

*From Allegory to Anagoge:
the Question of Symbolic Perception in a Literal World*

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La Primavera (1482) by Sandro Botticelli

We must surely all agree that the general movement of Western intellectual life since Descartes has been towards increasing detachment of observation, compartmentalised thinking and rational explanation. We no longer live in a world of mystery. Yet at the heart of astrological practice and teaching lies a process that defies the strivings of the mind and is itself profoundly mysterious—symbolic insight. How do we help clients to glimpse the underlying meaning of their concrete life-dilemmas, and how do we teach students to begin to move from fact-accumulation to an awareness of a different kind of knowledge, one which arises at the interface of their soul with the world? This is a challenge that we have encountered in our Masters degree programmes at the Universities of Kent and Christ Church in Canterbury UK over the past fifteen years. In this essay I want to present to you a model or framework which in our experience facilitates a move away from the ‘literal’ thinking which pervades the pragmatic thinking of our society towards a richer, deeper and more meaningful way of

approaching the study of astrological symbolism and divinatory practices. It first arose in the context of looking at Botticelli's *Primavera*, a painting which lends itself to multiple levels of interpretation.¹



Central to the painting is the relationship between the central goddess (who can be identified as the divine feminine in her various guises of Venus, Luna, Sophia, Isis or Mary)² and Mercury, whose conjunction marries imagination and intellect, love and reason. In the Platonic and Hermetic traditions which inspired Botticelli's work, the mutual interplay of these two modes of perception has always been regarded as the basis for a human knowledge which is philosophical in the true sense, and which is stirred by the evocative power of symbol and metaphor.³ The *Primavera* also gives us the key to the means of attaining this knowledge, to which I shall return.



In discussing the model of the four senses of interpretation – literal, allegorical, moral and anagogical or mystical – I am locating astrology in a hermeneutic method which enables us to articulate, and enter, the mystery of symbolic perception. This method, explicit in early Christian and Jewish theology and in the poetic theology of Dante, is implicit in Platonism and Neoplatonic epistemology. The Platonic image of the cosmos presents a series of ascending spheres from the material earth to the intelligible One; but we are not to take the scheme of this model literally. We are not talking here of a hierarchy of discrete levels where one jumps further and further away from the world to some sort of immutable abstract truth, which is a common criticism of Platonism, but of a process of deepening perception or unfolding consciousness, like the unpeeling of an onion, which gradually moves from the cause-and-effect, 'out there-in here' objectivity of our habitual mode of thinking to an increasing awareness of the unity of subject and object, until the kind of knowledge is reached which can only be described as spiritual in that it fully embraces both inner and outer, or imaginal and material reality in a single act of perception. It is a model which allows something to be revealed as something we have always known but forgotten – an innate knowledge of how we mirror the world, of an inner cosmos as

vast and as awesome as the outer one. This kind of knowledge plays little or no part in the programmes of our schools and universities.⁴

So, what does it mean to see behind the literal appearance of things? Let's begin by considering the words of St Augustine and Thomas Aquinas, who write specifically about allegorical and symbolic interpretation in relation to the reading of Scripture.⁵ Augustine stresses at the outset that the intuition of deeper meaning in a text stimulates the student's own desire to learn, and that the penetration of this meaning is a pleasurable activity in that it leads towards the ultimate joy of union with God. We have certainly found that students respond to the 'opening' of astrological symbolism, its revelatory function and 'realisation' in the world with some amazement, for nowhere else in their studies do they find this element of *meaningful* insight.⁶ Of course the capacity of the text, image or symbol to disclose its wisdom in this way is the very reason we consider it to be 'sacred' in the first place.

