SIGNS, SIGNATURES, AND SYMBOLS: THE LANGUAGES OF HEAVEN

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ABSTRACT: This paper explores the perception and use of astrological symbols—'glyphs' and stylised images for the planets and zodiacal signs—in contemporary astrological currents as well as in different historical contexts. Can there be such a thing as a 'symbolic' astrology, or is all astrology symbolic? And if so, what does this term mean? How does a symbol differ from a sign, a metaphor, a signature, or an allegory? 'Symbol' is assigned a variety of connotations in contemporary academic usage, from a linguistic referent to a means of establishing social identity, and these connotations may differ widely from the way astrological symbols have been understood in the past and are understood now by astrological practitioners of various persuasions. The manner in which symbols, at different historical epochs, have been perceived as magical or talismanic—containing or embodying the thing symbolised—will be examined in relation to both the astrological glyphs and the charactêres or 'eye-writing' found in astral magic over the centuries.

THE POWER OF IMAGES

I would like to begin my paper with a brief scenario. Two astrologers—they might be contemporary, or they might belong to an earlier historical epoch—are discussing the natal horoscope of one of their clients. They might have an actual horoscope in front of them, laboriously hand-drawn on parchment, papyrus, or vellum; or they may be viewing a computer-generated horoscope on a PowerPoint presentation at a conference. The design of the 'nativity', as it was once called, might differ according to the cultural context, as the three birth charts shown in figures 1 and 2 below—from late antiquity, the early modern period, and the twenty-first century—demonstrate.

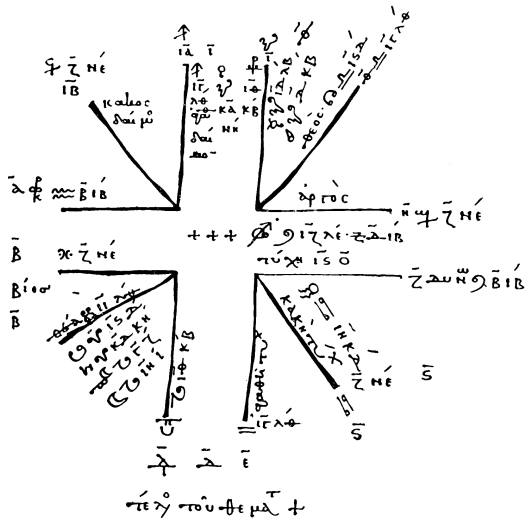
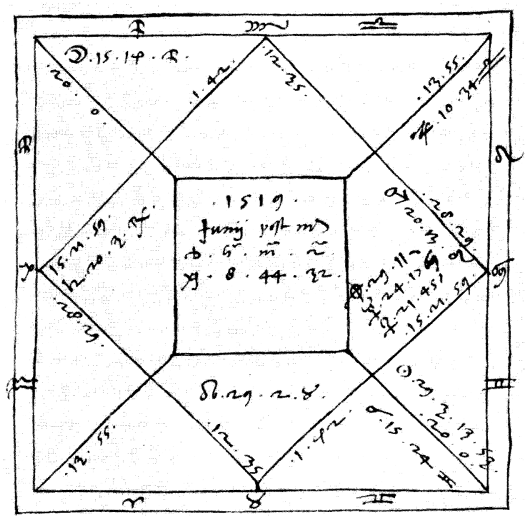


Fig. 1: Greek horoscope set for 28 October, 497 CE.[1]



[1] Otto Neugebauer and H. B. van Hoesen, *Greek Horoscopes* (Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 1987), [Hereafter Neugebauer and van Hoesen, *Greek Horoscopes*], p. 156.

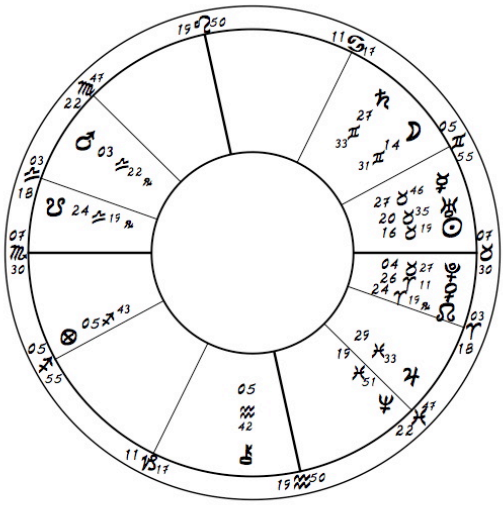


Fig. 2: Top, horoscope of Cosimo I de' Medici (1519–1574), produced in 1537. Bottom, horoscope of Sigmund Freud (1856–1939), calculated on an Apple iMac with software produced by Time Cycles Research.[2]

Horoscopes from the Renaissance and early modern period tend to be square, while modern ones are circular. For many centuries only the seven 'planets' visible to the naked eye—Sun, Moon, Mercury, Venus, Mars, Jupiter, and Saturn—were included; in more recent times the celestial objects have proliferated and include planets discovered in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries such as Uranus and Neptune, as well as asteroids and 'centaurs' from the Kuyper Belt beyond Pluto. But the structure and primary components of the horoscope have remained consistent.

Equally, our two astrologers might not have any actual document before them, but are discussing something they can see in their mind's eye. And they can both see the same thing. One of them gestures toward a particular point in the chart; it is the planet Mars, whose symbol or glyph has remained recognisable for a millennium and a half.

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[2] Horoscope of Cosimo I, Firenze, Bibl. Medicea Laurenziana, Pluteo 89 sup., 34, 'Astrologia, magia e alchimia nel Rinascimento fiorentino ed europeo', in Claudia Beltramo Ceppi and Nicoletta Confuorto, eds., *Firenze e la Toscana dei Medici nell' Europa del Cinquecento* (Florence: Electa Editrice, 1980), [Hereafter Ceppi and Confuorto, 'Astrologia, magia e alchimia'], p. 380.

