

Astrology, Archetype and Symbol

by Carole Taylor

*A man finds his shipwrecks,
tells himself the necessary stories.
Whatever gods are – our own fearful voices
or intimations from the unseen order
of things ...!*

American poet Stephen Dunn captures the idea of Odysseus' voyage as a metaphor for life – how we are made, not by what we think we want, but by the journey we find ourselves on; this is Odysseus's secret, 'kept even from himself'. Wherever this calling comes from – from the seeker's own inner voice or from the 'unseen order of things' (and who is to say that these are not one and the same) – the story of our hero's life-changing voyage home has survived for almost three millennia, powerful because it is archetypal; therefore relevant in every generation.

I write this during Mercury retrograde, a time which symbolically invites us to withdraw some of our attention from the busy-ness of the world to be more reflective. A retrograde Mercury is a symbol of imaginal perception (not 'straightforward', but pushing against the grain into unseen spaces or backwards into memory, like Odysseus being blown off course by the winds), the very modes we need when working with astrology. It is these ways I would like to explore the familiar territory of archetype and symbol, particularly the role of the Shadow and the Trickster, and the work of Ficino and Jung, to shed light on the process of learning and practising astrology – the 'road's dangerous enchantments' that Dunn speaks of in line 29 of his poem.

Jung and the Unconscious

"Since the stars have fallen from heaven and our highest symbols have paled, a secret life holds sway in the unconscious. That is why we have a psychology today, and why we speak of the unconscious."²

Arguably the most powerful movement within astrology

in modern times has been its re-imagining in the light of Jungian psychology. To the Greeks of Homer's time, psyche was simply the breath of life and the difference between being alive and being dead; with Plato, psyche became soul, an image of the innate patterns of human behaviour possessed by the capacity for reflection and moral choice. Finally with Jung, the psyche became defined in terms of the 'Self', a wholeness that comprises both conscious and unconscious aspects and thus a full image of the individual in all their depth and complexity. Jung's model offers an image of the psyche which is rich with potential because it interiorises the archetypal patterns which in previous times had been envisaged as exterior gods or the blind forces of fate.

"By psyche, I understand the totality of all psychic processes, conscious as well as unconscious." And: "I have suggested calling the total personality, which, though present, cannot be fully known, the self."³

The idea that part of us is unconscious or unknown is not a 20th century discovery – the Greek physician Galen, for instance, recognised that we make unconscious inferences based on our conscious perceptions while the philosopher Plotinus suggested that we become aware of our thought processes only when we pay attention to them. Jung's direct correlation of the unconscious with God, his recasting of Plato's 'Ideas'⁴ as archetypes in the unconscious, and his reworking of other ancient and Neoplatonic/Hermetic principles such as the four elements, the duality of the cosmos, and the planetary journey of the soul, inspired a way of working with astrology in the 20th century, initiated by Dane Rudhyar and developed to full richness by Liz Greene that became the foundation of psychological astrology.

Image above: *Odysseus departs from the Land of the Phaeacians*, painting by Claude Lorrain (1646)

“Astrology, like the collective unconscious with which psychology is concerned, consists of symbolic configurations: the “planets” are the gods, symbols of the powers of the unconscious.”⁵

A psychological approach offers a level of illumination that deepens and enriches every kind of astrology, from personal consultancy to playing the stock market. You don't need to be trained in Jungian analysis or engaged in client work to appreciate this – it is simply a way of seeing which privileges the symbolic imagination and reflects the symbol back to ourselves for the purpose of our own self-knowledge. Nothing is more powerful than the archetypal language of astrology in inviting us to make connections between what we see on the surface or recognise consciously in ourselves, and what lies deep below, in the hidden spaces beyond our conscious image of who we are.

