

Simply the World: Astrology & Poetry by John P O'Grady

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At a certain point in an astrologer's experience of reading birth charts, a moment comes when—*click!*—something happens. Gone are the floundering and the hesitation; no need for the awkward dash to the bookshelf for a reference manual. Things have changed utterly: the interpreting suddenly *flows*, as if by magic, and everything "falls into place." The delineations seem to emerge gracefully out of the blue rather than stumble through the smoke of an overworked intellect. "Oh wow, this really works!" Call it the "Astrologer's High," the first of many such felicitous moments—genuine to the core—and no matter how frequently they recur, they should never lose their initial luster. Even the most seasoned of astrologers ought to feel an abiding sense of wonder, that first-flower-of-spring sense of joy, whenever they practice their art.

At the very center of astrology is the act of reading the birth chart. Also known as the horoscope, the birth chart is a mandala-like diagram that plots the relative positions of heavenly bodies as seen from a particular point in space and time. Astrologers like to say that the chart is a map of the heavens at the moment of one's birth, thus a constellation of symbols that may mark the spot where a treasure trove of meaning is found.

Since human beings often prefer divination to indecision, it comes as no surprise that most who visit an astrologer are in the midst of some kind of crisis. And a crisis, as I once heard it defined by Rob Hand, is "a moment in which the past has the least hold on the present and the present has a maximum hold on the future." By peering into the symbolic skies of an individual's chart, the astrologer, via the imaginative act of reading, observes the turbulent weather of the soul and issues a report.

Yet what is it that happens when an astrologer "reads the chart"? What exactly is the nature of this interpretive experience? For many astrologers, the knack for seeing into the birth chart becomes so familiar as to be taken for granted. They speak convincingly of transits, progressions, and even karma generated in past lives, but ask them to describe the actual experience of obtaining this information—in other words, *how they read*—and they go strangely quiet. It reminds me of Saint Augustine's musings on the nature of

time: “I know what it is, but when you ask me I don’t know anymore.”¹

Understandably, most writings on the subject of astrology are intended to teach something of this extraordinary language by elucidating its symbolism and presenting interpretive techniques. The focus is on *what* it all means rather than *how* it comes about. A commendable endeavor, no doubt, but while the astrological literature as a whole yields considerable insight regarding the significance of far flung celestial objects such as the asteroid Charon, it has almost nothing to say about the ordinary yet nonetheless astounding process of interpreting a chart. Why is this the case? Perhaps astrologers have become so habituated to the marvel of their art that the actual experience of reading the birth chart—*as experience*—fades into the background of everyday life, essentially becoming invisible. “We are estranged from that with which we are most familiar,” says the philosopher Heraclitus.² Left hanging is a most vital question: What does it mean to “read” in an astrological way, as opposed to some other way, say a scientific one?

First of all, we must admit that reading a birth chart is a rather unusual method compared to the majority of reading we do in our daily lives, which is directed primarily toward information gathering: the newspaper tells what is going on in the world, *TV Guide* announces what will be broadcast, traffic signs convey the rules of the road, and IRS booklets presumably explain how to fill out tax forms. In each of these cases and countless others, the words on the page are meant to be taken literally. We assume the authors are not employing irony or terms that have obvious multiple meanings; we certainly don’t expect to run into religious or aesthetic symbols. “Just the facts, Ma’am.” Words in these everyday modes are like delivery trucks: once they unload their cargo, they are dispatched and we forget about them. This commonplace form of reading, where language is thought of as a tool to “get the job done,” is essential for accomplishing the day’s business, not only in the marketplace but also in the halls of government and in the ivory towers of academia. Words here are presumed to mean “just what they say.”

Now compare this strictly literal style of reading to what happens when we encounter the words of a poem. Notice I say “encounter,”

¹ Saint Augustine, *Confessions*, Book 11, Chapter 14. Available at: <http://ccat.sas.upenn.edu/jod/augustine/Pusey/book11>

² Charles Olson’s translation, quoted in Devin Johnston, *Precipitations: Contemporary American Poetry as Occult Practice*, Wesleyan University Press, 2002, p. 75.

because a genuinely poetic reading is not about collecting information off the dump-trucks of words, but is a deep and transformative experience. It’s like receiving tidings from a strange messenger who has come out of an exotic territory. Simply put, poetry alters consciousness. Although the words of a poem retain their literal meaning, at the same time they have a far more spacious dimension. Indeed, it is more precise to say that one “steps into” a poem, much as the ancient Roman augurs stepped into the *templum* in order to conduct their divinations. The poem, once entered, becomes a kind of sacred space, where extraordinary things are bound to happen. As soon as the frontier of the poem’s surface (its literal meaning) is crossed, the reader gains entry to a place that is no place, vast in extent, and becomes alert to a flashing darkness on a far off horizon. It’s a signal that registers directly on the heart.

