

Operation of the Sun: Astrology and the Alchemical Myth

by Donna Woodwell

*“If the doors of perception were cleansed, everything
would appear as it is: Infinite.”*

~William Blake,

The Marriage of Heaven and Hell, 1793



For years, a woman has had a successful career at a well-known advertising agency. But for the last six months, she has been plagued by a deep sense that her life is meaningless. She has recently quit her job, but is uncertain about the direction she would like her life to take. She feels confused and depressed, and wants to understand what is happening.

On the advice of a friend, she booked an appointment with a well regarded astrologer. After casting a chart, the astrologer saw that Pluto has been transiting across the woman's Ascendant. The astrologer told the woman the story of Pluto, sharing with her the archetypes associated with god of the underworld. In short, the astrologer has given the client a narrative, an astrological mythology with which to understand her own experiences.

Communication scholar Walter Fischer proposed that human beings are essentially story-telling animals – “*Homo Narrans*.” According to Fischer, “. . . *symbols are created and communicated ultimately as stories meant to give order to human experience*.” Narratives connect past, present and future into a continuous whole, allowing listeners to recognize patterns and continuity of experience. A sense of existential order, meaning and wholeness is a prerequisite for what some have called *self-actualization*—the desire to find one's path in life and to reach one's full potential.²

This quest for self-knowledge is deeply woven into the fabric of human history. Inscribed on the threshold at the Oracle of Delphi, *Know Thyself* was a touchstone for the classical Greek philosophers.³ This

search has permeated the Western esoteric tradition, leaving its indelible mark on the Hermetic arts of alchemy and astrology.

The Search for Gnosis

Greek philosophers from Pythagoras to Plato to Plotinus speculated on the nature of the cosmos and the interaction of human consciousness with the material world. Plato divided existence into two broad categories—the timeless realm of ideas where the prototypes of manifested things exist and the time-bound realm of the manifest world.⁴

If this cosmic model is true, how, then would existence proceed from the world *above* to the world *below*? Various Greek philosophers presented their unique theories of a step-by-step process to move from a world of ideas to a world of physical manifestations. For Plotinus, *The One* was symbolized by *Light*, which was said to emanate through various stages of existence, eventually manifesting in physical form.⁵

However such cosmological theories only tell half the story of creation. If these models accurately describe the descent of human consciousness into the material realm, what do they say about the reverse process, the ascent into the realm above? In other words, if one climbed down the chain of being to enter the material world, then if one climbed up the chain of being, one would become more god-like, infused with the Light.

It is exactly this process of enlightenment that captivated the attention of the Mystery Schools of the Mediterranean region. At the time of the Pythagoras and Plato, Mystery Schools operated from Babylon to Greece to Egypt.⁶ Through a series of initiations and other practices, followers participated in the reenactment of mythic journeys, which served as an allegory

for the initiate's own search for enlightenment. Joseph Campbell found examples of this quest for redemption, which he called the "Hero's Journey," in numerous mythologies of the ancient world.⁷

In each version of the mythic story, the Hero is transformed by the quest. The Greek word for this type of understanding based on personal experience is *gnosis*. The word *gnosis* applies to any type of experiential understanding. For example, a technical description of the nerves and neural pathways stimulated, or even a poetry-laden metaphor cannot substitute for the *gnosis* of an orgasm. In the same way, by acting out a mythological narrative, initiates of the Mystery Schools sought to move beyond theory and analysis and experience an ecstatic union with the Light.

The Hero's Journey

In Sumerian and Babylonian mythology, the goddess, Innana (Ishtar), descends through seven gates (planetary spheres) into the underworld where she is killed.

After three days and three nights, she is resurrected through the intervention of other gods and journeys back to her place in the heavens.

In the Egyptian tale of Isis and Osiris, Osiris was killed and dismembered by his brother, Set. Isis searched Egypt for Osiris' parts and resurrected him with her magic.

In Greek mythology, Orpheus descended into Hades to free his wife, Eurydice; in the Eleusinian mysteries, Demeter's daughter, Persephone, was trapped in Hades until Hermes was sent to retrieve her

Krishna, avatar of the Hindu god Vishnu, descended into the underworld to find the six sons of Devaki. Devaki's love and rejoicing at the return of her children restored them back to their rightful place in the planetary realms.