Astrology and the Archetype of the Shadow

“The archetype is essentially an unconscious content that is altered by becoming conscious and by being perceived.”⁶

With Plato's Allegory of the Cave⁷, the shadow made its entrance into western psychology. The Greeks and Romans made use of it in art to depict an aspect of the human form, but it disappeared in Medieval art, re-emerging in the art of the Renaissance.⁸ This is perhaps no coincidence, for it mirrors the presence of a psychological strand in astrology which acknowledges the unconscious aspect of human character and the importance of using symbolic imagination to access it; this begins with the Neoplatonists, fades with the more fatalistic astrology of the Medieval period and then reappears at the end of the 15th century with the Hermetically-inspired astrological magic of Marsilio Ficino. With the Renaissance, humanism begins to place humanity centre-stage, privileging the power of the individual and laying the way for a modern sense of 'psyche', no longer seen as our immortal soul but as our total sense of self, the full ground of our being, shadow and all.

“Everyone carries a shadow, and the less it is embodied in the individual's conscious life, the blacker and denser it is.”⁹

Ficino recognised aspects of his own 'shadow', even though he did not use this term. Throughout his work, for instance, we see writ large his struggle with depression and poor health which he linked to Saturn in his birth chart:

“Saturn seems to have impressed the seal of melancholy on me from the beginning; set, as it is, almost in the middle of my ascendant Aquarius, it is influenced by Mars, also in Aquarius, and the Moon in Capricorn.”¹⁰

But for Ficino, the planets were no mere indicators

of character traits; they were active forces within the human soul, pointing towards the potential for self-knowledge through careful inner work. Through appropriately-timed ritual action using corresponding images, medicines, odours, music, plus the faculties of imagination, reason, and contemplation, the astrologer-philosopher might align themselves in harmony with the heavens to lead a fulfilling life.

“But it is not only those who flee to Jupiter who escape the noxious influence of Saturn and undergo his propitious influence; it is also those who give themselves over with their whole mind to the divine contemplation signified by Saturn himself.”¹¹

In other words, Ficino is saying, rather than trying to find an antidote to what ails you, do the opposite – go deeper into it and it will yield its gold. Ficino fully embraced the heavy melancholia of his Saturn; he understood it as the source of the revelatory insight of the scholar-philosopher and a true companion on the imaginative spiritual journey of the soul, in which the sphere of Saturn most reflects the divine because it is the planet closest to God in the ancient cosmic order. Jung offered his own form of cosmic magic, linked to the planetary gods. He coined the term 'archetypes' in 1919 to describe mythic primordial patterns – universal psychic structures within the collective unconscious that underlie and inform human behaviour and experience; indeed, versed like Ficino in Neoplatonism, he came to think of them as fundamental to the universe itself. He referred to the original patterns as the 'archetypes-as-such', fluid forms which then become actualised as archetypal motifs such as the Mother, the Trickster, the Shadow or the Self, and archetypal events such as birth, death and the union of opposites, all capable of diverse expression and given shape by history, culture and context.

For Jung, the Shadow represents the personal unconscious, the counterpoint to the conscious personality. It is quite literally the 'dark side', the part of us which we do not acknowledge or even consciously know about, often experienced in projection. It generates both fear and possibility, a black but fecund prima materia, intrinsic to the creation of an integrated personality.

Jung saw the encounter with the Shadow as the initiation into the process out of which the Self finally emerges. This encounter is fraught with difficulty,



Marsilio Ficino

inviting us to move beyond the version of ourselves which we have built up in the first part of our lives – and Jung wrote extensively about this process and about the encounter with the Shadow as the first stage of individuation and as the initial nigredo stage of the alchemical work.

This encounter is what often prompts people to seek out astrologers, counsellors or psychotherapists. A discussion of it in client practice would fill, and has filled, volumes. But perhaps not so much has been written about the shadow of the astrologer as we encounter it in our journey into and through astrology. I would hazard, for instance, that not many astrological training courses actively encourage their students to do the kind of ongoing inner work described by Ficino or Jung. The shadow is not easily located or named. It does not lie neatly in just one or two places in a chart – the 8th, the 12th, Saturn or Pluto – so that the reasoning mind can easily come to know it. Any planet or configuration will have its hidden dimensions and indeed perhaps, like Freud's iceberg, these are even the major part.

