

# The Ideal and the Real

## *Saturn-Neptune*

**Richard Tarnas**

*Through an exploration of the individual biographies, personalities, and the creative work of major figures in both popular and high culture, Richard Tarnas's essay on the Saturn-Neptune archetypal complex gives a powerful demonstration of the multidimensional nature of the archetypes and their myriad forms of expression in the particulars of human experience. In a continuation of the method of analysis he developed in *Cosmos and Psyche*, Tarnas cites numerous examples from philosophy, science, politics, music, literature, and film as he explores the expression of the Saturn-Neptune complex in the lives of such diverse figures as William Blake, Oscar Wilde, David Hume, Sigmund Freud, Charles Darwin, Karl Marx, Samuel Barber, and Joni Mitchell.*

In this paper I would like to explore the remarkably diverse range of ways in which a specific archetypal complex associated with natal alignments involving two planets, in this case Saturn and Neptune, can express itself in various individuals born with those planets in major aspect. On the one hand, in each example cited below, the two archetypal principles involved were conspicuously dominant and in dynamic interaction in the individual's life and work. Yet on the other hand, within this commonality of archetypal presence and dynamism, equally evident was the extraordinary diversity of ways in which those were concretely embodied. The lives and personality characteristics of individuals born with Saturn-Neptune alignments were consistently marked by certain themes having a definite underlying archetypal coherence, a coherence that is easily recognizable even though the particular forms those themes took differed considerably from one person to the next.

For the sake of clarity, I will focus here only on this one planetary combination shared by many individuals, leaving aside all the other planetary aspects and combinations that they did not have in common. (In the same way, we might seek to discover a common quality among many individuals born with, say, French ancestry, leaving aside for the moment whether they are rich or poor, male or female, Christian or Jewish, and so forth.) We are abstracting out of a more complex reality just one common factor—major natal aspects between Saturn and Neptune—in order to focus on a possible common archetypal quality in the lives of those born with this natal aspect.

While this separation of one aspect from all the others in the birth chart is helpful as one stage in our analysis, in examining the biographical evidence I found that these other natal planetary configurations in each case consistently coincided with other clearly visible archetypal complexes and tendencies that seemed to exert a particular shaping influence on

how the Saturn-Neptune complex was experienced and expressed in that individual's life. It was only by taking into account the entire birth chart with all its planetary configurations that I could glimpse something like the full richness of an individual's life, work, and personality as these embodied the complex interplay of the various archetypal principles involved.

In the course of examining many hundreds of cases, I found that individuals born with alignments between Saturn and Neptune seemed to experience with special distinctness and potency the tensions and contrasts between two radically different existential realms. On the one side, Saturn is associated with the principle of limit and finitude, the literal material and temporal world of concrete empirical reality; with realism, hard fact, mortality, the dark and problematic aspects of existence; with the impulse towards gravity, judgment, and discipline; with contraction, constriction, and endings; and with the establishing of strict boundaries, defined structures, and tense polarities. On the other side, associated with Neptune are the spiritual, ideal, and imaginative dimensions of life; the subtle, the intangible, and the invisible; the impulse to dissolve boundaries and structures in favor of underlying unities and undifferentiated wholes; and tendencies towards illusion, delusion, and escapism. In all of the following examples, for further simplicity and clarity of analysis, we will consider only those with Saturn and Neptune in hard, quadrature aspect—conjunction, opposition, or square—so that the dialectic between the two principles is especially vivid.

As a simple first example of an individual born with Saturn and Neptune in close alignment, an opposition, we can recognize this particular archetypal polarity in the case of William Blake, with his well-known commitment to the life of the spiritual imagination in sharp contrast to the narrowed vision of conventional perception and positivist science:

May God keep us from single vision and Newton's sleep!

If the doors of perception were cleansed, everything would appear to man as it is, infinite. For man has closed himself up, till he sees all things through narrow chinks of his cavern.

In every cry of every Man,  
In every infant's cry of fear,  
In every voice, in every ban,  
The mind-forg'd manacles I hear.

Art degraded, Imagination denied  
War govern'd the Nations.

Poetry fetter'd Fetters the Human Race.  
 Nations are Destroy'd or Flourish in proportion as  
 Their Poetry, Painting and Music are Destroy'd or Flourish:  
 The primeval state of Man was Wisdom, Art and Science.<sup>1</sup>

We can recognize this same archetypal polarity in a somewhat different form in the case of Oscar Wilde, who was similarly born with Saturn and Neptune in close hard-aspect alignment (a square), and whose life and work consistently dramatized his heightened sensitivity to the tension between the aesthetic imagination and the drab assaults of ordinary life:

It is through Art, and through Art only, that we can realize our perfection;  
 through Art and Art only that we can shield ourselves from the sordid perils of  
 actual existence.<sup>2</sup>

So also, to take a more contemporary example, James Hillman, was born with Saturn and Neptune in close square alignment. Here the archetypal polarity is visible in Hillman's sustained exploration of the contrast between, on the one side, the tyrannical constrictions of the modern mind with its literalism and shallow vision, and on the other, the soul-making depths of the imaginative and aesthetic sensibility found in the ancients, the Renaissance, and Romanticism. Thus his thesis of the "poetic basis of mind" (first set forth in his famous Terry Lectures at Yale University in 1972, when Saturn and Neptune were in close opposition in the sky) asserted that a true psychology "starts neither in the physiology of the brain, the structure of language, the organization of society, nor the analysis of behavior, but in the processes of imagination."

Where there is a connection to soul, there is psychology; where not, what is  
 taking place is better called statistics, physical anthropology, cultural  
 journalism, or animal breeding.<sup>3</sup>

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1. These quotations are from *The Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, ed. D. V. Erdman, commentary by H. Bloom (New York: Doubleday, 1970). In the following, page numbers refer to this publication:

"and Newton's sleep": William Blake, "Letter to Thomas Butts, 22 November 1802," 693.

"narrow chinks of his cavern": Blake, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (1793), 39.

"mind-forg'd manacles I hear": Blake, "London," *Songs of Experience* (1794), 27.

