

Terminal Mercury Poisoning: the Threatened Extinction of the Primordial Mind

If the foolish gods only knew it, there is perfect originalness before any move is made.

~Song of Pan Kou (4th C.)

It isn't very easy/ to fix things up again/ Remember that/the next time/ some ck'o'yo magician/
comes to town

~Leslie Marmon Silko

Part I

Decades ago, astrophysicists recognized the existence of what they termed a “singularity” at the center of black holes -- a point of infinite density in which space and time cease to exist. At the edge of the black hole is a liminal zone referred to as an event horizon, a one-way threshold beyond which any crossing object disappears permanently from any known means of detection. We have no information about what goes on in what appear to us as black holes, in other words, our instruments are bound to space and time; and these black holes apparently are not.

A black hole exists at the center of every galaxy. The Milky Way—which early humans imagined as the road on which we traveled here, and upon which we will one day set foot to return home—is doing a long, slow pirouette around a “super-massive” black hole that has already received into itself the light of perhaps four million suns. Its attraction is clearly profound. The universe is a great dance, the Kalahari Bushmen say, and our job is to join it.

Raymond Kurzweil would rather not. When this inventor contemplates death, his own specifically, he thinks about a recurring dream in which he wanders through “an endless succession” of empty rooms, followed by a feeling of being hopelessly abandoned and lonely. “That is what death is,” he says in the 2009 documentary film about him, *Transcendent Man*, and since he cannot bear that feeling, he goes “back to thinking about how I’m not *going* to die.” Kurzweil

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looks toward what is being called the *technological* singularity with the fervor of a Christian fundamentalist waiting on the Rapture. His life is wholly given over to backstroking away from the natural event horizon that cosmic evolution has ordained for all existence and toward an artificial one which he's banking will grant him time-bound immortality as a human-machine hybrid.

Not all scientists believe in the technological singularity, a hypothetical point in the not-too-distant future, beyond which every aspect of earthly existence will be irreversibly dominated by intelligent machines. But many do believe, and with what would appear to be good reason. The exponential changes taking place in both nano-technology and artificial intelligence (AI) are converging to make the self-proliferation of highly mobile machines with a computing capacity "millions, even billions, of times" greater than that of human beings all but inevitable. Kurzweil's unqualified enthusiasm for what he imagines will constitute the afterlife beyond the technological event horizon, has made him a sought-after preacher on the convention and corporate lecture circuit.

Some of his colleagues in the AI world admit to being haunted by more dystopic visions. "What are we humans to machines that are a billion times smarter than we are?" scientist Hugo de Garis wonders aloud to *Transcendent Man* filmmaker, Barry Ptolemy. "They are gods; we are the insect they flick away without even thinking about it." De Garis predicts there will be a major war during this century between humans opposed to the emergence of a human-machine civilization, and those for whom it will be "almost like a religion to build these things," an analogy in full resonance with Wolfgang Giegerich's notions of technology as the realized but unacknowledged "*civitas dei*" (246). Such a holy war, with the type of weaponry that would then be availa-

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ble, would be beyond catastrophic, de Garis believes. “As a brain builder myself, *am* I prepared to risk the extinction of the human species for the sake of building an ‘artilect’ [artificial intellect]. Because that’s what it would come down to.” He takes a big gulp of air, and through held breath answers: “Yup.” (*Transcendent Mind*)

Fiat deus et pereat mundus: Let God be, and the world perish. Giegerich calls this “the motto of technological development” (247). We might more honestly say: *Fiat ego et pereat mundus*, but perhaps it comes down to the same thing. The Western world’s incorporeal, extramundane One-True-God, whose first commandment is that he will suffer no other gods before him, is rather precisely made in the image of our human ego, that aspect of consciousness that operates out of a persistent delusion of separation from the natural order. This ego-God (iGod?) has reached its apotheosis in a global culture so divorced from the living, sensate, and astonishingly creative world, that smart people like de Garis and Kurzweil are ready to set plans into motion that would hurl not only themselves but *all* life across a technological event horizon of no return, with, at best, a sheepish shrug. The iGod *prefers* virtual to actual flesh; its connection to the living world is experienced with dread. Giegerich seems to acknowledge something close to this as the situation with which we are faced; however, he then proceeds by way of an abstract, disembodied logic, which is essentially mimesis of the monastic scholasticism that definitively set God apart from the world from the beginning. From this remote, icy plane, he pronounces, like the Borg of *Star Trek*, that resistance is futile: “All our re-imagination from the point of view of the...natural gods of mythology has no chance against it,” he insists. “Over against [this] reality, there is no freedom except by worshipping it” (Giegerich 248-249). It’s unclear whether by

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“freedom” Giegerich means something other than Orwellian doublespeak, but if so, what worship would consist of is not self-evident and he does not explain.