In Christian mythology, after Christ's death, he descended into hell, the realm of Satan (Saturn), for three days to redeem the souls of Adam.

Alexandria and Hermeticism

While the initiates of the ancient world likely had some contact with one another, the march of Alexander's armies into Egypt in 331 BCE set in motion new levels of religious and philosophical syncretism. On the western edge of the Nile delta, the Greeks founded Alexandria, a city which would one day become home to the greatest library of the ancient world. Towering over the city was the Pharos, a lighthouse once named one of the Seven Wonders of the World.⁸ The Pharos' light served as a beacon to sailors as well as to seekers of knowledge and wisdom. This cosmopolitan crossroads of cultures became a melting pot for the philosophical and metaphysical ideas of the ancient world.

In Alexandria, the yearning for gnostic revelations found expression in the contemporary cultures of the region. The Jewish theory of emanations became known as the *Kabbalah*. Christian Gnostic sects were prevalent in the early Christian movement, and, though deemed heretical by the Church, survived in small communities even into Renaissance times. Centuries later, gnosticism would even reach into Islam in the form of the Sufis.

Hellenistic philosophy and the Mystery Schools of ancient Greece found a compatible cousin in the Egyptian esoteric tradition. In the 1st to 4th century CE, this Hellenistic-Egyptian syncretism gave birth to a form of gnosticism known as Hermeticism. The Greek god Hermes was blended with the Egyptian god, Thoth, creating a new archetypal figure known as Thrice-Great Hermes or Hermes Trismegistos.⁹ As a god of wisdom and learning, Hermes Trismegistos was well-matched to the scholarly Alexandrian *psyche*.



—Hermes Trismegistos,
by D. Stolcilus von Stolcenbeerg
from *Viridarium Chymicum*, 1524.

For Hermeticists, the One unified essence of the Cosmos expresses itself in the myriad forms of the natural world. So, by studying Nature, by observing how things move and transform, Hermeticists believed they could discover how to transform the self. The surviving books included in the *Corpus Hermeticum* blended the philosophies of the time—Platonism, Neo-Platonism and gnosticism—as well as natural sciences such as alchemy and astrology—to chart a course for the seeker of enlightenment.¹⁰

The Spaygric Art

Alchemy draws imagery from the science of metallurgy. The first known instance of refining ore (copper) occurred in Mesopotamia as early as 3800 BCE; by the Common Era the refining of ore was widely known throughout the Mediterranean region. The Arabic word for alchemy, *al-kimiya*, may derive from the ancient Egyptian, *kême*. Meaning black earth, *kême* is the rich, dark alluvial soil deposited by the annual flooding of the Nile for which Egypt was named.¹¹

The metallurgical process for refining ore is called smelting. Smelting breaks down the ore and removes impurities through various chemical processes (heating, dissolution, evaporation, etc.). The recombined substance results in a purer form of the desired metal. The metal becomes more refined with each additional smelting cycle. Alchemy's mottos—*Solve et Coagula* (disintegrate and coagulate) *Separatio et Coniunctio* (separate and join)—describe the act of transformation from one thing into another through this dance of construction, destruction and reconstruction. For this reason, alchemy has been called the *spaygric* art, from the Greek words *σπᾶω* and *ἀγείρω*, which translate as divide and unite.¹²

In the Hermetic tradition, everything in the material realm manifests a dual existence—ideal and material, active and receptive, male and female principles. Human consciousness is no exception, expressing itself as a fiery, active principle, an illuminating spark of Light or intellect; and a watery, receptive principle that receives and reflects the Light to the everyday, egocentric mind. The active principle is sometimes translated as *nous* or spirit, while the receptive principle has been called *psyche* or soul.¹³

Hermeticism posits that for most humans, consciousness remains entranced by the concerns of the material world. The soul chained to these material concerns is obscured, unable to reflect the Light of the spirit. Alchemy involves the purification of the soul so that it is once again in harmony with the spirit. The alchemical Great Work is the *hierosgamos*, or sacred

The Emerald Tablet

Truly, without deceit,
certain and most verifiable,
That which is Below corresponds
to that which is Above,
and that which is Above
corresponds to that which is Below
to accomplish the miracles of the One Thing.

