

# The Historiography of Astrology: A Diagnosis and A Prescription

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## Introduction

I would like to suggest a change in how social and cultural historians of astrology approach their subject-matter. That change at once obscure, important, and impertinent: obscure, because it is virtually impossible to codify, except in very general terms, as a methodological rule; important, because it would nonetheless have considerable and, I feel, highly positive effects on history-writing; and impertinent, because my advocacy requires me to criticise my equals and/or betters.<sup>1</sup>

The initial stimulus for what I want to say was a relatively inchoate but persistent intuition, a disquiet about the current state of the subject. However, it coincided with two other influences. One was some new work from within the contemporary astrological community (Cornelius 2004). The other was a newly awakened interest on my part in anthropological analyses of the same sort of material – ‘magic’, ‘the supernatural’, and/or ‘the occult’ – in connection with my recent work on astrology and/as divination (Willis and Curry 2004).

There is no space here to argue the case for approaching astrology as divination. To obviate any misunderstanding, however, I must stress that for reasons explained in Willis and Curry (2004), it would be quite inappropriate to categorize divination – and by implication, astrology *qua* divination – as magic, if by that is meant, for example, the manipulation of occult forces à la Neoplatonic, Hermetic, or Renaissance magic (see also Curry 1999). Equally ill-judged, for the same reasons, would be the rubric of ‘occult science.’ Divination is certainly not a science, whether ancient or modern (although the reverse is not so easy to dismiss; see Curry 1992, 167).

In order to explore the issue I decided to take as my starting-point Keith Thomas’s *Religion and the Decline of Magic* (1971) and, as a convenient terminus, a relatively recent book that seems on its way to achieving comparable status, both among historians and general readers, namely Anthony Grafton’s *Cardano’s Cosmos* (1999).

Then I remembered a powerful critique of the first book by the anthropologist Hildred Geertz which appeared, together with a reply by Thomas, in the *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* of 1975. The point is not so much Geertz’s specific criticisms and suggested corrections as the fundamental problem she perceived, and, consequently, the kind of approach that might serve as a remedy. It seems perfectly fair to ask, after thirty years, what progress, if any, has been made.

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<sup>1</sup> For earlier reflections, see Curry 2000.

Actually, both problem and prescription also figure in a longstanding debate within the discipline of anthropology, as well as (albeit to a significantly lesser extent) among historians. And although it is not my purpose to trace it in any detail, anthropologists have already have considerable impact upon historians of magic (for want of a better label) – again, more so than the reverse.

### Thomas vs. Geertz

Let us start with *Religion and the Decline of Magic*. The essence of Geertz's critique (shared by others) was that Thomas's approach to magic was fundamentally utilitarian and functionalist, with the meeting (or attempted meeting) of needs, both individual-psychological and social-sociological, as a virtually exhaustive explanatory framework. In this, as she also pointed out, he had followed Bronislaw Malinowski in assuming that magical acts are *necessarily* ineffective; thus their persistence apparently gives rise to the puzzle, why do they persist? And the functionalist answer is, because they meet actors' needs that they themselves fail to recognise. Thus, for Thomas, the principal question to be answered regarding astrology was: why were such beliefs, which are "now rightly disdained by intelligent persons, taken seriously by equally intelligent persons in the past?" (Thomas 1973: ix). Geertz rightly pointed out the peculiarity of this attitude, all the more striking on the part of an historian writing of a period when to take astrology seriously (some of it, at least, and to some degree) was the norm, no less for intelligent persons than anyone else. It follows, she wrote, that "It is not the 'decline' of the practice of magic that cries out for explanation, but the emergence and rise of the label 'magic'" and its attendant connotations (1975: 76).

In a related context, four years later, G.E.R. Lloyd remarked of how Greek science developed: "The *explanandum* is not, in any case, the victory of rationality over magic: there was no such victory: but rather how the criticism of magic got some purchase" (1979: 263-64). And in a paper on early modern English astrology, I called for "a project which defies anachronism by asking not 'why did they believe in astrology?' but 'why did they *stop* believing in it? Why them and not these others?'" (Curry 1991: 290).<sup>2</sup> But note that as recently as 1991 this was still more of a *desideratum* than a reality. So this is one problem, or one aspect of the problem: *anachronism*.

