

Homage to the God of Transitions

- Brian Clark



*I love a public road: few sights there are
That please me more; such object hath had power
Over my imagination since the dawn
Of childhood, when its disappearing line,
Seen daily afar off, on one bare steep
Beyond the limits which my feet had trod
Was like a guide into eternity,
At least to things unknown and without bound.*

- William Wordsworth from *The Prelude*

Life Guide

I first knew I had Gemini rising when I was 19. But not right away. The first chart I had drawn had Cancer rising - I was puzzled, as that did not seem to be the avid train traveller I had become. Eventually the mistake was uncovered - there was daylight saving at my birth; hence Gemini was on the Ascendant and Mercury was my ruler. Even before I knew it astrologically, Mercury had always been on the horizon of my life. As ruler of my horoscope, he has been a remarkable life guide, coach, raconteur, tutor and sometimes antagonist.

When I was a child adults would always ask me, 'what do you want to be when you grow up?' And like many young children I had my standard answer. Having spent my childhood living on military bases, surrounded by security fences and gates, I was intrigued by the man who would suddenly appear out of a small shed to lift the gate for my father and I to pass through when our car pulled up to the boom gate. When the gate lifted, my father and I would continue our way into the headquarters where he worked.

So, when asked this question, I would answer confidently 'a gate lifter', inspired by the magic and power of that faceless man who guarded the boundary crossing. Today I look back and see that man was like Hermes and when you have Hermes as your god and guide you are familiar with thresholds, boundary crossings and transitions.

Sandals: Fit for a God of the Road

Like most Roman gods, Mercury inherits many of his attributes from his earlier Greek personification, the god Hermes.



Characteristic of Hermes were his sandals, often winged, not just for speed but for his role as a messenger and herald. High-quality sandals are necessary for a traveller and as god of the roads, these were imperative for Hermes. Anyone familiar with life on the road has Hermes for his God. Hermes was often a guide to the earlier heroes like Perseus whose task to slay Medusa was accomplished through the mentorship of the god and the loan of his winged sandals.

Godly icons such as these sandals distinguish the Hermetic personality. He was also recognisable by his *petasos*, his traveller's hat and his *kerykeion*, his herald's wand, commonly known as the *caduceus*, its Latin name. This was usually held in his left hand; in earlier depictions he held the *rhabdos*, his wand or magic staff, in his right. Over time the two became merged into one.¹ Sandals, traveller's hat and staff symbolise his role as courier and connector. Feet, hands and head; all extremely active in the Hermetic personality.

While we are familiar with Hermes as a youthful god, a second-generation Olympian, his mythic personality is much older and dates back another millennium to the Mycenaean period where he was often worshipped as a chthonic god of fertility and boundary.

Homer's Last Chapters

Similar to many of the Gods, Hermes enters Greek epic through the first books of western literature, Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. In the last book of the *Iliad*, Book 24, Troy has lost their hero Hector in the war. The city is thrown into grief; Troy is in a state of flux. It is evident that a dramatic change is imminent; nothing could remain the same.

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 his son's body from Achilles. Troy must bury their dead so the transition of Hector's soul can be complete. Homer does not describe a literal underworld journey, but Priam's passage crosses the threshold from certainty into the dangerous unknown, highlighting Hermes role as a guide into the underworld.

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 Greeks. As guide, Hermes is the companion Priam needs to cross the boundary between what is known and what is not. He is 'dearest to be man's companion'; while Hermes is the guide, Priam's safety is assured. The god is clearly depicted as joining Priam in the boundary zone, on the threshold, in order to safeguard his passage. This is the darkness, a metaphor for threshold crossings and it is here on the brink of darkness that Hermes awaits Priam.²

Hermes rendezvous with Priam is on the edge of darkness, sunset; 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:

he helps a few people,
he cheats an endless number
of the race of mortal men
in the **darkness of night**.³

Hermes escorts Priam through the dangerous passage, putting the sentries to sleep so his presence goes unnoticed, then guides Priam through the first set of gates. Finally Hermes opens

the huge gates that lead Priam to where Achilles is camped. At this point Hermes 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.

We meet Hermes again 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'. The crossing-place of the river suggests the transition back to the world that is known. The poet 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 ⁴

In Book 24 of the *Odyssey*, boundary-crosser Hermes leads the disembodied souls of Penelope's suitors into the dim darkness of Hades. ⁵ Hermes is guide once again, this time to souls who are no longer incarnate and once the souls have reached their underworld destination, Hermes disappears. Homer uses the threshold symbols of river and gates are once again. Hermes has successfully guided the murdered suitors to the realms of Death, their new level of experience. Their transition is completed.