And just as all things come from this One Thing
through the meditation of the One Mind,
so do all created things originate from
this One Thing through Transformation.

Its father is the Sun;
Its mother the Moon.
The Wind carried it in its belly.
Its nurse is the Earth.
It is the origin of all,
the consecration of the Universe.
Its inherent Strength is perfected
if it is turned into Earth

Separate the Earth from Heaven,
the Subtle from the Gross,
gently and with great ingenuity.
It rises from Earth to Heaven
And descends again to Earth,
Thereby combining within it the
powers of both the Above and the Below.

Thus you will obtain the Glory
of the Whole Universe.
All Obscurity will be clear to you.
This is the greatest Force of all powers,
because it overcomes every Subtle thing
and penetrates every Solid thing.

In this way was the Universe created
From this will come many wondrous Applications,
Because this is the Pattern.

Therefore I am called Thrice Great Hermes,
Having all three parts of the wisdom
of the Whole Universe.
Herein have I completely explained
the Operation of the Sun.

Translation from:
http://www.alchemylab.com/emerald_tablet.htm

marriage, of soul and spirit, so that human consciousness merges with the Light.

Following the metallurgical analogy, the transformation of the *psyche* requires a kind of psychological smelting. In order to transform itself, the *psyche* must descend into the metaphorical underworld in order to be reborn with a new understanding and perspective. This alchemical process is circular, alternating between *solve* and *coagula* on the path towards perfection until base consciousness is rendered noble. Each descent to the depths and ascent to the heights marks another cycle of psychic initiation.

Astrology, Language of Alchemy

As another ancient science exploring *how things change*, astrological symbolism was a natural fit for alchemy. In the Emerald Tablet, an 8th century Arabic text following in the Hermetic tradition, alchemy is referred to as the *Operation of the Sun*. Its counterpart, the *Operation of the Moon*, is astrology.¹⁴

Since both alchemy and astrology were part of the Hermetic tradition, it's not surprising that alchemists saw the basic building blocks of their cosmological understanding in the symbols of astrology. For example:

○	The circle represents <i>nous</i> , the Light within spirit
☾	The crescent represents <i>psyche</i> , the reflective transmutable soul.
+	The cross represents matter or material egocentric consciousness.

Using these basic elements, the glyphs for the alchemical metals correspond precisely to the glyphs for the classical planets. Echoing the philosophy of Aristotle, the alchemist saw nature as striving towards perfection. Seeing the One as both immanent and transcendent, the Hermetic tradition shares some ideas with Animism. Metals were seen as alive in some sense; over millennia, they too would evolve toward perfection, from the base lead to noble gold.

This evolution is paralleled in the *ascent* through the planetary realms. In the 2nd century CE, an Alexandrian named Claudius Ptolemy wrote his astrological treatise, *Tetrabiblos*. In Ptolemy's description, the ruling planets of the zodiacal signs form a kind of ladder, with rungs for Saturn, Jupiter, Mars, Venus, Mercury and the Moon and Sun.¹⁵

As a description of the alchemist's quest to transform lead into gold, this *Stairway to Heaven* (or Planetary Ladder, see drawing next page) has become one of the primary alchemical metaphors for the transmutation of the soul in the quest for enlightenment.

