



THE TRANSFORMING TRADITION

by Brian Clark

Author's Note: This is an edited version of an opening address given at the 22nd Conference of the FAA (Federation of Australian Astrologers) on January 18, 2018 in Melbourne, Australia (<http://www.faa-inc.org.au/faa-conference-2018/>). I shifted the title of this talk from the conference theme of “Transforming the Tradition” to “The Transforming Tradition,” to place emphasis on the tradition of astrology and its innate tendency to shape-shift, as it has done throughout the last two millennia.

Astrology has an extensive tradition. But what is the essence at the heart of this tradition? What lies beneath the spectrum of horoscopic symbols, techniques, and theories? And how do we find ourselves immersed or baptized in astrology and yet not fully comprehend or realize what it is that we are a part of? I hope to address these questions and others in this article.

The word “tradition” derives from the Latin *tradere*, meaning “to transmit, to hand over, to give for safekeeping.” Tradition suggests the passing-on of information, knowledge, or beliefs by word of mouth or practice. It implies a long-established and inherited way of thinking, perhaps even going back thousands of years. Embedded within a tradition are continuing patterns of cultural beliefs and customs that have similar and recognizable methods, rituals, techniques, and procedures; hence, astrology is a perfect fit for this definition of tradition.

While astrology’s centre of attention may shift — techniques morph, predictions get made, and methodologies come and go — the essence of astrology never changes. At times astrology has nearly died, at other times it has thrived, but it has always survived. For thousands of years, it has been a picture language, an amalgam of symbols, shaped through the human imagination that the heavens inspire. Much of our tradition has been passed down orally, so our practices are often more subjective than objective.

Astrology, the study of the stars, looks to the vault of the heavens and inspires us — its students — to discover mean-

ing, purpose, and direction from the images projected onto the canvas of the night sky. Our tradition is an ancient symbolic language and, as Dane Rudhyar implied, when we know this language, the sky speaks to us.¹

This shared symbolic language of our craft is how our tradition survives. Whether expressed plainly or poetically, clinically or emotionally, in a traditional or a modern tongue, there is a common foundation, a shared touchstone that elevates astrology to the status of one of humanity’s oldest traditions. No matter what dialect we speak, we all are heartened when we look up at the night sky and see a Venus–Jupiter conjunction, and we all moan when we become aware of Saturn bearing down on our Sun. Coherence across our tradition bonds us: Astrology is always changing, yet always remains the same. Unaltered by its temporary forms, it remains eternal.

But what is this essence at the heart of astrology? What is the inner character beneath the spectrum of horoscopic symbols? Here are some musings.

An Encounter with the Divine

There is a spiritual or religious element to our tradition. I am not referring to an organized religion, but an encounter with something larger than ourselves: a sense of the divine, a calling — murmurs from the soul. Astrology is divinatory by nature, informed by the measurement of a sky that is populated with personifications of the divine; hence, we could liken the tradition of astrology to an informed imagination or a considered encounter with the divine.

The astrological tradition is unique in that it calls us in its own way. Unlike most traditions, astrology cannot be systematized or regulated. It relies on another way of knowing that is beyond the rational, the factual, or the cognitive. This perceptive knowing of the heavens weaves a cohesive and colourful thread through the tapestry of astrological tradition. We cannot really be involved with astrology without encountering and considering the divine, as our craft consistently calls out the names of the gods. I remember, years ago, how delighted I was when the textbook for my Classical Mythology course

credited astrology with prolonging the survival of the classical gods.²

In the 2018 FAA Conference program, there are quotes from some voices of the past that refer to the reverie and the spirited dimension of our study. Here is one, from Vettius Valens:

... but when I lit upon the divine and revered theory of the heavens, I wished to purify my way of life of every vice and pollution, and anticipate the immortal soul. From that point divine things seemed to converse with me, and I acquired the intellectual capacity for sober investigation.³

Well, let's leave out the "purifying every vice and pollution" and the "sober" bit for now, and appreciate the strand of the divine that passes through astrology — this fibre of our tradition that looks to the imaginative heavens for inspiration, infinite in its possibilities. We might equate this with a mystery or Hermetic tradition, as it serves human development, but again this tradition in astrology cannot be easily categorized. It is divinatory in nature, seeking guidance from the divine or from a force greater than ourselves. Whether we call this force Goddess, the universe, the unconscious, archetypes, planets, patterns, or karma, its character is beyond human sensibilities.

We may have an intellectual curiosity about astrology and be fascinated, amazed, and sometimes disquieted by its accuracy. To me, it seems that part of the tradition is that astrology remains astonishing, incredible, staggering, because it reveals what we have not seen before. It is divine in that it lives in the sky — cosmic in the truest sense in that it is perfect in its beauty, yet unknowable to the human mind.

