

Hermes and the Creation of Space

by Murray Stein

The Greek God

Who was Hermes? The great 19th century German mythographer, W.H. Roscher, identified Hermes as the wind, subsuming under this basic identity all of his other roles and attributes - Hermes as servant and messenger of the sky god Zeus, Hermes as swift and winged, Hermes as thief and bandit, Hermes as inventor of the pipes and lyre, Hermes as guide of souls and as god of dreams and sleep, Hermes as promoter of fertility among plants and animals and as patron of health, Hermes as god of good fortune, Hermes as patron of traffic and business activities on water and land. Ingeniously, Roscher tied all of these functions to the primitive perception of a wind god. Hermes is like the wind. We can hear Shelley's "Ode to the West Wind" as a moving hymn to this god:

O wild West Wind, thou breath of Autumn's being,
Thou, from whose unseen presence the leaves dead
Are driven, like ghosts from an enchanter fleeing...

Norman O. Brown took up the scholarly quest for the essence of this enchanter in his classic work, first published in 1947, Hermes the Thief. Brown does not mention wind, or any other natural elements either for that matter, but instead focuses on the human features of this complex Greek deity. Brown locates the core of Hermes in his stealth and his magic. Hermes was generally known in the ancient world as amoral and the patron god of thieves, highwaymen, travelers and traders, and businessmen. In the famous portrait of him given in the Homeric Hymn, Hermes is a merry and light-hearted trickster figure. More than a simple robber or trickster, however, Brown sees in Hermes the figure of a magician. From his magical powers flow his other functions and attributes. In Brown's brilliant account, Hermes is not meteorological but psychological, a human type, a shamanic presence.

Hermes role as psychopomp is well-known too, and emphasized by Kerényi in his essay on this god. This deepens the image. Jung adverts to this identity of Hermes in his references to Hermes Kyllenios: "Hermes is the psychon aitios, 'originator of souls,'" he writes (1969, par. 538). Perhaps one can trace a symbolic link between Brown's shamanic-magical Hermes and Roscher's wind god Hermes in the linguistic fact that wind and spirit have the same name in Greek: pneuma.

In the cluster of stories involving Hermes passed down in Greek tradition and literature, a distinct type of human character shines through: a young man of ideal physical build, extroverted, swift in physical movement and rhetorically gifted, enchanting and seductive, ready to serve but not to be taken advantage of, friendly but independent, inventive, intelligent, generally benign and having a ready sense of humor, athletic, stealthy. In art and story he is usually depicted as a puer aeternus, along the lines written by M.L. von Franz in her book on this theme. In mythic tales he is not at the center of politics, decision-making or narrative action, but on the periphery: "Mercury stirring up the broth of air at the edge/ Of Botticelli's Spring," to use John Hollander's fine words ("Looking Ahead"). Hermes stands at the edge, an edge-person, located essentially in liminality. "Hermes' original home was not at the center but on the edge of things, on the boundary," notes Brown (p.113). The father principle is relatively weak and absent in Hermes (he is a bastard son of Zeus who fell in love momentarily with the nymph Maia), while the mother is positive and doting. This puer aeternus has the airy swift spirit of the wind and the intelligence and a skill of a magician.

Hermes as Archetypal Image

What is Hermes? Wind, magic, a puer spirit. But beyond that, he is a god, and to fathom what this means we need to plunge deeper into the connections between this mythic image and the archetypal and instinctual base of the psyche from which he comes and which he represents. Why is he an immortal god? Where is his numinosity?

Brown points out what many other scholars say as well, that the "name Hermes is probably derived from the Greek word for 'stone-heap,' herma, and signifies 'he of the stone-heap'" (p. 33). Martin Nilsson, in his delightful little book, Greek Folk Religion, imagines a peasant walking through the Greek countryside. He writes:

If our peasant passed a heap of stones, as he was likely to do, he might lay another stone upon it. If a tall stone was erected on top of the heap, he might place before it a bit of his provision as an offering. He performed this act as a result of custom, without knowing the real reason for it, but he knew that a god was embodied in the stone heap and in the tall stone standing on top of it. He named the god Hermes after the stone heap (herma) in which he dwelt, and he called the tall stone a herm. Such heaps were welcome landmarks to the wanderer who sought his way from one place to another through desert tracts, and their god became the protector of wayfarers. And if, by chance, the wayfarer found on the stone heap something, probably an offering, which would be welcome to the poor and hungry, he ascribed this lucky find to the grace of the god and called it a hermaion. (p. 8)