Geertz also argued that what linked together the specific behaviours exhaustively catalogued by Thomas was "not a psychological attitude but an ontology" – a world. In particular, "What it means to know and to gain knowledge ('cunning') in such a cosmos has a peculiar connotation in such a cosmos, having much more to do with participation and influence than our terms signify" (1975: 83, 85). This point overlaps one made by E.P. Thompson in an earlier cogent essay-review of Thomas: "religion, magic, astrology, prophecy – all operate in a language of symbolism which, when translated into rational argument, loses a portion of its meaning and all of its psychic compulsion" (1972: 49). Let this be the second problem, then, or aspect thereof: *positivism*, or, to borrow an apposite term from Owen Barfield, RUP: residues of unresolved positivism.<sup>3</sup>

Thomas (1975: 101, 102), in his reply to Geertz, was unrepentant:

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Veyne 1988: 2: "No positivist criticism can adequately deal with mythology and the supernatural. How then does it happen that people cease believing in legends?"

<sup>3</sup> Unfortunately I cannot locate the exact source of his use of this expression at the moment.

it is unquestionably true that it is the technological gap between man's aspirations and his limited control of his environment which gives magical practices their relevance.... Their [cunning folk's] prestige depended upon their supposed efficacy, and earlier anthropologists were right to point out how the self-confirming nature of their activities prevented clients from realizing that they were not efficacious.

In short, 'we' know, and what we know is the truth; they, on the other hand, 'believe', and have only beliefs. (Until, that is, they turn into us, which putative process is what supplied the grand narrative of Thomas's text.)

### Grafton's Cosmos

At this point, let us turn to Grafton's *Cardano's Cosmos*. At the risk of seeming ungrateful, I shall pass over its several virtues to come straight to the point in the present context: what progress has there been? Certainly Thomas's crude functionalism has disappeared from view, but it seems to have been replaced by refinements – historiographical epicycles, if you will. Thus, Grafton writes of "the social worlds [astrology] *served*". Classical and Renaissance astrologers "*projected* the same beneficent and threatening images into the heavens," while the "preserved horoscopes and textbooks of astrology *mirror* the hopes and expectations, anxieties and terrors of a whole society..." (1999: 6, 5, 10; my emphases). Furthermore, "Cardano would never have admitted that he – or Ptolemy – owed his prominence to persuasive abilities, rather than operational knowledge of nature" (1999: 145).

Just as Malinowski was an inspiration for Thomas, there is an anthropological *éminence gris* for Grafton: E.E. Evans-Pritchard and his *Witchcraft, Oracles and Divination among the Azande* (1937). And just as the work of the latter was more subtle than that of Malinowski, so is Grafton's in comparison to that of Thomas. Thus, Grafton (1999: 15) proclaims that "I wanted to do justice to both the rationalism and the irrationality of Renaissance astrology..." An admirable goal, but note the choice of words: the 'rationalism' (not rationality) of astrology follows granted the premisses, but modernist sensibilities are saved by the very next term, because those premisses, as 'we' 'now' 'know' – and *all three terms* can, and should, be closely questioned – are 'irrational'. So it is safe to grant what Thomas probably would not have, namely that "the astrologers and their clients used rational means to explore their worlds and their selves, and to master them" (1999: 202). "Even Cardano's expressions of skepticism," Grafton (1999: 162) writes, "resembled those of the Azande medicine men studied by E.E. Evans-Pritchard; he often challenged the proficiency of individual rivals, but not the validity of the art they practiced [sic]."