Fig. 3: Left to right, Greek Mars, 497 CE; Mars from the horoscope of Cosimo I de' Medici, 1537; Francis Barrett's Mars, from The Magus, 1801; computer-generated Mars, 2010.[3]

This consistency might lead us to imagine that the same principle applies to all the astrological symbols. But other planetary glyphs are not so obliging. Among the extant horoscopes from the Hellenistic period analysed by Neugebauer and van Hoesen, the only planetary symbols that appear, according to these authors, are those of the Sun and Moon; there are no glyphs for the zodiacal signs, and those for the five planets, as well as the signs, only begin to appear during the fifth century CE. The symbol for the Moon in these nativities is, not surprisingly, connoted by the lunar crescent, but the Sun appears in this peculiar form:

Fig. 4: Left, Greek Sun, late fifth century CE; right, the Sun in the horoscope of the emperor Hadrian (76–138 CE), fourth century CE.[4]

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[3] Greek Mars: Neugebauer and van Hoesen, *Greek Horoscopes*, p. 156. Mid-sixteenth-century Mars: Ceppi and Confuorto, 'Astrologia, magia e alchimia', p. 378. Early nineteenth-century Mars: Francis Barrett, *The Magus, or Celestial Intelligencer, Being a Complete System of Occult Philosophy* (London: Lackington & Allen, 1801), p. 175.

[4] Greek Sun: Neugebauer and van Hoesen, *Greek Horoscopes*, p. 156. Hadrian's horoscope, cast in the second century CE and drawn in the fourth century by Hephaistion of Thebes, in Frederick H. Cramer, *Astrology in Roman Law and Politics* (Chicago: Ares, 1996), p. 165.

No early astrological text has illuminated the meaning and origin of this symbol, which is so unlike the obvious rayed solar symbols found in much older Bronze Age monuments. This late antique rendition of the Sun also ignores the Apollonian symbol of the point within the circle, evidenced on coins from the Sun-god's shrine at Delphi dated as early as the fifth century BCE.[5] The point in the circle, ubiquitous in contemporary astrological texts, appears for the first time as a specific astrological significator in Renaissance printed books.[6]

Fig. 5: The Sun as it has been portrayed in horoscopes from the Renaissance to the present.

The solar symbol in these Greek horoscopes from late antiquity might easily be mistaken for Mars, since there is a decidedly phallic quality implicit in its shape. It is certainly not intended to reproduce in diagrammatic form the physical disc of the Sun: it is a symbol, rather than a stylised representation. There is, however, one textual source which might possibly illuminate why the Sun was symbolised in these horoscopes as a phallic power: the recently discovered papyrus document known as the Derveni Papyrus, an Orphic text comprising a hymn, probably written in the fifth century BCE or earlier, and interpreted by an Orphic initiate and allegorist of the time of Philip II of Macedon, the father of Alexander the Great, in the early fourth century BCE. The allegorist informs us:

> Since in his [Orpheus'] whole poetry he speaks about facts enigmatically, one has to speak about each word in turn. Seeing that people consider that generation is dependent upon the genitalia, and that without the genitals there is no becoming, he used this word, likening the sun to a phallus. For without the sun the things that are could not have become such...[7]

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[5] See *British Museum Catalogue of Greek Coins, Central Greece* (1963), Plate 14, no. 4, 24, and 33.
[6] See Neugebauer and van Hoesen, *Greek Horoscopes*, p. 163.
[7] Gábor Betegh, *The Derveni Papyrus: Cosmology, Theology and*

It is possible that Orphic currents, emerging in Presocratic Greece and exercising a profound influence on the development of Platonic and Neoplatonic philosophies, might also, in their preoccupation with astral and eschatological matters, have contributed to the development of a system of astral symbols to connote not any physical heavenly body, but the specific qualities and attributes of those celestial divinities for whom the actual planets were themselves understood to be symbols.[8]

Our two astrologers are therefore not looking at any literal representation of a concrete object. The consistency of the symbols of the signs and planets which comprise what today's astrologers understand as a birth chart has been firmly established since the arrival of the printed book, but the origins of these figures are obscure and they seem to have followed a complex and circuitous route over the centuries which has been anything but consistent—not only in their visual presentation, but in the ways in which they have been understood. Contemporary astrologers tend to describe these figures as symbols, as we will see later; but the word 'symbol' has itself gone through considerable shifts in meaning depending on which culture, and which academic paradigm, it is being viewed through. I would like now to explore some of these views on the nature of symbolism, and a few of the ways in which astrological symbols, now thoroughly codified and recognised by any astrologer

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Interpretation (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), [Hereafter Betegh, *Derveni Papyrus*], Col. 13.

[8] For Orphic cosmologies and theogonies, see Betegh, *Derveni Papyrus*; W. K. C. Guthrie, *Orpheus and Greek Religion* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1952); M. L. West, *The Orphic Poems* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983); Walter Burkert, *Babylon, Memphis, Persepolis: Eastern Contexts of Greek Culture* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), pp. 71–98; M. L. West, '*Ab ovo*: Orpheus, Sanchuniathon and the Origins of the Ionian World Model', *The Classical Quarterly* 44, no. 2 (1994): pp. 289–307; Robert Eisler, *Orpheus the Fisher: Comparative Studies in Orphic and Early Christian Cult Symbolism* (London: Watkins, 1921); Vittorio D. Macchioro, *From Orpheus to Paul: A History of Orphism* (London: Constable, 1930); Peter Kingsley, *Ancient Philosophy, Mystery, and Magic: Empedocles and Pythagorean Tradition* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995); Alberto Bernabé and Ana Isabel Jiménez San Cristóbal, *Instructions for the Netherworld: The Orphic Gold Tablets* (Leiden: Brill, 2008).

anywhere in the world familiar with Western astrological practices, have been and are perceived.

SYMBOLS AND PICTORIAL REPRESENTATIONS

Pictorial images of the constellations can be dated back to the Babylonians. Figure 6 shows a *kudurru* or boundary-stone, ca. 1100 BCE, portraying various celestial objects including the constellation of the Scorpion. Iconographic representations of the circle of the zodiac can likewise be dated back to antiquity; the so-called 'altar' of Gabii, ringed by the twelve Olympian gods associated with the zodiacal signs as described in Manilius' poem, the *Astronomica*, is, like the poem, from the first century CE. The artifact shown below (fig. 7) is unusual because its specific iconography is clarified by Manilius' text.[9] There are innumerable examples of such pictorial representations of the circle of the zodiac throughout history, expressed in many cultures and embedded in settings ranging from calendars to churches to iPhone apps. It might seem simple to work out how the symbols for the zodiacal signs could have been derived from such pictorial forms—the horns of the ram are replicated in the glyph for Aries, the head of the bull in Taurus, the twins in the two pillars of Gemini, the claws of the crab in Cancer, and so on. But here, as with the symbols for the planets, there are considerable variations, and some bear no resemblance to the zodiacal creatures they are meant to designate (fig. 8).