The name Hermes is connected with the name for the stone heap that was a boundary-marker, a herma. This is the physical fact from which the experience of Hermes springs, in which it is grounded. Around this concrete phenomenon of the boundary-marker there grew up the many associated features and qualities that go into making this god what he is. Something about the experience of herma and boundaries and cross-roads stimulated the Greek imagination into elaborating the figure of Hermes.

Nilsson continues his imaginative presentation by saying that this stone heap at the crossroads might have marked a grave, and perhaps there was a body buried under it. This would mark a space that was a crossroad in a double sense, with one axis horizontal, another vertical: A three-dimensional cross-roads. Hermes is a god of travelers living and dead, his monument of stones a boundary marker for the world on this plane and between it and the underworld. Kerényi, in his masterful study, Hermes, Guide of Souls, emphasizes the god's role in traversing the boundary between life and death, between this world and the underworld of shades, Hades. Because of his association with boundaries and with the realm of shades, Hermes takes on the features of a liminal god, or of what I have called a god of liminality in my book In MidLife, that is, one who inhabits interstices, a denizen of betwixt-and-between (cf. Turner). He stands at the edge not only geographically and interpersonally but also metaphysically. He is essentially in and of the world of liminality.

The element of uncanniness, which Walter Otto so forcefully stresses in his chapter on Hermes in The Homeric Gods, would attach to Hermes because of this close association with the spirits of the dead and the underworld. The Oxford Classical Dictionary states flatly that while Hermes appears as a youth, he "...is probably one of the oldest [of the gods] and most nearly primitive in origin....and signifies the daemon who haunts or occupies a heap of stones, or perhaps a stone, set up by the roadside for some magical purpose" (pp.502-3). Again, we come upon the notion of magic in connection with Hermes.

The classic statue of Hermes, called a Herm, was a later development. It was a quadratic pillar usually about 6 feet high resting on a square base, topped with a bearded head and fronted with an erect phallus. Herms first appeared under rule of the tyrant Hipparchus around 520-524 B.C., who had these figures set up as boundary markers throughout Greece. Oddly, the Herm has none of the qualities of movement and lightness usually associated with the spirit of Hermes, and the head atop it is that of an older, bearded man. It is anything but youthful, dynamic and air-like, although it is quite charming in its own way. A marker of boundaries, it is geometric and hard-edged, exact and defining. Hipparchus set these in place, according to Brown, in order to "integrate the cult of Hermes into urban and political life of the city-state" (p. 113). This brought Hermes more centrally into Greek consciousness. A Herm was also placed at the Propyleia (entrance) to sacred precincts and temples, where he marked the boundary of the temenos. With this development, liminality moved in closer to centrality; everywhere Hermes now stood at boundaries and defined spaces, referring the citizen to horizontal and vertical dimensions of existence.

Archetypally, we can see in the image of Hermes a mythical statement of the psyche's innate tendency to give definition to perceptual and mental horizons, to mark edges, to define spaces. Originally Hermes stood at the edge of known space, a pile of stones at the boundary. His sign marked the limit of consciousness. Beyond the boundary lies the unknown, the uncanny, the dangerous, the unconscious. When markers are created and limits set, however, curiosity and explorativeness are also excited and new spaces for exploration and discovery invite the bold and courageous traveler. If Hermes marks the boundary between conscious and unconscious, we have to realize that this boundary is always shifting and in flux; it is mercurial. Background and foreground may instantaneously reverse too, and generate new perceptions, novel insights.

Within the area of the known, containers take shape which are reserved for specific types of human activity, while beyond them lies the "other," the foreign (even if only temporarily), the taboo, the forbidden, the unclean. Hermes standing at the boundary marks a psychological and sometimes a moral limit and calls special attention to the space being entered or left. When he first appears, he may create a new space by dividing a vast horizon into the "here" and the "beyond," and thus he creates both consciousness and a new unconscious. His intervention in the perceptual and psychological field creates new possibilities for consciousness, also new edges and boundaries beyond which lie the mysterious "others." When he disappears, there is a loss of identity and definition.