A Multitude of Techniques

Embedded within our tradition are countless ways to learn the language of the stars. But we can confuse technique with tradition. Our tradition includes technical information, but this is not its heart. Astrological tradition embraces the elegance of multiple techniques, many of which change over time, and, as with all traditions, some customs are lost, then re-found. Techniques open doors, but our tradition is how we see beyond these techniques.

We may be overwhelmed by the complexity of astrological methods, confused by the multiplicity of procedures, and disheartened by the contradictory formulas available; however,

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these are necessary initiations into the rituals of astrological practice. We sort through the endless array of tools to see which ones are best for us. While we might marvel at the sophistication and accuracy of technique, we can never say that one technique is better than the other. If we do, then astrol-

ogy is brought to the level of intellectual debate and proof, rendering it factual. Our tradition involves the intelligence of the symbol, which opens the portal to another way of knowing: one that is beyond the rational.

Symbols: The Poetic Language of the Soul

Our tradition uses symbols to awaken meaning and stimulate insight. Astrology invites us to inhabit a symbolic life that values the sacred and the mysterious, a life that nurtures the soul. Entangled in our workaday responsibilities and domestic tasks, we can easily lose contact with our symbolic life. Symbols are all around us, even in the midst of our everyday jobs and mundane duties. The astrological horoscope contains a remarkable arrangement of symbols that invite us to be imaginative. It is through the art of synthesizing the horoscopic symbols that we continue the tradition.

Symbols are agents for what is nameless, ambassadors for what is unidentified. Therefore, the intellect can find great significance in symbols, for they add value to what cannot be conveyed through a philosophical or conceptual framework. A symbol is uncommitted in that it does not stand for something specific; it does not judge or moralize, but directs us beyond itself to a meaning or revelation, giving form to the forgotten truths of who we really are.

Many years ago, I remember my teacher Isabel Hickey saying that "astrology deals with symbols, and the soul speaks

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and thinks in symbols,"⁴ and how necessary it was to find a way to let the symbols reveal themselves. Dare I say that was more than 40 years ago, and the same symbols in my horoscope keep revealing deeper layers and levels of meaning. Symbols are not fixed but keep living, being animated and brought to life by our considered inquiry into them.

Symbolic language and images are used by all religions in an effort to honour the realm of the divine or what is beyond the scope of human comprehension. Symbols are the poetic language of the soul. Every symbol opens up a level of interior reality that is beyond our cognitive understanding, yet mysteriously they correspond with our exterior reality. So, in a way, each symbol of the horoscope has two faces: one which opens up reality and one which opens up the soul.⁵

Astrological symbols are two-edged. The language of astrology is an intricate symbolic language which bridges the two worlds of earth and heaven, night and day, and literality and imagination, revealing both the literal world and the soul. Our tradition of astrology ascribes meaning to symbols, neither fixing nor defining them, yet allowing them to inform our imagination. Our tradition is imaginative, forged from the information that the cycles, passages, and returns of the heavenly

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bodies provide. As suggested, we might call it an *informed imagination* or a *considered intuition*. The technique defines what is being considered, its area, quality, and attributes, but it is our imagination that opens the portal of its possibilities.

Our tradition predates the rise of rationalism. The starry heavens are still as inspiring and revealing as they were before they became precisely measured and separated; the planets are still as divine and constant as when they were first witnessed. To participate with their revelations and be touched by their divinity, we do not only measure and look at them, but we look *through* them, to the eternity of the cosmos and its mysteries. And this is the essence of the metaphor that moves astrologers, no matter what their beliefs: The starry heavens are the eternal and constantly reassuring experience of a world far greater than our understanding; the starry heavens are beyond our intelligence and perfectly ordered in their own nature.

Whenever we refer to the heavens, we honour intelligence superior to our own and participate with the mystery and sacredness of the spirit that animates the cosmos. Astrology nurtures the pre-rational psyche, where the divine can still be witnessed every night in the sky full of stars.

Imaginative Truths

Astrology's root metaphor of the starry heavens underscores all its techniques and methods, no matter which school of thought we follow. It's no wonder that magic is experienced by its practitioners who participate with astrology, whether their focus is financial or psychological, traditional or modern. But we cannot appease the rationalists nor allay the criticism of sceptics, because imaginative truths cannot be measured or weighed. Neither are they visible in a test tube or under a microscope.

It is the third ear that hears the metaphor and the third eye that sees through the literality of the measured sky into its inspired revelations. Urania, the muse of astrology, reminds us that the sky's bright night lights captured our imagination and guided us long before we had the means to measure them or articulate their synchrony. We cannot easily find words for astrology's mystery, nor do we need to. Once we are moved by its profound revelations, astrology lives in us, not outside in a world that needs to corroborate an experience.