In defining the four senses, Augustine and Aquinas speak of the literal of a text as a material reality, the story taken at face value. Here we find the meaning or signification of the words themselves in their historical, linguistic and literary contexts; statements of fact, from which Aquinas does not exclude metaphor and analogy. An example he gives is the assertion that 'Christ sits on the Right Hand of God' which is a 'literal' statement of the power of God but given as a metaphor.⁷ Both theologians make it clear that there is no 'spiritual' sense understood at this level, although this does not lessen its importance, and we may note that Augustine explicitly warns of the dangers of disbelieving in the reality of an underlying historical and factual truth.⁸ We may perhaps define the literal as a 'horizontal' discourse, expanding the medieval understanding to a more contemporary idea of left-hemisphere knowing—quantitative weighing and measuring, comparing, arguing, clarifying, conceptualising and rationalising, which of course has its immense value. But still it remains a demonstration of a reality from a position that is not yet participating *in* that reality, that is not engaged in it but stands apart; it is what we call 'knowing; it is how we have all been taught to think, to evaluate. For the ancient philosophers, it is *episteme*—intellectually certain or scientific knowledge, but beyond this lies *gnosis*, an intuitive, spiritual sense which arises from signification rather than fact. Aquinas tells us: "That signification whereby things signified by words have themselves also a signification is called the spiritual sense, which is based on the literal, and presupposes it. Now this spiritual sense has a three-fold division."⁹

This moves us into the territory of allegory, the 'speaking otherwise' (from the Greek, *allegoria*) or, in the case of the fables of the poets, truth 'disguised' by poetic metaphor. For Aquinas, allegory is the

first stage of the discernment of 'divine' meaning in scripture, for example the 'thing signified' by words may be Christ. Traditional academic thought has no problem with allegory as a literary device because it does not yet demand that we participate in the 'knowing' or are changed by it. As Henry Corbin explains:

The difference between "symbol" and what nowadays is commonly called "allegory" is simple to grasp. An allegory remains on the same level of evidence and perception, whereas a symbol guarantees the correspondence between two universes belonging to different ontological levels: it is the means, and the only one, of penetrating into the invisible, into the world of mystery, into the esoteric dimension.¹⁰

Allegory is the way we usually explain astrology, the symbol 'standing for' the emotion, or person, or event. But when we move to the two further stages of interpretation, we can no longer keep our distance. There begins a process of 'seeing through' the literal or allegorical which stirs self-reflection; Corbin describes this movement from sensible to symbolic perception as a "transmutation of the immediate data (the sensible and literal data) [which] renders them transparent."¹¹ It is this very transparency which enables the transition to take place, and paradoxically, allows the literal and spiritual senses to be understood simultaneously.

The third stage or sense is called the Moral or Tropological, which derives from the word *tropos* or turning, and does indeed form a turning point for the diviner or reader. It demands a turning back to *oneself* in order to understand, and thus has implications and effects which are moral in that they influence how we act. At this point, we enter into a mode of knowledge which is commonly called esoteric. In Christian contexts, this is the interpretation which leads to a more conscious imitation of Christ. In an astrological context, it brings into play the relationship of the astrologer to the client and his or her participation in the particular circumstance within which a symbol 'manifests'. It can arise at that moment when you realise that your client's chart mirrors your own current preoccupation, when you utter words you do not intend which shock you with their truth, or when you are moved by the meaningfulness of a synchronistic event which calls you to action. It is experienced as a revelation which arises in the moment and spontaneously connects your inner life to the outer event or image, beyond your conscious intention. This is not knowledge which is accrued through human effort. Marsilio Ficino calls it a 'gift of the soul' which is dependent on Grace.¹² Now the astrologer is no longer the detached observer of God's creation, but is challenged to acknowledge the 'secret mutual connivance' as Jung put it, between herself and the world she perceives.¹³ It is not comfortable, because it involves a breaking down of our assumptions about the nature of reality; and it is very hard to stay with. Not all students, clients or readers are able to have a sense of this *tropos*, but the beauty

of the model as a whole is that it allows everyone to enter the world of symbolic interpretation at their own level, even if it is to just make the first step from fact to metaphor.