Boundaries, it must be noted, are basic to human perception, and their creation and maintenance therefore are archetypal. Boundaries create categories for thought and behavior. Fences not only make good neighbors; fences make neighbors, period. Without boundaries there are no object relations - in a sense there are no objects; without definitions there can be no thought; the world is ouboboric, undifferentiated, pleromatic. The appearance of herma - an epiphany of Hermes - represents the introduction of the differentiating principle into the pleromatic void.

In Seven Sermons to the Dead (1989, pp. 378-90), Jung calls this principle creatura, the principle of distinctiveness:

Distinctiveness is creatura. It is distinct. Distinctiveness is its essence, and therefore it distinguisheth. Therefore man discriminateth because his nature is distinctiveness.... Our very nature is distinctiveness....the natural striving of the creature goeth towards distinctiveness, fighteth against primeval, perilous sameness. This is called the PRINCIPIUM INDIVIDUATIONIS. This principle is the essence of the creature.

Hermes is the psyche etching lines into the panes of perception.

What does it add to say that this function of making distinctions is archetypal and not simply an artifact of ego-functioning? It says that the ego actually depends upon the psyche in order to

function properly. By keeping Hermes out of the ego and refusing to make him ego-syntonic, we acknowledge our dependency upon archetypal powers even for our most mundane daily activities. In the agora and not only at a crossroads in the wilderness, at home and not only at the gate of the sacred temenos, Hermes is present. The archetypes undergird the ego in all of its activities and functions. This is a key to perceiving sacredness in everyday life.

Hermes and the Instinct of Creativity

The erect phallus on Hermes monuments has perplexed scholars and amused tourists. Burkert says that a "form of territorial demarcation, older than man himself, is phallic display, which is then symbolically replaced by erected stones or stakes. To this extent, stone cairn and apotropaic phallos have always gone together" (1985 p. 156). Burkert, who seems to be a keen student of animal behavior and ethnological studies, connects the phallicism of Herms to the phallic display of a certain species of monkeys: "...they sit up at the outposts, facing outside and presenting their erect genital organ.... every individual approaching from the outside will notice that this group does not consist of helpless wives and children, but enjoys the full protection of masculinity" (1982, p. 40).

To me this emphasis on Hermes' protective role and on the use of Herms to brandish claims of territoriality seems interesting but far-fetched. It is one thing to say that Hermes stands at boundaries and defines space; it is quite another to make of him a guardian of the gate. This is not usually seen to be his role. Cerberus guards the gates of Hades, not Hermes. And Apollo would be insulted to realize that one supposed Hermes was needed to guard the gates of his sacred precincts on Delos. Hermes is a thief, not a guard. Burkert has to admit: "That a monument of this kind could be transformed into an Olympian god is astounding" (1985, p. 156).

The answer is of course that Hermes was a god long before the Herm was constructed. He is archaic and primordial. But so is territory and the sense of territoriality. Yet it was not Hermes' management of the territorial imperative that placed him on Olympus. It was his connection to the source of life, to archetype and instinct, to the self. Hermes states creativity. It seems to me that a better explanation for the presence of the erect phallos on Hermes' monuments has to do with his deep and indeed essential association with the instinct of creativity.

Creativity is highlighted in a number of tales and emphasized by some scholars as a major attribute of this god. Along with Hephaistos and Prometheus, Hermes was loved and honored by craftsmen. The sheer rampant energy of creativity sounds through the image of Hermes as he is classically presented in the Homeric Hymn. In the [Hymn to Hermes](#) we hear of the new-born baby creating the lyre from a tortoise shell on the first day of his life. Later he is credited with the discovery of starting fire by rubbing sticks together and with the invention of the pipes. The sheer joy and delight he experiences at his own quick and sure inventiveness are infectious as one reads or listens to the Hymn. This has reminded some readers of the gleam in the craftsman's eye as he forges a new device or solves a practical problem (cf. Brown, p. 79). You can hear this joyous craftsman's energy in Wagner's rendition of Siegfried hammering his sword into shape in the third opera of the Ring cycle.

