

Hermes Helps with Hermeneutics *moving between interpretation and imagination*

by Brian Clark

While I had a passing awareness that Hermeneutics focused on the practice of interpretation, I had never applied the process to reflect on my astrological practice, especially those times when something else beyond the horoscope, the client, and I happened. Using the Hermeneutic method to articulate the psychic depth of the astrological tradition became apparent to me when I read both Geoffrey Cornelius and Angela Voss's consideration of this process in application to astrological symbols.¹ Their ideas motivated me to meander



Zeus flanked by Hermes and Iris

Symbols speak too

Over the course of my astrological consulting practice, I have witnessed and been involved in many profound and meaningful exchanges that were beyond what I could have ever imagined when I first began seeing clients professionally.² I would describe these experiences as reverent, as something was constellated beyond astrological and psychological techniques and awareness. It mainly occurred when the client was open to exploring the symbol that I was endeavouring to amplify and bring into consciousness. In the process, which often felt muddled, something else happened; sometimes a memory was restored which changed the whole dynamic and atmosphere of the consultation. Or an emotion rising to the surface would bring tears which accompanied an unbereaved loss or the sediment from a painful betrayal. Sometimes in listening to the client's pain I could feel the horoscope symbols responding, without me saying a word. Other times something quite magical would happen like the lights would flicker or a chilly current of air would blow through the room. In these times, the client and I knew that something had changed as if another layer or dimension of feeling had been evoked.

I always recognized this as part of the consultation when the horoscopic images had psychically disturbed something. At this point the consultation turned and no longer was a theoretical, intellectual, or interpretive process that engaged us.

Not all astrologers will necessarily engage any further, as this requires participation with the ambiguity of the unconscious and a willingness to trust their own subjective processes and involvement. I feel it also involves respect and understanding of the unconscious process. While the revelations of the astrological horoscope may be meaningful interpretations and explanations, they do not always pierce what lies beyond the literality of the symbol. Not all enter into the mystery of the symbolic process.

It is not something that is easily illuminated, this mysterious process of how astrology often reveals and heals. Nor is it easy to articulate how astrology opens the doors of perception to correlate the symbol with the experience, to move between imaginal and literal realities. For a long time, I accepted that it was part of the process, especially when the unconscious was stirred and both I and the client were open to exploration.

Hermes Helps with Hermeneutics

Hermeneutics was always a philosophical study that mystified me, but since its ‘folk etymology’ was connected to Hermes, the multifarious god of the in-between, I knew his underlying presence would offer me something of value. Hermes was not just the god of words, but the god who found imagination in the word; hence a god of symbol. Words were symbols, but his sleight of hand could also trick us into thinking we were on the right track when we were not. As a god who was granted access to both worldly and underworldly hemispheres and the god known as the shepherd of dreams, somewhere in this study, I sensed Hermes would offer guidance.

The word *hermeneutics* derives from the Greek to suggest interpretation or explanation. This way of thinking developed in ancient Greece as a means to interpret oracles, myths, dreams, omens, even epic poetry. How important it was, given Hermes was also the god of liars, that the interpretation could be determined to be truth or lie. At Delphi, Pythia, the oracular voice of the divine, delivered her messages in riddles. Since divine messages were ambiguous, irrational, and lacked clarity, an interpretative method to decode it in lay language was often necessary. One of the first ways of thinking about this process was allegorical; that was to express it differently, mainly in a nonliteral way, which attempted to extract a deeper or hidden meaning. What was being signified by the message?