For those rare souls who can penetrate further than moral perception, the *anagogic* or mystical dimension lies in wait. For Aquinas, this level, the ‘sense beyond’, can only mean the ultimate glory of redemption, life with Christ in heaven.¹⁴ It is about union, union of the act of perception with what is perceived, union of literal and symbolic, world and psyche. The world no longer *imitates* the divine word, as in allegory, but *becomes* the divine word. At this stage all divisions are transcended and embraced, as all four senses become contained in one. The Platonist Iamblichus says that this is the mode of knowledge which is truly that of divination, “suspended from the Gods, spontaneous and inseparable from them.”¹⁵

In looking at knowledge in this way, it becomes clear that there is no disembodied ‘truth’ that stands apart from the vision of the reader or student. The degree of engagement of the person with the symbol or text or image IS the ‘truth’ revealed to that person at that moment, and it is always possible to go deeper. We begin to realise that, if we are to take our authorities seriously, the very process of developing symbolic perception has profound spiritual implications. Aquinas says “it must be said that Sacred Scripture is divinely ordered to this: that through it, the truth necessary for salvation may be made known to us”;¹⁶ and Ficino stresses that when one penetrates to the deepest meaning of a text, it is the word of God that one hears. He likens the nature and quality of the ‘signification’ apprehended through the actual words to the presence of the soul in the human body: “The human soul therefore will be immortal and introduced by God into our body, like the signification introduced into the air by God. If one pays attention to this signification, it is the thought of God who speaks that one comprehends.”¹⁷ Which is why astrology can be understood as a spiritual practice—even, I would suggest, as a path of initiation into the mysteries.

I would like now to consider the nature of symbolic knowledge in relation to Platonism, for in the works of Plato and his followers we find myths and allegories which speak clearly to students of the differences between literal and metaphorical thinking. The most direct and powerful of these must be the allegory of the Cave in the *Republic*.¹⁸ Here Plato makes the distinction between the literal world of the region of shadows and the spiritual or intelligible world of true knowledge. The people in the cave do not have freedom of movement. They are fettered and can only see shadows of objects carried behind them, projected by the light of a fire onto the back wall of the cave. When they are released and are able to turn round, they then see representations of real objects being carried along a walled

path. This stage we might compare to allegorical interpretation, and it is the first step towards seeing things ‘as they really are’. Platonically, the fire is an image of the Sun, whose light fosters understanding; but it is also something else. Fire is passion, desire, longing; it is the stirring power of the imagination. In Platonic and Sufi traditions, you are not led to anagogic perception through intellectual striving but are led there because you *desire* union. Engagement through love leads to changed perception, as we all know when we are ‘in love’, and this is why Cupid or Eros hovers over our central goddess in the *Primavera* and is about to wound the Grace Chastity or Venus with a burning love for Mercury, who has penetrated with his caduceus every level of reality. Eros – the child of Mercury and Venus¹⁹ - draws one from the literal world through love and points to the kind of knowledge Plato calls intelligible, which for Socrates includes the contemplation of the stars and the Sun as the images of divine intelligence; the ‘heavens above the heavens’ become revealed as one stands under the stars in awe of their majesty. The stars are supreme symbols precisely because their life-giving powers so evidently manifest on all levels.

Modern positivist thought now takes the shadows of Plato’s cave to be the ‘real’ world and reduces his Ideas to mere abstractions. The world beyond the literal becomes shadowy, superstitious mumbo-jumbo, inevitably, as it cannot reveal its meaning in the harsh light of scientific experiment or rational analysis. If we are to teach astrology in Universities, we will have to reclaim our ground, the middle ground in which we delight in the power of the imagination with the ‘divine enthusiasm’ of the Neoplatonic *magi*. At the anagogic or intellectual level of perception there may be no distinction between our thought and the thought of the Cosmos; but at the symbolic we are entering into the life in between, whether through the use of an image or an act of divination. The language of astrology, poetry, art and music IS the language of this middle realm, balanced between pure intellect and sensory perception yet encompassing both, drawing in the anagogic reality and displaying it to the senses through the beauty of its many forms. The ‘poetic metaphor’ of astrology, as Ficino would say, is not to be confused with ‘reason or knowledge’.²⁰ When we are teaching astrology we are surely activating what Henry Corbin terms the ‘active imagination’ an organ of true perception which mirrors the Images of the archetypal world.²¹ This realisation helps students begin to free themselves from the tendency of our society to drag astrology, screaming, into a literal world in which it does not belong, a world in which vision is opaque, where the imaginal is reduced to the mere imaginary.²²