Planetary Alchemy	
♄ Lead	Lead is represented by Saturn, the slowest moving planet out from the Light of the Sun. At this level the <i>psyche</i> is submerged in the concerns of the material realm. The cross of matter reigns above the crescent of soul.
♃ Tin	Jupiter symbolizes tin. Lighter and more malleable than lead, tin represents the loosening of bonds chaining the <i>psyche</i> to the physical realm. The crescent of soul has begun to free itself from the cross of matter.
♂ or ♀ Iron	Iron shares its glyph with the red planet, Mars. Iron symbolizes the courage and strength of will necessary to undergo the difficult work of psychological transformation. The circle of spirit struggles for mastery over matter.
♀ Copper	The glyph for Venus corresponds to Copper. Copper's orange hue resembles gold, but in an unrefined state. Spiritual love and compassion have quenched material desires.
☿ Mercury	Quicksilver, or Mercury, is both a metal as well as an agent, activating the process of transformation. As such, Mercury represents the bridge between <i>above</i> and <i>below</i> , both as the messenger of the gods and as the divine child. The circle of spirit is linked to both the soul and matter.
☾ Silver	The silver Moon reflects the receptive nature of the <i>psyche</i> . The crescent of soul.
☼ Gold	The Sun is linked to Gold; both evoke the Light of the <i>nous</i> . The circle of spirit.

Descent of the Sun

Another allegory from the natural world for the Hero's quest is found in the seasonal changes of the Earth. In autumn and winter days grow shorter as the Sun descends into the Earth. At Winter Solstice the Sun is reborn to ascend back into the heavens through the spring and summer. The Sun itself becomes the Hero of the seasonal journey.

The constellations were established around 3000 BCE in the Age of Taurus.¹⁶ At this time when the ecliptic was aligned so that the Summer Solstice fell on the cusp of Leo, the zodiacal archetypes encoded the same elements of the descent-ascent cycle of the ancient mythologies of the Mystery Schools. In fact, scholars such as Archarya S went so far as to propose that the astrological myth was actually the prototype for the later religions of the region.¹⁷

The Hero's journey begins at the cusp of Leo and Cancer. Here the divine masculine and feminine principles, symbolized by the Sun and Moon, meet in the heavens. When Summer Solstice falls here, their union corresponds with the moment of greatest light in the northern hemisphere.

From the union of Sun and Moon, comes the divine child, signified by the planet Mercury. Mercury is born into the arms of the Virgin (Virgo), the sign following Leo on the ecliptic. The child realizes itself as a separate entity from its mother, recognizing a distinction between self and other. The analytical mind begins to ponder and categorize its new existence. The spirit has become flesh.

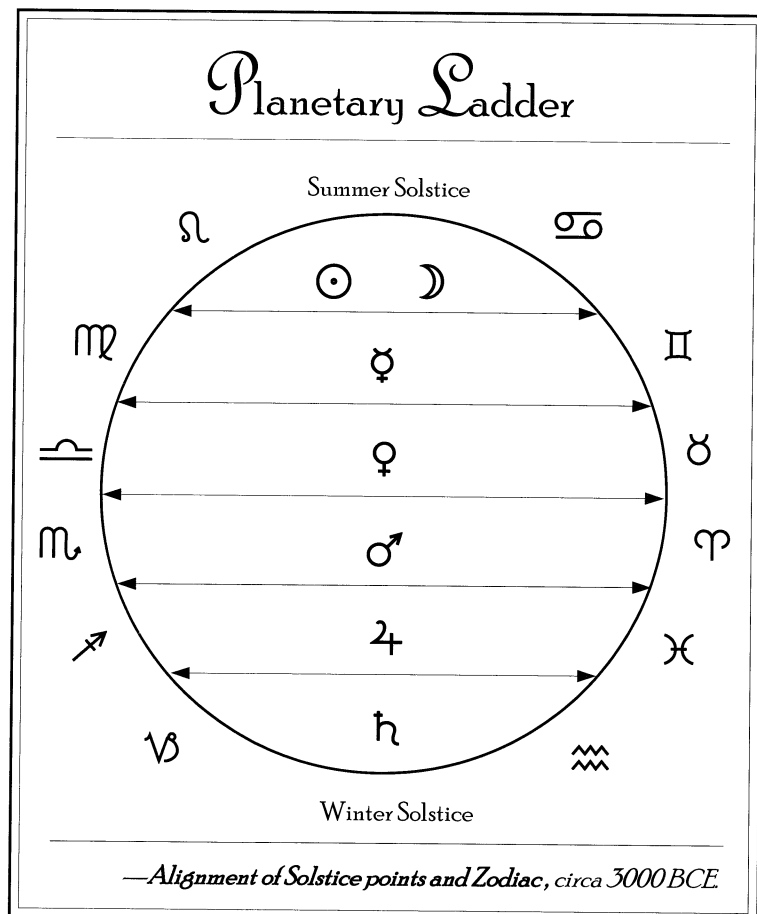
But the duality of material existence ensnares the Son of the Sun. In Venus-ruled Libra, the Lightbringer (Lucifer, a Roman name for Venus as the morning star) is trapped by his own desires for the other. The scales of Libra are invoked when Inanna's lover, the shepherd-king, Dumuzi, brings a wedding gift of milk in pails, yoked across his shoulders.¹⁸