"War Governed the Nations": Blake, *The Laocoön* (1820), 271.

"Wisdom, Art and Science": Blake, *Jerusalem* (1804), 144.

Blake was born with Mars conjoined to his Neptune opposite Saturn, visible in the highly embattled character of his assertion of the spiritual imagination over the literal, disenchanted, mechanistic vision.

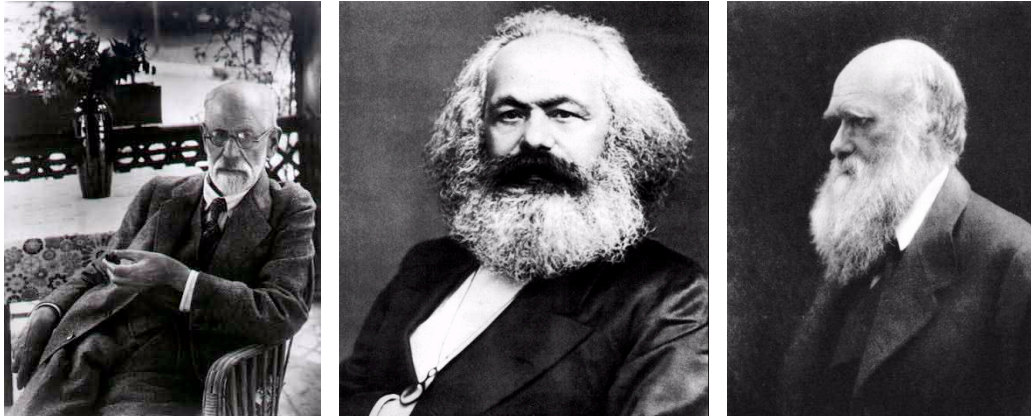
2. Oscar Wilde, *The Critic as Artist* (1891; repr., New York: Mondial, 2007), 67.

3. James Hillman, *Re-Visioning Psychology* (1975; repr., New York: HarperPerennial, 1992), xviii–xix. Hillman also cites this definition of the poetic basis of mind in *Archetypal Psychology: A Brief Account* (Dallas: Spring Publications, 1983), 10.

Each of these several statements by Blake, Wilde, and Hillman are representative, and even fundamental, expressions of their particular sensibilities and intellectual vision. Each statement also clearly reflects the basic polarity between the two archetypal principles associated with Saturn and Neptune. In a sense, this particular planetary combination is especially instructive as an example of how the two corresponding archetypes might combine, because these particular archetypes are of such radically different natures. Their very ontologies are, so to speak, from different planets—matter versus spirit, the concretely empirical and literal versus the imaginative and the ideal, the finite and temporal versus the infinite and eternal. Yet the form this archetypal polarity took in Blake, Wilde, and Hillman, though highly characteristic of many individuals born with these two planets in aspect, was only one of several such forms I observed in which the polarity was expressed. An equally characteristic motif among individuals born with this same planetary configuration—and equally reflective of this same archetypal polarity—was a definite tendency towards metaphysical skepticism, a seemingly innate proclivity to doubt the existence of transcendent or spiritual realities (Neptune), negating these in favor of the concrete empirical world (Saturn). This tendency often took the form of a strong impulse to demystify religious belief as itself a principal cause of both oppression and illusion in human life.

For example, David Hume, the paradigmatic skeptic of modern philosophy and acute critic of religious belief (*On Miracles, Dialogues on Natural Religion*) was born with Saturn and Neptune in alignment, as also was Bertrand Russell, his twentieth-century successor (*Why I Am Not a Christian*). So also was Freud, with his psychoanalytic deconstruction of religious belief—most explicit in *The Future of an Illusion* in which all religion is viewed as the psychological residue of childhood projections of parental omnipotence. So too were Darwin, with his scientific dismantling of the biblical understanding of creation, and Marx with his socioeconomic deconstruction of religion (“the opiate of the people”), and also Foucault with his postmodern development of the same tendencies—all born with Saturn and Neptune in alignment.

In the latter group of individuals, the tension between the two corresponding archetypal principles seemed to be resolved through a decisive identification with one side of the polarity (Saturn) in such a way as to require the negation of the other (Neptune). The archetype associated with Saturn, governing the concretely literal and material dimensions of life, as well as the very impulse towards judgment and negation, is here expressed as a commitment to a skeptical common-sense empiricism, strict factual judgment, a fidelity to the demands of the temporal and finite—the naked truth undistorted by emotion or fantasy, a stern negation of whatever is assessed and found wanting. This Saturnian constellation of impulses is expressed as an emphatic denial of the entire archetypal gestalt associated with Neptune—the metaphysical, the spiritual, the supernatural, the transcendent, the timeless and infinite—with these here regarded as naïve illusion and wishful projection, the shadow side of the Neptune principle.



*Negating the spiritual: Freud, Marx, and Darwin,  
each born during a Saturn-Neptune alignment*

This same theme and archetypal complex was evident in major cultural figures from earlier centuries, but took a modified form according to the cultural climate of the particular era. The Saturn-Neptune conjunction takes place every thirty-five to thirty-seven years, occurring approximately three times each century. The births of Bacon and Descartes, for example, took place in coincidence with two successive Saturn-Neptune conjunctions thirty-five years apart, in 1561 and 1596, respectively, at the end of each conjunction period.<sup>4</sup> In both cases, we see the characteristic themes of this archetypal complex that we observed in the cases of Hume, Russell, Freud, and others. In the case of Bacon, we see the shrewd skeptical critiques of conventional beliefs, the call for tough-minded empirical rigor against the speculations of the ancients and the Scholastics, the demand for practical scientific results rather than metaphysical imaginings, the constant impulse to unmask illusions and naïve projections. This unmasking impulse was precisely expressed in Bacon's famous analysis of the "idols" ("idols of the tribe," "idols of the cave," and so forth), revealing the manifold ways the human mind can fail through prejudice and ingrained habit, linguistic confusion, perceptual distortions, and the like. Yet all these Baconian themes suggestive of disenchantment and demystification were expressed within an emphatically Christian framework, in which what was questioned was not traditional religious faith, but rather philosophical positions that Bacon viewed as empirically untenable, mere fantasies of benighted tradition, resulting from an undisciplined mind prey to the distortions of the imagination.