[9] For the twelve gods as rulers of the signs of the zodiac, see Manilius, *Astronomica*, 2.433.

Fig. 6: Babylonian kudurru ca. 1100 BCE portraying the constellation of the Scorpion.[10]

[10] British Museum 102485. See Leonard King, *Babylonian Boundary-Stones and Memorial-Tablets in the British Museum* (London: British Museum, 1912), pp. 76–79, Plates I–IV.

Fig. 7: Left, the altar of Gabii, first century CE, Louvre MA 666. Right, drawing of the altar flattened into two dimensions to show the zodiacal sign associated with each deity.

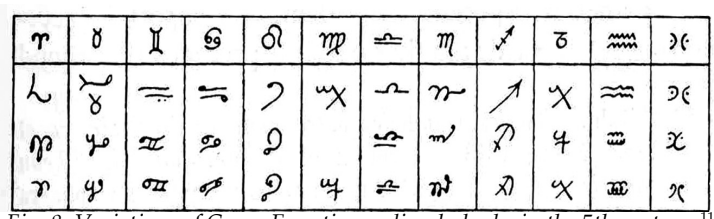

Fig. 8: Variations of Greco-Egyptian zodiacal glyphs in the 5th century.[11]

And there is also the question of why these particular images—ram, bull, twins, crab—have themselves became meaningful symbols. It seems somewhat specious to assume that they are imaginative projections by gullible, unscientific pre-moderns onto groups of stars which might or might not bear a resemblance to the image; why project twins rather than the columns flanking the door to a temple, or even two trees?

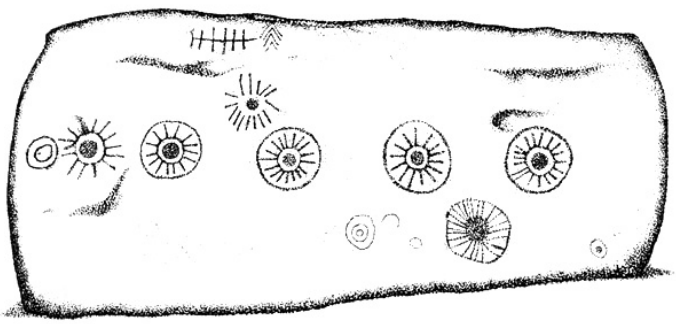

Fig. 9: The 'Stone of the Seven Suns' from the Dowth passage tomb, Kerbstone 51, ca. 11,000–8500 BCE, with solar symbols.[12]

The planetary symbols are even more baffling in terms of their derivation, although the symbol for the Moon is understandable enough and reflects the perception of a

[11] See Wilhelm Spiegelberg, 'Die ägyptischen Namen und Zeichen der Tierkreisbilder in demotischer Schrift', *Zeitschrift für ägyptische Sprache und Altertumskunde* 48 (Leipzig: Hinrich, 1864–84): pp. 146–52; Alexandra von Lieven, 'Divination in Ägypten', *Altorientalische Forschungen* 26 (1999): pp. 77–126.

[12] Drawing from Martin Brennan, *The Boyne Valley Vision* (Dublin: Dolmen Press, 1980), at http://www.knowth.com [accessed 18 July 2010]. [Chicago no longer recommends putting in an access date. Would you like to keep this? Please advise]

visible heavenly phenomenon, the lunar crescent. Symbols for the Sun are also found in very ancient cultures, but they do not resemble the phallic symbol used in the horoscopes of late antiquity; they are more obviously representational, as demonstrated by the images found in the Dowth passage tomb at Meath, Ireland, dated ca. 11,000-8500 BCE (fig. 9). More elusive planetary symbols, such as those of Mercury and Saturn, could be related to the objects or instruments that designate the planetary god's attributes in myth and iconography: Mercury's winged helmet might be seen in his planetary symbol, and Saturn's sickle—the instrument he used to castrate his father Ouranos in Hesiod's theogony—might be glimpsed in the shape of *his* planetary symbol. But if this is so, we must consider the possibility that these objects are themselves symbols of qualities, powers, and mythic narratives associated with the planetary god, and have a much more complex web of associations.

So, are the planetary and zodiacal symbols really a species of shorthand—condensed images of larger but nevertheless literal pictorial representations? Were they always understood as a culturally agreed celestial alphabet to designate specific concepts? Or might they be related to the Greek perception of Egyptian hieroglyphics—a word which literally means 'divine inscription'—and the understanding of these characters as a mode of symbolically representing aspects of the divine? In this context the symbol becomes a kind of magic key, seal, or password which transcends ordinary rules of communication, and can reveal divine secrets through images which hint at and embody that which has no image, for those who have the facility to understand them. The late-second-century Christian theologian Clement of Alexandria wrote about the Egyptians:

> When they want to indicate the sun, for example, they make a circle, and the moon a crescent shape, according to the literal form...Other things they engrave figuratively...and they transpose and alter their character; they change some things, others they recast entirely.[13]

In other words, some symbols appear to be diagrammatic or

[13] Clement, *Stromateis* 5.4.20–21, in Peter Struck, *The Birth of the Symbol: Ancient Readers at the Limits of Their Texts* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004), [Hereafter Struck, *Birth of the Symbol*]p. 199.

stylised representations of physical reality, like the lunar crescent, although they also intimate knowledge beyond the object; while others, like the planetary glyphs, appear to bear no relation to any physical object, and are meant to refer to patterns, potencies, and narratives that cannot be communicated in any conceptual form. To use Peter Struck's words, the symbol 'can tell us more than we can possibly know'.[14]

Mary LeCron Foster, expressing the perspective of many cultural anthropologists, asserts that a symbol 'is any entity that has socially participative meaning'.[15] The meaning perceived in symbols thus exists only in the concordant minds of the participants in a given culture; symbols do not contain any ontically intrinsic meaning, but are constructions which form the binding glue of cultures and their customs. LeCron goes on to say:

