon other metals as a purifier for the greater good. He is a public servant, in a sense, for the community of souls, metals/minerals and gods, and all kinds of 'heavenly' relationships are moderated and furthered by his presence at the table of the Gods. Hermes does not encourage ego-inflation in 'individualist' oriented writers and artists, indeed the 'genius' metaphor of Western literary and artistic cultures - and also at the root of modern 'celebrity' worship - may well represent an eclipse of the ancient Hermetic attitude toward poetry, story-telling, etc. The path of Hermes is the path of ego dissolution (though not in the simple transcendent sense as articulated by the great Monotheistic religions). Hermes represents a mercury inspired corrosion of delusional fantasies of separation from others—especially of the creative self from the needs of the community of souls. From such a perspective, the new decentred 'self' of Postmodern literary culture might well, in some respects, be described as a 'Mercurial/Hermesian phenomenon' as long as structures fundamental to life are not 'dissolved' at the same time.

3. A Sacred Interspecies Poetics: The Heavens Mirror the Earth Mirror the Essence of a Human Being:

Apart from the personal and socio-cultural insights arising out of a Jungian-Alchemical perspective, we might also venture certain interspecies ‘relational’ insights. The alchemical formulation: “World = Human kind = the Gods” could act as a counter to the profound separation between human beings and the natural world currently endemic in the so-called advanced industrial societies. In the alchemical tradition, nature is animate and alive (prior to Paracelsus, anyway), this fact is in itself a critique of our unexamined commitment to scientific materialism which explicitly aims to de-animate matter in order to exploit it. Franz Boll, in 1926, described the central alchemical insight as follows: ‘The science and knowledge of all things consists in learning of the true harmony and consonance of nature with the macrocosm and microcosm of the world and man ...’ If we hold to this idea we would surely make it a priority to address the current imbalances between human beings and the natural world, and between individuals and their societies. Alchemy, at core, engages us in a poetics of cherishing, getting to know and protecting the ‘other’, for the other is understood as an aspect of the self—in modern terminology: an aspect of the expansive ‘inter-relational self’ currently being rediscovered by quantum physicists and some schools of psychology.

4. Non-Conformity: A Plurality of Paths to the ‘Green Gold’ of ‘The Stone’: The path of the Hermes inspired alchemist was, at times, a lonely one. The work was often carried out independent of the Church and other institutions that made social control a priority. Many alchemists were burnt as heretics and witches by the late Medieval Church on account of their indulgence in outlawed, semi-pagan, magical activities. It is no accident that the cultural hey-day of alchemy in the West is associated with the more tolerant, explorative world view associated with the Renaissance. The existential consciousness exhibited by many twentieth century writers and poets perhaps has parallels with the highly individualised ‘work’ (spiritual development) undertaken by many alchemists.¹³

5. A Poetics of the Infinite Present: Hermes was the God of transitions, of change and acceptance of change. Openness to change is an important attribute of writers down the ages. Those born under the sign of Hermes—the traveler (migrant/refugee?) God—as I was, were perhaps raised on his chemically volatile ‘milk’, with its vision inspiring capacity to confront us with ‘alternative worlds’, and thus alternative forms of consciousness. The Hermes inspired poet/writer holds to a poetics of ‘Infinity including the transpersonal

¹³ This is perhaps the reason that Joseph Campbell discusses their contribution to Western art and literature in his *Creative Mythology* volume rather than elsewhere in his corpus.

embodied self'. This is not a transcendental poetics of 'World + One' (to attain fulfilment) nor a materialist poetics of 'World including self as a purely materialist something.' Hermes always reminds us of the infinite possibilities of the present embodied moment—here-in 'the Green Gold', the evolved animistic self, the synchronistic self (Jung), the self of the 'Implicate Order' (rather than the conditioned, dulled down 'Explicate Order' self). As a pagan Greek God with roots in European matrifocal traditions Hermes offers a poetics of immanence, of sensuousness, of immersion in life rather than rejection of life. This view of life may lead to a constructive, pluralist poetics, a poetics of the 'Implicate Order' as it seeks to manifest its possibilities for full living in the everyday world (as per Bohn's quantum formulation). In short, a poetics of expanded relational possibilities within embodied existence.

6. Devotion to Meaningful Learning: Learning in the Service of Healing: Hermes was a God of writing, as was his kindred Egyptian God, Thoth. He was also the God of magic and, if Jung and Eliade are correct, the God of Soul transformations—specifically psycho-spiritual healing. These functions carried over into Medieval spiritual alchemy to some extent, which, of course, Mercurious (as Hermes Trismegistus) presided over with his magical caduceus. By definition, the Mercurial impulse thus merges the impulse to psycho-spiritual healing and soul transformation with the peculiar hallucinatory and imaginative-creative procedures labelled by Jung 'active imagination'. In Gaul, Mercury merged with indigenous Gods associated with writing and eloquence (e.g. Lug), and thus poetry, music, story-telling and many other art forms also fell under his dominion in the Roman occupied Celtic lands.