Perhaps most importantly, the four senses model gives students a framework within which to address the huge themes of fate and destiny which must be raised in any study of astrology, cosmology or magic. I have already emphasised the essential premise of Platonism – and of alchemy - that the

human soul has the innate capacity to develop a way of knowledge which progresses from a clear separation of the knower from the thing known to an experience of the world and self as a unity, and that this is a spiritual quest. It was understood that when the depths of anagogic perception had been reached, the soul achieved the immortality of the gods. From this perspective, an attitude towards, or practice of divination which remains on the 'literal' level of cause and effect will inevitably give rise to the limitations of fated pronouncements, and the fulfilment of these pronouncements by the seeming connivance of the world 'out there'. Astrologers who give judgements purely from rational inference and the rule book are the 'petty ogres' Ficino despised, because they merely deal with the shadows in the cave, and therefore keep the prisoners shackled.²³ It is possible to live in this world, and operate by its laws, but it will not free you.

The Ptolemaic model of astrology is literal and allegorical but goes no further, as it attempts to take on the mantle of Aristotelian natural science. The Platonic model can go further precisely because it takes on board the mystery of the symbolic image, and the possibility that something may be revealed to human beings from another order of reality. On the level of moral understanding, astrological prediction approaches prophecy and fate becomes destiny as the astrologer is moved by the symbol and the client recognises her own desire and freedom of choice. Ultimately, anagogically, linear time ceases to hold sway and the prophetic soul perceives past, present and future as one. Pseudo-Ptolemy, Marsilio Ficino and William Lilly all tell us that true astrological judgement comes from a fusion of the 'divine chance' of the soul's 'turning' to its own wisdom, together with diligent study and practice, and Lilly himself points out that 'the more holy thou art.. the purer judgement thou shalt give'.²⁴ Our literal world does not recognise the 'divine chance' because this depends on the seizing of the meaning of a sign, the 'mere coincidence', the dream, the moment when our desire is revealed. But the very word desire – *desidere* (from the star) - takes us back to the stars, and if we can begin to evoke this desire in the hearts of our students then we can really begin to study astrology with them.²⁵ Plotinus talks of the divinity present in the literal, concrete material world as a 'lure' or 'bait' to enchant and draw people to a spiritual perception. 'The world is full of signs' he says, and 'the wise man is the man who in any one thing reads another'.²⁶ I would suggest that astrology itself can act as such a bait for students who are hungry for a deeper meaning in their studies, precisely because the planets literally exist and can be perceived through the sense of sight. From there they can begin, and the four senses hermeneutic enables them to move in a process of interiorisation so that they can enter into, rather than simply learn about, the meaning of a symbol. This surely has profound implications, for it may just begin to revolutionise the assumptions of an academic method which separates knowledge from knower, thought from being, conception of reality from its experience.