In the case of Descartes, born during the Saturn-Neptune conjunction exactly one cycle after Bacon, the same archetypal complex was evident, again expressed within the early modern accommodation between science and religion, but this time with a rationalist rather than empiricist outcome. We see the familiar themes of the Saturn-Neptune polarity in Descartes's initial philosophical starting point of universal doubt, and then again in his famous resolution of that skeptical crisis by establishing a strict division between matter and

4. 5°44' and 15°33' from exact alignment, respectively.

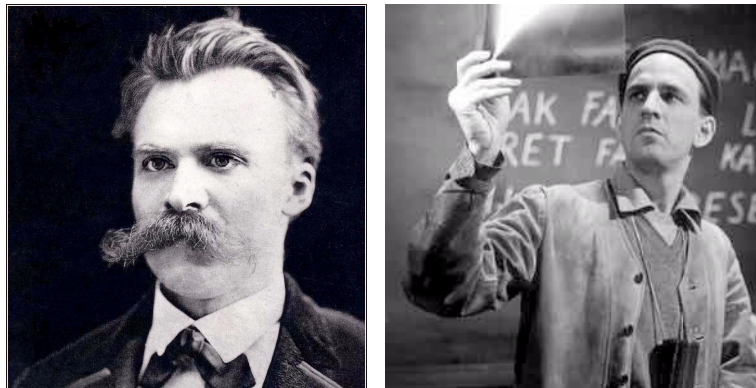
spirit, body and mind. What was demystified and rejected by Descartes was not religion, but rather the spiritual dimension of material reality. The outer world of matter and mechanism (*res extensa*) was sharply distinguished from an inner spiritual-mental world (*res cogitans*) that was the unique possession of the human self. In turn, in a further inflection of the same archetypal Saturn-Neptune dynamic, Descartes specifically linked the human mind with God, giving the rational self a firm, ultimately spiritual foundation for objective knowledge. The Cartesian dualism and skepticism involved a stern turning away from the subjective illusions of the imagination, and an austere disengagement from the body and nature by objectifying these as mechanistic, in order to achieve clarity and distinctness of rational knowledge in understanding the true nature of objective reality. In each of these philosophical moves and motives, the dialectic between Saturn and Neptune is readily apparent.

We can gain a further insight into the nuanced complexity of this archetypal dialectic if we revisit the three figures I first cited as being committed to the deeper truth of the cultivated imagination over the naïve apparent truth of the literal world—Blake, Wilde, and Hillman. For in all three of these individuals, one can also recognize a definite impulse towards deconstructive skepticism, a passion to strip away illusions and hypocrisies, as well as emphatically critical attitudes towards conventional philosophical and religious beliefs expressed in work after work (Blake's *Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, Wilde's *De Profundis*, Hillman's *Re-Visioning Psychology*). Yet, comparing the two groups we have been discussing so far, in the cases of Blake, Wilde, and Hillman, the underlying archetypal dialectic was engaged with entirely different imaginative orientations and spiritual consequences from the Bacon-Descartes-Hume-Darwin-Marx-Freud-Russell-Foucault form of the same complex: the former more in the Romantic tradition, broadly conceived, the latter in the Enlightenment tradition.

In a further commonality in all the individuals cited from both groups, the impulse towards skeptical judgment of naiveté, conventional belief, illusion and hypocrisy was often expressed with a certain sharpness of irony that I found to be a frequent characteristic of this archetypal complex. Jonathan Swift, for example, was born with Saturn and Neptune in hard-aspect alignment, as also was Mark Twain—both men masters of irony, skeptics of received wisdom, with sharp eyes for hypocrisy and deceit, all characteristic traits I observed among those born with these two planets in alignment. A more recent example would be Jon Stewart, whose satirical political commentary on *The Daily Show* in the United States has widely influenced contemporary public awareness and alertness to government, corporate, and media spin, propaganda, and deception.

Still others with this configuration expressed the same archetypal tensions through a marked tendency towards philosophical doubt, but a doubt resolved in neither the Baconian (empiricist) nor Cartesian (rationalist) manner but instead through a sustained underlying mood of uncertainty, tentativeness, and ambivalence. We see this in the case of Montaigne, who chose as his life motto "*Que sais-je?*" ("What do I know?"). In this instance and many others like it, there appeared to be more of a balanced stand-off, as it were, between the two principles, a sustained tension of irresolution.

Still others with these planets in hard-aspect alignment reflected the same polarity more in the manner of Ingmar Bergman, with his compelling combination of religious skepticism, unmasking illusions, existential uncertainty, spiritual anguish, and an unflinching encounter with suffering and mortality, acutely expressed in film after film—*The Seventh Seal*, *Wild Strawberries*, *Through a Glass Darkly*, *Winter Light*, *The Silence*, *Persona*, *Cries and Whispers*, and many others—in a long journey of creative exploration of the principal themes associated with this archetypal gestalt.



*Nietzsche and Bergman:  
both born during Saturn-Neptune conjunctions*

Friedrich Nietzsche combined virtually all the themes we have discussed so far in a complex and evolving synthesis—the radical skepticism, the trenchant questioning of conventional beliefs, the sharp irony, the unmasking of hypocrisy and delusion, the enduring concern with honesty and deception, illusion and truth, ambiguity and uncertainty. So too with Nietzsche's consistent hermeneutics of suspicion, his extraordinary eye for shadow, his absolute rejection of a metaphysical beyond, his unflinching encounter with cosmic disenchantment and nihilism, his spiritual struggle and anguish, his striving for spiritual fulfillment in this world without superstition or false consolation. Nietzsche was born at the cusp of one Saturn-Neptune conjunction in late 1844 (the conjunction after that of Darwin's birth) and declared the death of God thirty-seven years later in 1881 during the very next conjunction of the Saturn-Neptune cycle. This was, in turn, the conjunction immediately prior to that which coincided with the birth of Ingmar Bergman exactly one cycle and thirty-seven years after that in 1918.