This approach raises several questions. (1) Is there any sense here that astrology could have involved – and, by implication, could still involve – anything more or other than serving, mirroring or projecting official realities (whether physical, social or psychological) compared to which it is essentially epiphenomenal? (2) Is there any awareness that historians of astrology too owe their prominence to persuasive abilities rather than 'operational knowledge of nature' – and, *horribile dictu*, maybe even professors of physics? (3) Is there any evidence that we too very rarely question the validity of our 'arts', and just as quickly come up against the limits of our scepticism?<sup>4</sup> That we are thus, *au fond*, in precisely the same situation as Cardano and his contemporaries, and vice-versa? And (4), is there any

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<sup>4</sup> As Wittgenstein observed, it is impossible to doubt everything.

acknowledgement that there were any serious astrologers – in as serious a sense of ‘serious’ as you like – after the Renaissance and early modern period? Or, by the same token, that however rare they might perhaps be, it is still *possible* (as well as *still possible*) to be a serious astrologer? Unfortunately, the answer to all these not unimportant questions must be, no. By implication, if we take *Cardano’s Cosmos* as a touchstone, the answer to my earlier question about progress must be: very little.

This conclusion is reinforced at a less exalted level by such recent books as Stephen Wilson’s *The Magical Universe: Everyday Ritual and Magic in Pre-Modern Europe* (2000: xxv), which covers the same terrain as that of Thomas, and according to which magic “is a system of over-rationalisation, which requires and produces explanation.... Magic here gives a sense of control in a situation of actual insecurity and impotence.... Via rituals, people...could ‘do something’ rather than remain passively helpless”, and so, depressingly, on. (I would make an exception of one work, however: Ann Geneva’s *Astrology and the Seventeenth-Century Mind* (1995), whose crowning virtue is to take William Lilly’s astrology seriously.)

Of course, I accept that there are perfectly valid sorts of history-writing which escape this damning verdict because they are trying to do something else. But in terms of the kind that both Thomas and Grafton profess to have undertaken – the recovery of ‘lost’ worlds of meaning, let us say (although we shall have cause later to question that goal more closely) – the approaches and conclusions of both are clearly unsatisfactory. They fail fully to respect and accommodate the lived experience of their historical subjects, astrologers and their clients, as real and true to exactly the same extent, and with the same qualifications (as part of that experience), as that of the historian writing about them. In a word, they lack *reflexivity*.

Even to the extent an historian’s goal is not hermeneutic but explanatory, perhaps along social scientific lines, it seems to me that there is a serious problem here. Without going into this debate to the depth it ultimately requires, is explanation really satisfactory when data that is regarded as essential by the human subjects has been discarded, tacitly ruled inadmissible, from the outset?<sup>5</sup> One will undoubtedly end up with an explanation, but it will surely not be one of its subject(s), whole and alive; it will be one of only whatever *can* be explained in such a way.

### **Insights from Anthropology**

What, then, does anthropology have to offer? After all, its historiographical influence to date has not been an unmixed blessing. And as I already mentioned, the same debate is longstanding, and often heated, within that discipline too.

A useful starting-point is Susan Greenwood’s *Magic, Witchcraft and the Otherworld: An Anthropology* (2000). It is useful because it reviews that debate within anthropology, and because her points have some some ringing resonances with their historiographical equivalents. For example, she writes that

anthropologists have used functionalist, structuralist or symbolic models to explain informants’ experiences. Alternatively, they have analysed informants’ accounts as ‘texts’ to be analysed in terms of meaning. The emic [i.e., ‘insider’s’] reality of informants has been treated as interesting and even

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<sup>5</sup> See the forthcoming review of Grafton (1999) by Geoffrey Cornelius in *Culture and Cosmos*.

reasonable (given the premises upon which it rests), but not as a serious alternative to Western scientific views of reality... (2000:11)

Now one of Thomas's conclusions in his response to Geertz was that "historians are going to have to come to terms with the methods and approaches of structural analysis" (1975: 108). But it should be clear that structuralism, whether in history or in anthropology, does not go to the heart of the problem we are considering. Nor even does the symbolic approach of the late Victor Turner, whose work on ritual, *communitas* and liminality is fascinating for the way it balances on the very point at stake here – "swaying between rationalization and deep understanding", in the words of Edith Turner (1992: 29). Roy Willis notes that

Turner's '*communitas*' concept was certainly an improvement on the 'functionalist' theory that long dominated anthropology, according to which all social institutions, including rituals, served to uphold the *status quo*. But it was still Durkheimian in that it saw human reality as contained within an alternation between the limitations of social structure and its libertarian antithesis.... In this model of '*communitas*', the infra-social world of aliens, beasts and cosmic spirits – especially spirits – would seem to have no part (1999: 118).