After his successful struggle with Apollo to attain equal rank - interpreted to represent the rise of craftsmen in ancient Greece and their seizure of equality with the aristocracy of Athens (cf. Brown, pp.79ff.) - Hermes is given equality in the arts with Apollo, the great god of poetry, music, dance and other artistic activities in ancient Greece. Hermes claims in the Hymn that he is a follower of Mnemosyne, the goddess of memory, and her daughters the Muses (hence his appearance in Botticelli's famous painting, Spring). His essential association with the instinct of creativity must be granted.

Brown draws an important distinction, too, when he points out that Hermes is not primarily a fertility god. The phallos on his statue is not a signifier of male procreativity and sexual prowess. Brown associates the phallos with his perception that Hermes is fundamentally a magician: "The phallus is so closely identified with magic in Roman religion that the word fascinum, meaning 'enchantment,' 'witchcraft' (cf. 'fascinate'), is one of the standard Latin terms for the phallus; no better evidence could be found for the appropriateness of the emblem for Hermes as magician. When Greek craftsmen hung images of ithyphallic demons over their workshops, it is clear that to them the phallus symbolized not fertility but magic skill at craftsmanship" (p. 37). I would agree with Brown but place the accent on creativity - the Creative itself as fascinosum, following Aniela Jaffe's interpretation of Jung's famous childhood dream of the underground phallus - rather than on magic, although the two can easily be associated. Creative people have often seem especially potent and magical, and their talents can be awesome and numinous. Creativity is magical, of the self and not of the ego.

The phallos on the Hermes monument, then, grounds this image in instinct, not in the sexual instinct as such however but in the instinct of creativity.

Hermes as a "factor" in the psyche

In my understanding of Jung's mature thought, a major mythic figure like a god represents a psychological factor that embraces an archetype and an instinct. The archetype, rooted ultimately in spirit, is represented in the psyche by an image and is a mental, and often a cognitive, object or process; the instinct, rooted in the material body, is experienced in the psyche as an urge, a drive, a force compelling one to do something. In the psychological factor that a god symbolizes, instinct supplies the drive and the dynamic force, while image orients and directs it. Instinct and archetype are wedded in the psyche, and a god is a representation of this conjunction.

To summarize what I have said so far about the Greek god Hermes: in Hermes we have a figure who signifies a union between an innate tendency on the part of the psyche to create boundaries and define spaces, to etch lines in the panes of perception (an archetypal process), and the instinct of creativity. It is this particular combination of archetype and instinct that makes Hermes so interesting psychologically. He signifies the creative instinct at work in the psyche in a particular way. A specific type of creator god, he is the creator of new spaces. It is in the creation of new spaces, novel spaces, inventive spaces, especially psychologically subtle spaces that Hermes shows his special nature and genius. Trickster and magician are suitable epithets, for often these are secret spaces of subtle interiority.

New Spaces

When you draw a line on a blank page, you create new space. And you also destroy or transform an already existing space. In this simple act, destruction and creation take place and a new space is opened up. A new inside/outside possibility has been created, as when some people are elected to form a small group within a larger group. Yahweh, another creator god, resembles Hermes in this respect; he too creates space, divides and sets boundaries, and selects a people from among all the peoples of the earth to be his chosen.

Some spaces have magical properties, which unite inside and outside in a surprising way, like the Moebius strip. Boundaries are not what they seem. Even carefully guarded and maintained, they are both real and unreal. It is as though the boundary line is a space itself, which can open into a new space and which is permeable to the other spaces. This is Hermes space, a liminal space. Boundaries, we find again and again, both separate and unite spaces.

What Jung called "the reality of the psyche" or "the objective psyche" is such a category. The psyche has boundaries, but they are both real and unreal. They are boundary lines that expand into liminal spaces themselves. At the boundary of psyche there is a psychoid area, psyche-like but not limited to subjectivity; it is both inside and outside of the psyche. Jung's notion of the objective psyche embraces a space that is beyond the usual subject-object, inner-outer dichotomy and includes parapsychological phenomena and synchronicity (for an incisive discussion of this, cf. von Franz, 1990, chapter 9). Can we think of Hermes as being the archetypal image embedded in Jung's notion of the reality of the psyche? Was Jung really a child of Hermes? I think a good case can be made for this.