Reviewing now the sequence of philosophers and intellectuals born during Saturn-Neptune alignments, beginning with Bacon and Descartes born in coincidence with the consecutive conjunctions of the sixteenth century, and extending through Darwin, Marx, Nietzsche, Freud, Russell, and Foucault, we can trace a developing continuum of increasing philosophical disenchantment that has deeply shaped the modern world view. Looking back even before Bacon, it is striking that the first modern master of disenchantment, Niccolò Machiavelli, was born in 1469 during the last Saturn-Neptune opposition of the fifteenth century. The founder of modern political philosophy and, for his era, a man uniquely

unencumbered by religious beliefs, Machiavelli fully separated politics for the first time from theological considerations, while examining the actual practice of Italian political life without illusions about human nature. Moreover, he began writing *The Prince*, his most significant work, when Saturn and Neptune were again in close alignment, in 1513. So many of the qualities for which *The Prince* is famous can be recognized as paradigmatic expressions of this archetypal complex—the entirely secular realism, the “scientific attitude” and clinical lucidity with which human affairs are observed, the keen eye for shadow, the critical appraisal and unmasking of the contemporary Church’s amoral political practices, the recommended use of deception and fraud as a sound strategy to maintain power, the general tendency towards pessimism and cynicism. In many respects, *The Prince* is the master text of the hermeneutics of suspicion. One can recognize its influence from Bacon to Nietzsche.

### Spirit and Matter, Body and Soul, Disenchantment and Hope

In all the cases cited so far as well as in many others not so well known, I found that the two archetypal principles associated with Saturn and Neptune were constellated with unusual specificity and intensity in the lives and psychological tendencies of individuals born with those specific planets in alignment. Yet a further phenomenon was also clearly visible in these same cases: In the lives of all these individuals, the two archetypes appeared to be *directly interacting and interpenetrating* in an extraordinarily complex, richly manifold way. That is, not only were these particular archetypes both highly activated in a readily visible manner, but they were also mutually acting upon each other, each in its own archetypally specific manner—sometimes opposing or negating each other, sometimes maintaining a tense equilibrium, and sometimes interpenetrating and coalescing with various synergistic results. The close geometrical relationship between the planets in the sky seemed to coincide with a close dialectical relationship between the corresponding archetypes in human experience. Yet *how* that dialectic was experienced—engaged, suffered, polarized, resolved, integrated—differed significantly from person to person.

For example, given Saturn’s close association not only with duality and tension but also with the problematic and shadow side of existence, with all that which is grave and difficult, it was striking how many individuals born with Saturn and Neptune in alignment expressed this same archetypal polarity between concrete actuality and the spiritual, ideal, and poetic dimensions of life in the form of a melancholic Romanticism—Coleridge and Chopin, for example, or Virginia Woolf, or Tennyson (*In Memoriam*), or Miguel de Unamuno (*The Tragic Sense of Life*). In each of these cases—and here we could include Bergman as well—a highly poetic temperament seemed to be especially confronting and focused on the disillusioning, sorrowful, or tragic aspects of existence. At issue here is the same archetypal contrast that the earlier-cited skeptical philosophers and scientists were engaged with, but in these cases with the emotional and imaginative elements highlighted, and with a poignant sense of the spiritual and existential loss involved. Moreover, the tension between the factual and the ideal that poets,

novelists, and philosophers articulated through words and language, composers born with this configuration, such as Chopin, seemed to convey in purely musical terms. Here we could also think, for example, of Samuel Barber (*Adagio for Strings, Sorrow*), or Miles Davis (*Kind of Blue, Sketches of Spain*), both born with this same configuration as well.

One can discern the same polarity expressed in words and music together throughout the many compositions of Joni Mitchell (born with the Saturn-Neptune alignment in hard aspect to both her natal Venus and Moon). A characteristic example is *Both Sides Now*, a song important both early and late in her life's work, in which she evokes with poetic simplicity the contradictions and contrasts between life's magic, romance, and dreams coming true on the one side, its bitter losses and disillusionments over time on the other, ending with precise Montaigne-like ambiguity:

I've looked at life from both sides now  
 . . . and still somehow  
 It's life's illusions I recall;  
 I really don't know life at all.

Moreover, we see this same polarity of enchantment and disenchantment, aspiration and disillusion vividly expressed in many of the earlier examples cited: One thinks of Blake's joyfully prelapsarian *Songs of Innocence* immediately followed by the dark *Songs of Experience*; or the tragic despair of Oscar Wilde's last works *De Profundis* and *Ballad of Reading Gaol* ("Something was dead in each of us / And what was dead was Hope"); or Mark Twain's late works, the deeply disillusioned *Letters from the Earth*, *The Mysterious Stranger*, and *The Great Dark*; or the pessimism and bitter irony in much of Swift's work, increasing in his later years as well. In extreme cases, including some of the figures we have been discussing such as Virginia Woolf, I found both the Saturn-Neptune natal configuration and the corresponding complex being expressed in individuals whose lives were subject to states of deep depression, spiritual desperation, debilitating addiction, mental disturbance.

Yet by contrast, still others with the same configuration seemed to embody this archetypal dialectic in an entirely different if no less vivid manner, with lives and personalities that tended towards the ascetic and monastic—a decisive renunciation of the material world (Saturn) in favor of a spirituality (Neptune) regarded as radically separate from mundane life. In this category of cases, exemplified by such paradigmatic religious figures as the eighteenth-century American preacher Jonathan Edwards or the fifteenth-century Florentine preacher Savonarola, we can begin to see a new level of complexity in the archetypal dialectic: On the one hand, the Saturn principle can be recognized as governing that which was being depreciated, negated, disengaged from, or sublimated in the service of the spiritual and transcendent: thus the spiritual impulse to transcend the mundane world of conventional life, to separate oneself from the concerns of the temporal, to rise above or deny the material realm, the physical body, the claims of ordinary human appetites, the stubborn structures of the ego, the consensus world view of literal concreteness—all themes closely associated with Saturn.

