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Ancient Deities and New Meanings: The Role of Myths in Twentieth-Century Astrology

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Abstract. This paper examines a peculiar notion of divinity: the observation that authors of twentieth century astrology books recount myths of ancient Greek deities. These old stories seem to contradict the often cited ‘new’ psychological nature of Western astrology since the 1920s following the influence of C. G. Jung’s psychology. On a larger scale, this observation has the potential to blur the boundaries between so-called ‘traditional’ and ‘psychological’ astrology. And yet astrological authors had their reasons for including Greek mythology in their books. The task of this paper is to flesh out the role that ancient deities play in – putatively – new astrological concepts using examples of the German astrologer Olga von Ungern-Sternberg (1895-1997).

Historians of astrology often emphasise renewals that astrology went through in the early twentieth century. For example, for the German-speaking world, Ellic Howe (1910-1991) cited Herbert von Klöckler (1896-1950) as ‘the first to jettison much of astrology’s medieval ballast and to attempt to formulate a version more compatible with twentieth-century requirements’.¹ Referring to von Klöckler’s work *Foundations of Astrological Interpretation*, published in 1926, Kocku von Stuckrad’s words are very similar to Howe’s when he writes that in this book, von Klöckler ‘modernised several older traditions and adjusted them to the requirements and inquires of the twentieth century’.² Other scholars see innovations in interpretation rather than in technical details. Brockbank,

¹ Ellic Howe, *Urania’s Children – The Strange World of the Astrologers* (London: William Kimber & Co. Ltd, 1967), pp.99-100.

² ‘etliche ältere Traditionen modernisierte und den Bedürfnissen und Fragestellungen des zwanzigsten Jahrhunderts. anpaßte.’, von Stuckrad, *Geschichte der Astrologie*, p.326.

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for example, argues that techniques in ‘modern psychological astrology’ are similar to the Hellenistic tradition, but that ‘the meaning derived from these techniques’ is different.³ Readers of astrological textbooks from the early twentieth century onwards will find not only ancient techniques, but also ancient deities mentioned in these texts: the old gods and goddesses are still present in the recent history and practice of astrology.

One author who referred to ancient deities and their myths in her writings was Olga von Ungern-Sternberg (1895-1997), one of Germany’s first female physicians and Jungian psychotherapists, and an astrologer since 1923.⁴ Working as a psychotherapist in the early 1920s, von Ungern-Sternberg realised a connection between her patients’ accounts of dreams and astrological constellations in the patients’ birth charts. She noticed, for example, that Saturn showed in patients’ dreams as ‘what mysticisms called “the guardian of the threshold”’.⁵ When, for example, a patient, who was born with Saturn at the Midheaven and strove to break free from and go beyond his/her personal form of existence, von Ungern-Sternberg found that in this person’s dreams an ‘unfathomable figure’ often appeared ‘at the boundary of being earthbound’ and sent the dreamer back to earth ‘or even threatened to devour the individual’.⁶

Von Ungern-Sternberg investigated such relationships between inner experience and astrological constellations and summed up her thoughts in the book *Die innerseelische Erfahrungswelt am Bilde der Astrologie* [*The inner-psychic world of experience in the symbolism of astrology*], first published in 1928. In it, she stated that ‘[t]he symbolism encompassing most superbly the general-human [matter] – among almost every people

³James Brockbank, ‘Planetary signification from the second century until the present day’, *Culture and Cosmos*, Autumn/Winter 2003, Vol. 7 no 2, pp 37-62.

⁴For von Ungern-Sternberg’s life see M. Heer, ‘Olga von Ungern-Sternberg’, at <<http://www.astrologos.de/artikel/olga-von-ungern-sternberg/>> [accessed 19 February 2013].