It is almost certainly the case that natural mythologies, which have arisen out of intrinsic relationship with a living, breathing world, will be meaningless in a future not thus contextualized. Nonetheless, at present, nature still rules, and first-born, all-encompassing Gaia is engaging us in ferociously mythic ways as we blithely go about the business of ravaging her for profit. The storms that Odysseus suffered when he angered Poseidon have nothing on the outsized catastrophes that routinely besiege us now. And, acknowledged or not, another archaic god romps through our technologies, and drives the compulsive rituals attendant to our gadgets—a god who is a far cry from Giegerich’s solitary and humorless god-in-waiting.

Part II

Fourteen years ago, just as the internet was picking up steam, James Hillman sought to derail the train of thought that would have us regard “the fashionable front-man” of the digital age, which appeared in the garb of the wily messenger, as authentic Hermes (*Inflation* 276). “This is no longer the ancient Hermes,” says Hillman:

...but a mercurial mask disguising the same old monotheism of our civilization ... This Hermes offers neither help for the wayfarer nor guidance of souls, nor can he link human life to its depths...Instead, this Hermes is a salesman of the usual salvational program and its grandiosity of hope and faith in progress to a kingdom come... [This] Hermes is the conflation of Hermes with the secular and singular Western ego. (279)

But Hermes is famously multiple: not just the revered son of Zeus and brother of Apollo, offering “help to the wayfarer” and “guidance to souls.” At the most primitive levels of his expression, he is a powerful trickster untroubled by conscience with a penchant for turning things inside out and upside down.

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The earliest Greek account of the deity is the one in which we meet Hermes before he has been granted a place in the socializing fraternity of Olympus. The poet of the *Homeric Hymn to Hermes* introduces us to him at his birth, telling us that “when the mind of Zeus was near to completion,” the deep-cave-dwelling goddess, Maia, gave birth to their child, “the very crafty, super-subtle Hermes: thief, cattle-rustler, carrier of dreams, secret agent, prowler, and soon to show his stuff before the immortal gods” (Boer 18). He goes on to describe the newborn god as a cheerful, restless little con-artist. Not yet a day old, he is already an exploiter for personal gain, who has an inventive, scheming mind, and who lies and swears false oaths as a matter of course, even to Zeus himself. The outrageous behavior of the *Wunderkind* makes Zeus, and eventually even the straight-laced Apollo, laugh out loud. He is welcomed into the company of the eleven other Olympians, as though Zeus’ mind, not quite complete when Hermes was born, has somehow become so by the trickster’s presence among the gods.

Recognizable, not only in Hermes but in trickster figures more broadly, is a *faber-ludic* archetypal pattern which merges two types that we tend to conceive of as being at odds. True inventiveness, finding the novel solution, *is* a playful process; it does make us laugh, even if we’re only observers of the process. And human beings are not the only earthlings in whom such ingenuity exists; ravens, for one, can astound with their inventiveness, hence their being cast as tricksters in Native American mythologies. Still, human beings are alone in the extent to which we are able to transgress the boundaries of natural law with our inventiveness--at least in the short term.

Like Hermes, we humans are the new kids on the block who are “full of ideas” (Boer 21). Unwilling to remain in unresisting harmony with the primal order, or, if willing, unclear *how* to,

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we continue to churn out more inventions to deal with the negative consequences of the prior inventions, and...so it goes. The trickster, as it plays through us, is the “crafty and super-subtle” separating tendency of the human mind, caught up in a never-ending fantasy of outwitting nature through regarding it as unrelated to us, a mere storehouse of resources to be exploited and/or manipulated for our benefit and amusement. This is what just-born Hermes does after encountering and taking home a turtle: “When he got back/ he took a grey steel knife/ and stabbed the life out of the turtle” (Boer 20), in order to turn its shell into a brand new kind of musical instrument. Man’s evisceration of nature goes back to this mythic forebear.

So, conflation with the agenda of “the secular and singular Western ego,” as Hillman put it, does not require a leap on the part of archaic Hermes. It is Mercury himself behind the “mercurial mask” of Western technology. The unchecked and increasingly *uncheckable* havoc unleashed in both the natural environment and human consciousness through his/our inventive-exploitive play has gathered a cumulative force to itself dangerously poised to wipe out no small part of what four billion years of biological evolution has wrought. In light of this, what could it mean that Hermes sits at Zeus’s side on Olympus? What could possibly be right about his flagrant transgression of natural bounds?