Yet on the other hand, in these very same cases, in addition to this *antagonism* between the two archetypes, the Saturn principle also seemed to *coalesce with* and *influence* the form taken by the spiritual impulse associated with Neptune. Thus we see the characteristic Saturnian qualities of rigor, order, self-denial, the strict maintenance of boundaries, separation, solitude, the sustained fidelity to a serious commitment, the hierarchical structures of authority and obedience, the loyalty to a tradition. Yet these Saturnian qualities and themes can be seen as embedded entirely within the context of spirituality, idealism, and the striving for transcendence, all associated with Neptune.

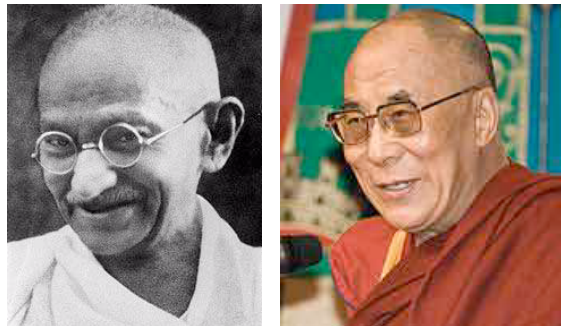
We can also recognize the signs of the Saturn-Neptune archetypal combination within this mode of spirituality in the disciplined cultivation of silence and interior emptiness, the devotion to prayer and meditation, the training of the imagination to live within certain traditional structures of religious experience. We see the themes expressed as well in the striving for humility and detachment, the impulse for renunciation and sacrifice, the embrace of poverty, the contemplation of death, the experience of dark nights of the soul, the need to maintain hope and faith in the midst of spiritual disappointment and despair. So too the sober and sometimes stern ascetic ethos, the emphatic impulse towards hard judgment often combined with a high degree of spiritual anxiety, the sharp negation of the things of this world, of sensuality and frivolity, sometimes accompanied by a tendency towards moralistic humorlessness or self-punitive suffering.

Thus throughout this subclass of manifestations of the Saturn-Neptune archetypal complex, the Saturn principle can be seen both as that which is being sharply separated, judged, and negated (i.e., the material world and its conventional concerns), and also as that which is itself drawing the rigorous boundary and making the negative judgment—radically separating “this world” from the realm of the spirit. The Saturn principle finds expression in the very act of drawing strict boundaries and setting up hard polarities by which the mundane is rejected in favor of the transcendent (the same archetypal dynamic and polarity as in the case of the anti-religious skeptics cited earlier, but with the exactly reverse valuation). Finally, Saturn’s characteristic qualities of rigor, seriousness, and stern judgment permeate the way in which the spiritual dimension is being engaged and pursued. Thus within the same overall existential orientation of ascetic withdrawal from the world, the two principles associated with Saturn and Neptune can be seen as simultaneously set off *against* each other and yet subtly *interpenetrating* each other in an extraordinary multiplicity of ways.

Moreover, I often observed that this interpenetration between the two archetypes could also take a form in which the very polarity they represented was the focus of arduous integration rather than of ultimate separation. Thus I found that many individuals born with Saturn and Neptune in alignment led lives marked by a serious and disciplined but highly pragmatic and this-worldly religiosity which above all sought to bridge the gap between the transcendent ideal (Neptune) and the empirical reality (Saturn) through some form of compassionate service to the whole and direct engagement with the problems and suffering of the world. Here the dominant impulse seemed to be that of bringing spiritual values (Neptune) into practical expression and enduring embodiment (Saturn) both within and against the

resistances of concrete social and political structures (also Saturn), through hard work and disciplined pragmatic organization (also Saturn).

Thus we see such representative figures born with Saturn and Neptune in alignment as Lincoln, Gandhi, and Martin Luther King, for example, or more recently Vaclav Havel.<sup>5</sup> So too, in the Buddhist tradition, the Dalai Lama (born during the same Saturn-Neptune opposition as Havel) and Thich Nhat Hanh (born during the immediately preceding square alignment, the same as Hillman and Foucault). Another paradigmatic example of this same impulse was Florence Nightingale, the nineteenth-century Christian mystic and founder of modern nursing who described her spiritual experiences as a decisive inner calling to engage in outward social action on behalf of humanity. So also Father Joseph Damien, the Belgian priest who gave his life to the care of lepers on the island colony of Molokai in Hawaii.



*Spirit in the world: Gandhi and the Dalai Lama*

I frequently observed that the lives and work of many individuals born with these two planets in aspect seemed to combine several of these different themes within the single personality and biography, often shifting from one mode to another in the course of life. Thus we see in Lincoln, born during the first Saturn-Neptune conjunction of the nineteenth century, not only his synthesis of concrete this-worldly political engagement with spiritual vision, as well as his commitment to the compassionate care of the oppressed, the wounded, the widowed, the orphaned, but also his tendencies towards religious doubt and skepticism, and a lifelong susceptibility to dark depressions—every one of these themes precisely reflective of the archetypal dynamic associated with Saturn and Neptune.

