A FURTHER NOTE ON HERMES.

BY J. RENDEL HARRIS, M.A., LITT.D., D.THEOL. F.B.A., ETC.

IN the RYLANDS BULLETIN for January last, I undertook to trace the Cult of the Greek god Hermes to practices and rituals connected with the Elm tree, and to affirm that the two terms Elm and Herm, assuming the latter to represent a pillar which antedates the anthropomorphic representation of the god, were linguistically equivalent. It was, however, carefully pointed out that, even if the arguments presented were valid, they did not offer a complete solution of the Hermetic problem, and it was not at all surprising that some interesting questions have been asked which involve in their answers the further verification of the hypothesis which had been offered, and an extension of the explanations which it furnished of the functions of the god. It will be remembered that the main difficulty in explaining Hermes, from any point of view, lay in his multiplicity. No other Greek god discharges so many duties: most of the Olympians are comparatively simple in their occupations; they know their business and they stick to it. Hephæstus, for example, is more at home in his smithy than on Olympus; when he does venture in among the elect it is either to do a bit of smith’s work on the skull of Zeus, or to make himself ridiculous by taking the place of Hebe, and supplying the needs of the thirsty. These are occasional occupations and amusements; they do not mean multiplicity of functions; and what is true of Hephæstus is true, for the most part, of Olympians generally. In the case of Hermes, however, we had to admit that he did not look like a god with a single origin, and there were some duties which he discharged which were left over for possible future explanation from diverse quarters. In particular we had found nothing in the supposition of an original Elm-cult to explain why Hermes was the professional guide of souls to the other world, except one rather lame, and certainly insufficient, suggestion from the side of folk-lore that it is still the fashion to make coffins out of elm-wood. One could hardly equate such a coffin with the very lively Psychopompos, as the Greeks termed their Hermes; and we had ruled out of court an explanation from
another quarter that Hermes is the Greek equivalent for the Egyptian Thoth, who has the duty of introducing the dead to Osiris, and assisting in the judgment of them for the deeds done in their bodies. Without denying possible relations between Hermes and Thoth in late mythology or philosophy, it did not seem to us that there was any primitive nexus between them, such as would satisfy the fundamental equivalent that Hermes should be some sort of a Herm or Pillar or Post.

To leave Hermes with his principal function unexplained would be another case of Hamlet detached from the Prince of Denmark.

I was glad, therefore, when my friend C. A. Phillips asked whether I had done justice to the passage in “Homer” where the elm tree is actually found in a funereal relation. The story which Homer is telling relates to the raising of a burial mound by Achilles over the body of Eëtion, the king of Thebe in Cilicia, the father of Andromache. Here is Andromache’s statement:—

“I have no father nor lady mother; my father was slain of goodly Achilles, for he wasted the populous city of Kilittians, even high-gated Thebe, and slew Eëtion; yet he despoiled him not, for his soul had shame of that, but he burnt him in his inlaid armour, and raised a barrow over him; and all about were elm trees planted by the mountain nymphs, daughters of Ægis-bearing Zeus.”

—(Iliad VI, 414-420.)

Now this is definitely funereal, and we have to enquire why the elm in Homer is a funereal tree. Let us see if we can find further traces of it either at the entrance to Hades or the exit therefrom or on the way thither.

When Vergil takes Æneas on his dread journey of exploration of the lower world, the hero, after passing the gates of Hades, where cluster the forms of Grief and Avenging Care, and Fear, Hunger and Want, comes to a place where there rises an elm tree, from whose aged branches the forms of idle dreams depend: the description is as follows:—

“Midway an elm, shadowy and high, spreads her boughs and secular arms, where, one saith, idle dreams dwell clustering, and cling under every leaf.”

—(Aen. VI, 282-284, tr. Mackail.)
Here the Elm tree is emphatically the tree of Hades, the funereal focus round which all the phantoms of the mind group themselves.

The next passage to which we may refer is in the story of the Descent of Orpheus into Hades to claim his lost Eurydice. We shall find his pilgrimage marked by the growth of the Elm, both when he descends into the Dark in hope, and when he returns to the upper Light in disappointment and despair.