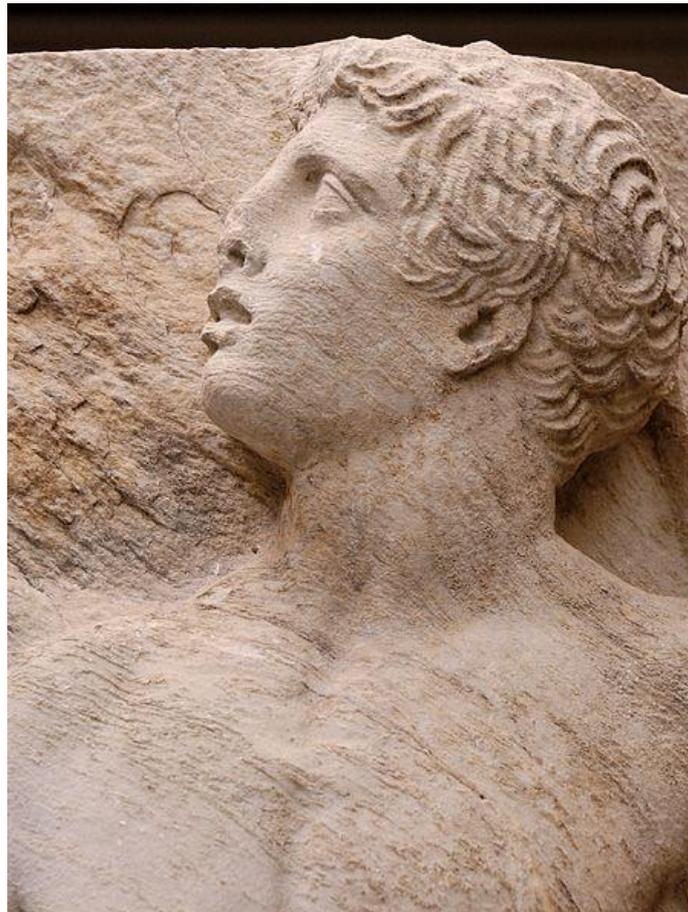


Image of Hermes on a column at Ephesus

However, allegory as a means of perception remains objective. While meaningful and insightful, it does not necessarily activate self-reflection or musing. Astrological symbols are allegorical; for instance, your Saturn in the 7th house might be interpreted as an older partner or a projection of

authority onto others. At this stage the symbol is interpretative. And even though it may be factual or accurate, it does not invite us to consider an inner dimension, nor reflect on a deeper soulful image.

Remaining at Delphi for a moment we are also reminded of another layer of interpretation embedded in the sayings or Delphic maxims which were inscribed on the columns of Apollo's temple. The most commonly known is *Know Thyself*, followed by two others: *Nothing in Excess* and *Surety Brings Ruin*. Something more is being asked of the petitioner by the god: to reflect on self, to be honourable and uncertain. I mention these aphorisms as these speak to the ethical and moral layers of interpretation, which open up a new dimension that the astrological symbol evokes.

Christians used the hermeneutic method to meaningfully amplify the moral lessons in the Bible. By the 3rd Century, a four-fold model of interpretation was being used and it is this model that best helped me to reflect on illuminating the symbolic process.³ I say *process* because in our time we often suggest that the act of interpretation ends with providing a solution or an answer. This focus on the four stages in the interpretative process was of interest to me, as I had spent my adult life 'interpreting' horoscopes. Throughout the process of sitting with clients, something else beyond my own comprehension often occurred when I was focused on a symbol. It was this mystery, beyond the interpretation and separate from the technique, that brought lifeforce into the interactive space between myself and the other.

The four stages of the hermeneutic process that have helped me imagine what happens when we engage with symbols are:

1. The Literal
2. The Allegorical
3. The Tropological or Moral
4. The Anagogic or Mystical

This symbolic process is similar to what James Hillman referred to as 'seeing through', or Henri Corbin suggested was 'penetrating into the invisible', or what Carl Jung said were 'transformers'.⁴ Paul Tillich suggested that every symbol 'opens up a level of reality for which non-symbolic speaking is inadequate,'⁵ as if a symbol opens onto new dimensions of knowing. The symbol is the agent that pierces the literal realm 'into the world of mystery, into the esoteric dimension.'⁶

Let's imagine we are amplifying an image from a dream, a Tarot card, or a horoscopic symbol – the first stage of encountering the symbol is *literal*; for instance, you dreamt of your childhood home; you drew the Moon card or you have Mercury retrograde transiting your 3rd house. All these are literal in that they are unembroidered facts. We can also see constructs like time, or emotions like anger, as being literal.

With *allegory* we assign a meaning to the symbol which is often derived from the conventions of the discipline, whether psychoanalytic, Tarot symbolism, or astrological tradition. For instance, the childhood home is symbolic of your revisiting the innocent past or the atmosphere of the family of origin; the Moon card suggests not everything is as it appears to be, and Mercury retrograde is the time to rethink your school and study strategy. While the interpretations can be much more elaborate and sophisticated, accompanied by the wise use of metaphor, not all students, nor even some practitioners of symbolic processes venture beyond this stage, remaining more objective and impartial, personally removed from the impact or effect of the interactive process.