Hermes and the Goddess

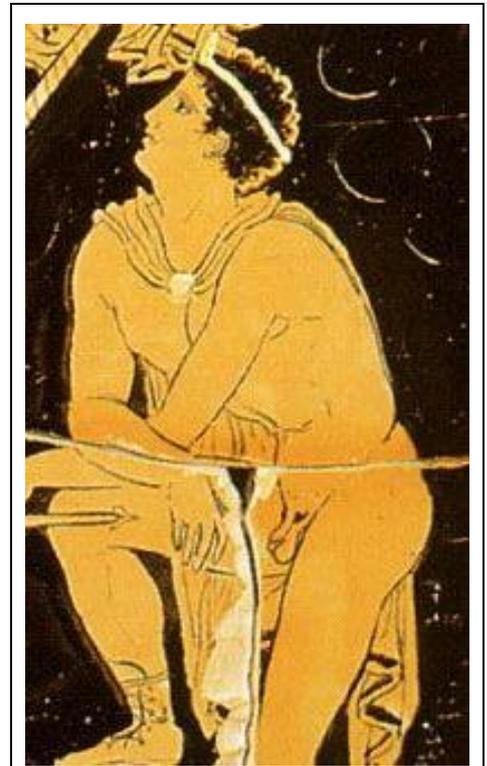
Classical texts make us aware of two important links Hermes has to the goddess. Two older goddesses Hestia and Mnemosyne were paired with the young god and reveal Hermes' multi-dimensional ways of thinking, knowing and being, as well as his respect for the continuity of feminine wisdom.

Hestia, the first born Olympian is paired with Hermes in *The Homeric Hymn to Hestia*⁶, an unusual couple as Hermes is the god of the road while Hestia is goddess of the hearth. Hermes is the outer traveller; Hestia, the inner voyager. On this level they complement and support one another. 'Hermes is present everywhere that contact is established with others, whether on the road, in public institutions, the town square, or the market, whereas Hestia waits for us 'at home''. ⁷ Hermes intimate relationship to Hestia is another version of his role as guide and leader of souls, bringing the pilgrim to Hestia's door.

Hestia is constant, focused and dislikes change. She is the hearth, a symbol for both the centre and the focus of the home as well as the personification of family life and the family circle. As custodian of the hearth she is the eternal firelight burning at the heart of life, the fireplace of the home, and the flame lit in the city's central precinct. Hestia is also central to psychic life representing the sacred centre and is the goddess who honours sacred space and protects sacred images. This image is a potent reminder of Hermes as the one who directs us on the road to deeper levels of self and it demonstrates the Hermetic fondness for the inner life and soulful depths.

Both are gods of thresholds, crossroads and boundaries: Hermes marks the outer territory while Hestia surveys the internal ones. In the classical world sanctuaries devoted to Hermes or Hestia were rare since these were gods who were encountered on the threshold of change or on the critical precipice of transition.

Mnemosyne was a Titan goddess; therefore belonged to an earlier stratum of the human experience. She was the goddess of Memory and the mother to the muses, the instinctual way to



remember. Art, music, poetry, dance, the heavens were mnemonics. But as rational science and logical concepts emerged, the seat of memory began to shift from the heart to the brain, aligning memory with a more logical and calculating experience, rendering Mnemosyne a passive goddess who collected and stored life's impressions. Her ways of knowing and remembering through imagination and creativity ceded to more logical methods and techniques. The power of image yielded to the power of the word and gods like Hermes took the throne of Memory. Yet it is Mnemosyne that Hermes first honours in song, as his verbal and musical talents are owing to the goddess.⁸

While Hermes takes on the mantle of magician, it is the goddess Mnemosyne that underpins his verbal skills, insights and memories. When he sacrificed to the gods, it was Mnemosyne that was first, as Hermes paid homage to the earlier forms of knowing, not only through logic, words and schooling but through imagination, images and experiences.

Hermes' pairing with both goddesses reminds us of the deeper and more profound aspects of the speedy one and for astrologers prompts us to move beyond the simplistic keywords for our guiding god, who is more than what we see on the surface; He is a god of depth and soul.

The Homeric Hymn to Hermes

We meet Hermes in the first epics of Western literature: Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. In Book 24 of each epic, there is a colourful description of Hermes as guide and leader of souls. In the *Iliad* he is the escort for the Trojan patriarch Priam into the dangerous camp of the enemy, while in the *Odyssey* Hermes is the guide into the underworld of the disembodied souls of Penelope's suitors.⁹ But classical literature's exquisite depiction of Hermes is in the *Homeric Hymn to Hermes*, a vivid and touching tale of the newborn who would become an Olympian. There are numerous ways to reflect on the hymn and all are valid.¹⁰ As the hymn begins we are first told of his birth in a cave in Cyllene in the Arcadian region.