Edith Turner was, in fact, one of the first modern anthropologists to take that brave next step toward deeper understanding in her book *Experiencing Ritual: A New Interpretation of African Healing* (1992). She grasped, and wrote (1992: 2; my emphasis), the crucial fact that in the healing ritual – in which "I participated instead of merely witnessing" – the central ritual object "is both a spirit *and* a tooth" – not just a tooth, 'really', onto which spirit-like properties are projected, mirroring social realities, and all the rest of the modernist rationalising apparatus. (It is a tiny but revealing fact that for all his innovative work on divination, Victor Turner did not actually attend a divination session.<sup>6</sup>)

Why brave? Not only because breaking with the consensus risks professional (institutional) failure, but because of the way it demands what Keats called negative capability – "that is, when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason." This is a personal and psychic demand as much as a professional *desideratum*, of course. Why not? Isn't the pretence that the individual and personal can be ironed out and dispensed with through methodology itself part of the modernist myth? And it *is* demanding. In the words of Greenwood (2000: 19), the effect of post-80s "critical awareness and the radical democratisation of knowledge" is "that ethnographic work is now attempting to bridge the gulf between Self and Other by revealing both parties as vulnerable experiencing subjects." In another word, *participation*.

Her conclusion is a close parallel to the remedy already suggested for Thomas's anachronism: "my emphasis," she writes (2000: 49), "...will [be] on seeing the process of becoming engaged in magical practice as learning the language of another mode of reality." But the spirit of this approach undercuts Grafton's qualified generosity too, because:

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<sup>6</sup> Peek 1991: 9.

If magic and the magicians' otherworlds are seen as irrational or are identified solely as due to individual psychology or as figments of the imagination, or even if – as in Evans-Pritchard's study of the Azande – they are rational in themselves for ordering action and social life, but in the final analysis are inferior to science – then this devalues the reality of magic for the practitioners themselves (2000: 13).

Such devaluation is entailed by both anthropological ethnocentrism – the inferior Other in another place – and historical anachronism: the inferior Other in an earlier time. (Note too how easily, given a teleological narrative of Progress, no matter how subtle, 'earlier' becomes evaluative as well as chronological). And a lack of reflexivity is part of the same package. Evans-Pritchard ascribed the Azande's "blind" adherence to oracles "to the fact that their intellectual ingenuity and experimental keenness are conditioned by patterns of ritual behaviour and mystical belief. Within the limits set by these patterns they show great intelligence, but it cannot operate beyond these limits" (1937: 338). Unlike ourselves, constantly and heroically venturing beyond the limits of our own assumptions, rituals and cultural patterns...? I think not.<sup>7</sup>

I am afraid it follows that ideally, at least, "if an anthropologist wants to examine 'magic' then she or he must directly experience the otherworld" (2000: 12). But what is the corollary for historians of astrology? How are participation and reflexivity possible when one's subjects are, so to speak, history? The answer, it seems to me, is this – and here I am trying for that elusive methodological prescription:

**1a.** The historian should have experienced, for him- or herself, the truth of astrology in action, in practice, and without any *post hoc* "reaching after fact or reason" to disqualify such an experience as metaphysically, ideologically or personally unacceptable.

**1b.** Failing this, he or she should have recourse to some equivalent experience and a principled habit of accommodating it.

**2.** When horoscopes by the astrologer(s) survive, the historian should have, or acquire, sufficient skill in the astrology involved to follow and illuminate them. (But note that this stipulation alone, although desirable, is not sufficient to result in the kind of history-writing I am advocating.)

Is no. 1, the key demand, unreasonable or unduly onerous? On the one hand, surely not. Unless one has succeeded in entirely turning oneself into a modernist automaton, some such experience is part of every life and, probably, at least to some degree, everyday life.<sup>8</sup> So the second, alternative stipulation (1b) is actually fairly generous. But the first remains the ideal.

