

Symmetrical Astrology: An Overview of Its Origins

by Gary Christen

The 20th century was an extraordinary era for astrology. In the previous 250 years, Western astrology had been discarded by the intellectual elite. Just prior to 1900, astrology began emerging from an intellectual free-fall, and for the first time in many centuries, it began to become innovative again.

Since the 1600s astrology had been surviving in the nooks and crannies of Western society. During this period it had undergone the decay of its institutional knowledge to the point that what was being passed off as astrological knowledge was basically watered-down pap, bearing little resemblance to the vital forms of astrology that had been practiced just a few centuries earlier. See what being an intellectual outcast can do to a body of knowledge in a few years? When first-rate minds leave the scene, things dumb down very fast.

In the years just before the end of the Victorian era, astrology took an innovative turn. New minds were turning on to astrology. People like W.H. Chaney, Alan Leo, Sapharial and others were bringing a new vitality to the old knowledge. Not an altogether healthy vitality, but a new one nonetheless.

There have been several revisions of astrology in the last hundred years or so. Some of them have become integrated into our day-to-day work with astrology. These are the successes. Some of them failed to gain a long-term following and are going into the dustbin of astrological history.

One of the first major innovators was Alan Leo. He wrote a series of volumes that today we could characterize as the codification of the late Victorian style of astrology. Leo gathered and organized astrology in a way that no other astrologer had done before, and he was able to transmit this work to a large audience that was primed for such works. Remember that for more than 50 years prior to Leo, the occult, in the form of séances and mediumship, had been very popular in the U.S. and England. Leo was in the right place at the right time to become not only financially successful in astrology, but also to influence generations of students even to this very day. Yet, only a decade after Leo's death in 1917, his work was generally rejected by his own contemporaries, or better put, was greatly revised.

One of his foreign students was a German named Karl Brandler-Pracht. Pracht was an itinerant astrologer (a common lifestyle for astrologers of the era) who traveled from city to city teaching and practicing. His ideas rested heavily on the use of the Arabic Parts and solar-arc-based directions. In 1911 he taught a class in Hamburg, Germany, and two of his students went on to influence Central European astrology in a big way.

Pracht's teaching and methods greatly inspired both Elsbeth Ebertin and Alfred Witte. Elsbeth went on to found a very popular magazine (*Mensch im All*, later called

Cosmobiologie). Eventually she caught the attention of the National Socialist (Nazi) party with her prediction of Hitler's failed 1923 coup in Munich.

Witte began in 1913 to write some original, ground-breaking articles, and by 1915 he had joined with Friedrich Sieggren to found the Keplerian Circle. The stated purpose of this group was based on Kepler's remark about the need to clean up the baby called astrology without throwing the baby away with the dirty bathwater. Basically, the group wanted to get rid of the junk that had accumulated over the centuries, and to investigate the origins of astrology.

Witte, a surveyor by profession, was classically trained and able to read Latin and Greek. He had available to him many of the ancient astrological works that were later destroyed in the two World Wars, and he was apparently obsessive enough to read and understand everything. He went through a process then that the astrological field is collectively going through today -- that is, rediscovering the roots of astrology and re-creating what the ancients actually did.

By 1918 Witte began to write a series of articles in which he introduced ideas that were considered radical. In fact, his ideas were very old, mostly coming from Greek influences with some ideas of Bonatti, Kepler and Morinus thrown in. The radical part of Witte's thought was his reevaluation of the older practices in the light of 20th-century methods of thinking.

Most astrology in the previous few centuries had been based upon position, placement and symbolic connections in the chart. What was remarkable about Witte's presentation was his emphasis on the geometric arrangement of the planets and other points in the horoscope. To a subject that had become weighted down with disjointed ideas divorced from any underlying theory, Witte brought a fundamental logic, with a clean method of interpretation based on a strong sense of hierarchy.

As you might expect, Witte's ideas were initially rejected, especially after he attempted to discover new planets using astrological observation to find them rather than using a telescope or gravitational theories. After 1924, magazines ceased publishing his articles, and he withdrew from promoting his ideas in public.

Still, his peers considered Alfred Witte a great, if eccentric (putting it kindly) astrologer, and many sought him out as a teacher during the 1920s and 30s. He influenced many Central European schools of astrological thought. In Germany, his teachings were referred to as the Hamburg School, and in America they became known as the Uranian System and then just as Uranian Astrology. In addition, astrologers who had initially studied with Witte put forth their own interpretations of his ideas. Most notable among these were the Cosmobiological School of Edith Wangemann and the Cosmobiology of Elsbeth's son, Reinhold Ebertin.

Over time, the distinctions between the various Witte-inspired schools of thought have narrowed. Some systems emphasize midpoints over other kinds of planetary pictures.

Some emphasize arc openings over aspects, and some have a different lineup of personal points than the one Witte used. No matter, they are fundamentally all about symmetry -- which, in the next articles, is what we are going to cover in detail.

Next: Planetary Pictures: An Introduction

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