> Symbolism arose and evolved into human culture because of a growing appreciation and social utilization of abstract likenesses between objects and events separated in time and space.[16]

This functional understanding of the symbol as a cultural construct based on observed resemblances is certainly relevant to the development and use of the astrological symbols: there must obviously be some agreement between astrologers as to the meaning of the symbols in order for them to be useful in texts read by other astrologers. The symbol must be 'institutionalised' or 'routinised' for the purposes of communication. But this approach does not answer the question of why a particular symbol should develop in relation to a particular planetary or zodiacal potency, particularly when there is no observed resemblance to a physical object. It would seem that Foster is referring not to symbols, but to signs or significators. The degree of resonance of a symbol, in her view, is determined by its 'use-potential', like the logo for a company or a household product: the wider and more useful the application, the more potent the symbol. If this is so, then human beings,

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[14] Struck, *Birth of the Symbol*, p. 201.
[15] Mary LeCron Foster, 'Symbolism: The Foundation of Culture', in Tim Ingold, ed., *The Companion Encyclopedia of Anthropology* (London: Routledge, 1994), pp. 366–95, on p. 366.
[16] Ibid., p. 370.

apparently oblivious to such theoretical interpretations, have found astrological symbols useful in a vast variety of different contexts for an extremely long time, and continue to do so even when prevailing cultural dominants oppose any suggestion of their relevance. This implies that the formation and continuity of symbols are more dependent on the degree of meaning and resonance experienced through them than on common cultural usage, and another approach to the astrological glyphs may need to be considered which is far older than LeCron's perspective and which seems to be more deeply interiorised and related more specifically to the religious imagination—which might or might not be a culturally generated form of human expression, depending on which academic paradigm one wishes to adopt.

SYMBOLS AS EMBODIMENTS

Some scholars credit the writers of the German Romantic movement of the nineteenth century, such as Johann Gottfried Herder (1744–1803) and Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph von Schelling (1775–1854), with the idea that symbols, and the mythic narratives that accompany them, express an ontic reality independent of the humans who articulate the symbols.[17] This understanding of the symbol is also found in Jung's analytical psychology, which stresses the intimate connection between myth and symbol, both of which express archetypal patterns that are both psychological and ontically objective.[18] Planetary myths encrust planetary symbols, and the glyph representing the planet communicates not only a characteristic astrological concept such as 'Mars equals aggression', but also a dense and intricate web of mythic associations which can best be expressed through narrative and ritual. In the view of the promulgators of this current in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Western thought, symbolic images arise from the unconscious; they are not invented or constructed, but are discovered or encountered. This understanding in fact long predates the German

[17] See Adolf Allwohn, *Der Mythos bei Schelling* (Charlottenburg: Verlag Rolf Heise, 1927), pp. 32–33; Alexander Altmann, 'Myth and Symbol', *Philosophy* 20, no. 76 (1945): pp. 162–71.

[18] See, for example, Carl G. Jung, *Psychological Types*, CW6 (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1970), ¶202, 401; Carl G. Jung, *The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious*, CW9i (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1968), ¶7.

Romantics: the term 'symbol', in ancient Greek divinatory practice, carries the notion of a meeting, an encounter, or a 'bumping into' something.[19] Seen from this perspective, symbols are not made, but happen; cultures do not generate symbols, but instead, symbols generate cultural patterns through an encounter with the potency of the ideas associated with them. They are simultaneously omens, the events portended by the omen, and that which stands behind both omen and event.

This perception of symbols approaches them as both representations and embodiments of an objective reality that exists both within and outside the human being; they are generated by the human psyche through the organ of the imagination rather than being constructed by the intellect as a cultural and social edifice, and they are capable of inaugurating the transformation of psychic energy while at the same time describing that transformation. This approach to the symbol can be found throughout the Greek world, from Orphic funerary plaques to early medieval Byzantine astral magic, and seems to have inhabited those currents of astrology that did not succumb, as Ptolemy did, to the influence of Aristotle's profoundly antagonistic approach to the poetics of symbolic expression.[20] Iamblichus, a Neoplatonist writing in the late third to early fourth century CE, asserts that the power of symbols to transform the devotee lies in the symbols themselves; they do not awaken something within the human soul, but derive their power from their identity with the divine potency embodied in the symbol:

> It is the power of ineffable symbols comprehended by the gods alone that establishes theurgical union. Thus, we don't perform these acts intellectually...In fact, these very symbols, by themselves, perform their own work, and the ineffable power of the Gods with which these symbols are charged, itself, recognizes, by itself, its own images. It is not awakened to this by our thinking.[21]

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[19] See Struck, *Birth of the Symbol*, pp. 90–94.

[20] See Struck, *Birth of the Symbol*, pp. 59–68, for Aristotle's antagonism toward the symbol in poetry.

[21] Iamblichus, *De mysteriis*, 96:13–97.9, in Gregory Shaw, *Theurgy and the Soul: The Neoplatonism of Iamblichus* (University Park, PA: PUBLISHER, 1995), p. 84.

Although symbols may, and usually do, encompass biology—such as the Sun as a phallus, or the Moon as a womb—they represent, from this perspective, the meaningful end of a spectrum which encompasses instinct at one pole and psyche at the other. They are, in other words, both spirit and flesh, and provide a bridge between the two.

Peter Struck, discussing the understanding of a symbol in the Hellenistic world, suggests that the symbol is:

> ... a form of representation that has an intimate, ontological connection with its referent and is no mere mechanical replication of the world, that is transformative and opens up a realm beyond rational experience, that exists simultaneously as a concrete thing and as an abstract and perhaps transcendent truth, and that conveys a unique density of meaning.[22]

This understanding of an ontological link between symbol and symbolised reflects an idea of sympathies or correspondences that was clearly formulated in Stoic circles in the last two centuries BCE, but appears in poetic forms three or four centuries earlier in Orphic texts such as the *Derveni Papyrus*, which portrays a cosmos in which everything has a share of every other thing in it, and is part of an underlying unity.[23]

> Orpheus named this [divine] breath Moira...For before Zeus received his name, Moira was the wisdom of the god always and through everything.[24]

The idea of an organic, interconnected universe filled with a single, primal divine substance is an idea with great agency and continuity, running from Presocratic to Platonic, Neoplatonic, Stoic, Hermetic, and early Jewish cosmologies, and continuing through medieval and early modern alchemy and Kabbalah to modern Theosophy and the astrologies influenced by it. It is also one of the basic building-blocks of Jung's psychological models, although the 'world soul' or *anima mundi* in Jung's work receives the more neutral

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[22] Struck, *Birth of the Symbol*, p. 5.