On one of my tours to Greece we visited the cave of Hermes. Upon the plateau before the steep descent, I looked across the Gulf of Corinth to Parnassus where Apollo's oracular cult had been established. How the hymn spoke to me as I looked across to the splendour of Delphi's setting: it made sense that Hermes would make every effort to be as divine as his older brother, the god of light and reason.



Perhaps Hermes was born in this minimalist cave, deep in the wilds of rural Greece removed from civilisation, as we must descend in order to fully know the cavernous depths of his soul.

The planet Mercury is also cavernous. Its surface is rough with many craters, all named after artists: poets, writers, sculptors, painters, dramatists, composers... His father is Zeus; his mother is Maia, one of the Pleiades. And then the *Homeric Hymn to Hermes* describes some of his characteristics.

A newborn, yet already he is described as:

- shifty
- cunning in mind
- a seeker of plunder
- a rustler of cattle
- a leader of dreams
- a spy who keeps watch in the night

These are early aspects of the archetype; the tale continues: at dawn he was born, at midday he was playing the lyre, and by evening had stolen his brother's cattle and returned to the nursery. Hermes is not only cunning, but imagistic, a magician, thief and road scholar!

And it was these mythic characteristics that the ancients saw not just in their god but in the wander in the sky that they knew as the Star of Hermes.

Released from Darkness; Plunging into Darkness

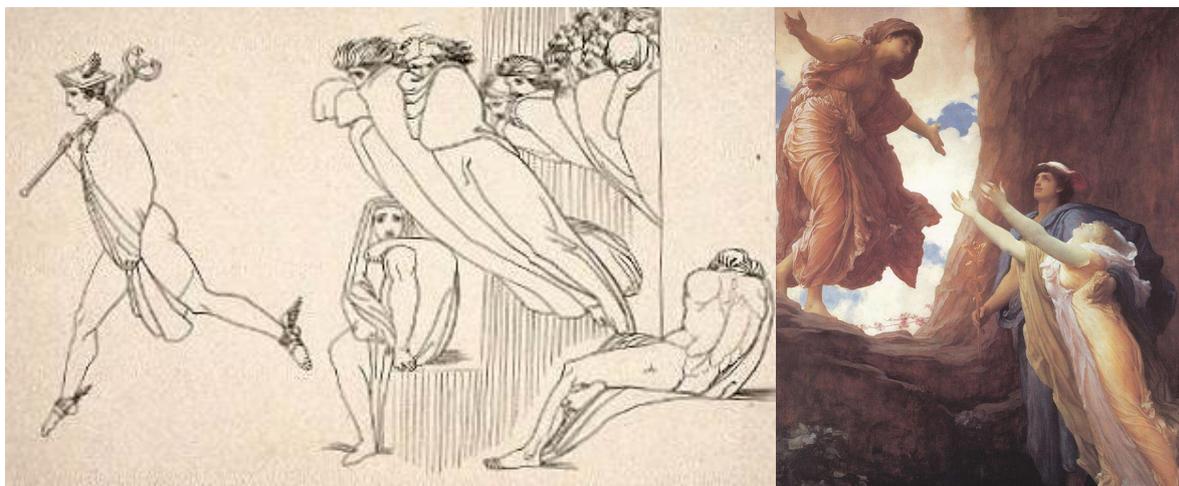
But Hermes also retrieves those whose soul longs to emerge out of the underworld. It is Zeus who once again calls on Hermes in his role as courier to the underworld when Demeter demands the return of her daughter Persephone. It is Hermes who can lead Persephone out of the darkness of the nether region back up into the light of the gods. It is also Hermes who leads Pandora, 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 life, an initiatory phase, like adolescence, midlife or seniority. Or the threshold may be encountered in the darkness of sleep when Hermes is the shepherd of dreams. Or the threshold is reached when loss and grief obliterates any defences to the point where they disappear beneath the horizon of consciousness and the individual psychologically enters into transition.

From the Star of Hermes to Mercury

The classical Greeks did not seem that involved with astrology; at least not the Greeks in Greece. But in Greek-speaking Egypt where cultures intermixed and the fascination with the mystical was prominent, astrology developed in the period after the classical flowering in Athens. At this time the planets were known as the stars of the Gods. To the Hellenistic astrologers the planet closest to earth was known as the star of Hermes, closely aligned with the Egyptian Thoth.

