

CROSSING THE THRESHOLD:

Hermes as Guide and Leader of Souls

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The Threshold to the Underworld

The classical motif of the hero's descent into the underworld or *katabasis* has been used in psychoanalytic writings (especially Jungian) as a metaphor for a descent into unconscious terrain, which is dark and unknown, contrary to the Olympian ideals of the ego. The underworld sphere is unlike anything the hero has known to date: the values, customs and laws of this domain are alien. The encounter with the underworld terrain is a rich metaphor for passages in a life when the psychological landscape shifts and becomes unfamiliar. These passages in one's life are evoked out of a sense of loss, grief or an encounter with death. The space that separates the two spheres between what has been known, but now lost, and what is unknown but looming ahead is a liminal or suspended state. What the hero has previously known is now suspended; old forms of familiarity are not available. The hero, symbolic of the conscious knowing of self and mastery of the world that encompassed him, now faces a descent into an alien realm that is dark, foreign and dangerous.

The threshold between these two worlds (between what is known, light and conscious and what is unknown, dark and unconscious) requires guidance and direction. Once the threshold has been crossed into the unknown, the hero cannot be in control of this world through his strength; his identity now is suspended and the fixed mental images that once bound him to the world are in flux. There are no firm boundaries in this state of transition between the upper and lower worlds. The hero has now entered a state of liminality. The guide therefore needs special skills to navigate the unfamiliar terrain.

Since the navigation during this liminal state is beyond the conscious faculties, all successful journeyers require a guide, familiar with this liminal process, to facilitate the transition in and out of the underworld.

In Book 6 of the *Aeneid*, the Sibyl points out to Aeneas that the route to and from the House of Hades is deceptive. She explains that the gates to the underworld are perpetually open and that entrance is easy but the return is difficult, if not impossible. Those who enter unprepared risk being lost in the foreign territory, unable to resurface. The Sibyl, to be Aeneas' guide for the descent, reminds us of the need to observe and respect the boundary between these two worlds. Crossing the threshold into the underworld is the demarcation of new territory; what is known and customary in

the upper regions no longer applies in the nether regions. Crossing this threshold is a rite of passage and hopefully the initiate is well prepared.¹

The Sibyl tells Aeneas:

Trojan, son of Anchises, sprung from the blood of the gods, it is easy to go down to the underworld. The door of black Dis stands open day and night. But to retrace your steps and escape to the upper air, that is the task, that is the labour. Some few have succeeded²

Threshold Symbols

The 'door of black Dis' is a perpetual symbol of transition, otherwise described as portals/gates to the underworld. These are symbolic boundary markers that one passes through to the other or under world. Like a border crossing, the gates to the underworld are a threshold where one shifts from the incarnate world of body to the disembodied world of *psyche*. Each night in sleep, the dreamer passes through these gates into the subliminal world of psyche's dream images and crosses out again at dawn, or waking light.

In classical Greek temples, the propylon was the ornate entrance to the sacred precinct of the temple. Crossing through this vestibule symbolised the movement from the secular space of everyday mortal life into the sacred space of the divine and the eternal. Similarly, the symbols of portals- gates, archways, doors- are prototypal of a rite of passage that marks a distinct change between the secular ordinary world of what is known into the unconscious terrain of what is not known. The gates of the underworld are symbolic of the transitional tension between the opposites: light-dark, life-death, certainty-uncertainty and clarity-mystery.

Van Gennep drew attention to the characteristic symbolism of *rites de passage*, such as a simulated death and resurrection, or a ritualistic passing through a door or archway (hence the term *liminal*, from the Latin *limen* "threshold")³

¹ Mircea Eliade in *Shamanism*, p. 52n, in speaking of Shamanistic initiations refers to the image of doors (gates) as threshold symbols in various cultures: "The motif of doors that open only for the initiated and remain open only a short time is quite frequent in shamanistic and other legends." In *Rites and Symbols of Initiation*, (page 65) Eliade also discusses the many threshold symbols including gates and doors: "Let us note that these images emphasise not only the danger of the passage....but especially the impossibility of imagining that the passage could be made by a being of flesh and blood".

² *The Aeneid*, 6:125-28

³ Victor Turner, *Rites of Passage, A Few Definitions* from The Encyclopedia of Religion edited by Mircea Eliade. Volume 12, page 386.