The Space of Psychotherapy

Perhaps we can leap now over two or three thousand years of history and look at the creation of novel psychological spaces in the twentieth century. I want to refer, initially at least, to the creation of the space of psychotherapy in our present and fast-closing century, and to see this as an artifact of the Hermes archetype.

Psychotherapy exists in and depends upon the creation of a space that is a new space and yet one that does not violate the boundaries of other already established spaces. It is a space that opens in the boundary line between public and private, professional and personal. It is a space that often has magical properties reflective of the reality of the psyche, in that synchronicity and parapsychological phenomena are often constellated in this space. Winnicott wrote of the kind of space I will describe as transitional space, but I do not much care for the term. Transitional to what? has been my question. I prefer to call it "a third space."

What kind of a space is this? Is there a therapist alive who has not been struck by the frequency of the feeling and the fantasy of therapy as a love affair? Not an illicit love affair, because often the spouse knows and apparently approves of it, and it takes place in the full light of day - taxes, insurance, office hours, answering machines, and all the paraphernalia of official business life. And yet, a married (or unmarried) woman leaves her home (or office) and comes to my place at a certain hour of the afternoon once a week, full of excitement and expectation, having prepared herself emotionally and physically for this intimate encounter. She may hesitate as she pays and say that she somehow doesn't feel it's right to give money for this, nor does she want to acknowledge that this is not a purely personal relationship on both sides. What a strange relationship this is, she may remark; so personal and intimate, and yet so removed from reality. The analyst knows so much about the patient, the patient so little about the analyst.

Taking the fee, the analyst may feel a bit uncomfortable too, wondering if he is somehow illicitly involved in a subtle form of prostitution: selling his time and attention for a set fee, on a time schedule, at his place.

But this is only the beginning, the surface. For constellated within the container of the analytic sessions is a third space, a psychic world unto itself yet existing within the given world of convention, law and other relationships, and a world that recognizes its own limitations, its boundaries whose violation is absolutely taboo. This world opens up, or is created, by the mutual interplay of the psyches within it, which represent two other worlds, two persons with full lives outside of this new space. There is therefore a duality within this new space, each side of which has connections strongly fixed to the worlds outside of this one.

This third space of therapy dare not become One World, the Prime World, the only real space, or it will lose its standing in the world of solid boundaries, and this would create psychic confusion and harm, even collapse. For this is a new and fragile space. And yet this space must also insist on its own legitimacy, its own right to exist, its own birthright and equality with other already established worlds. Here in the twentieth century experience of deep psychotherapy we find a

replay of the ancient story of the birth of Hermes and his rivalry with a brother, Apollo, who was already established and claimed a lot of space for himself. The third space, a new space, is a Hermes space.

Depth psychotherapy is a Hermes space in another respect as well: it connects the upper world with the underworld, the world of shades and dreams, the unconscious. In the famous diagram that Jung drew of the analytic relationship, he showed a further complication within this third space. There are four dimensions within it: 1. consc. to consc. (horizontal); 2. consc. to unc. (vertical); 3. unc. to consc. (diagonal); 4. unc. to unc. (horizontal). It is a quadratic relationship. Of the four vectors, the fourth is the most fascinating, for it is this one that represents the underground connection and implies the field of mutuality that defies the laws of time and space, inner and outer, mine and yours. Out of this ground comes a force and a form that will define the quality of the interactive field in each unique analytic relationship. It is here that we look for the epiphany of new archetypes, mediated by the messenger god, Hermes, the creator of this new space. Here, within the third space of analysis, is yet another third space that bridges and includes the duality of the personalities involved in this complex field of vectors. Like Hermes crossroad-markers, psychotherapy marks a double crossroad, horizontally in relation to the civic world and vertically in relation to the psychic world.

Let me give a somewhat whimsical example of how this constellation of a third space manifests itself in clinical practice. A young man came to me recently for therapy because he was stuck in his life and quite seriously depressed. After several sessions in which we became acquainted, more or less (vectors 1,2,3), he had a dream in which he was in bed with a well-known but now somewhat dated movie star. The dream went on to portray some of his personal conflicts and problems in a humorous and graphic way, but the extraordinary detail that I noted in the dream was the identity of the movie star. I asked the young man whose dream this was for his associations to her, but he had none to speak of, other than some movies he had seen many years ago. He had not thought of her consciously in a long time and could hardly even remember her name after he woke up and was recording the dream.