[23] For Stoic cosmology and physics, see F. H. Sandbach, *The Stoics* (London: Duckworth, 1989); A. A. Long and D. N. Sedley, *The Hellenistic Philosophers, Vol. 1* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), pp. 158–437.

[24] Betegh, *Derveni Papyrus*, Col. XIX.

terminology of 'collective unconscious' or 'objective psyche'.[25] In this world of sympathies, a planetary symbol enjoys a secret identity with the planet it symbolises, and the planet, in turn, is itself a symbol for potencies both interior and exterior, in the human being and in the world, which can only be articulated through the symbol. This idea also stands as the foundation-stone of magic: if everything reflects and contains everything else, then deliberately invoked transformation on one level will result in transformations on other levels.

The astrological symbols in this context are thus not merely representations or signifiers, but embody the thing portrayed; symbols in pictorial or linguistic form may be stylised or condensed forms of larger, more complex pictorial representations, but the latter too embody the essence of the thing portrayed and are thus themselves symbols. An example of this approach to the astrological symbols is the use to which they were put in magical rituals from the early medieval period onward. In magical grimoires such as the fourteenth-century *Liber iuratus* (figs. 10 and 11), planetary symbols are combined with what are known as *charactêres*: arrangements of lines and dots that form visual/linguistic entities understood to both embody and represent celestial potencies or angelic entities associated with particular planets and groups of stars.[26]

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[25] For Jung's explication of the 'collective unconscious', see Jung, CW9i.

[26] For the *charactêres*, see Gideon Bohak, *Ancient Jewish Magic: A History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), p. 272, for possible derivations of the term *charactêre* (*kalaqtiraia* in Aramaic), used by Jewish magicians in late antiquity. For a Greco-Egyptian example of the *charactêres*, see *PGM* X.24–35, in Hans Dieter Betz, ed. and trans., *The Greek Magical Papyri in Translation, Including the Demotic Spells* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), p. 149, and the various examples in John G. Gager, *Curse Tablets and Binding Spells from the Ancient World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992). For early modern examples, see the pseudo-Paracelsian *Archidoxis Magica*, written ca. 1560, translated into English by Robert Turner in *Archidoxes of Magic: Of the Supreme Mysteries of Nature: Of the Spirits of the Planets: Of the Secrets of Alchemy: Of Occult Philosophy: The Mysteries of the Twelve Signs of the Zodiack: The Magical Cure of Diseases: Of Celestial Medicines* (London: N. Brook and J. Harison, 1656; repr. London: Askin Publishers, 1975); Juris G. Lidaka, '*The Book of Angels, Rings, Characters and Images of the Planets*: Attributed to Osbern Bokenham', in Claire Fanger, ed., *Conjuring*

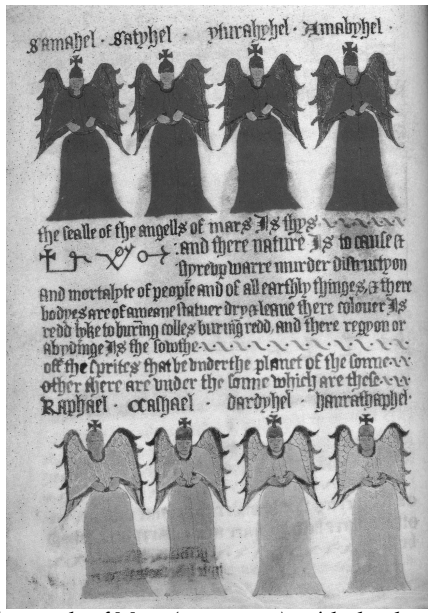

Fig. 10: The angels of Mars (upper row), with the charactêres and astrological glyph for Mars, from the fourteenth-century grimoire, Liber iuratus.[27]

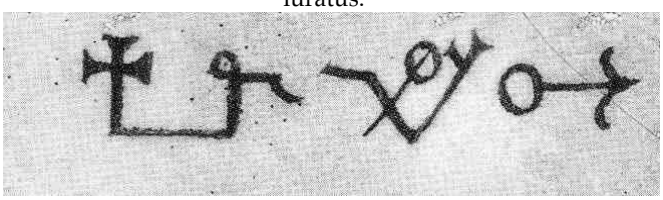

Fig. 11: Enlarged image from the Liber iuratus of the charactêres *of Mars with his planetary glyph on the right*

Texts such as the *Liber iuratus* combine *charactêres* with planetary glyphs in the understanding that both contain magical potency, and the drawing of the glyph is itself a

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Spirits: Texts and Traditions of Medieval Ritual Magic (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1998), pp. 32–75. See also Campbell Bonner, *Studies in Magical Amulets, Chiefly Greco-Egyptian* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1950), pp. 12–13.

[27] *Liber iuratus*, Royal MS 17 A XLII, ff. 68v–69, British Library, reproduced in Sophie Page, *Magic in Medieval Manuscripts* (London: British Library, 2004), p. 46.

ritual act which can invoke the chosen entity. These glyphs and *charactêres* have been used on magical seals and talismans from late antiquity to the present day for the purpose of invoking the heavenly powers.