The Call to Astrology

For most of our history (with, of course, notable exceptions), astrology has not been part of the mainstream. It often flows in another direction, especially when there is no context for imagination in the culture.

In the modern era, astrologers often feel disenfranchised and marginalized, yet we communally bond together to celebrate our tradition, as we do at conferences. We create organizations like the FAA⁶ to house our astrological profession, to collectively recognize who we are, and to be responsible for our tradition (by setting standards and promoting ethical practice, for instance). But as a profession, astrology is still vocational in that working astrologers make their own path, without holiday pay or sick pay, a minimum wage, or a guaranteed income.

Astrologers are called to the path of astrology, but that does not necessarily suggest being a full-time professional. To me, what it does suggest is being responsible for the tradition. As a beginner student, we may feel a great responsibility to get it "right" when doing someone's chart. Yet, ironically, it is only we who *can* get it "right." Our first task is to ensure that we have thoroughly studied the astrological principles, practices, and techniques before we embark on astrological evaluations or appraisals. But as we begin to participate and engage with the symbols of our and others' charts, we are on our own. While what we see or sense or feel or know is

informed by the horoscopic symbols, it is drawn up through us into that moment. We are in a participatory reality, as our own understanding and experience enlighten the symbol's meaning.

Astrology is a path, and we all walk differently down this path. There is no right way for everyone, only the way, and that is defined by us, our temperament, or, as Isabel Hickey would say, our past lives. When we are on the path of astrology, we have guides, teachers, and colleagues who can help us to understand, but our experiences and insights will be different from theirs; therefore, our tradition can include feelings of solitariness.

Yet there is also a tradition of others who have gone the same route and discovered the magic and mystique for themselves, as you will. This is why I always promote supervision and peer discussion among ourselves. Traditions recognize the oral transfer of knowledge and an apprenticeship model of learning through their valued elders. Astrology has a legacy of remarkable teachers who have preceded us and given us their wisdom of depth and value. To recognize the elder is important, and to know that the elder shows us things in ways we may not always understand or accept — this is the path of wisdom. We find our teachers and, as one of my earlier teachers always said, “the student surpasses the teacher,” which is in the tradition of a tradition.

Symbolic Sensitivity, Magical Thinking

There is magic to astrology. We might look at this in two ways: organized or formal magic and spontaneous magic. Astrology has had a historical association with magic — the Greek Magical Papyri and the *Picatrix* come to mind. While the tradition may have flirted with organized magic, in itself it is magical, not through any technique, spell, chant, or Full Moon ritual, but through an authentic participation in and sensitivity to its symbols. Many astrologers have experienced magic, spiritualism, the occult, and all forms of mysteries that enchant us, but for me, the tradition of magic in astrology arises through the spontaneous and participatory work with the symbol. Astrological magic is not manipulated, but works through us when we engage, honour, and participate with its symbols in an intelligent and respectful way.

Practitioners of magic were magi, and throughout ancient times, these included the practitioners of astrology. Our tradition has also been linked to the ancient role of priest and seer. In some way, this magic of astrology is the *seeing through* or *seeing beyond* — although, at times, it can become entwined with magical practice. Still, it is not a literal magic, but the magic of the stars. Whether we call it synchronicity, the psyche, or a sixth sense, astrological practice opens a portal to another world.

William Lilly springs to mind. When Lilly began to practise astrology, he was also experimenting with various forms of occultism, such as descriptions of talismanic magic, crystal gazing, the invocation of spirits, and other “incredibilia,” as he called them. As he suggests, it was his active involvement with these practices that contributed to his decline in health, “growing lean and spare and every day worse.”⁷ This was the impetus that helped him to turn away from his magical practices, and a few years later he burned his magical textbooks. Can we deduce that Lilly's magical learning inspired his suc-

cesses with his horary work? I am more inclined to see Lilly as being innately attuned magically, just as some are more symbolically attuned or spiritually attuned, so to speak. When the tradition is practised, magic happens, symbols speak, and the spirit moves. We do not have to manufacture magic or force it to happen; it happens instinctively when we are open to its symbols. Over time, this becomes more apparent. Like any tradition, it is important to let this develop at its own speed.

If we were to assign a Greek divinity to magic, it would be Hecate. And she was the daughter of Asteria, whose name

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loosely means “starry one” or “of the stars,” derived from the Greek *aster*. Magic was always connected with the stars. Interestingly, Apollo, the god of oracles, is Asteria's nephew and Hecate's first cousin, so magic, oracles, and the stars are aligned in Greek myth.