We can see this same multiplicity of relevant themes in Oscar Wilde. One motif and focus of his work was, as we saw, the sharp dichotomy between the aesthetic imagination and the sordid and tedious mundane world (“We are all in the gutter, but some of us are looking at the stars”). Another equally pronounced Saturn-Neptune theme throughout Wilde’s life

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5. Compared with all the other examples so far cited, Gandhi and King are instances of natal Saturn trine Neptune, a soft or more intrinsically harmonious aspect between the two planets and principles. Similarly, Fr. Joseph Damien, cited in this same paragraph, was born with the sextile.

involved the complex interplay of truth and illusion—both comic and tragic—from essays like “The Decay of Lying” and “The Truth of Masks” to his novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and then on to his plays *An Ideal Husband* and *The Importance of Being Earnest*. Consider from the latter the double-reverse-flip irony of “I hope you have not been leading a double life, pretending to be wicked and being really good all the time. That would be hypocrisy.” Or: “The first duty in life is to assume a pose. What the second duty is, no one has yet found out.”<sup>6</sup>

And yet another theme characteristic of the Saturn-Neptune archetypal gestalt, which emerged in Wilde’s final years, involved the profound relationship between sorrow and the spirit:

How else but through a broken heart  
May Lord Christ enter in.  
(*Ballad of Reading Gaol*)

Where there is sorrow there is holy ground.  
(*De Profundis*)

Indeed, perhaps the most characteristic phenomenon I observed in all correlations between a specific archetypal complex and individuals born with the corresponding planetary alignment was that the biography, the personality, and the work and vision associated with that individual consistently reflected multiple variations of the characteristic themes for that archetypal combination. These multiple expressions of the same complex could be conspicuous at different times of life or simultaneously, in different areas of life or intricately combined within the same area.

For example, Coleridge was born during the last Saturn-Neptune conjunction of the eighteenth century (the one immediately prior to that of Lincoln and Tennyson thirty-seven years later). On the one hand, Coleridge is known for the haunting apparitions of *Rime of the Ancient Mariner* and *Kubla Khan*, the melancholic disillusionment and inward-turning of *Dejection: An Ode*, and the tragic marital disappointment and chronic opiate addiction that shadowed so much of his life. Yet on the other hand, he is equally notable for his philosophical articulation of a fundamental polarity and antagonism between Enlightenment empiricist rationalism and Romantic imaginative cognition (Understanding versus Reason). In stressing this essential polarity throughout his life, Coleridge closely resembles both Blake and Hillman, affirming the greater creative power of the imaginative intelligence to body forth deeper realities and discern larger wholes in both outer nature and inner experience. One also sees in many of these cases, as in Coleridge, Blake, and Hillman, a certain monastic or ascetic impulse, but here expressed not as religious otherworldliness but as a disciplined devotion to the interior life of art, culture, and scholarship, a sustained cultivation of the poetic and intellectual imagination against the constraints and distractions of conventional mundane values.

While considering Coleridge and literature, we might note that the polarity between the Saturn and Neptune principles can also be recognized in the polarity between prose and poetry.

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6. Cited in Richard Ellman, *Oscar Wilde* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1988), 311.

While prose has a greater focus on imparting factual information, reflecting on matters of objective common concern, and communicating ideas with unambiguous clarity and precision (all Saturnian values and themes), the realm of poetry is specifically more concerned with the realm of imaginative vision, with exploring the ambiguities of the interior world and subjectivity, and with the creative use of language and imagery with attention to the subtle nuances of aesthetic meaning and intangible impression (all values and themes of the Neptune archetype). Significantly, Coleridge, who wrote both prose and poetry, once concisely defined the difference between the two (from *Table Talk*): “Prose = words in their best order. Poetry = the *best* words in the best order.”

Building on this definition, perhaps we could add that this is why some prose is poetic, and some poetry prosaic. What is genuinely poetic is not limited to the literal genre “poetry”; nor, by such a definition, is all poetry genuinely poetic. Even here, then, in this paradoxical complication of the Coleridgean formula, the characteristic Saturn-Neptune dialectic is visible, expressed in the act of “seeing through” the literal appearance to the intangible essence—through the prose to the possibility of its truly poetic character, and through the “poetic” to the possibility of its prosaic actuality. Here the archetypal polarity and tension is embodied in the act of seeing through the letter to the spirit, through the visible to the invisible, through the concrete surface of the conventional reality to the underlying animating principle, through the illusion to the truth.

I was especially struck by those cases of individuals born with Saturn-Neptune configurations who brought forth insightful analyses of an entire range of issues and conflicts specifically associated with this archetypal complex, sometimes devoting their lives to that task: thus the sixteenth-century writer Robert Burton, for example, with his classic treatise, *The Anatomy of Melancholy*; or Stendhal, with his equally classic dissection of romantic rapture, illusion, and disillusion, *On Love*—both born with Saturn and Neptune in alignment. So too Max Weber, who, after his own deep psychological and spiritual crisis, brought forth his penetrating analyses of the disenchanted modern mind—the word “disenchanted” (*entzaubert*) being Weber’s own coinage—as he explored the pervasive loss in the modern world view of a spiritual dimension that previously provided a ground of meaning for human life embedded in the cosmic order. We see yet other forms of the Saturn-Neptune complex in Weber’s analysis of asceticism in both religious and economic contexts—the “innerworldly asceticism” of Protestant spirituality, which engages the material world in order to free the self from it—and the intolerable spiritual anxiety produced by the Calvinist belief in predestination, which in Weber’s analysis eventually helped engender the secularized Protestant ethic of capitalism.

An especially notable example of an individual born with a Saturn-Neptune alignment whose lifework and philosophical vision seemed to be completely pervaded by this archetypal complex was Martin Heidegger. Here one thinks of his deep exploration of existential *angst*, the dread with no nameable object, the pervading consciousness of guilt and death, inauthenticity and bad faith, the spiritual plight of mortal humanity, nothingness and nihilism, the fall from Being, the “darkening of the world,” the tragic loss of the old gods. Yet by contrast, one thinks also (in line with Blake and Coleridge) of Heidegger’s philosophical

appeal to the great poets and poetry as alone capable of restoring humankind to authentic Being, or his final interview where he stated that “only a god can save us.”

Returning to James Hillman within this context, one would be hard pressed to suggest one area of his lifework and remarkable range of insights that is not eloquently reflective of this same archetypal dynamic associated with the Saturn-Neptune configuration with which he was born: his many vivid analyses of disenchantment and disillusion, the special relationship of the soul to limitation and death, to melancholia and depression, loss, abandonment, nostalgia, psychopathology, suicide and the soul, nightmares, psychic disintegration, falling apart. We see other familiar signs of this archetypal complex in Hillman’s abiding concern with ambivalence and ambiguity, healing fictions and the fiction of case histories, seeing through the literal, unmasking the projection, doubting the apparent objectivity of one’s perceptions.