On the other hand, where academic disciplines are concerned, apparently it is asking a lot. Even within anthropology, where ethnography is so central, it has been a struggle to attain and arguably remains a minority view. An anthropologically literate historian, Ronald Hutton, recently provided a terse and amusing summary as part of a valuable overview (2003: 286): the dominant methodological positions have been that (1) it is alright to behave like the natives, but not to think like them, subsequently succeeded by (2) it is alright to go native as long as you don't stay native afterwards. But as he points out, even the latter approach

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<sup>7</sup> V. Peek 1991: 8.

<sup>8</sup> Hence the title of Latour's *We Have Never Been Modern* (1993).

retained the assumption that the beliefs and attitudes of the people studied were valueless in themselves, and that the anthropologist would accordingly suffer no loss in shaking them off at the end of the project... [Also] it turned the researcher into a form of impostor, an undercover agent for a different culture who acted out membership of a group before leaving it and throwing off the disguise.

Too many historians have, for too long, undertaken an equivalent of this patronising and ultimately exploitative act.

### **Against ‘Belief’**

The issue at stake is one summarised in this way by another anthropologist, Katherine Ewing (1994: 571-2)<sup>9</sup>: “the taboo against going native results from a refusal to acknowledge that the subjects of one’s research might actually know something about the human condition that is personally valid for the anthropologist: it is a refusal to believe”. But I would prefer to say ‘to experience’, and this leads to an important point which needs emphasis. *I am not arguing that historians should ‘believe in’ astrology.* Belief is not the issue here, or certainly not a fundamental one. Another anthropologist, Jenny Blain, reflects helpfully on the adverse consequences of “Taking the view that ‘they believe it, so I’ll accept it as emic description’” and stopping there: it

positions the researcher as having access to a ‘truth’ outside and at odds with that of her participants. It is, to say the least, patronising. It may also, in the final resort, actively deny access to the ‘realities’ of the participants.... including the researcher’s own experiences. And in distancing the ethnographer from this ‘belief’, it starts to reify ‘emic knowledge’ as fixed, static and unchanging, as generally shared, rather than as a specific construction of interpretations that each person, ethnographer included, engages in, and with.

“For some time,” she adds, “my choice was to refuse to adjudicate belief...<sup>[10]</sup> However, ‘belief’ is, in my opinion, not a good description for the relation of [the anthropologist’s] subjects, shamanists, with the other beings and realities that share their worlds” (Blain 2002: 156-157).

In addition to Blain and the other anthropologists mentioned here, I could adduce Wouter J. Hanegraaff’s (2003: 374) recent reflections on the inadequacy of intellectualist interpretations of participation, and David J. Hufford’s (1995) succinct methodological critique of scholarly ‘disinterest’. Similarly, the striking progress in science studies in the last few decades, both historical and sociological, required adopting the ‘symmetry principle’ of bracketing the so-called truth-value of both ‘scientific truth’ and ‘superstitious beliefs’ and treating the conditions of their production alike.<sup>11</sup> Doubtless further support of a philosophical kind could be found in the work of Gadamer, Ricoeur and Wittgenstein.

<sup>9</sup> Reviewing Luhrmann 1989, a work whose controversial status still remains potent.

<sup>10</sup> As it was mine: cf. Curry 1992: 16-17.

<sup>11</sup> The historiographical *locus classicus* is Shapin and Schaffer 1985.

There is a simpler test regarding the adequacy of ‘belief’, however. It is to note the fact that (at least in my experience, both personal and second-hand) historians and other academics studying astrology are often asked – including by other academics, although usually in private – “But do you believe in it?” whereas those lecturing on, say, physics, very rarely are. (This asymmetry is itself a revealing fact with a history, of course, which can and should be studied – but which also impinges directly on how it is studied.) But what justification is there for regarding such a question as relevant in the one case but not in the other? And what would we think of someone who thought it a substantively important question for an historian of science, or of art: “Do you actually believe in it?” Could we sensibly require historians of religion to be ‘believers’ – *or* require them not to be?