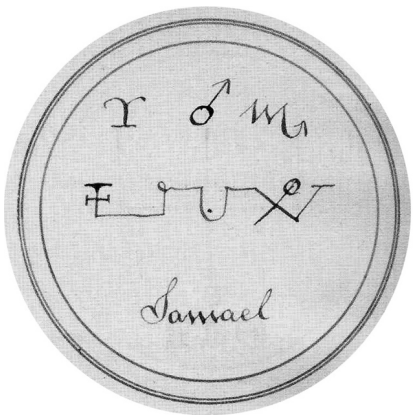

Fig. 12: Talisman for the Martial angel Samael with charactêres and glyphs for Mars and his two zodiacal signs, Aries and Scorpio, from the late nineteenth century. Note that the charactêres are the same as those from the Liber iuratus *five centuries earlier.*[28]

This idea has continued into some contemporary astrological currents, and may lie—albeit unconsciously—behind the insistence on the part of some astrologers that it is important to draw the birth horoscope by hand, even if it is initially calculated by a computer programme, because 'something' happens when these figures are inscribed by the astrologer. Whether understood as a mode of meditation allowing a deeper understanding of the birth chart, or as a form of preparatory ritual, or simply as a way of facilitating an attentive and relaxed state in which to greet the client, this emphasis on the drawing of the glyphs belongs to the complex realm of ritual magic, because it concerns the establishment of a relationship with that which the symbol both represents and embodies.

ASTROLOGICAL SYMBOLS IN MODERNITY

[28] Martial talisman from an MS translated by Ebenezer Sibly in the late eighteenth century and transcribed by Frederick Hockley in the late nineteenth: *The Clavis or Key to the Magic of Solomon* (Lake Worth, FL: Ibis Press, 2009), p. 270.

We might, with considerable justification, assume that so-called 'modern' astrology begins with Alan Leo at the turn of the twentieth century.[29] In *Esoteric Astrology*, a work first published in 1913, Leo opens with a chapter entitled 'Astrological Symbology', and proceeds to explain in detail the meaning of the glyphs.

> So far as the planets are concerned, these symbols are built up of the circle, the semi-circle, and the cross... The half-circle is 'employed as the symbol of the Soul, regarded as intermediate between Spirit above and Body below. The cross 'implies complete manifestation and incessant activity...This cross stands for Body, as distinguished from the circle, Spirit, and the semi-circle, Soul.[30]

Leo's understanding of the planets which these glyphs represent is that 'it is not the physical planets themselves that affect mankind, but the supreme Intelligences who use the planetary bodies as their physical vehicles'.[31] This is a very different and far more literal view than that of the planet as itself a symbol.

Margaret Hone, writing forty years later in her *Modern Textbook of Astrology*, also refers to the planetary and zodiacal glyphs as 'symbols'. She then goes on to describe these 'symbols', offering an interpretation directly derived from Alan Leo's understanding of them:

> [The symbols of the planets]...may be seen to be composed of different combinations of three parts, the circle, the half circle, the cross. This will have more meaning to the modern

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[29] For Leo's contribution to 'modern' astrology, see Kim Farnell, *The Astral Tramp* (London: Ascella, 1998); Patrick Curry, *A Confusion of Prophets: Victorian and Edwardian Astrology* (London: Collins & Brown, 1992), pp. 122–59; Nicholas Campion, *A History of Western Astrology, Vol. 2: The Medieval and Modern Worlds* (London: Hambledon Continuum, 2009), pp. 231–34; Bessie Leo, *The Life and Work of Alan Leo, Theosophist-Astrologer-Mason* (London: Fowler, 1919). For Leo's own publications, see, *inter alia*, [Would it be OK to replace '*inter alia*' with 'among others'?] Alan Leo, *How to Judge a Nativity* (London: Modern Astrology, 1903); Alan Leo, *Astrology for All* (London: Modern Astrology, 1904); Alan Leo, *The Key to Your Own Nativity* (London: Modern Astrology, 1910); Alan Leo, *Esoteric Astrology* (London: Modern Astrology, 1913).

[30] Leo, *Esoteric Astrology*, pp. 1–4.

[31] Ibid., p. 7.

> student if he understands that they date from the earliest days of mankind before reading was known, when an idea had to be taught to the people in pictorial form. The circle is said to symbolise eternity, the never-ending: hence spirit or primal power. The half-circle signifies soul. The cross signifies the material world.[32]

Hone uses the term 'signifies', suggesting that these figures, although she calls them symbols, were deliberately and consciously constructed to designate a specific concept such as 'material world' or 'soul'. Hone presents this idea without any critical discussion of what is meant by 'soul', by 'symbol', or, for that matter, by the extraordinary idea that such figures date to a period 'before reading was known'—extraordinary because the first textual appearance of recognisable zodiacal and planetary glyphs occurs in the fifth century CE, and earlier astrological works tend to spell out the name of the planet or zodiacal sign. Generations of astrologers have nevertheless accepted Hone's interpretation, as they have Leo's; her book was the standard textbook for astrological students in Britain for several decades following its publication in 1951.

The idea that the glyphs were consciously constructed does have an important precedent: in the sixteenth century, the Elizabethan magus John Dee (1527–1608) designed a figure which he used as the basis for a cosmological/alchemical exegesis entitled *Monas hieroglyphica*.[33]

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[32] Margaret Hone, *The Modern Textbook of Astrology* (London: Fowler, 1951), p. 21.

[33] John Dee, *Monas hieroglyphica* (Antwerp: G. Sylvius, 1564). Dee explains the construction of the emblem in a series of twenty-four 'Theorems'. For English translations of the *Monas hieroglyphica*, see C. H. Josten, trans., 'A Translation of John Dee's *Monas Hieroglyphica'*, *Ambix* 12, no.2/3 (1964): pp. 84–221; John Dee, *The Hieroglyphic Monad* (York Beach, ME: WeiserBooks, 2000). See also Peter J. Forshaw, 'The Early Alchemical Reception of John Dee's Monas Hieroglyphica', *Ambix* 52, no. 3 (2005): pp. 247–69; Frances A. Yates, *The Occult Philosophy in the Elizabethan Age* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1979), pp. 83–89; Federico Cavallaro, 'The Alchemical Significance of John Dee's *Monas Hieroglyphica*', in Stephen Clucas, ed., *John Dee: Interdisciplinary Studies in English Renaissance Thought* (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2006), pp. 159–76.

Fig. 13: Emblem from John Dee's Monas hieroglyphica. *The emblem contains the lunar crescent, the solar point within a circle, and the planetary glyphs for Mercury and Venus, as well as the glyph for the zodiacal sign of Aries as the symbol of the element of fire.*

Dee comments throughout his short work that the circle, crescent, and cross are the only symbols used to construct the glyphs of the planets, and this is probably the source for the later interpretations of the Theosophists. But Dee's 'Monad' is itself not an astrological glyph or symbol; it is an emblem, a kind of condensed signature constructed to convey pictorially the major themes in Dee's philosophy. Dee uses his explication of the emblem to articulate his cosmology and philosophy, and the *Monas* is thus a form of shorthand deliberately utilising a particular arrangement of already extant astrological symbols to convey specific ideas.