Gates (like the door of Dis) are a universal motif for the transition between the two worlds.⁴ Passing through this threshold into the underworld now engages us in an otherworldly realm of *psyche* or soul.

Another threshold symbol employed by the classical writers is the river and/or the crossing of the river. This symbol is paradoxical in that the river is a symbol of life and immortality as well as death. The river is both the place of baptism into life and the forgetting of the life.⁵ Hence the many rivers of the underworld serve as boundary markers between two distinct worlds. A common motif is to “cross over” the river after death, or symbolically after a loss or psychological death.

Crossing the river at the time of death, as part of the journey to another world, is a common part of the symbolic passage that people have seen as part of one’s journey after death.⁶

Another common symbol of the threshold is the image of darkness. Darkness is synonymous with the images of sleep and death, both offspring of Night⁷ (darkness). Therefore in classical descriptions of thresholds it is common to have references to night or other symbols of darkness and death- bats, caves, sunset etc. (*note- in quotes from classical references I have highlighted these symbols*).

The image of the threshold to the underworld is well delineated by these archetypal symbols. For the mortal journeyman a divine guide is imperative, a guide (or aspect of one’s inner self) familiar with *psyche*’s terrain. In the classical Greek tradition it is the god Hermes who we find at the threshold to help convey the soul/s across this liminal space.

Hermes, Guide of the Souls

Honouring transitional space, marking boundaries⁸ and journeying are all part of the Olympian god, Hermes’ domain. Hermes is a multi dimensional god. He is both the shepherd and guardian of

⁴ Amplification on this point is evident in Mircea Eliade *Shamanism, Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy*- see Chapter 13.

⁵ The underworld river *Lethe* represents the river of forgetting.

⁶ Diana Eck, *Rivers* from *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, Volume 12, p.487.

⁷ Hesiod in *Theogony*, lines 758-9 depicts Sleep and Death as brothers:

“There live the children of dark Night, dread gods,
Sleep and his brother Death.”

⁸ Marking boundaries was literally enacted through the placing of a ‘herm’ (a stone pillar centred with an erect phallus and having the head of Hermes on top) at important transitional points, crossroads or property boundaries- see Morford and Lenardon, *Classical Mythology, Fifth Edition*, pp. 213-4.

flocks while also being a messenger to the gods; his associations range from images of the trickster god through to the *psychopomp*.

It is in the *Homeric Hymn to Hermes* that the multifaceted images of this god are aptly portrayed, starting as the baby thief, trickster, and charmer. From the hour of his birth, Hermes crosses sacred boundaries. It seems appropriate that Zeus, near the end of the poem, bestows on Hermes the role of the only recognised messenger to the realm of Hades. Here Hermes is named as the god who has access to both worlds. In becoming the messenger to Hades he also becomes the god who guides the soul across the boundary separating life from death. He becomes the god of liminal space.



It's for the glorious Hermes
to rule,
and to be the only recognised
messenger to Hades,
who himself never takes a gift from
anybody.

This time, though,
he will give him
a gift that is far from least.⁹

In the closing of the *Homeric Hymn to Hermes*, Apollo himself had to set boundaries with his younger half-brother by refusing to share his role as the god of divination with Hermes. This was Apollo's domain, not Hermes'. Hence it is significant that later in the hymn Hermes attains the role of messenger and guide into the underworld. Jenny Strauss Clay argues that Hermes inability to equal Apollo is "Olympianism"- the hierarchical structure that exists amongst the Olympian gods placing Apollo's rank before Hermes as Zeus precedes Apollo, clearly dividing the power structure on Olympus. Others have suggested the ending of the hymn is purely propaganda for Apollo.¹⁰

⁹ *The Homeric Hymn to Hermes*, translated by Charles Boer, Spring, Dallas, 1970.

¹⁰ *The Politic of Olympus*, p.150.

However we could also suggest Apollo's connection to divination and healing as well as Hermes as the underworld traveller could represent more mystical aspects of their nature. Apollo as the god of prophecy, healing and divination is a god who may have been aligned with the northern traditions of Shamanism.¹¹ In the hymn Hermes is now a boundary crosser (like a shaman) and as we will see guides and retrieves the souls to and from the underworld. As thief, trickster and boundary crosser he also aligns himself with the role of a shaman. In the poem he is also credited as the original designer of the lyre, Apollo's instrument, which links him into the tradition of music, also important to the shaman. Perhaps some of the mystical traditions of Shamanic soul retrieval may be entering the conservative Homeric poem, albeit unconsciously.