The hidden shadow behind the Sun, for instance, is perhaps a terror of our own insignificance, a lack of self-confidence that gives rise to its exact opposite – an unconscious need to hog the limelight or criticise the creativity of others. Jupiter's shadow lurks wherever we have lost faith and become cynical or have slipped into self-righteousness or fundamentalism. And of course, every planet in our chart represents not only a propensity in our own character, but also our

relationship to the people and experiences in our lives which resonate to its archetype. Each planet's shadow is therefore complex, with roots in prior times and generations. Importantly though, embedded in the hidden recesses of each configuration are potent creative potentials which may challenge us greatly on the astrological path, but which will eventually come to define our gifts as astrologers.

In my years of studying and then teaching at the Faculty of Astrological Studies, I have found that it is not uncommon for students of astrology to undergo a significant personal crisis of some kind, often about a year or two into study. It might manifest overtly as divorce, redundancy, a period of depression or illness, or a crisis with astrology itself, feeling overwhelmed by some aspect of it. At these points, some people take time off from the subject or even decide to abandon it altogether; others impatiently drop out to set up as professionals, truncating the training process. But some might recognise it as an intrinsic part of the archetypal journey towards Self-hood, for which astrology has become (consciously or unconsciously) their chosen vehicle. A training programme is only the 'outer court', to borrow a term from the mystery traditions – the 'inner court', the greater part of the work perhaps, is the personal alchemy brought about by our engagement with astrology itself. Like Ficino, struggling with depression but understanding it as the black counterpart to the imaginative power of the intellect, for the practitioner of astrology such transformation is purposeful. It is also, arguably, an ongoing process through life, for as long as we are prepared to work with it. As Anthony Stevens describes the encounter with the Shadow, it is the difficult 'process of washing one's dirty linen in private'¹², or indeed Jung's own description: 'a tight passage, a narrow door, whose painful constriction no one is spared who goes down to the deep well'.¹³

Being led by the Trickster

"...a word or an image is symbolic when it implies something more than its obvious and immediate meaning. It has a wider "unconscious" aspect that is never defined or fully explained. Nor can one hope to define or explain it. As the mind explores the symbol, it is led to ideas that lie beyond the grasp of reason ... (A symbol) hints at something not yet known."¹⁴

Beyond the conscious reasoning mind is the faculty of imagination and intuition, a faculty which responds instinctively to the symbol as 'an energy-evoking, and directing, agent'.¹⁶ Jung suggests that a symbol arises spontaneously from the unconscious, a potent image of an archetypal pattern not immediately accessible to the conscious mind. To understand it more fully we must move beyond intellect into a frame of mind which not only accepts mystery and ambiguity (so we grasp that the symbol describes what we see but also hints at what



Orpheus descent into limbo

we can't see) but which also understands that a symbol is a dynamic and archetypal psychic presence (so we grasp that the symbol also exists inside ourselves, no matter whose chart we happen to be looking at). The symbol is a liminal device, uniting inner and outer, astrologer and client, literal observation and participatory experience.

To work with astrological symbols is both illuminating and unnerving. A symbol is not a sign – it does not give clear instructions about what to do or what is going on. It points instead into the unknown depths and we do not know precisely what we will find there. It invites both a journey and a relationship.

Plato suggests, in the aforementioned Allegory of the Cave, the idea of different levels of insight on the philosophic path. Later philosophers (Origen, St Augustine) developed this idea in the context of interpreting the Bible – Augustine in particular saw ever-deeper layers of engagement with Biblical passages as the foundation of a profound mystical quest.¹⁶

Out of this emerged what has become known as the 'fourfold method' or the 'hermeneutic of the four senses', the primary model for Biblical interpretation until Martin Luther. Used by Dante in *The Divine Comedy*, it was adopted in the Renaissance as a way of approaching art as a container for divine truth. It can be applied to any symbolic form – glyphic, poetic, textual or artistic, including the components of an astrological chart.

The four levels are the literal, the allegorical, the tropological, and the mystical. Literal is literal – what is the planet Mercury made of, how long does it take to orbit the Sun, and so on. It doesn't tell us very much. The purpose of the allegorical level is to find a metaphoric parallel – if Mercury moves fast, then it is a symbol of quickness and nervous motion, and in darting into and out of the 'underworld' of the Sun, it is the psychopomp, the guide of souls. Thus we move a little closer towards the symbol's essence by looking beyond literal facts to

attach some kind of interpretation.