The strange and remarkable fact was that I had seen this very movie star in a restaurant only several months previously. She may be the only movie star I have ever seen up close (to my knowledge). What this dream told me was that vector 4 was activated, that Hermes was active. He would create a unique interactive field between us. A new space was being created.

I could go on for a long time with similar examples from my own clinical experience and from the practices of colleagues and supervisees who have shared their experiences with me over the past twenty years, each of which would illustrate the activation of this fourth dimension. This is the uncanny element in analysis, that such things can and do happen in this highly protected, private, and confidential space. It is a space that is maximally sealed off from the world and yet so profoundly open to it at another level.

Active Imagination

Jungian analysis classically uses two major methods: dream analysis and active imagination. Both of these activities encourage the constellation of Hermes and the creation, or manifestation, of a "third space" in analysis. Active imagination, however, is an activity that is undertaken in solitude, by oneself, rather than in the presence of another. It works on the vertical axis (#2) rather than the horizontal, and its function is to consellate a third psychic space within the individual.

Again we can see Jung as a child of Hermes as he embraces this method and refines it during his midlife years. As he tells the story of his discovery of active imagination as a method to promote individuation and to engage the unconscious, Jung entered this psychic geography for the first time with considerable fear and trepidation:

It was like a voyage to the moon, or a descent into empty space.
First came the image of a crater, and I had the feeling that I was in the land of the dead. The atmosphere was that of the other world.
Near the steep slope of a rock I caught sight of two figures, an old man with a white beard and a beautiful young girl. I summoned up my courage and approached them as though they were real people, and listened attentively to what they told me.

Jung, 1989, p. 181

So begins active imagination as a psychological technique in the twentieth century. This led to the creation of a space that Jung was to occupy time and again for the rest of his life, a Hermetic space in which he conversed with a teacher named Philemon and with a host of other figures.

Active imagination opens a "third space" within the interpsychic matrix, which contains, again, a polarity - the I (ego) and an other (an archetypal image, typically) - and opens out in a Moebius-strip-like twist to the object world. This is the reality of the psyche, inside and outside related in synchronistic unison.

Jung tells of a happening not long after this discovery of the third space of active imagination in which the objective psyche was constellated and parapsychological and psychoid phenomena became active.

It began with a restlessness, but I did not know what it meant or what "they" wanted of me.....
Around five o'clock in the afternoon on Sunday the front door-bell began ringing frantically. It was a bright summer day; the two maids were in the kitchen, from which the open square outside the front door could be seen. Everyone immediately looked to see who was there, but there was no one in sight. I was sitting near the doorbell, and not only heard it but saw it moving. We all simply stared at one another. The atmosphere was thick... "For God's sake, what in the world is this?"
Then they cried out in chorus, "We have come back from Jerusalem where we found not what we sought."
That is the beginning of the Septem Sermones.

(ibid., pp. 190-91)

In this example we can see the confluence of inner and outer phenomena in a highly charged liminal space, a typical Hermes space lying between the daylight world of a calm Sunday afternoon on Lake Zurich and the spirits of the dead who hunger for new meaning and arise from the depths of history and the unconscious in search of it. It would take Jung the rest of his long and productive life to try to satisfy them. As he portrays himself in the autobiography, he was a man who lived a good deal of his life in this "third space" of verticality.

More New Spaces

Psychotherapy itself and active imagination are two instances of the creation of new space in the modern world. But we can certainly find Hermes at work in many other locations as well. Wherever he is constellated, a new space opens up. He both creates and marks the space, sets it apart, and gives it an aura of numinosity and fascination. Where creativity and distinction-making come together, there Hermes appears.

In the University, a new cross-disciplinary committee is born; in communications, a new space called virtual reality suddenly pops up on the screen and draws awe and fascination, even addiction to itself; in business, advertisers create a space between producers and consumers and

ply their trade, while multi-national corporations define new spaces for commerce, traversing national and ideological boundaries and sending financially charged electrons back and forth into banks around the world. This is, in fact, the space age and new spaces are being created at a rate of speed that surpasses our capacity to follow them all. Hermes is everywhere, alive and active. One might even call this the Age of Hermes!

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