Mircea Eliade, however, warns of exclusively seeing Hermes in this way:

We will merely mention Hermes Psychopompos; the god's figure is too complex to be reduced to a "Shamanic" guide to the underworld.¹²

While Eliade's point is taken, it is of interest to see Olympian gods, Hermes and Apollo, aligned with mystical traditions. Perhaps both Apollo and Hermes are always too easily relegated to the rational side of the Olympian pantheon. Hermes as *psychopomp* brings a more instinctive way of knowing to the soul in transition.

In the role of *psychopomp* Hermes guides both disembodied souls and incarnate heroes into the underworld. The hero, Herakles' last labour required him to enter the underworld and bring back the monstrous dog Cerberus. This was the dog that ferociously guarded the threshold entrance to Hades and Herakles' task was to bring the dog back to the upper world. He was to accomplish this feat without weapons. For the descent and ascent Hermes aided Herakles. Herakles tells Odysseus he could have not done this labour without Hermes.¹³ Here Hermes acts as a companion-guide on the road to overcoming death. He is able to pass through the boundary separating life and death and aids the hero to return to the realm of consciousness out of the sphere of death.

So then it is appropriate that Orestes appeals to Hermes for help. In his anguish Orestes seeks consolation for the murder of his father. It is Hermes, he knows, who can be his guide:

¹¹ For amplification on this point see E.R. Dodds, *The Greeks and The Irrational*, Chapter 5: The Greek Shamans and the Origin of Puritanism. Dodds traces the influence of northern shamanism on the Greek notions of *psyche* with references to the Hyperborean (northern) Apollo as influenced by this tradition.

¹² *Shamanism*, p. 392.

¹³ in *The Odyssey of Homer*, Book 11:625-6, Herakles in the underworld tells Odysseus:

“but I brought the dog up and led him from the realm of Hades
and Hermes saw me on my way”.

Hermes, Guide of dead men's souls below the earth,
Son of Zeus the Deliverer, fill your father's office:
Be my deliverer. Receive my prayer; fight in my cause.
An exile nearly returned to this my land, my house,
I seek my native right. Over this mound, his tomb
Before my deed is in hand, I call on my dead father
to hear, to sanction.¹⁴

The Guide on the Descent

Homer cleverly illustrates Hermes' role as the guide over the threshold and through liminality in the last books of his epics, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*.

Troy had lost their hero, Hector, in the war. With this great loss, the city was thrown into grief; there were no longer any fixed reference points. Troy was in a state of flux, of liminality. It was evident that a dramatic change was imminent; nothing could remain as it was.

Priam, Troy's patriarch and Hector's father, embarks on a journey from the citadel of Troy into the dangerous and foreign encampment of the Greeks in order to plead for the return of Hector's body from Achilles. Troy must bury their dead hero so the transition of both Hector's soul as well as the city can be successfully accomplished. While Homer in Book 24 of *The Iliad* does not describe a literal underworld journey, the descent by Priam crosses the threshold of certainty into the dangerous unknown. The symbolism used to describe the mission is synonymous with the imagery of an underworld journey to Hades.

Since an important threshold is to be crossed, it is Hermes whom Zeus sends to guide Priam even though Hermes' loyalty in the war is with the Achaians (the Greeks).

He [Zeus] saw the old man and took pity
upon him, and spoke directly to his beloved son, Hermes:
'Hermes, for to you beyond all other gods it is dearest
to be man's companion, and you listen to whom you will, go now
on your way, and so guide Priam inside the hollow ships
of the Achaians, that no man shall see him, none be aware of him¹⁵

¹⁴ Aeschylus, *The Oresteian Trilogy*, translated by Philip Vellacott, Penguin, London, 1959.