⁵‘... ist das, was die Mystik als “Hüter der Schwelle” bezeichnet hat, ein Bild des Saturn,...’, Olga von Ungern-Sternberg, *Die innerseelische Erfahrungswelt am Bilde der Astrologie* [*The inner-psychic world of experience in the symbolism of astrology*] (Stuttgart: Rudolf Arnold Spieth Verlag, 1975 [1928]), [hereafter von Ungern-Sternberg, *Die innerseelische Erfahrungswelt am Bilde der Astrologie*], p.70.

⁶‘...daß ein Mensch, so er aus der persönlichen Form seines Daseins heraus will, ..., so tritt ihm an der Grenze des Erdbundenseins eine abgründige Gestalt entgegen, die ihn zur Erde zurückweist oder ihn selbst zu verschlingen droht, ...’, von Ungern-Sternberg, *Die innerseelische Erfahrungswelt am Bilde der Astrologie*, p.70.

and in some form valid at almost every time – is astrology’.⁷ She had found that dynamics as mirrored in a horoscope ‘correspond to the dynamics of the different dispositions of the according individual’s inner world’.⁸ From this she concluded that myth, as it appears in astrology, ‘reflects both the outside and the inside, the perceived world and the psyche taking hold of this world’, but the psyche must be stimulated from outside; it has to encounter the outer world so that inner images can come alive and become an individual’s reality.⁹ Accordingly, she described how ancient peoples laid the foundations for humanity’s collective unconscious. Their ‘yet untouched psyche’, von Ungern-Sternberg wrote, ‘created these images when they encountered an environment that tremendously acted upon the autonomous laws of the soul. The mythological symbol reflects a people’s experience, even is its destiny’.¹⁰ Ungern-Sternberg thus assumed that the first step in the creation of mythological figures like deities, especially those in relation to the sky, was not an internalisation of outer objects (stars, constellations), but rather an inner psychic process, initiated by humans’ interaction with their environment. Von Ungern-Sternberg’s view concurs with that of Hans Jonas who considered it likely that ‘the externalization of an inner principle’ is historically ‘the naturally prior stage’.¹¹

Thus in von Ungern-Sternberg’s book, the ancient deities had the function of explaining the connection between the human psyche and astrology – and as a consequence justifying the practice of astrology. In

⁷ ‘Die das Allgemein-Menschliche am großartigsten umfassende Symbolik – bei fast jedem Volk und zu fast jeder Zeit in irgendeiner Form gültig – ist die Astrologie’, in von Ungern-Sternberg, p.26.

⁸ ‘Die im Horoskop gespiegelten Zusammenhänge entsprechen dem Gegeneinanderspiel der verschiedenen Anlagen der jeweiligen menschlichen Innenwelt ...’, von Ungern-Sternberg, *Die innerseelische Erfahrungswelt am Bilde der Astrologie*, p.156.

⁹ ‘Der Mythos spiegelt somit wieder beides, Außen und Innen, die erlebte Welt und die von dieser Welt Besitz ergreifende Seele’, von Ungern-Sternberg, *Die innerseelische Erfahrungswelt am Bilde der Astrologie*, p.25.

¹⁰ ‘die noch unberührte Seele der Völker hat diese Sinnbilder im Zusammentreffen mit einer auf die Eigengesetzlichkeit der Seele gewaltig einwirkenden Umwelt geschaffen. Das mythologische Sinnbild spiegelt die Erfahrung, ja ist das Schicksal eines Volkes’, von Ungern-Sternberg, *Die innerseelische Erfahrungswelt am Bilde der Astrologie*, p.25.