Soul, Personality, and Power

The characterizations of soul and its relationship to the horoscope vary considerably throughout astrological tradition, depending on the epoch, the practitioner, their spiritual beliefs, and their philosophical orientation. Even though soul is ambiguous and open to interpretation, this question of soul is the heartbeat of astrology. “Soul” conjures up a collection of ideas, images, beliefs, and feelings; however, one thing seems common, and this is that soul appears unworldly and eternal. It is an invisible quality that breathes life into the life, a smouldering ember that becomes a passionate flame. Soul cannot be manufactured or commoditized, but is present in an ephemeral thought, a profound experience, in reflective and timeless moments, or in feeling the anguish of being human.

Soul's early linguistic roots were associated with the breath of life in the body. Yet soul conveys something more than just breath — it is what gives life its force, depth, and substance. As an image of the life breath, soul authenticates the natal horoscope, which could be likened to a lifelong meditation on the first breath of life. The horoscope is akin to soul. Its amalgam of symbols stimulates contemplation on living a heartfelt life, and reveals our inner world and spiritual character. I imagine the horoscope to be like a vivid dream, the dream of one's life. And like a dream, it calls us to participate in a conversation with our soul, whatever we might imagine that to be. Like the soul itself, the horoscope spans two worlds — the incarnate and the heavenly — and can exist in the past, the present, or the future, while still remaining timeless.

I feel that the practice of astrology is an act of soul-making, since being involved with its symbols helps us to internalize them, to temper them, to be mindful and respectful

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of them. We ensoul our world through being actively engaged with astrological symbols, and when our world is ensouled, it becomes richer, more meaningful, and soulful. As we connect with the symbols of our horoscopes, they become internalized psychic realities and soulful as well. We might have many concepts of soul and its journey, but ultimately the tradition is engaged in the question of soul and its mystery.

Yet, like all traditions, astrology has shadows and dangers that might lead us into grandiosity, inflation, and absolutism when we think we have the answers — or, worse, *the* answer to everything. When James Hillman spoke to a group of astrologers in Bath in 2005, he mentioned the danger of astrology's "emotionally compelling power," suggesting that "because astrology is archetypal, it is compellingly powerful and therefore dangerous."⁸ When personality is positioned before soul, the power of astrology may be used with arrogance rather than humility. There is often a conundrum with how astrology is used, as the soul and the personality are like the Piscean fish moving in opposite directions. Are our insights and understanding used to support and develop the tradition of astrology, or simply ourselves and our ambition?

Astrological knowing can unleash a power, a mesmerizing power which can elevate us yet not rescue us. When in the grips of this power, we may be inflated with what we know (or think we know), offer advice rather than assistance, become certain and try to be convincing. When inflated, we are caught in a binary way of thinking, set adrift from an oracular way of knowing that arises through the void of not knowing. Unknowing allows us to be open to knowing. Therefore, it is important to tend to our self-development and mindfulness first, and as the Zen parable advises, we must wash dishes, clean house, and take care of ourselves before astrology finds its niche in the context of our everyday lives.

The supplicants who petitioned the divine at the Delphic temple of Apollo were reminded to "Know Thyself." The art of divination needs contemplation and consideration before the meaning can become clear — it is not a straightforward process. Knowing becomes knowledge through this discriminatory and reflective process.

The danger that Hillman struggled with "for many years in many ways in many writings [was] *literalism*."⁹ The astrologer is often coerced into becoming literal, factual, and predictive, or pressured into telling clients what they want to hear. Part of our tradition is to voice the symbol and, in doing so, to see through it, beyond it, to be oracular. It is a great danger if we take the astrological images to mean that they exist in chronological or earthly time. As I mentioned previously, the irony is that these images often do, but it is not through cause-effect or a Saturn transit, but through an unexplainable phenomenon that occurs through mythic and symbolic participation when we mindfully engage with astrological imagery.

I have pondered astrology as language, religion, and magic; I've skimmed over science and philosophy, mentioned soul, and ignored character analysis. Our tradition is a composite of all these things, and, like any composite, the whole

is always greater than the sum of its parts. Astrology's nature is revelatory and insightful; yet, ironically, we are often unable to find adequate words to truly express its essence and depth. Astrological insights and truths can be witnessed, but most importantly they are experienced through the power of astrology's symbolic language. Astrological inspiration is informed, its imagination is focused, its revelations are considered. It is heavenly, yet not beyond our reach.

Astrology evokes reverence due to the grandeur of space and the beauty of the heavens. Its tradition preserves the imagination of the night sky, this magical umbrella that covers our heads and inspires us to become engaged with the larger mysteries of life. Even when used playfully with lightness and humour, astrology transports us to another way of knowing, a way that brings about astonishment, admiration, and respect in us.

References and Notes

(All URLs were accessed in February 2018, unless otherwise noted.)

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