As guide on this journey Hermes is the companion needed to cross the boundary between what is known and what is foreign. He is “dearest to be man’s companion” and while Hermes is the guide, Priam’s safety is assured. The god is clearly depicted as joining Priam on the edge of liminality in order to safeguard his passage. This is the darkness, the metaphor for crossing into the territory that is not known, uncertain, foreign - Hades’ realm of death. At the threshold of darkness Hermes awaits Priam:

Now when the two had driven past **the great tomb of Ilos**
they stayed their mules and horses to water them in **the river**,
for by this time **darkness had descended** on the land; and the herald
made out Hermes, who was coming toward them¹⁶

Darkness is an image of approaching the threshold, crossing the limen into the unknown. Homer describes Hermes rendezvous with Priam on the edge of darkness, sunset, and later we shall see Hermes leaving Priam at this same threshold, dawn, as the sun rises.

Darkness is the domain of Hermes. The *Homeric Hymn to Hermes* suggests this:

And Hermes mingles now
with all men and gods.
And even though
he helps a few people,
he cheats an endless number
of the race of mortal men
in the **darkness of night**.¹⁷

Hermes escorts Priam through the dangerous passage, putting the sentries to sleep so Priam’s presence goes unnoticed, and then guides him through the first set of gates. Finally Hermes opens the huge gates that lead Priam into the sphere of Achilles. At this point Hermes reveals his true identity to Priam and leaves the old man to engage in negotiations with Achilles. Hermes is the guide in the transition but once the destination is reached, he leaves. Liminality and transition are Hermes’ sphere; once the goal has been reached, the hero is no longer in Hermes’ realm.

¹⁵ *The Iliad of Homer*, Book 24: 332-337, translated by Richmond Lattimore, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1961. 24:332-7.

¹⁶ *The Iliad of Homer*, translated by Richmond Lattimore, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1961. 24:349-352.

¹⁷ *The Homeric Hymn to Hermes*, translated by Charles Boer, Spring, Dallas, 1970.

We meet Hermes again in lines 679 ff. when it is time to take Priam back to Troy. He wakes Priam and his herald and guides them safely to the “crossing-place of the fair running river, of whirling Xanthos” (24:692-3). The crossing-place of the river suggests the transition back to the world that is known. The poet once again uses the symbol of the rising sun to mark the transitional point of the ascension.

there Hermes left them and went away to the height of Olympos
and dawn, she of the yellow robe, scattered over all earth ¹⁸

Hermes, as the one who crosses boundaries, also leads the disembodied souls into the realm of Hades. This is illustrated in Book 24 of *The Odyssey* as Hermes leads the procession of the suitor’s souls into dim darkness of Hades:

Hermes of Kyllene summoned the souls of the suitors
to come forth, and in his hands he was holding the beautiful
golden staff, with which he mazes the eyes of those mortals
whose eyes he would maze, or wakes again the sleeper. Herding
them on with this, he led them along, and they followed, gibbering.
And as when **bats** in the **depth of an awful cave** flutter
and gibber, when one of them has fallen out of his place in
the chain that the bats have formed by holding one on another;
so, gibbering, they went their way together, and Hermes
the kindly healer led them along down **mouldering pathways**.
They went along, and **passed the Ocean stream**, and the White Rock, and
passed **the gates of Helios** the Sun, and the **country**
of dreams, and presently arrived in the **meadow of asphodel**.
This is the dwelling place of souls, images of dead men. ¹⁹

Hermes is guide once again, this time to souls who are no longer incarnate. Again the symbols of the river and the gates are important. Hermes guides the disembodied souls into the land of shades where they encounter the heroes who fought in the Trojan War. One of the suitors, Amphimedon is recognised by his uncle, Agamemnon. Now that the souls have reached their underworld destination, Hermes disappears. He has successfully guided the murdered suitors to the realms of Death, their new level of experience. Their transition is completed.

¹⁸ *The Iliad of Homer*, translated by Richmond Lattimore, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1961, 24:692-4.

¹⁹ *The Odyssey of Homer*, translated by Richmond Lattimore, New York, 24: 1-14.

But Hermes also retrieves those whose soul longs to emerge out of the underworld. It is Zeus who once again calls on Hermes in his role as courier to the underworld when Demeter demands the return of her daughter Persephone. It is Hermes who can lead Persephone out of the darkness of the nether region back up into the light of the gods:



And when Zeus
heard this,
in his deep voice,
and seeing far,
he dispatched
Argeiphontes
with his golden wand
to Erebos
to exhort Hades
with soft words
and to bring back
the gentle Persephone
from the dark mist
into the light again
among the Gods.²⁰

It is also Hermes who leads Pandora, whom he has just named and helped create, to Epimetheus.