Vergil will tell us of this also in the *Georgics*; and Ovid will have the same story in his *Metamorphoses*.

The situation is summed up for us as follows in Folkard's *Plant Lore, Legends and Lyrics*:

p. 323. "The ancients had a tradition that, at the first sound of the plaintive strains that proceeded from the lyre of Orpheus, when he was lamenting the death of Eurydice, there sprung up a forest of elms; and it was beneath an elm that the Thracian bard sought repose upon his unavailing expedition to the infernal regions to recover his lost love.

"Rapin thus tells the tale:—

‘When wretched Orpheus left the Stygian coast,
Now hopeless since again his spouse was lost;
Beneath the preferable shade he sate
Of a tall Elm, and mourned his cruel fate.'"

From the foregoing references in the Greek and Latin poets it may be inferred that the Elm tree has some peculiar connection with the dead and with their progress from the Visible world into the Unseen, since we find it planted by the grave and growing where the shades of the dead do congregate, at the Gates of Hades and beyond.

A somewhat similar statement to that of Folkard will be found in de Gubernatis, *La Mythologie des Plantes* (II, 170). "On raconte aussi qu'aux premiers accords de la lyre d'Orphée pleurant la mort d'Eurydice poussa un forêt d'ormes." This statement appears to have been transferred to Folkard's pages.

We are thus left to find an explanation for its recurrence, whether occasional, as in the case of particular burials, or secular and world-old as in Hades itself. The natural explanation is that the Elm tree is planted on the Way of Souls from the Starting-point to the Goal: it marks the track, just as a modern telegraph pole would do, and is itself a Herm by which the way may be discerned. Inasmuch, then,
as it serves to direct the dead along the Way of Souls, it may be properly described as \textit{Psychopompós} which is the mysterious title and avocation of Hermes. Plant the elm from point to point along the Via Sacra, and the pilgrim will not miss his way. Replace the tree by a pillar, and we shall have the monoliths which punctuate the great pilgrim roads to the Land's End and the Sacred West.

Our identification of Hermes and the Elm has now led us to the explanation of the chief function of our complex deity, and there is no need to introduce Thoth or to talk of Osiris.

Other questions which have reached us come from the quarter of philology, and relate to the mutual relation of the vocables in \textit{Elm} and \textit{Herm}. Why should we have \textit{l} and \textit{r} interchanged? Why should the god have an aspirate and the tree be deficient in it? As regards the first question, there is no change more common than the one suggested. The Romance languages are themselves in evidence for the \textit{l} and \textit{r} interchange: it may be difficult to determine how far such a change occurred in prehistoric speech, over what areas of country and at what intervals of time, but the change itself is so easy and so natural that it is hardly worth contesting.

The other point requires more explanation. We have pointed out that the word which we call \textit{elm} belongs to a group of trees, whose names are modifications of a primitive form, something like \textit{imon}, which is capable, by the change of the initial vowel of becoming \textit{alm}, \textit{elm}, \textit{ulm} and the like. So far there was little to dispute over. The voiceless \textit{l} had already been suggested; but it was not quite clear how that involved aspiration. If, however, this initial letter was akin to the Welsh and Gaelic \textit{l}, we are familiar with the fact that this double consonant has in it a submerged aspirate, which comes out in such forms as \textit{hl} in Hlodovic, or \textit{Fl} in Floyd, and in Shakespeare's Fluellen. Such a submerged aspirate is sufficient to account for the breathing in the Greek and Latin Hermes. As a matter of fact an \textit{elm-wood} in Welsh appears as \textit{Llwyfein}, but it is supposed that this is a modification of an earlier \textit{leimansion} (query, \textit{lleimansion}). I leave it to Gaelic scholars to deal with any residual difficulty.

No doubt there are other questions which will come up for discussion in connection with this latest explanation of Olympian dignities. The chief value of the present note is to show a possible explanation of the title of \textit{Psychopompos} applied to Hermes as the Guide of the Dead.