When the Summer Solstice falls on the cusp of Leo, or the midheaven of a chart, the Autumnal Equinox or the cusp of Scorpio falls on the Ascendant. The gateway to the alchemical work of transformation and redemption also lies in Scorpio, sign of the Scorpion and the Phoenix. This first stage is called the *Nigredo*, or blackness. It requires an encounter with what Jung called the *Shadow*.

The call to embark on the Hero's journey begins with the sense that something in life is amiss. The movie, *The Matrix*, a modern retelling of the ancient cycle, opens with Neo (the New) sitting at his computer looking for something, compelled by a deep sense that his understanding of reality is not quite right. The seeker begins to ponder such questions as *Who am I? Why am I here?* The courage of Mars (Scorpio) is needed to set out on the Quest.

After the Hero has made the choice to undertake the quest, a teacher (Jupiter) often appears. This sage equips the Hero for the journey, by teaching him new skills or providing him with a magical weapon. The young Hercules is taught by the centaur Chiron (Sagittarius). Neo's search leads him to Morpheus (Greek god of dreams and nephew of Thanatos, god of Death), who shows him how to view his world in a new way. In Star Wars, Luke Skywalker meets Obi Wan who helps him discover the Force, and provides him with a light-saber (arrows of the archer). Now the Hero is ready to meet the Shadow.

The Christian mystic St. John of the Cross called this phase of the alchemical process the "*Dark Night of the Senses*,"¹⁹ the time when the mind realizes that the ego's habits and behaviors are no longer serving.



In terms of modern psychology, the underworld represents our unconscious mind, the home of repressed memories and their defense mechanisms. Descending into this shadowing realm can result in internal conflict, chaos and confusion, leading to fear, frustration, anger, or a desire to run away from everything.

For the alchemists, Saturn represented the metal lead: dull and heavy. Saturn rules Capricorn, the winter sign of increasing darkness. As Carl Jung wrote:

*He who looks in the mirror of the water, first sees his own image. He who looks at himself, risks to meet himself. The mirror does not flatter, it shows accurately what is reflected in it, namely that face that we never show the world because we hide it by the persona, the mask of the actor.*²⁰

Facing the hidden and repressed parts of the self can be terrifying and depressing (Saturn). It seems light has fled the world (winter). Saturn's lead poisoning causes mental instability. Following the path through the unconscious cannot be intellectualized, only experienced, fumbling blindly through inner darkness.

The Winter Solstice marks the point when the Sun has reached its maximum extreme of southern declination. For three days, the Sun appears to stand still, until its return to a northerly trek is visible along the horizon line and the days become longer once again. In alchemy, this return to the light is called the *Albedo*, the beginning of the unification of opposites and the transcendence of duality.

As the sign on the cusp of the Winter Solstice, Aquarius marks the beginning of the *Albedo*. Psychologically speaking, eventually the *psyche* in crisis hits bottom—internal pressure builds to a point where change is *demand*ed. The psychic charge is so great that it attracts a lightning flash of illumination (Aquarius) that destroys the old to make way for the new.

To use another alchemical metaphor, enlightenment is like turning coal into diamonds; it takes tremendous weight and pressure (Saturn) for the transformation to occur. Here is where modern minds often get stuck. With no initiatory traditions to give meaning to the process, many seek to avoid the unpleasant symptoms. When the Hero resorts to anti-depressants to skip the saturnine stage, the alchemical process is halted and the date with the soul is postponed. Here again, courage and will (Mars exalted in Capricorn) are required to complete the journey.