The third level is called tropological because at this point we are invited to 'turn' in our perception; we cross a mental threshold and the symbols begin to speak in a different way. As Angela Voss puts it, 'the 'turning inward' can be seen as the third

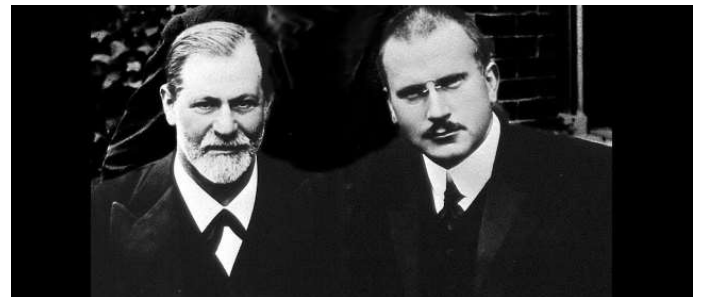


Archangel Raphael (Archangel of Mercury) and Tobit by Titian

or 'moral' stage...where the individual participates in the symbolic meaning and a change or deepening of self-knowledge takes place'.¹⁷

It is here that the Trickster is in play. This is the part of us which has the capacity to outwit our conscious mind so that our perception can be drawn towards the mysteries of our own interior. The person we think we are, and our conscious sense of motivation is never the entire story – and the inner Trickster knows this. The symbol performs a sleight of hand and beckons towards its own deeper meaning; the Trickster within moves us into an encounter with the dimensions of our chart which lie in shadow.

I sense that these two characters are at work when we first encounter astrology, revealing what makes it meaningful to us. Ficino hints at this relationship himself – in the first of his *Three Books on Life*, he says that the intellectual philosophy of Saturn needs to be tempered by the quick wit of Mercury; he uses the language of alchemy to speak of the gold hidden within the lead of Saturn that needs Mercury to shake it free. We might also think of the image of Mercurius in the work of Jung, the trickster archetype whose face he 'saw' whenever he came across something in his work which defied rational explanation.



Carl Jung and Sigmund Freud

Jung encountered Mercurius in his engagement with astrology. He ignored the exhortation of Freud, to reject 'the black tide of mud...of the occult' and plunged straight in. Yet he acknowledged two sides within himself – the scientist and the mystic – a duality which brought pain and confusion as well as illumination. The so-called marriage experiments, for example, out of which emerged the theory of Synchronicity, were deeply disturbing to Jung – he set out to test astrology, but it not only slipped the noose of rational enquiry, his experiments seemed to suggest that the presence of the observer somehow unconsciously 'arranges' the outcome in a way which reflects the observer's own psychic state. Marie-Louise von Franz recalls what happened after the first batch of results:

"On obtaining this positive result Jung was, however, not quite comfortable. As he sat in front of his tower in Bollingen one afternoon, suddenly he saw, through the interplay of light and shadow, a mischievous face laughing out at him from the masonry of the wall. ...

The thought struck him: Had Mercurius, the spirit of nature, played a trick on him?"¹⁸

We each have our own particular story when it comes to our first encounter with astrology, a story which hints at the journey yet to come and the reason for taking it – the nature of the encounter is autobiographical, a reflection of our character and birth chart, the story itself a symbol of why we are called to it. Even Ficino had his story – we might see his astrological magic as rooted at least partly in his own very personal quest to make sense of the challenges of his melancholic character and physical limitations. Along the journey, he encountered pagan philosophers and the curious magic of the *Corpus Hermeticum* and was forever changed. His greater gift to astrology was to reveal its psychological and imaginative potentials and thereby lift it out of the deterministic model inherited from the Medieval world. Ficino described his melancholic nature as ‘a unique and divine gift’. There are ever-deeper layers to every symbol which gather up our past experiences, present desires and future potentials, the parts we know and the parts yet-to-be-revealed. In our chart lies the reason we were drawn to astrology, the kind of astrologer we are likely to be, what we have to offer, and potentially, how it might change us.