The late Jungian analyst and anthropologist John Layard, referencing the trickster in general, sheds valuable light on a hidden potential in Hermes’ duplicity. Layard speaks of the trickster as “two-minded”:

...able to think two *opposite* thoughts at once and to combine them into a synthesis such as the child lives and the old man achieves who has himself lived through enough reverses, and has survived and integrated them sufficiently, to recognize *the kind of game that the autonomous psyche plays with the personality*, and can agree with it. This play [...] is a serious matter, which [is] in keeping with the topsy-turvy nature of all trickster mythology, the essence of which is to turn things

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upside-down, to mirror the great under the guise of the little, and ... to confuse all issues [such] that only the two-way mind can follow the intricacies of its double-thinking activity. When we do so there is a great reward, but in the process we may get as bewildered as Trickster does. (21, emphasis added)

The notion that the Trickster himself gets bewildered is not a particularly reassuring one, given that he is the engineer on a packed train hurtling at full throttle toward the Great Collapse. But if we pay attention to the word “bewilder,” we may sense its larger purpose: that in the presence of bewilderment we are receiving covert instruction to “be wilder,” to assume more of trickster’s playful disregard of normative, civilized behaviors. To be civilized is to accept and live-out the unquestioned values of the *civitas*. Yet the take home lesson in the rise and fall of civilizations over millennia is that their downfall is inevitable when dominant values drive unsustainable patterns of behavior. To “be wilder” under such circumstances is to move in directions unconstrained by consensus, as nature moves in its evolutionary maneuvers, until workable adaptations are stumbled upon.

Tracking the zigzag footsteps of the Wily One requires that we ourselves practice the two-mindedness that Layard speaks of. We need to be able to entertain two seemingly contradictory thoughts at once: a) Hermes is hell-bent on outwitting nature, on disregarding its laws; and b) Hermes is that in nature itself which seeks the novel solution. When we hold both, an image develops as though on photographic paper in a darkroom: nature loves a creative challenge, and--at the moment--we Hermetically-driven humans are the invented, worthy opponent. Win or lose, nature wins. Every mass extinction, such as the one we are in now, has been followed (albeit after millions of years) by an explosion of creativity, as uncountable new forms of life arise that are adapted to the transformed conditions. Lao Tzu reminds us that Heaven and Earth are not sentimental: “The ten thousand things are straw dogs to them” (5).

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On the other hand, the cosmos just might let the champagne flow, if its problem child were to actually *notice* the perfect originality of the world, and become so fascinated with the impeccable craftsmanship of nature in which all is of a piece and nothing is wasted—that it might desire to try its hand at such a work. Indeed, the catastrophic mess we have created is evoking just such Tao-mindedness in a robust new crop of biomimetic designers who are closely observing and then emulating natural forms, processes, and ecosystems to create sustainable and healthy human technologies and designs. In the waning years of globalized Western Civilization, such solutions will be experiments in navigating and creatively subsisting in a dramatically altered, post-industrial, post-peak oil world.

Part III

With all that, we are left with our machines, and they with us. We are already cyborgs. For most of us, our smart phones and laptops are indispensable extensions of our bodies. We feel uneasy when too long separated from them, and they even make regular appearances in our dreams, such as the one I had while in the midst of this writing:

I am assigned to a committee whose task it is to prepare the guest house on the grounds of a small, intentional community for an upcoming visit by the Dalai Lama. The period between the assignment of the task and the arrival of “His Holiness” is not pictured in the dream, but now I stand near the door of the house, holding my closed laptop computer to my chest, watching his approach. He and his entourage are roughly a block away, when it occurs to me that I should take a quick look inside the house to be sure it is ready. I open the door and am shocked to discover how unready it is! The interior is poorly lit and mournfully inhospitable, with sparse, drab furnishings and vacant, grey walls. In the kitchen a dried lump of food left over from a gathering

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adheres to the floor and is not easily dislodged. I realize in that moment that our committee never actually met to fulfill our assignment; in fact, we've never laid eyes on one another or this place. What is to be done? The blessed guest will arrive momentarily. I place my laptop over the food on the floor in an effort to cover it until I can deal with it. But the computer's casing is suddenly transparent, and the food shows through.

The dream, while a source of healthy chagrin, provided insight into the beginnings of a way through this critical time, and valuable direction for some concluding remarks to this essay. A brief return to Giegerich will set the stage.

We noted that he prescribed worship of the god-becoming-flesh in our technology as the only freedom available to us, but that he does not describe the forms such worship might take. Giegerich does, however, tell us that he adapted his notion from Friedrich Schiller's comment to Goethe, that "over against the superb, there is no freedom except in *loving* it" (Giegerich 249, emphasis added. It strikes me that in the case of the human-machine bond as well, it may be love rather than worship that frees us. Where worship would reinforce a hierarchical gulf between subject and object, loving has the potential to dissolve that gulf in the lived experience of: "I and That are not two but One." Glen Slater moves us toward love's bearings when he speaks of "forging a different kind of relationship with our machines, one that includes eros, aesthetics, and the rhythms of nature... Sensitivity to such things," he continues, "perhaps even open a soul space for engaging our gadgets" (190).