However, if the Hero has endured long enough for the Aquarian breakthrough to occur, the result is a new perspective free of the previous limiting psychological structures. Pisces follows on the zodiacal path;

after the confines of the old psychic structures are destroyed, the seeker experiences a sense of mystical expansion. The world is seen with new eyes. Some alchemists have called this phase the *Peacock's Tail*. This royal bird was Juno's (Jupiter's) sacred bird. Its iridescent hues are reminiscent of Iris, the rainbow messenger of Jupiter who signified the passing of the storm.²¹

But the alchemists also warned of the dangers of clinging to these mystical feelings. The expansiveness can lead to ego-inflation and a sense of grandeur. False visions can be distractions from the work. Buddhism teaches that seekers may also develop psychic powers called *siddhis*, as a result of their practice, but warn that these should not become a distraction from the goal of true enlightenment.

Mars-ruled Aires suggests that an act of will is required to take the next step on the alchemical journey. The seeker must turn away from distractions and stay on the path. But the seeker who developed a messianic complex might be tempted to employ the martial energies of Aires for imposing his way on others.

At this stage of his journey, the alchemist encounters a guide. Venus, ruler of Taurus, is born from the foam of the sea, another image of the unconscious. In Renaissance mythology, the guide is symbolized in Dante's Beatrice, who comes to him after he has traveled through the Inferno and Purgatory to help him on the last stage of his journey. In the modern myth, the guide is Trinity, who leads Neo to his own place of transformation.

The guide is a representation of the alchemist's own *psyche*; awareness has reached the level where conscious cooperation with the unconscious is possible. The seeker begins to learn a new way to relate to the self. Rather than relying on force to repress the urges of the unconscious, the alchemist discovers how the Goddess of Love soothes the savage beast. One can imagine ritual bull dancers of the Bronze-age Minoans celebrating the dance of human and animal, psychic and material.

The final stage of the alchemical process is called the *Rubedo*, the *Reddening* (sometimes the *Citronitas* and the *Rubedo*). The Twins, the hermaphrodite, and the messenger of the gods symbolize the sign of Gemini. Here the alchemist begins to understand the paradox of existence, transcending the duality of self and other, male and female, spirit and matter. This knowledge, or gnosis, comes from the direct perception of reality.

The reunification of opposites is symbolized by the Sacred Marriage of the White Queen and the Red King. By marrying the purified *psyche* to the *nous*,

the seeker achieves enlightenment, or a new level of mastery over the self.

Thus, the astrological cycle has come full circle. By traveling from the realm of Saturn to the Sun, the alchemist has succeeded in turning lead into gold. The astrological marriage is reflected in the mystery of the Sphinx, the head of a woman (Moon in Cancer) on the body of a Lion (Sun in Leo). The two snakes of the caduceus, representing the two opposing forces of our nature, joining together at the head, correspond to the Moon and Sun of the Planetary Ladder.

For the alchemists, however, enlightenment is not an end state. Just as a metal is refined again and again to reach increasingly pure states, the transformation of the soul is not the same as being done once for all time. Rather, after each cycle, the seeker returns with new understanding to begin the journey again.

The final stage of the *Rubedo* is the rebirth of the divine child. The illuminated *psyche* returns to integrate its experiences into a new life. In Buddhist terms, the *Bodhisattva* returns to Earth to be of service to others. Astrologically, the divine child reborn in the arms of the Virgin, is once again entranced by the cosmic mirror. At Scorpio, the Ouroboros consumes its tail, and the cycle of death and rebirth begins again.

Experiential Astrology

For Plotinus and the Gnostics, as one descended the Planetary Ladder, one acquired certain traits from each planetary realm. As one ascended the ladder, one was required to release those traits in the quest for enlightenment. An alchemist may also view this as the transformation of the base expression of planetary archetypes into more noble expression. For example, the Martian will to dominate others is transmuted into self-discipline.