As Hermes was an intermediary, an in-between god, one who only showed himself on thresholds, he was aptly named, since in the heavens he only revealed himself at the shifting times of dawn or dusk. He was an escort to the underworld, known as the *psychopomp*.¹¹ As the sender or transporter, he became known as the guide of souls, leading them in and out of Hades.



Two images of Hermes as leader of souls *into* the underworld (John Flaxman's portrayal of Hermes guiding the souls of Penelope's suitors into the underworld, 1805, Tate Gallery) and Hermes as leader of souls *out of* the underworld (The Return of Persephone by Frederic Leighton, 1891)

Even though Hermes is the conductor of souls and is given the role of guide to the underworld, he is not a god of death as Hades is. Hermes is associated with transitions, in between states,

liminality and threshold crossings. Hermes is not a god of the Netherworld or afterlife, but is given the power to visit it.

He also conversed with the neighbors of the dead, those souls who slept. As the *Oneiropomp*, Hermes was the sender of dreams. Earlier myth, as explained in *Theogony*, ascribed these functions to Thanatos and Hypnos, the gods of death and sleep but as the Olympian order began to prevail, it was Hermes who now led the soul into death and sleep. Hermes was also the *hypnagog* who hovered on the threshold of sleeping, as well as the *hypnopomp* who was there at dawn's waking.¹² In myth Hermes appeared at the transition between waking and sleeping and materialised at the gateway as the shepherd of dreams.

And so it was similar with Hermes of the heavens. The ancient astrologers observed both sides of his nature and unlike more contemporary astrologers were more aware of his role in the night world. In myth, as in the sky, he is only seen in the transitional realm. And catching a glimpse of Mercury is not easy. He is visible only near the horizon, the liminal zone between the day and night worlds. In his morning face he rises to bring the souls up from the underworld; in his evening face he guides the souls down. And the ancients knew this in the heavens as well, through Mercury's cycle with Apollo, the Sun.

In traditional astrology Mercury is the only planet that is aligned with both day and night. Rising before the Sun, Mercury supports the day gods, but when he shifts to set after the Sun, his allegiance is with the night world of the Moon. Neither benefic, nor malefic Mercury rejoices in the 1st house, the place where soul is housed in body and spirit vitalises the personality. We are always between or immersed in two worlds when Hermes is on the rise or set.

As closest planet to the Sun and as the mythological brother of the Solar God Apollo, Mercury is aligned with the Sun and in the heavens the cycle of Mercury from our vantage point here on Earth maps out a remarkable course in the heavens.

Endnotes

¹ Jules Cashford, *How Hermes and Apollo came to Love Each Other*, Kingfisher Art Productions, Somerset, UK: 2014, 11 -12.

² *The Iliad of Homer*, translated by Richmond Lattimore, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1961, 24:349-352

³ 'The Homeric Hymn to Hermes', from *The Homeric Hymns*, translated by Charles Boer, Spring, Dallas, 1970

⁴ *The Iliad of Homer*, 24:694-5

⁵ *The Odyssey of Homer*, translated by Richmond Lattimore, New York, 24: 1-14.

⁶ 'The Hymn to Hestia' from *The Homeric Hymns*, translated by Charles Boer describes Hermes and Hestia.

⁷ Ginette Paris, *Pagan Meditations*, translated by Gwendolyn Moore, Spring (Dallas, TX: 1986), 181

⁸ 'The Homeric Hymn to Hermes', from the *Homeric Hymns*, translated by Michael Crudden, Oxford University Press, Oxford, UK: 2001, 58. The hymn was probably written about 2500 years ago and suggests Hermes honoured Mnemosyne for she was 'assigned' to the young god.

⁹ For a fuller description of Hermes as leader of Souls, see Chapter 7 from my manuscript Chaos to Cosmos available from Astro*Synthesis – see <http://www.astrosynthesis.com.au/student-astrology-ebooklets>

¹⁰ In the *Sibling Constellation* (Penguin: 1999), I reflect on this hymn from the point of view of sibling rivalry and the journey siblings often take from envy to equality. See Chapter 9 *Hermes Patron of the Sibling*.

¹¹ The word *psychopomp* is Greek, from *psyche* referring to soul or souls and *pempo* to send off, to guide; therefore the *psychopomp* is the guide to the psyche (soul) or the guide and leader of souls.

¹² *Hypnagogia* is the experience of transition from wakefulness to sleep: from the Greek *hypnos* "sleep"; *agōgos* "leading" or "inducing"; *Hypnopompia* is the transition from sleep to waking: *pompe* "act of sending".