For completeness: The elusive final stage of the ‘four senses’ is the mystical level, where we enter the heart of the symbol’s mystery – a direct encounter with the ‘deity’ in which any sense of separation falls away. We become one with the living presence behind the symbol, for which the symbol is finally seen to have been only a token, a device to bring us over the threshold into imaginative participation. Perhaps we may experience this only fleetingly, from time to time – but astrology offers us a vehicle for it.

The legendary Orpheus was said to embody all four types of ‘divine frenzy’ or ‘divine madness’ which Plato spoke of: poetic, amatory, prophetic and priestly. For instance, Plato believed that the poet, when divinely inspired, is able to communicate the messages of the gods through their flowing lines of verse. In a chart reading the astrologer and client together might achieve something of this ‘altered state’, a feeling that what emerges in the session has an oracular dimension, greater than the sum of its parts, coming from ‘somewhere else’. We cannot claim this as being the result of our own astrological expertise; it is more complex than that. But perhaps if we have made our relationship to the symbols and done the work on ourselves, it encourages such heightened inspiration to enter the consultation space.

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Endnotes

Chart Data (from Astro-Databank - https://www.astro.com/astro-databank/Main_Page)

Marsilio Ficino: 19 October 1433, 13.26 LMT, Figline, Italy.
Carl Jung: 26 July 1875, 19.29, Kesswil, Switzerland.

References CW refer to the volumes of C.G. Jung, *Collected Works*, translated by R. F. C. Hull, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London. Paragraphs are cited as §.

¹ From Stephen Dunn, ‘*Odysseus’s Secret*’, lines 23-27, <https://inwardboundpoetry.blogspot.com/2006/08/191-odysseus-secret-stephen-dunn.html> (accessed 25.9.2019).

² C.G. Jung, *Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious*, CW 9i, §50.

³ C.G. Jung, *Psychological Types*, CW6: Def. 48 §797 and CW 9(ii), §9.

⁴ Or the ultimate truths residing in the divine mind

⁵ C.G. Jung, Response to Andre Barbault, May 1954, from *Collected Letters Vol. II*, translated by R.F.C. Hull, Princeton University Press, Princeton, N.J.: 1975.

⁶ C.G. Jung, *CW 9i*, §5-6.

⁷ See Plato, *Republic* (514a–520a).

⁸ See for instance E.H. Gombrich, *Shadows: The Depiction of Cast Shadows in Western Art*, Yale University Press, New Haven: CT: 2014.

⁹ C.G. Jung, *CW 11: Psychology and Religion: West and East*, §131

¹⁰ Marsilio Ficino, *Letter to Giovanni Cavalcanti* quoted in Angela Voss, *Marsilio Ficino*, North Atlantic Books, Berkeley, CA: 2006.

¹¹ Marsilio Ficino, *Three Books on Life (Book 3, ch.22)* translated by Kaske & Clark, *Medieval & Renaissance Texts & Studies*, Binghamton, NY: 1989. Ficino’s ‘seven steps’ are also outlined in this book.

¹² A. Stevens, *On Jung*, Routledge, London: 1990, p.235.

¹³ C.G. Jung, *Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious*, CW9i, §45.

¹⁴ C.G. Jung and M.L. von Franz, *Man and His Symbols*, Aldus Books, London: 1964, pp.20 & 55.

¹⁵ Joseph Campbell, *Flight of the Wild Gander: The Symbol without Meaning*, New World Library, CA: 2002, p.143.

¹⁶ For example, see H.F. Dunbar, *Symbolism in Medieval Thought and its Consummation in the Divine Comedy*, Yale University Press, New Haven: CT: 1929. For application to astrology, see Angela Voss, ‘From Allegory to Anagoge: the Question of Symbolic Perception in a Literal World’ in *Astrology and the Academy* eds. N. Campion, P. Curry & M. Yorke, Cinnabar Books 2003, available at www.skyscript.co.uk/allegory.html (accessed 25.7.2019).

¹⁷ Angela Voss, *Marsilio Ficino*, p.28.

¹⁸ M.L. von Franz, C.G. Jung - *His Myth In Our Time*, Hodder & Stoughton, London: 1975, p.238.



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