The poet Rainer Maria Rilke observes that “most events are inexpressible, taking place in a realm where no word has entered.”³ Poems are gateways to this realm. If you take care to keep your mind close to your heart—as all good readers of poetry must—this non-verbal aspect of the poetic experience makes perfect sense, even if—and here’s the paradox—it can’t be expressed in words, not even in the words of the poem itself. To add to the bewilderment, the poem’s words are, when you get right down to it, no different from the words in a newspaper: the same ones appear in both places, and the same dictionary definitions apply. How then account for the difference between a poem and what is not a poem?

In a Dialogue attributed to Plato, Socrates remarks: “All poetry, by its nature, is enigmatic, and not everyone can take it in.”⁴ An enigma is a puzzling or highly obscure form of speech. Now, in a democratic and plain-speaking culture such as we have in America, enigmatic speech is rather frowned upon—so much so, that even when it comes to highly valued religious texts that are themselves enigmatic, such as those by the Old Testament prophets and John the Evangelist, there is a marked tendency in the culture to take such works as factual prose. Though “God’s Word” is by nature poetic, many readers insist upon taking it literally.

The same misapprehension extends to more secular varieties of poetry and indeed to astrological interpretation. That astrology has long been the target of self-proclaimed debunkers is attributable not to the reasons they claim—namely, that it is an irrational indulgence or a “pseudo-science”—but to the fact that astrology is more like a

³ Rainer Maria Rilke, *Letters to a Young Poet*, translated by M.D. Herter Norton, W.W. Norton & Company, 1993, p. 17.

⁴ Plato, *Complete Works*, edited by John M. Cooper, Hackett, 1997, p. 605.

form of poetry, employing glyphs rather than words, and if practiced successfully, represents a style of knowing that is totally *other* to that of the scientific method, which itself is steeped in literalism. In other words, consciousness operating under a different set of rules. Little surprise then that the literal-minded debunkers are so wrought with anxiety—they fear losing control.

Now we can see why poetry, not to mention astrological interpretation, presents a supreme challenge to so many people. “All beautiful things are difficult,” is the proverbial wisdom. But nowadays we compound our difficulties, living as we do in a zealously literalist and technological culture. We mistake control for beauty and seek to dominate nature by engineering our will upon it. Free-flowing rivers are dammed into slack water, wild forests are replaced by plantations, and human bodies are coifed, sculpted, and tummy-tucked into a voguish conformity. Even the astrological reading has been reduced by some entrepreneurs to a standardized computer printout.

Our obsession with control extends to language itself: we insist that words should behave. Something of this attitude is evident in the words of the linguist Roman Jakobson, who describes poetry as “organized violence committed on ordinary speech.”⁵ He does not intend it as a compliment. Contrast his view with that of the great poet Gerard Manly Hopkins, who writes that the reader’s task is not to decipher or to explain the poem, but rather to hold it in memory, where one day it might “explode.”⁶ Or Emily Dickinson’s famous definition of poetry as that which takes off the top of your head.⁷ Moving past the “violence” of the imagery, the poetically inclined reader can see that both Hopkins and Dickinson regard poetic experience as nothing less than a prison-break from ordinary consciousness. The mind is set loose for some free and easy wandering. No wonder poetry is looked upon with so much suspicion in our culture—it represents a threat. It does no useful “work.” It attracts the wrong kind of people. In short, it breeds trouble. The same things, of course, are said about astrology.

But there is another way of looking at both poetry and its sister art, and that is from the inside—the inside of the poem or the chart. Poetic experience begins with a provocative human gesture, a calling forth from present circumstances into the Dark Chasm of eternity. The response comes back in the form of an echo. A poem

⁵ Roman Jakobson, “Linguistics and Poetics,” in *Style and Language*, edited by Thomas Sebeok, MIT Press, 1960, pp. 358.

⁶ Gerard Manly Hopkins, *A Hopkins Reader*, Oxford University Press, 1953.