The influence of Theosophy, and of Alan Leo's Theosophical astrology, on twentieth-century astrological currents has been pervasive. This understanding of the deliberate derivation of the glyphs from the circle, semi-circle, and cross has proved to be a tenacious concept. So, for example, the Theosophically inclined astrologer Isabel Hickey, in a work published in 1970 called *Astrology: A Cosmic Science*, presents a section called 'Planetary Symbols and Their Meanings', in which the circle 'represents the eternal self' while the point in the middle (the glyph for the Sun) 'represents the divine spark at the centre of every living cell'; the half-circle is 'the symbol of the personality' [note the difference between 'personality' and the idea of 'soul']; the cross is the 'symbol of earth-manifestation'.[34] Composite glyphs such as that of Mercury, according to Hickey, combine the three symbols, and their position—for example,

[34] Isabel Hickey, *Astrology: A Cosmic Science* (Bridgeport, CT: Altieri Press, 1970), p. 30.

whether the circle is at the top, in the middle, or at the bottom—determines how the glyph is to be read, rather like an algebraic formula.

The Theosophical understanding of these symbols, although purportedly based on a very ancient symbolic code, is virtually mechanistic, implying that someone—perhaps an enlightened individual or a secret group of initiates—sat down and constructed them specifically to designate the various relationships of spirit, soul, and matter according to where the emphasis lies in the interpretation of the planet. In fact the planetary glyphs from late antique horoscopes do not contain any crosses at all, and it is possible that, as the pagan world gradually succumbed to the spread of Christianity, the glyphs were also 'Christianised' and the planetary gods rendered subservient to Christ through the imposition of the cross. The Theosophical understanding of the glyphs presents them not as symbols, but as signs or significators: a kind of shorthand like the periodic table in chemistry, where specific letters and numbers are assigned in a codified manner to indicate particular qualities. This approach, perhaps in part derived from John Dee (with whose work Blavatsky was familiar), is entirely contradictory to the manner in which the glyphs emerged and developed slowly over many centuries, altering according to cultural context and understood from diverse perspectives, including both pedagogical and magical.[35]

A particularly interesting perception of the zodiacal symbols was presented in the early 1940s in a work called *Astrological Physiognomy* by an American astrologer called Gloria Barrett.[36] Barrett did not offer an explanation of the origin of the symbols as did earlier Theosophical astrologers such as Leo, but understood each zodiacal symbol to represent not only psychological characteristics but also a myriad of associations ranging from the macrocosmic – such as correspondences in religions and philosophies – to microcosmic – correspondences in individual occupations, character, and health – as well as representatives of the animal, plant, and mineral kingdoms. This listing of correspondences in relation to an astrological symbol is

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[35] For Blavatsky's familiarity with Dee's work, see H. P. Blavatsky, *The Letters of H. P. Blavatsky, Vol. 1, 1861–1879* (Wheaton, IL: Theosophical Publishing House, 2003), p. 242.

[36] Gloria Barrett, *Astrological Physiognomy* (Chicago: Aries Press, 1941).

neither unique nor modern, and may be found in many astrological texts from late antiquity, although the emphasis on signs rather than planets is characteristic of the astrologies emerging from Alan Leo's work. But Barrett offers her unique contribution by illustrating pictorially the 'energy' of each symbol as reflected in human physiognomy.

The idea that the human body is a symbolic representation of the human soul even in the smallest details is not new; physiognomy was pursued as a window into character and fate from the medieval period onward, and various derivations, such as cheiromancy (palmistry), metaposcopy (analysis of the lines on the forehead), and phrenology (analysis of the features of the skull) have remained popular in esoteric circles from the late eighteenth century to the present day.[37] But Barrett's perspective is focused specifically on the physical embodiment of the astrological glyphs. Glyph, energy, and physical body are seen as a unity, each expressing a different level of a central archetypal pattern for which the symbol is the optimum description. Barrett illustrates her concept with some extraordinary images (fig. 13). What she calls the 'symbolic picture' for Aries is meant to represent an abstract image of a particular kind of energy in motion. Next to it is the 'form principle', portraying the energy as it determines the form of various natural objects; finally we see the 'form of forehead'—an image of the structure of the upper portion of the human skull, correlated with a list of physical attributes including stature, skin, nose, chin, jaw, hands, movements, gait, voice, and speech.

[37] For academic works on these subjects, see, *inter alia*, [would it be OK to place 'among others' here too?] John van Wyhe, *Phrenology and the Origins of Victorian Scientific Naturalism* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2004); Lawrence Fine, 'The Art of Metoposcopy: A Study in Isaac Luria's Charismatic Knowledge', *AJS Review* 11, no. 1 (1986): pp. 79–101; P. G. Maxwell-Stuart, ed. and trans., *The Occult in Early Modern Europe: A Documentary History* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1999).

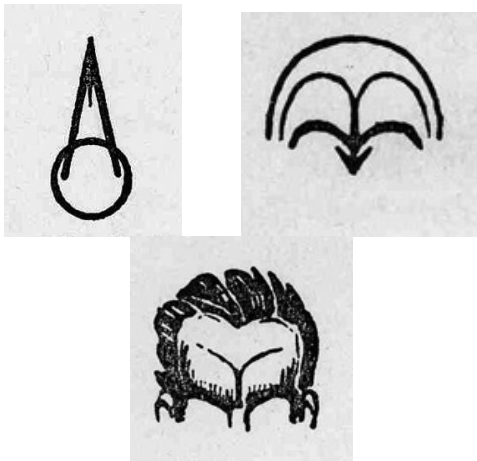

Fig. 14: Left, the Aries 'energy'; centre, the Aries 'form principle'; right, the Aries forehead.[38]