¹¹ H. Jonas, ‘Myth and Mysticism: A Study of Objectification and Interiorization in Religious Thought’, *The Journal of Religion* Vol. 49, 4Oct. 1969), 315-329, p.315.

her understanding, the gods and goddesses were not outdated religious relics. ‘The images of the mythological main figures’, she wrote, which can be found in variations among all peoples, ‘correspond to general-human and deepest life contexts’.¹² They, she added, ‘always point at psychic forces’.¹³ Likewise, the dynamics in an individual’s horoscope, von Ungern-Sternberg concluded towards the end of her book, ‘correspond to the dynamics of the different dispositions in the native’s inner life’.¹⁴ A more recent Jungian psychotherapist, Edward Edinger (1922-1998), expressed the connection between ancient deities and the human psyche more concisely. ‘As we reflect on the mythological images’, he wrote, ‘we are studying the facts of the psyche and trying to interpret them’.¹⁵ ‘In psychological terms’, he continued, the Olympian deities are ‘inhabitants of the collective unconscious’ and ‘expressions of the archetypes, those psychic entities that continue to exist unchanging while the momentary individual egos come and go’.¹⁶ Archetypes, Edinger specified, are ‘basic patterns within the human psyche that exist independent of personal experience’.¹⁷ ‘Each of us’, he concluded, ‘contains within us the whole Olympian Pantheon.’¹⁸ In this respect, ancient deities like Saturn/Chronos, Jupiter/Jove or Mars/Ares exist independent of place and time, then and now.

In fact the notion that the deities and stories about them, the myths, are of a timeless nature is much older. In the fourth-century CE, the Neo-Platonist Sallustius had stated that mythological narratives ‘never happened, but always are’.¹⁹ Also von Ungern-Sternberg’s notion of a correspondence between the inner and outer worlds is not a twentieth

¹² von Ungern-Sternberg, *Die innerseelische Erfahrungswelt am Bilde der Astrologie*, pp.64-65.

¹³ von Ungern-Sternberg, *Die innerseelische Erfahrungswelt am Bilde der Astrologie*, p.65.

¹⁴ ‘Die im Horoskop gespiegelten Zusammenhänge entsprechen dem Gegeneinanderspiel der verschiedenen Anlagen der jeweiligen menschlichen Innenwelt...’, von Ungern-Sternberg, *Die innerseelische Erfahrungswelt am Bilde der Astrologie*, p.156.

¹⁵ Edward F. Edinger, *The Eternal Drama: The Inner Meaning of Greek Mythology* (Boston, Mass.: Shambhala, 1994), [hereafter Edinger, *The Eternal Drama*], p.4.

¹⁶ Edinger, *The Eternal Drama*, p.18.

¹⁷ Edinger, *The Eternal Drama*, p.19.

¹⁸ Edinger, *The Eternal Drama*, p.21.

¹⁹ Sallustius, *On the Gods and the World*, IV at https://hermetic.com/texts/on_the_gods-1 (accessed 30 May 2016).

century innovation in astrology. Mutual correspondences were common concepts in both Renaissance astrology and alchemy, because these two fields of knowledge were linked. This is understood in many modern astrological texts: in Liz Greene's words, they 'belonged to the same world-view – that outer and inner reflect each other and are part and parcel of one whole'.²⁰ The Renaissance physician and alchemist Paracelsus (1493-1541) specified several celestial objects that he thought to be reflected within a human individual, not only in the physical body, but also in the soul. He wrote:

Within Man there are Sun, Moon, Saturn, Mars, Mercury, Venus and all signs, the north and south poles, the Dipper and all quarters of the zodiac.²¹

This historical example suggests that features which appeared to have entered astrology as late as in the twentieth century were actually part of it long before the term 'psychological' was part of astrologers' vocabulary. It seems that there is no form of astrology that is not psychological, but then the specification 'psychological astrology' is a tautology and therefore unnecessary.

Next to their function as explanatory means, the ancient deities play another role in recent astrological literature and practice. Like other astrological authors, von Ungern-Sternberg used Greek mythology to delineate meanings of astrological symbols. She thought that 'the planets do not accidentally bear the names of ancient gods familiar to us whose worship throughout long times determined the psyche's life in a special way'.²² She viewed the astrological planets as inner psychic forces showing both the general (archetypal) parts and one's personal share. Her

²⁰ Liz Greene, 'Alchemical Symbolism in the Horoscope', in *Dynamics of the Unconscious*, ed. by Liz Greene and Howard Sasportas (York Beach, Maine: Samuel Weiser, Inc., 1988), p.260. See also Ingrid Merkel and Allen G. Debus (eds.), *Hermeticism and the Renaissance: Intellectual History and the Occult in Early Modern History* (London: Associated University Presses, 1988).