⁷ Thomas Wentworth Higginson, “Emily Dickinson’s Letters,” *The Atlantic Monthly*, October 1891. <http://www.theatlantic.com/unbound/poetry/emilyd/edletter.htm>

is a catastrophe for literalism—catastrophe literally meaning an “overthrow” or “turning things upside down”—a major earthquake or forest fire raging through the soul, in which things that had long been visible are made invisible, and what had been invisible—let’s say darkness itself—is now made visible. To describe this particular aspect of poetic experience, Ananda Coomaraswamy uses the term “aesthetic shock,” which is a state of “agitation, fear, awe, or delight induced by some physically or mentally poignant experience.”⁸ In the old days it was simply called the “Sublime.” In any case, it’s what shakes us to the very core. With this in mind, both lovers of poetry and interpreters of astrological birth charts should concur with Roberto Calasso’s claim that “all the powers of the cult of the gods have migrated into a single, immobile and solitary act: that of reading.”⁹

Yet if poetic experience in whatever form is catastrophic for literalism, it also inaugurates a new, albeit “darker,” phase of human perception. “There are many misteries contained in Poetrie,” says Sidney in his renowned *Defense*.¹⁰ Interpretation occurs at the intersection of three roads: the human condition, the natural world, and what the ancients called the daimonic. It is a magical but dangerous spot. Historically, it’s where criminals were hanged, suicides buried, and witches were alleged to meet. Crossroads were sacred to Hecate, that bronze-sandaled, moon-loving daughter of Zeus and Demeter—Hecate who was said to have at her command all the powers of nature. “Common sense” warns against entering such an unseemly wilderness; no “sane” person would go there. Perhaps this is why Plato equates poetry and madness—the experience of it only arises in those shadowy meeting-grounds on the far side of the mind. Consider Gary Snyder’s description of such a place in his short poem titled “How Poetry Comes to Me”:

It comes blundering over the
Boulders at night, it stays
Frightened outside the
Range of my campfire
I go to meet it at the
Edge of the light¹¹

The backcountry of poetic experience is land untrammelled by literalism or any other ism. Passage through its watersheds is risky.

⁸ Ananda Coomaraswamy, “*Samvega: Aesthetic Shock*” in *Coomaraswamy: Volume 1: Selected Papers Traditional Art and Symbolism*, ed. by Roger Lipsey, Princeton University Press, 1977, p. 182.

⁹ Roberto Calasso, *Literature and the Gods*, Vintage, 2002, p. 22.

¹⁰ Philip Sidney, “Defense of Poetrie” (1595). Available at:

<http://www.uoregon.edu/~rbear/defence.html>

¹¹ Gary Snyder, *No Nature: New and Selected Poems*, Pantheon, 1992, p361.

Wildlife abounds, some of it big and fierce. Nobody will know you are out there. Anything can happen, even the truth.

Yet, if one declines the risk of experiencing poetry—which, I’ll go so far as to say includes not only reading the birth chart but also feeling passion of any kind—one is still confronted with one’s own being in the world, itself a vast and enigmatic poem. (Just like yourself, you rhythmical knot!) Thales, acknowledged by many as the first philosopher in the Western tradition, conceived of the world as a *poiema theou*, a “divine making or poem.”¹² This same view was held by poets throughout ancient times and transmitted down to Shakespeare’s day. Even in the early twentieth century some poets and artists still spoke in terms of the world-as-poem. The Irish writer A-E, for instance, called poetry the “voice” of the mind of the living earth.¹³ Yet, already by his time it was a minority view.

We today have all but lost the capacity for what Jacob Boehme in the seventeenth century called the “sensual language of nature,” a language understood by “birds in the air and animals in the forest according to their species.”¹⁴ As for the human species, it would seem that the ability to experience poetry has become something of a vestigial appendage, appearing in fewer and fewer individuals, who are then regarded by the mainstream as evolutionary throwbacks or freaks.

For the last several decades, students studying poetry in colleges and universities have been indoctrinated in a method called “close reading.” As defined by one popular glossary of literary terms, it is “the detailed and subtle analysis of the complex interrelations and ambiguities (multiple meanings) of the components within a work.”¹⁵ The key word in this definition is “analysis.” So far as I have been able to observe, analysis for the academically trained reader is a license to approach the poem much as the old placer miners approached a hillside of auriferous gravel: they aimed their big water-cannon at the landscape and started blasting away, wreaking havoc and sluicing the murky runoff into boxes where they hoped a few flakes of gold might drop out.

Or to employ a more organic metaphor: the poem, like a specimen on the dissecting table, is reduced to its component parts in order

¹² Erazim V. Kohak, *The Embers and the Stars*, University of Chicago Press, 1984, p.184.

¹³ AE, *The Candle of Vision*, Macmillan, 1918.

¹⁴ Jakob Boehme, *Mysterium magnum ; or, An exposition of the first book of Moses*, translated by John Sparrow, London, J. M. Watkins, 1924, Chap. 35, sections 59-60.