From another perspective, as bringer of dreams from Gods to humans—always an important source of creative inspiration—Hermes is closely associated with the symbol creating, projecting and interpreting faculties in human beings. Some, of course, label this faculty the 'imagination'. The arts are surely an external manifestation of this inbuilt human faculty (possessed, as Barthes reminds us, by both the reader/recipient and the author/performer of a text). And thus we might see 'writing', even the arts generally, in all their complexity as, potentially, the 'Green Gold', i.e. as the elixir, or sacred balm of the philosophers, the path to a full and engaged existence *in the world*. As Derrida reminds us, however, writing as 'pharmakos' can be both a remedy and a poison - it is up to the creative 'alchemist' through the 'work' to ensure it functions as the former rather than the latter.

We are thus invited to see the Hermetic writer/poet/artist as a person, male or female, who merges great learning, an ethic of social service and mastery of his or her chosen craft. Such an artist would likely also exhibit a deep commitment to processes of personal and social healing.

7. Writing with a Sense of Humour: Hermes as the ‘Good Thief’. As I’ve grown older I’ve realized how important ‘theatre’ and ‘humour’ are to writers and poets and their audiences. As we’ve seen, the Hermes of alchemy presided over the most profound soul-wrenching psychic transformations imaginable – the *Nigredo* or Dark Night of the Soul stage, the Putrefaction stage etc. It is thus easy, at times, to forget that Hermes is also a mischievous, congenial, good-natured and sociable fellow. Not for him, or for writers identified with him, the ‘disease of seriousness’. Hermes is the guide to the *via negativa*, the dark night of the soul, but he is also the trickster God and enjoys a good laugh occasionally.

The Self-Confessed Hermesian ‘Shadow’

As we ponder the above aspects to our developing post-modern Hermesian poetics we might also reaffirm another aspect to the Hermes-Mercurius archetype also implicit in the permutations of primitive alchemy and discussed by Jung in his chapters on ‘The Spirit Mercurius’ in his book on alchemy: at each moment of manifestation the Hermesian principle can manifest either positively or negatively, but in its manifestation the concept of the healing of opposites and dualities is always a suggested option or path - Hermes is a mediator between apparently opposing forces. The ‘Work’ is precisely the process of tipping the manifestation toward the ‘third’ point of the ancient mystic triangle - the point of the convergence of opposites, the healing of apparent dualities through the creation of something new. This is not a recipe for world transcendence, as Jung points out, rather it is a model for integrated living in the world.

If we return for a moment to the two conspicuous aspects of post-modern culture that we have focused on in this article, i.e. the influence of Derrida’s language-based ‘deconstruction’ theory and the advent of the new communications technologies (described by McLuhan as heralding the end of the ‘linear mind’) we can perhaps accept the notion that: a) ‘deconstruction’ in itself is not implicitly ‘progressivist’ and ‘liberational’ in a world where hyper-capitalism and technology induced cognitive fragmentation is already dissolving (possibly for oppressive ends) all traditional structures (both in the personality and in the body-social/cultural). Similarly, b) although the new communications technologies clearly enact a non-linear reprogramming of the previously ‘linear’ mind so central to the scientific, individualistic and rationalist innovations of the past 500 years (‘the calculating mind’ Heidegger) such a reprogramming - though apparently Hermesian, that is to say nominally ‘democratic and relational’ (and epitomised perhaps by the vast network of texts and files that is the world wide web) - may yet harbour its own destructive ‘shadow’ side unless we pay due attention to the transmutational goal of ‘the work’ before us.

Hermes-Mercury is a volatile creativity archetype whose main teaching - to be absorbed across a lifetime, perhaps - does not concern the way to build, once and for all, a

static and absolutist ‘paradise on earth (or in heaven)’ - whether attained through technology or theory - but, more darkly, concerns the necessity for *continuous* alchemical purification, transmutation, etc. as a means to avoid the catastrophes of being that are part and parcel of existence. Here-in, we also note subtle differences between primitive alchemy and the desecralised scientific ‘alchemy’ at the heart of the Faustus myth and thus of modern science.

Interestingly modern science, founded on the materialist philosophies that apparently killed off alchemy in the eighteenth century, remains inexplicably enslaved, as Eliade points out in his book on alchemy, to some of the more puerile fantasies of the inferior alchemists—a faith in endless progress, a search for a substance or technique that will grant us immortality, also a search for materialistic and psychological elixirs of every description—against ageing, against every conceivable illness and inconvenience—also elixirs of perfection, i.e. plastic surgery or drugs that make us run faster and jump higher). In economic terms there remains a metaphoric desire to turn ‘Lead’ (or any matter at all) into mere economic ‘Gold’.

The consequence of this simplistic secular alchemy seems to have initiated a profound imbalance between human cultures and the life support system of the planet. We are all in the ‘flask’ these days, and consuming our own entrails (in a negative and diseased, rather than medicinal, sense) as the planet heats up. We are all part of a vast, global alchemical/environmental experiment—and the prognosis is not good. Perhaps the role of the postmodern writer/poet remains stubbornly alchemical though the *Prima Materia* is these days simultaneously the psyches of we humans AND the integrating matter/mind/spirit of the world itself, its forests and oceans, its atmosphere and its capacity to sustain life. Perhaps it’s our job as writers to remind people that all matter is animate and that the world is full of the ‘green gold’ and that this gold is more ultimately valuable than the yellow stuff so cherished by the organisers of our hyper-capitalist global economy.

In this task studious attention to the sometimes subtle and unheralded, sometimes gaudy and exotic, transformations associated with the ‘Masked god’ - that is the ‘Hermesian principle’ - ever remains a creative and even moral imperative.

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