²¹ '...', dass im Menschen sind Sonne, Mond, Saturnus, Mars, Mercurius, Venus und alle Zeichen, der Nord- und Südpol, der Wagen und alle Viertel des Tierkreises', Paracelsus, *Die Geheimnisse: Ein Lesebuch aus seinen Schriften* [*The Secrets: A Reader from his writings*] (Munich: Knauer, 1990 [1941]), p.138.

²² 'Nun tragen die Planeten sicher nicht zufällig die uns vertrauten Namen antiker Gottheiten, deren Verehrung durch lange Zeiten hindurch das Seelenleben in besonderer Weise bestimmte', von Ungern-Sternberg, *Die innerseelische Erfahrungswelt am Bilde der Astrologie*, p.66.

aim was to convey an understanding of 'the image of the deity as an image of human experience'.²³ Consequently, she developed the planetary meanings directly from the myth or typical characteristics associated with the deity of the same name. Taking her passage about Saturn as an example, von Ungern-Sternberg first described that Saturn/Chronos, following his mother Gaia's wish, castrated his father Uranos and became the new supreme ruler, in her words 'the lord of creation himself'.²⁴ 'With Saturn's independent existence', she continued, 'guilt due to the castration of the father began at the same time and with it – [began] fear. Saturn devoured his own children in order not to lose the throne their hands'.²⁵ Next, she developed the following astrological meaning of Saturn:

... this image reflects the justification of this guilt for the sake of development ... Saturn is the primordial symbol of fear born out of the knowledge of the limitations of one's nature ... Saturn denotes the experience of dependency of the world In the horoscope Saturn's position indicates accordingly the knowledge of one's own boundary, thus the starting-point of fear and at the same time the self-assertion of one's own form.²⁶

The development of the astrological meanings of the planets from the myths of the ancient deities bearing the same names is a practical application of the theoretical notion described above, that the deities are expressions of archetypes.

Conclusion

This paper analysed one astrological text, Olga von Ungern-Sternberg's book *Die innerseelische Erfahrungswelt am Bilde der Astrologie*, in order

²³ von Ungern-Sternberg, *Die innerseelische Erfahrungswelt am Bilde der Astrologie*, p.69.

²⁴ von Ungern-Sternberg, *Die innerseelische Erfahrungswelt am Bilde der Astrologie*, pp.68-69.

²⁵ 'Mit Saturns selbständigem Sein begann zugleich die Schuld durch die Entmannung des Vaters und damit – die Angst. Saturn verschlang seine eigenen Kinder, um nicht durch deren Hand ebenfalls den Thron zu verlieren', von Ungern-Sternberg, *Die innerseelische Erfahrungswelt am Bilde der Astrologie*, p.69.

²⁶ von Ungern-Sternberg, *Die innerseelische Erfahrungswelt am Bilde der Astrologie*, pp.69-70.

to examine the role of ancient deities and myths in twentieth century astrological writings. The analysis showed that, by including deities and myths, von Ungern-Sternberg described in what way, in her view, astrology and an individual's psychological structure are connected via mythological figures such as gods and goddesses. Furthermore, ancient deities and myths are employed in order to develop interpretations of the planets in horoscopes. The assumption of a timeless nature of ancient deities and myths as well as that of the correspondences between the inner and outer worlds already existed in astrology before the twentieth century, before the influence of psychological theories like those of C.G. Jung. In this regard, the specific term 'psychological astrology' seems to be an unnecessary tautology.