The father sent the gods' fast messenger
To bring the gift to Epimetheus.²¹

Pandora, as a newly created soul, is led by the divine guide/messenger to her fate. Here Hermes mediates a cataclysmic transition, a transitional experience that has repercussions for many.

Hermes meets us at the thresholds of death and again at the ascending gate. He waits at the gates, on the edge of darkness. The threshold may be a crucial juncture in a life, an initiatory phase, like mid-life:

²⁰ *The Homeric Hymn to Demeter*, translated by Charles Boer, Spring, Dallas, 1970.

²¹ Hesiod, *Works and Days*, 84-85.

..the psychological change that unfolds at mid-life, and the element that most unmistakably declares its uniqueness and brings it to its deepest meaning, is the lucid realisation of death as life's personal, fated conclusion.²²

The psychological encounter with death at 'mid-life' brings the individual to the threshold where one encounters Hermes.

Or the threshold may be encountered in the darkness of sleep where Hermes, on the liminal of the dream state, is now the shepherd of dreams. Or the threshold is reached when the pain of loss and grief weighs down the ego defences to the point where they disappear beneath the horizon of consciousness and the individual psychologically enters into liminality. These are some of many varied underworld experiences that constellate Hermes.

Encountering Hermes

*He who move about familiarly in this world-of-the-road has Hermes for his God.*²³

Hermes was not the only God to cross the boundary to the underworld.²⁴ But as we saw it is Zeus, the prime authority, who promotes Hermes to this role. He is the mediator²⁵ and conveyor of the soul in transition. Why Hermes?

Emily Vermeule in speaking of Hermes in his role as *psychopomp* says that the god "was not accidentally made the wittiest of the Hellenic gods".²⁶ Hermes' wit and dexterity may be the internal light that helps guide the souls into the underworld. His intelligence helps be reflective enough to contemplate death or perhaps to try to figure methods to control it. Hermes facilitates what the hero cannot. In a psychological sense the classical Hermes may be an innate intelligence that operates at transitional points in our lives. For as Vermeule suggests strong emotions, like Sarpedon's anger,

²² Murray Stein, *In Midlife*, p. 108

²³ Karl Kerényi, *Hermes Guide of Souls*.

²⁴ Asclepius raised a mortal from the dead hence lead the soul out of the underworld. Iris was also appointed as a messenger of the Gods and was able to occasionally cross the boundary to the other world. Hecate, while resident in the underworld, was also known as the guardian of the crossroads. In the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter* she is instrumental in aiding Demeter to trace the whereabouts of Persephone- in some ways she too guards the process of liminality. Sarah Iles Johnston in *Hecate Soteira; A Study of Hecate's Roles in the Chaldean Oracles and Related Literature* draws an interesting parallel between Hermes and Hecate:

"This is not to argue that Hecate never served the role that Hermes did at liminal points - protecting what was within a boundary from that which was without. The two functions could co-exist. Conversely, Hermes connection with liminal points, like Hekates' could include protecting during transitions; he was, after all, a traveller's god and a messenger god. As Psychopompos, he aided men in crossing the boundary between life and death."

²⁵ as between Odysseys and Circe in *The Odyssey*

²⁶ Emily Vermeule, *Aspects of Death in Early Greek Art and Poetry*, p.26.

cannot resist death. Even Herakles' strength is of no avail in facing death. He needs "the intelligence for which he was not renowned" which Hermes as guide facilitates. Memory, as part of Hermes' intelligence, also helps the transition. Remembering allows continuity to the process of life and ensures that something lives on after death.

Greek suggestions that intelligence was the only effective defence against death were literally true.²⁷

Hermes' quickness and cunning is an integral part of the process of descent and entry into the sphere of the underworld and Death. It is perhaps the internal Hermes, a symbolic god, who first recognises the liminal symbols in our lives then guides us safely through the transitional passage as He did with Priam. Hermes' multifaceted selves -the trickster, the thief, the charmer, the guide, the healer- perhaps are all part of an innate ability to cross the threshold into the underworld.

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²⁷ Ibid, p. 27.