Next is the **tropological** stage, a turning towards the esoteric or mysterious sense of the symbol. Tropological derives from the Greek *tropos*, *to turn*; one implication is to turn towards the self. At this stage the symbol engages us in subjective experiences and focuses us on an interior and deeper meaning, not in a factual, but a more amplificatory, reflective and personal way. Objectivity and certainty begin to wane; forms of subjective knowing are stirred and constellated through a slip of the tongue, a spontaneous image, a physical reaction, a memory, song lyrics, feelings being awoken, a spur-of-the-moment thought, an emotion bubbling up, recollecting a parallel experience.....when we turn towards these experiences, another way of knowing is aroused. The soul stirs.

When working with a client, this is when the symbol turns to a mutual experience, a transferential level - the shared and subtle coexistence with the 'material and the psychic state of the astrologer'⁷. Without even being conscious the image of the childhood home stirs in the therapist; the subjective experiences of the Moon are awakened in the Tarot reader and the archetype of Mercury stirs in the astrologer as the psychopomp takes us beyond what we consciously know. Both client and other are now involved in a participatory and connective universe; the synchronicity that always exists is evident and held in the psychic container that has been forged between the client and practitioner. Boundaries between the observer and observed, psychotherapist and patient, astrologer and client are dissolving through the subjectivity of feeling.

In the section on the Psychology of the Transference in CW 16: *The Practice of Psychotherapy*, Jung makes an interesting comment about how some psychotherapists find it strange, even ridiculous that 'they should also have a *feeling-relationship* to the contents of the unconscious'. Jung asserts that when the symbol turns, ethics are implied. But it is through subjectivity, not an intellectual or objective approach that this occurs. Jung says:

Feeling always binds one to the reality and meaning of symbolic contents, and these in turn impose binding standards of ethical behavior from which aestheticism and intellectualism are only too ready to emancipate themselves.⁸

The last level is the **anagogic** or the mystical dimension; an inner knowing of divine presence is evoked. No longer an intellectual knowing or an objective statement, there is an inner recognition that the symbol has rung a bell, created a deeper connection to the true self and awoken an authenticity of the feeling life. This inner knowing can now interface with the world in a more meaningful way, facilitating the outer world to become ensouled.

This inner sense of being involved with a divine knowing accepts that the literal world is also connected to my presence in it. This literal world is encompassed within a larger reality of divine sentience. This acknowledgement reenchants the secular world. In this way the symbol brings a sense of wellbeing, even if the symbol is dark or painful. It encourages a sense of hope, even when the symbol is despairing because the sense of the divine and our way through the outer world are now interconnected.

The symbol has turned to hope and acceptance; the stage where Jung suggested the symbol "is psychologically true, for it was and is the bridge to all that is best in humanity"⁹. At this level the symbol evokes the ethical and the honourable, the moral level, which is the key to constellating all that is best in us. When astrological symbols are free to move between the symbolic and the literal, the imaginative and the real, they are a bridge to the divine that reconnects us to the wellsprings of who we are.

Endnotes

CW refers to *The Collected Works of C.G. Jung*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London by volume number and paragraph. All pictures are in the public domain.

¹ See Geoffrey Cornelius, *The Moment of Astrology*, The Wessex Astrologer, UK: 2003, pp. 277-302 and Angela Voss, "From Allegory to Anagoge: The Question of Symbolic Perception in a Literal World" – see <https://www.astrosynthesis.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/From-Allegory-to-Anagoge-Angela-Voss.pdf>

² See Brian Clark, *Soul, Symbol and Imagination: The Artistry of Astrology*, Astrosynthesis, Australia: 2019.

³ Geoffrey Cornelius, *The Moment of Astrology*, pp. 277-302.

⁴ See James Hillman, *Revisioning Psychology*, Harper & Row, New York, NY:1975, p. 140 -145; Henri Corbin "Mysticism and Humour, Spring: 1973, p. 27.; CG Jung, CW 5: 344.

⁵ Paul Tillich, “The Nature of Religious Language”, *Theology of Culture*, Oxford University Press, Oxford: 1959, pp. 56-7.

⁶ Henri Corbin “Mysticism and Humour, p. 27

⁷ Jung called this the ‘secret, mutual connivance’ – see CW 8:905

⁸ CW 16,489

⁹ CW 5: 343