The practical side of alchemy has been called *Theurgy*, or the *Operation of the Stars*.²² Alchemists accomplished their work by the planetary hours, phases of the Moon and seasonal cycles. They used these techniques to find the most efficacious time for their work. For example, Renaissance alchemist, Cornelius Agrippa, gave directions for making planetary talismans to induce revelatory dreams drawing on the planetary archetypes.²³

Modern astrologers have also suggested using this kind of sympathetic magic when one is experiencing challenging planetary aspects. For example, if Mars were conjoining Pluto, instead of cowering in the proverbial closet, one could plan to apply Martian energies to something Plutonic, such as refinishing furniture, fixing plumbing, taking out recycling or shoveling compost.²⁴

Archetypes can also be contacted through what has been called sacred theater. Just as the initiates of the Mystery Schools ritually dramatized the mythology of their unique tradition, alchemists used the paraphernalia of their art—alembic, retort, crucible and furnace—to act out their own allegory of self transformation.

Ritual drama provides a structure to consciously engage the forces of the unconscious. According to drama therapist, Paul Rebillot:

*The Buddhists say that one of the basic fears is the fear of unusual states of mind. We fear these in ourselves, and we fear them in others. One way to deal with that fundamental fear is to experience an unusual state of mind in a safe situation. . . . The value of [ritual drama] is that it allows people to realize that they can both enter into and come out of an extraordinary state with full consciousness.*²⁵

In the alchemist's laboratory, the dross could be burned away in the crucible, leaving a more pure form of the metal. But through his experiments, the alchemist also participated symbolically in the burning away of the impurities of the *psyche*.

Some modern astrologers have suggested using ritual dramas in conjunction with the active imagination to work directly with the planetary archetypes. Like the descent-ascent mythos of the ancient Mystery Schools, astrology has its own version of the Hero's Journey in the form of the seasonal journey of the Sun along the path of the ecliptic. The archetypes of the zodiac and the planets resonate well with the *psyche*'s sub-personalities, providing a way for conflicting psychological forces to enter into a dialog with one another.²⁶ Astrologer Babs Kirby called this use of creative visualization "*experiential astrology*," and found it to be a powerful tool for healing and self understanding.²⁷

Astrologer as Storyteller

Our modern world is facing a crisis of perception. In the words of Joseph Campbell: "*All the old mythic notions of the nature of the cosmos [have] gone to pieces.*"²⁸ No longer are there rites of passage to help those in the chaos of crisis understand the nature of their experiences. This lack of a mythic narrative has led to a plague of meaningless and existential angst in the modern *psyche*.

The client who seeks the counsel of an astrologer when Pluto is crossing her ascendant is looking for something more than the answer to the *When is this going to be over* question. She is looking for a way to understand herself and her experiences—in short, a seeking to comprehend her own mythic journey. As the Operation of the Moon, astrology provides a

mirror for the journey, reflected in the guise of astrological archetypes. In this way, the astrologer takes a role in the client's personal quest. The astrologer may assume the guise of the counselor or *psychopomp*, a mediator between heaven and earth, to help clients in crisis re-weave the tattered threads of their own story into a new narrative that promotes healing and wholeness. Or the astrologer may evoke fear in clients, creating a story that limits the creative potential of the client, thus donning the mask of the underworld monster who bars the path forward.

Hermeticists recognize that both characters have a place in the process. But it remains up to astrologers to decide which story they wish to tell.✽

Endnotes

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- ²⁸ Joseph Campbell, *Myths to Live By: How We Re-Crete Ancient Legends in Our Daily Lives to Release Human Potential*. New York: Bantam Books, 1972, pp. 5-6.

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"Ma'at-neb-men-aa, Ma'at-ba-aa" ...
 [are] ancient Egyptian syllables stated in open Lodge meetings, meaning:
great is the established Ma'at, great is the spirit of Ma'at.
 (Source: *The Hiram Key* by Knight & Lomas.)

"In ancient Egypt, justice was recognized as a good so fundamental that it was part of the natural order of things ... Ma'at, signified something more comprehensive than fairness. Originally the word was a physical term; it meant level, ordered, and symmetrical like the foundation plane of a temple. Later it came to mean righteousness, truth and justice."
 [emphasis added] (Source: *Warrior Pharaohs* by P.H. Newby.)