Similarly, we can recognize Saturn’s characteristic tendencies towards establishing polarities and oppositions, making judgments and sensing oppression, in Hillman’s many sharply drawn dichotomies: between the Saturnian *senex* and the spiritually aspiring *puer*, between Hebraic and Hellenic, monotheistic and polytheistic, “North” and “South”—the North with its sternly didactic, ascetic, Germanic, Protestant rationalist spirit and the South with its lushly aesthetic, poetic, pagan, Mediterranean soul. Hillman’s dichotomies are asserted even within the Neptunian realm itself in his famous antithesis between “spirit” and “soul,” with his many subtle distinctions and passionate judgments concerning the potential tyranny of the spirit and the spiritual ascent over the richly unresolved life of the interior soul and its wanderings in the depths of this world.<sup>7</sup>

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7. In Hillman’s articulation of a sharp distinction between “spirit” and “soul,” the Neptunian dimension is itself precisely divided into transcendent spirit and immanent soul, peaks and vales. Hillman establishes this polarity with many acute distinctions and hierarchically ranked judgments (Saturn) concerning the potential oppressiveness (again, Saturn) of the monotheistic spiritual quest that seeks to move up and out, beyond this life’s petty concerns to a centered state of elevated purity and rightness on the radiant mountaintop high above the body’s imprisonment and above the soul’s ceaseless wanderings (with the modern form of the spirit visible in the Cartesian sense of rational spirit as *res cogitans*, that which is closest to God and the modern form of the spirit within the Enlightenment-scientific mind.) This spiritual impulse upward and beyond is distinguished from the soul’s erratic and circular movements downward and deep, its descents into the interior darkneses, its day-to-day, moment-to-moment immersion in the embodied, animated, polytheistic and polyphonic, clouded valleys of mortal concerns, poetic imaginings, confusions, feelings, moods, symptoms, and relational complications—the vale of soul and “soul-making.” Thus Hillman gives to spirit the negative aspects of both Saturn (oppressive, confining, dry, monotheistically dogmatic, literal) and Neptune (escapist, narcissistic, self-deluding). And conversely, he gives to soul the positive aspects of both Saturn (authentic, unflinchingly confronting mortality and finitude, suffering and pathology, the actual embodied life in this world) and Neptune (rich in symbolic meaning and imaginative depths, fluid and enchanted, immersed in the invisible and intangible dimensions of life that give human existence a deeper significance).

In terms of our discussion of archetypal multivalence, it is instructive to note that the Dalai Lama (Tenzin Gyatso) makes exactly the same distinction between spirit and soul that Hillman does—but with precisely the reverse hierarchy, favoring the spiritual ascent to the high and light over the soul’s remaining in the dark and heavy. Remarkably, the Dalai Lama was born during the Saturn-Neptune opposition in 1935, which was the hard-aspect alignment immediately following the square in 1926 during which Hillman was born. For both Hillman’s and the Dalai Lama’s renderings of this important polarity, see Hillman’s “Peaks and Vales: The Soul/Spirit Distinction as Basis for the Differences between Psychotherapy and Spiritual Discipline,” in *Puer Papers* (Irving, TX: Spring Publications, 1979), 54–74.

Paradoxically, another form of this same archetypal dynamic is visible in Hillman's impulse to *dissolve* conventional dichotomies (subject and object, outer and inner, masculine and feminine, good and evil) and to undermine the dualistic, dichotomizing compulsion altogether. The same complex is also evident in his stress on the importance of possessing or developing an "eye for shadow," the imaginative capacity to discern the dark and problematic side of things. And it is evident, too, in the shadow of this eye for shadow: the ever-present potential for the unconsciously self-fulfilling, maya-like *projection* of shadow, as in paranoia, depression, and cynicism.

Even Hillman's affirmation of the life of the soul and of the archetypal dimension of existence is pervaded by the two very different sides of this complex. On the one hand is Hillman's call to recognize the actuality (Saturn) of the *mundus imaginalis* (Neptune), the imaginal world of archetypal forms. Yet on the other hand is his acute awareness of the bedazzling power of archetypal complexes in shaping the life of the soul and structuring all experience, perceptions, and ideas, potentially creating an unconscious prison of constellated fantasy within which one's life and activities are constrained and distorted. Finally, equally characteristic of the same underlying gestalt is Hillman's lifelong work on behalf of the return of the soul (Neptune) to a disenchanted world (Saturn), his urging of patient devotion to the long labor of "soul-making" (a term he drew from Keats, in a letter written during a Saturn-Neptune square in April 1819), and his call to engage the concrete crises of our time—social, political, ecological—with the insights and values of a cultivated interior life that does not remain sequestered within the confines of the therapeutic hour.

Recalling again the other two members whom I cited along with Hillman in the first group of individuals born with the Saturn-Neptune configuration, we can recognize the presence of this same impulse to bridge the chasm between inner and outer, invisible and visible, soul and body, in Oscar Wilde:

By the artificial separation of soul and body, men have invented a Realism  
that is vulgar, an Idealism that is void.  
(*The Picture of Dorian Gray*)

And in Blake:

Man has no Body distinct from his Soul; for that call'd Body is a portion of  
Soul discern'd by the five Senses, the chief inlets of Soul in this age.  
(*The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*)

So also with Blake's affirmation of a deep *coniunctio* between these two archetypal principles associated with Neptune and Saturn, the infinite and the finite, the eternal and the temporal:

Eternity is in love with the productions of Time.  
(*The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*)

Thus we see within the larger class of individuals who are born with Saturn and Neptune in hard-aspect alignment a distinct concern with the schisms between body and soul, matter and spirit, time and eternity. Yet this schism and polarity can be engaged in an extraordinarily wide range of ways that, from one end of the spectrum to the other, can include diametrically opposite philosophical positions.