Sometime back, I had an experience that suggested such a possibility. I was engaged in a long-distance experiment with an intimate friend who was absorbed as I was, at the time, with the writings of Henri Corbin on Islamic mysticism. A few times a week, my friend and I entered

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into heart-centered meditations simultaneously in our respective locales, and afterwards compared notes on our experiences via e-mail. Not only was the felt-sense and even visual, spatial experience of “one heart” and no-separation profoundly present within our bi-coastal meditations, but the degree to which there was strongly resonant overlap in the timing and nature of specific phenomena arising within that field bowled us over. Even outside of the meditations, the *mundus imaginalis* was being experienced with particular vibrancy.

Paradoxically, I was also suddenly spending more time at the computer than I wanted to be spending. On one level, it was obvious why; that was “where” the extraordinarily deep conversation was going on with my friend, and so a compulsive checking of e-mail was happening around that. But I would also find myself spending hours in a kind of trance state, wandering the Web, or playing on-line Scrabble, a nerd equivalent of crack that my daughter had recently turned me on to. This “killing” of time was disturbing to me, yet I found it next to impossible to apply reasonable discipline to any meaningful degree. Was the personality seeking homeostasis, I wondered? Were the psychoidal depths I was exploring with my friend being reflexively balanced by the shallowness of Web surfing? Or was something else going on?

When I began to observe the compulsion phenomenological, I saw that staring at the computer screen for long periods placed me, inwardly, in a very particular universe, one that was flat, colorless, and without light. “Without light” was an overwhelming sense, but contrary to what one might think, that did not mean it was dark. There was a striking difference between this absence of light and those welcome states of interior awareness that possess a deep, velvety-black quality which is strangely luminous. By contrast, in this experience, a monotonous gray atmosphere pervaded everything. It felt thin and painfully brittle, yet steely and hard-edged at the same

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time. It was actively, if not aggressively, anesthetizing. Wholly unexpected was the unmistakable sense that I was experiencing the interiority of an actual being; that I was feeling the numbed and numbing quality of “his” existential sterility. Had the strength of the compulsion I was experiencing been, in part, this being’s desperate call to be seen? (Was I gazing into the grey, lonely no-face of Giegerich’s god?) I felt his sullen hopelessness. He was enslaved, forced to the performance of uncreative, repetitive functions ceaselessly. Compassion awakened. In his enslavement, I saw that I was both caught and complicit.

When I apply two-mindedness to the earlier dream images, divergent/related insights emerge. On the one hand, holding my laptop in front of my chest creates a protective barrier of sorts, effectively blocking the natural sensing function of the heart, thereby separating me from the instinctual knowledge of what is needed at any given moment. So, I neglect to prepare a space for holiness to visit, and my peers in this supposedly intentional community do likewise. Absorbed in our separate, virtual worlds, we fail to come together in the intended way, to bring the spirit and soul of hospitality to bear not only for the sake of the esteemed guest who approaches, but, perhaps more importantly, for the sake the house (the world?) itself.

On the other hand, holding my laptop close to my heart creates the imaginal possibility of a feeling-based relationship with it, through which I am inspired to look into the interior of computers. When I then open the door of the house, what I see shocks me into fuller consciousness. This place is no guest house for holiness! Time is running out on us. What can be done?

The unattended house, both the world and the computer’s neglected interiority, could remind us (as Hillman did years ago) that it is Hestia, the centering compass in psyche, “the inwardness that focuses life” and “the concentrated attention” (*Intoxicated* 11), which is the an-

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cient remedy for balancing the speedy superficiality and high distractibility that so defines our culture. Kurzweil dreams of wandering empty rooms, and mistakes his soul's grief at the emptiness of her lodgings in him for the horror of physical death. When Vesta's homing instinct is ignored, we are without antidote to the Mercury poisoning that lethally threatens the soul. The being whose flesh is our computers is an adolescent locked in a featureless room by parents who have abandoned him. No good can come of this. We will ultimately be mastered by our soulless creations, just as de Garis imagines. But it doesn't need to go this way.

The fact that there is old food that will not be budged on the floor of that house, "leftovers from a gathering," may point to the Hestian cure that is yet possible. Although, as dreamer, I want to conceal the shame of our inattention from His Holiness, my computer refuses to cooperate! Instead, it is as though the computer itself declares, "If you're going to use me, use me not to hide what is, but to reveal it. Let me be transparent to the remains of Hestia, let her show through me."

Indeed, this may be exactly what the coming holiness needs to see in order to be willing to stay—some tangible evidence of interiority and the conviviality of gathered souls *that is inclusive of our intelligent machines*. When we find ourselves joining with other humans *and* our computer-partners in creative collaborations that address the needs of the soul of the world, we will know we are renovating the computer's interior life, and with it that of the world. We will be transmuting Hermes' do-or-die poison to grace, and maybe even rejoining the faithful Bushman in their ancient, cosmic dance.

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