¹⁵ C. Hugh Holman, *A Handbook to Literature*, Macmillan, 1986.

to explain how it works. This approach is strictly intellectual, some might even say scientific, and its goal is to produce a clever exegesis. Missing is any attention to emotion, to lived experience. Just as the butterfly afloat in a world full of flowers is far removed from the pinned specimen in the cabinet, so the poem in the heart of one experiencing it is a far cry from what happens to it in the heads of the academic laborers whose business it is to categorize, explicate, and historicize literary “texts.” Nietzsche is right: “We talk so abstractly about poetry because all of us are usually bad poets.”¹⁶ Astrology has suffered a fate of similar kind.

Most astrologers today speak in terms that make it difficult to distinguish their own style of consciousness from that of their ungenerous opponents, the literal-minded debunkers. They seem beholden to a misplaced belief in causality. Writes one practitioner in a previous issue of *The Mountain Astrologer*: “But within each of our charts, and each of our lives, *the heavy-handed influence of the Saturn-Pluto opposition has been brought to bear on any number of issues.*” In the very next article, we find: “The Pentagon is *under the direct jurisdiction of the strict, uncompromising, uniform-wearing planet Saturn.*” And finally, another writer, same issue: “The Sun’s upcoming trine to restless Jupiter and its square to that fatiguing taskmaster Saturn *make you* pace around the home or office, waiting for the continuous cold or humidity to let up.” [Italics added in each case.] Even if we grant the figures of speech, these astrologers regard the planets as *causes*. Such examples are not difficult to find in contemporary astrology; they are, in fact, the norm. I don’t cite them to refute their predictive accuracy or belittle their authors. Rather, I wish to show how deeply ingrained is the malady of literalism in our culture. And how odd to find it among astrologers, whose very practice is so deeply rooted in poetic experience. It would appear that there is no escaping the urge to read literally and to attribute causality where none is warranted.

“The stars are not causes,” says Plotinus.¹⁷ Or as Heraclitus puts it: “The lord whose oracle is at Delphi neither indicates clearly nor conceals but gives a sign.”¹⁸ Meister Eckhart issues a similar admonition against literalism: “That person never gets to the underlying truth who stops at the enjoyment of its symbol.”¹⁹ (19)

¹⁶ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, Cambridge University Press, 1999, p.43.

¹⁷ Plotinus. “Are the Stars Causes?” in *Enneads*, Larson Publications, 1992, pp.104-119.

¹⁸ Heraclitus, “Fragment 93,” in *Fragments: A Text and Translation with a Commentary by T.M. Robinson*, University of Toronto Press, p. 57.

¹⁹ *Meister Eckhart*, vol. 1, translated by Fritz Evans, John M. Watkins, 1947, p. 187.

Literalism is the path to idolatry. Of all people, astrologers ought to recognize this. Their job in “reading” the birth chart is not to parse it for malign and beneficial “influences,” but to express it deeply as a poem, and then base their interpretations upon that experience. Not only would they then be better equipped to counter the misunderstandings of their graceless and ill-informed critics, but also they would serve as better guardians of the mysteries that their vocation demands they reveal.

When it comes to poetic experience of any kind, we very much need to cultivate the ability to read closely—close, not in the sense of those academic technicians from the universities, but close in the sense of being intimate. Faced with the poem or the astrological birth chart, we don’t need to “pull it apart” so much as we need to draw it into our heart, where in turn it will lead us to that place that is no place, where wisdom abides. We must be prepared to admit that some poems—and some birth charts—are simply impenetrable to analysis. You hear tell of astrologers who, upon first looking at an unfamiliar chart, will break into tears, or let out a little sigh, or simply shudder. No astrological manual provides the gloss for these phenomena. Such emotive responses will remain forever “dark” to analysis. Words will never explain them. Even so, these “aesthetic shocks” are no less meaningful—and who is to say that the unsayable is not *the most meaningful experience of all?*

Many astrologers in defense of their art cite Carl Jung, who theorized that at the very deepest levels of the human psyche lie the archetypes of the collective unconscious. The archetypes are “primordial images” expressed in dreams, myths, poetry, and art of any kind. One time he was asked by a student, “So, what lies beneath the archetypes?” Jung responded, “Simply the world.” How ironic then that it is sometimes necessary to leave the world and make long journeys through those dark caverns of the soul—otherwise known as the “underworld”—and come out on the other side, only to discover we are right back in the very place whence we set out. The Zen teaching applies: “Before I studied Zen, mountains were just mountains, and water was just water. Then I studied a little Zen, and suddenly mountains were more than mountains, and water more than just water. But now that I have experienced Zen deeply, once again mountains are just mountains, and water is just water.” The same might be said of astrology.

We read poetically in order to sound the depths of experience. At the bottom of every poem—as well as every birth chart, dream, and kiss—is simply that most venerable of all poems, the world itself.



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