In examining such correlations, we can therefore discern certain “family resemblances,” to use Wittgenstein’s term—subcategories of kindred spirits within the larger class of individuals born with a particular configuration. These familial groupings link together persons whose lives embodied closely related inflections or expressions of the larger archetypal complex, as we saw, for example, with the metaphysical or religious skepticism variously expressed in Machiavelli, Bacon, Descartes, Hume, Darwin, Marx, Nietzsche, Freud, Russell, and Foucault; or the melancholic Romanticism of Coleridge, Chopin, Tennyson, Woolf, Barber, Miles Davis, and Joni Mitchell. Yet these groupings are highly fluid and overlapping, with any given individual in one of the subcategories frequently sharing significant themes in common with individuals in another group.

Freud and Virginia Woolf, for example, while representative of the two separate groupings in which they were just cited, philosophical skepticism and poetic melancholia, can nevertheless also be recognized as sharing a certain common sensibility and areas of existential concern that precisely reflect this same archetypal complex—their shared taste for irony, their sharp eye for shadow, their passion to confront life unflinchingly without illusion or self-deception, their disdainful judgment of collective naïveté and wishful delusion. The lives and sensibilities of both Freud and Woolf were pervaded with the ambiguous theme of disillusionment—at once the demystifying disenchantment that frees one from naïve delusion, and the sorrowful disappointment of hopes and ideals that would give life its meaning and purpose. We see this same archetypal gestalt in Freud’s and Woolf’s frequent bouts with depression and despondency, their imaginations at once poetic and dark, simultaneously symbolic and reductive, their shared concerns with death, illness, chronic difficult-to-diagnose mental and physical conditions, neurosis, madness, despair, the haunting of the present by the past, the suffering of the human soul.



*Oscar Wilde and Virginia Woolf:  
literary exemplars of the Saturn-Neptune complex*

Here again Oscar Wilde provides an especially potent and evocative example of how the several distinct, even antagonistic, themes and impulses we have seen as characteristic of the Saturn-Neptune archetypal complex can be expressed in one individual. I found that it was especially when a particular planetary configuration in the natal chart was being transited by an outer planet that the corresponding archetypal complex tended to be most visible, most highly activated, and that the antithetical impulses associated with that complex were most likely to be simultaneously constellated and then dynamically impelled towards a larger synthesis. Thus it was when Wilde had the once-in-a-lifetime transit of Pluto exactly crossing his natal Saturn-Neptune square during and after 1895 that he underwent the trial, imprisonment, and spiritual crisis that brought forth his final powerful works, *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* ("I never saw a man who looked / With such a wistful eye / Upon that little tent of blue / Which prisoners call the sky") and *De Profundis*, his noble, often desperate, but spiritually profound apologia. In the following passage from *De Profundis*, we see the characteristic archetypal themes of the Saturn-Neptune complex, combined with themes associated with the Saturn-Pluto complex (which I have explored in *Cosmos and Psyche*) in intricate, mutually intensifying interaction:

I have lain in prison for nearly two years. Out of my nature has come wild despair; an abandonment to grief that was piteous even to look at; terrible and impotent rage; bitterness and scorn; anguish that wept aloud; misery that could find no voice; sorrow that was dumb. I have passed through every possible mood of suffering. . . . But while there were times when I rejoiced in the idea that my sufferings were to be endless, I could not bear them to be without meaning. Now I find hidden somewhere away in my nature something that tells me that nothing in the whole world is meaningless, and suffering least of all. That something hidden away in my nature, like a treasure in a field, is Humility.

It is the last thing left in me, and the best: the ultimate discovery at which I have arrived, the starting-point for a fresh development. It has come to me right out of myself, so I know that it has come at the proper time. It could not have come before, nor later. Had any one told me of it, I would have rejected it. Had it been brought to me, I would have refused it. As I found it, I want to keep it. I must do so. It is the one thing that has in it the elements of life, of a new life, *vita nuova* for me. Of all things it is the strangest. One cannot acquire it, except by surrendering everything that one has. It is only when one has lost all things, that one knows that one possesses it. . . .

I am completely penniless, and absolutely homeless. Yet there are worse things in the world than that. I am quite candid when I say that rather than go out from this prison with bitterness in my heart against the world, I would gladly and readily beg my bread from door to door. If I got nothing from the house of the rich I would get something at the house of the poor. Those who have

much are often greedy; those who have little always share. I would not a bit mind sleeping in the cool grass in summer, and when winter came on sheltering myself by the warm close-thatched rick, or under the penthouse of a great barn, provided I had love in my heart. The external things of life seem to me now of no importance at all. You can see to what intensity of individualism I have arrived—or am arriving rather, for the journey is long, and “where I walk there are thorns.”<sup>8</sup>

Moreover, it was here, in *De Profundis*, that Wilde articulated an extraordinary synthesis of skepticism and faith, a firm agnosticism imbued with a sense of the sacred, while simultaneously giving voice to an overriding impulse to find the sacred and the spiritual only in the concrete actualities of this life:

Religion does not help me. The faith that others give to what is unseen, I give to what one can touch, and look at. My gods dwell in temples made with hands; and within the circle of actual experience is my creed made perfect and complete: too complete, it may be, for like many or all of those who have placed their heaven in this earth, I have found in it not merely the beauty of heaven, but the horror of hell also. When I think about religion at all, I feel as if I would like to found an order for those who *cannot* believe: the Confraternity of the Faithless, one might call it, where on an altar, on which no taper burned, a priest, in whose heart peace had no dwelling, might celebrate with unblest bread and a chalice empty of wine. Everything to be true must become a religion. And agnosticism should have its ritual no less than faith. It has sown its martyrs, it should reap its saints, and praise God daily for having hidden Himself from man. But whether it be faith or agnosticism, it must be nothing external to me. . . . If I may not find its secret within myself, I shall never find it: if I have not got it already, it will never come to me.<sup>9</sup>

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8. Oscar Wilde, *De Profundis* (1905; repr., New York: Penguin, 1976), 152–53. Wilde wrote *De Profundis* in 1897. It was published posthumously in 1905.

9. Wilde, *De Profundis*, 154–155.

## Birth Data and Sources

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