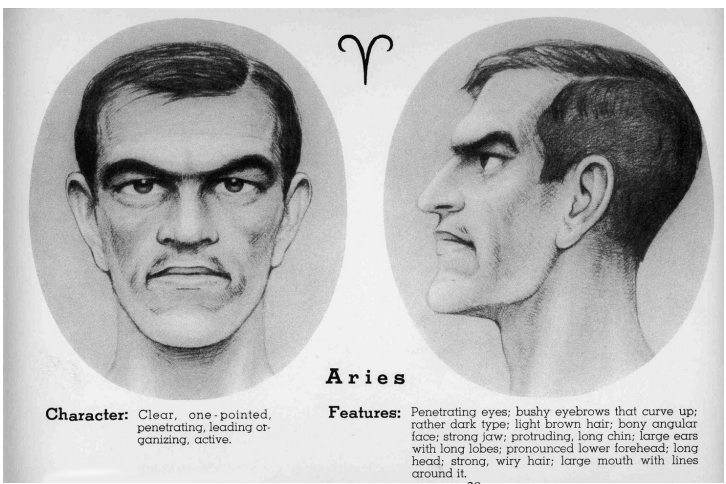

Fig. 15: The Aries face.[39]

Among the plates accompanying Barrett's book is a complete 'Aries face' (fig. 14), which might be terrifying if one met the gentleman in a dark alley—he looks rather like Sean Connery on a bad day—but which is meant to represent the archetypal qualities of Aries, personified by its zodiacal

[38] Barrett, *Astrological Physiognomy*, pp. 46–47.
[39] Barrett, *Astrological Physiognomy*, Plate 10.

symbol embodied in the human face. Another example, this time of the zodiacal symbol for Capricorn, indicates the extent to which this particular mid-twentieth–century astrologer understands the symbols as a limitless chain of correspondences, including the distillation of energy into human form through the specific features of the human face.

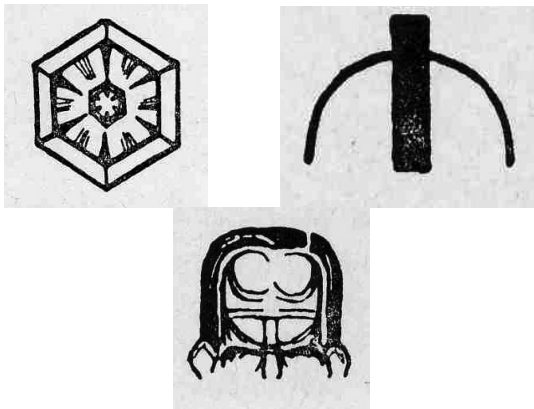

Fig. 16: Left, the Capricorn 'energy'; centre, the Capricorn 'form principle'; right, the Capricorn forehead.[40]

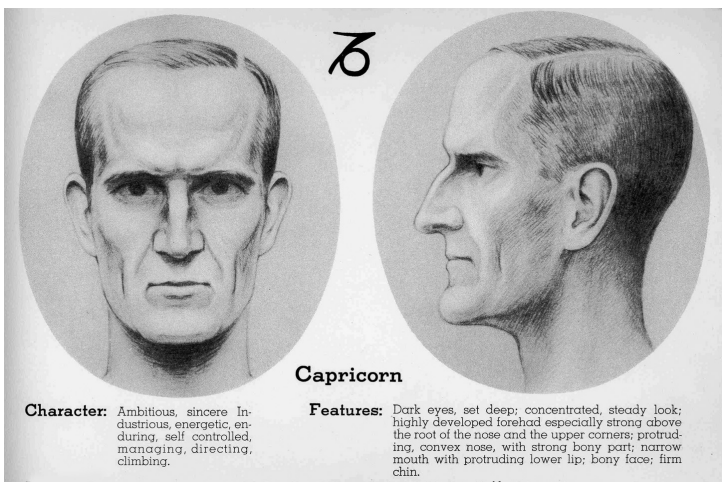

Fig. 17: The Capricorn face.[41]

[40] Barrett, *Astrological Physiognomy*, pp. 91–92.
[41] Barrett, *Astrological Physiognomy*, Plate 19.

This is the symbol solidified and concretised: in other words, the symbol 'made flesh'. It echoes the ancient idea of the cosmic *anthropos* or 'primordial man' upon whom the human body is modelled: symbol as flesh and flesh as symbol. Jung, irritated with Freud's insistence on the reducibility of so many symbols to the concrete reality of the male sexual organ, remarked laconically in a footnote that even the penis should be understood as a phallic symbol.[42] Barrett appears to understand the glyphs not as something designed to convey a specific set of concepts, but as images of ontically autonomous energies that participate in every level of existence, including the human body. The symbols are thus everywhere because everything encapsulates everything else. It is not that the symbol represents the zodiac sign, but rather, that symbol and zodiac sign are both reflections of an archetypal principle which cannot be grasped by the rational mind alone, but which can be apprehended best through the complex web of the symbol.

The cultural functionalism of the astrological symbols is a valid perspective on their role in various historical contexts. The development of symbolic systems—visual, linguistic, or both—cannot be separated from the cultural context within which they are formed. But at the same time, it might also be appropriate to suggest that these symbols, rather than being 'invented' or 'designed', emerged through a long process that incorporated cosmological, philosophical, and experiential perspectives from a wide variety of cultures; and that they had, and continue to have, an agency independent of their cultural 'use-potential'. This raises a final and perhaps unanswerable question: If the astrological symbols themselves have agency, does it make any difference whether or not the astrologer who utilises them is aware of it? I would like to conclude with a quote from William Butler Yeats, whose particular understanding of symbols was rooted in his training and experience in both astrology and magic in the occult orders of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries:

> Symbols and formulae are powers, which act in their own

[42] See Carl. G. Jung, *Civilization in Transition,* CW10 (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1964), ¶637, n. 3: 'The phallus is not just a sign that indicates the penis; it is a "symbol" because it has so many other meanings'.

> right and with little consideration for our intentions...They are, indeed, personifying spirits that we had best call Gates and Gate-Keepers, because through their dramatic power they bring our soul to crisis.[43]

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[43] William Butler Yeats, letter to Florence Farr, cited in Kathleen Raine, *Yeats, the Tarot, and the Golden Dawn* (Dublin: Dolmen Press, 1972), p. 44, and William Butler Yeats, *The Autobiography of William Butler Yeats* (New York: Macmillan, 1953), p. 272, cited in Raine, *Yeats, the Tarot, and the Golden Dawn*, p. 45.

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