Endnotes

- ¹ On the four senses of interpretation in relation to the *Primavera*, see Joanne Snow-Smith, *The 'Primavera' of Sandro Botticelli: a Neoplatonic interpretation* (Peter Lang, 1993).
- ² See John Dee, 'Eclipsed: An Overshadowed Goddess' in *Journal of Renaissance Studies* vol. 27, issue 1, 4-33.
- ³ See Iain McGilchrist, *The Master and his Emissary* (Yale University Press, 2009).
- ⁴ See Jacob Needleman, *A Sense of the Cosmos* (Monkfish Book Publishing, 2003).
- ⁵ See Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, I.9-10; Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine* 2.6.7-8. Augustine on allegory is discussed in D.W. Robertson, *A Preface to Chaucer: Studies in medieval perspective* (Princeton, 1963), ch.2. See also John F. Boyle, 'St Thomas Aquinas and Sacred Scripture' at www.nd.edu/~afreddos/papers/Taqandss.htm
- ⁶ On the 'realisation of the symbol' and the four senses hermeneutic applied to astrology, see Geoffrey Cornelius, *The Moment of Astrology* (Bournemouth: The Wessex Astrologer, 2003), chs 14 and 15.
- ⁷ Aquinas, *Super epistolam ad Galatos lectura*, ch.4, lect.7, in *Super epistolas s.Pauli lectura*, ed. R. Cai (Turin, 1953), vol. 1, p.620. Reference from J. Boyle, op.cit.
- ⁸ See Augustine, *City of God*, XIII, ch.22: 'The spiritual interpretation of the paradise of Eden does not conflict with its historical truth.'
- ⁹ Aquinas, *ST* I.10.
- ¹⁰ Henry Corbin, 'Mysticism and Humour', in *Spring* (1973), p. 27, quoted in S. Wasserstrom, *Religion After Religion: Gershom Scholem, Mircea Eliade, and Henry Corbin at Eranos* (Princeton University Press 1999), p.93.
- ¹¹ Henry Corbin, *History of Islamic Philosophy*, trans. L.Sherrard (London, 1993), p.13, quoted in S. Wasserstrom, op.cit., p.95.
- ¹² Marsilio Ficino, 'Commentary on Plotinus' in *Opera omnia*, (Basle, 1576, repr. Phénix Editions 2000), p.1626.
- ¹³ C.G. Jung, *Synchronicity: An Acausal Connecting Principle* (London 1972), p.85.
- ¹⁴ Aquinas, *In Galatos*, ch.4, lect.7, p.621.
- ¹⁵ Iamblichus, *On the mysteries*, I.III, trans. T.Taylor (Frome, Somerset 1999), p.23.
- ¹⁶ Aquinas, *Quaestiones quodlibetales*, 7.6.1. ed. R.Spiazzi, (Turin, 1956), p.146.
- ¹⁷ Marsilio Ficino, *Theologia Platonica*, 10.7, in P.Moffitt Watts, 'Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite and Three Renaissance Platonists, Cusanus, Ficino & Pico on Mind and Cosmos' in *Supplementum Festivum, Studies in Honour of P.O.Kristeller* ed. J. Hankins, (Binghamton: State University of New York, 1987), p. 297.
- ¹⁸ Plato, *Republic* VII.
- ¹⁹ See Robert Graves *The Greek Myths*, vol.1 (Harmondsworth 1997), p.58, for reference to this version of the myth.
- ²⁰ See M. Ficino, 'Disputatio contra iudicium astrologorum' in *Supplementum Ficinianum*, ed. P.O. Kristeller (Florence, 1949), vol.2, p.43.
- ²¹ Henry Corbin, *Celestial Body and Spiritual Earth*, trans. N. Pearson, (Princeton N.J. 1977), p.11.
- ²² Since writing this paper, both MA programmes in Canterbury have come to an end for bureaucratic and financial reasons. The interested reader is pointed to www.mythcosmologysacred.com where our work is continuing.
- ²³ Marsilio Ficino, 'A Disputation against the pronouncements of the astrologers' in *The Letters of Marsilio Ficino* vol.3, (London 1981), p.77.
- ²⁴ William Lilly, 'To the Student in Astrology' in *Christian Astrology* (1647, repr.Regulus 1985).
- ²⁵ On the etymology of *desidere*, see Darby Costello, 'Desire and the Stars' in *the Astrological Journal*, vol.45, no.4, July/August 2003, pp.5-12.
- ²⁶ Plotinus, *Enneads* II.3.7, trans. S. MacKenna (London 1962).

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