For these reasons, I am taking as fundamental not belief but reflexive participation: in Geertz’s (1975: 83) terms, not a “psychological attitude” but “ontology”, that is, worlds; and in Wittgenstein’s (1953: 241), not “opinion” but “form[s] of life”.<sup>12</sup> By the same token, the appropriate objects of enquiry are not beliefs but practices. And a point I made in 2000 – recently endorsed by Hutton (2003: 289-90) still stands: to write an ‘objective’ or ‘impartial’ history of astrology (*in the sense that is meant by objectivists*) is simply not an option; in taking astrology and astrologers seriously, one is already, in Hutton’s words, “automatically taking sides in at least one major, and often bitter, cultural debate.”

At this point I want to introduce a voice from the astrological community. Indeed, I am honour-bound to do so, because Geoffrey Cornelius’s recent call for “primary scholarship”, honouring the phenomenological “primary truth” or “verity” of astrology, slightly predates as well as parallels mine. And one of his points too is that astrology cannot adequately be treated as “some sort of belief-system, to be sympathetically annotated, dissected, and put up for comparison with various other belief-systems.” To do so is to engage in “a common avoidance strategy”, typical of the social sciences, “which is to avoid allowing the material to touch the observer as *truth for the observer*” (2004: 108; emphasis in the original).

Cornelius’s emphasis on the need to allow for the possibility for experiencing the primary truth of astrology – on a parity with that of any other truth-experience, *including* scientific – should not be understood as an attempt to elevate the status of astrology to that of science. We are denying that scientific truth-value *has* such privileged status, one which sets it apart from other experiences of truth and grants it a superior epistemological position, *even in principle*, against which to measure other kinds, such as astrological or magical, and to which they might aspire (and then, all too predictably, fail<sup>13</sup>). Such an attempt would simply be another anachronistic and positivistic move in the service of what we are criticising. The intention, rather, is to move towards reconstruing the notion of truth as such (including scientific) as *itself* participatory.

Now for historians to ignore these sorts of points because of their provenance – whether astrological, anthropological or philosophical, but in any case extra-disciplinary – would only be evidence of a professional tendency to circle the wagons and sit tight. But let me offer some slight relief: even if the news remains unwelcome, I am at least about to quote another historian! Before leaving the anthropologists, however, let me emphasise, with irresponsible brevity, something more we could learn from them. Astrological truth does not emerge arbitrarily, willy-nilly; like

<sup>12</sup> Cf. again Hanegraaff 2003, whose position (e.g. on pp. 374-375) seems very Wittgensteinian .

<sup>13</sup> See Willis and Curry 2004, ch. 8.



arguably every other human situation where truth is an issue, it does so in the context of what, viewed diachronically, is a *tradition*, but what equally, viewed synchronically, is a *ritual*. However understandably, we have, I think, neglected the latter aspect, and our work has suffered as a result. Now what ritual ‘is’ is beyond the scope of this paper, but all the anthropologists I have mentioned positively have valuable insights into it for us (and to their ranks must certainly be added the late Roy Rappaport [1999]).

### Provincializing Reason

Dipesh Chakrabarty, in his book *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (2000), makes essentially the same observation as Cornelius: “the giveaway word ‘belief’ is what takes [us] out of lived, preanalytical relationships and inserts [us] into an objectifying relationship of social science...”<sup>14</sup> And his title refers to just the project of reconstruing what constitutes truth I have just described.

Chakrabarty’s analysis is profound and subtle, and I hope I shall not do it an injustice in briefly summarising the salient points for my purpose. “Reason becomes elitist” – in the way we have seen at work in the historiography of astrology – “whenever we allow unreason and superstition to stand in for backwardness, that is to say, when reason colludes with the logic of historicist thought. For then we see our ‘superstitious’ contemporaries as examples of an ‘earlier’ type, as human embodiments of the principle of anachronism” (2000: 238). And what is the enabling condition for historicism, that opens the door to teleology and anachronism? It is the “capacity to construct a *single* historical context for everything...the capacity to see the past as genuinely dead, as separate from the time of the observer...It is through such objectification – predicated on the principle of anachronism – that the eye of the *participant* is converted into the eye of the *witness*” (2000: 239; my emphases). (If I may add a purely subjective comment, perhaps this point also explains that deadening pall that so much history-writing seems to cast over its subject-matter, no matter how exciting it is – or should be.)

However, as Chakrabarty adds, the same programme also provokes romantic attempts “to try to get inside the skin of the past, to try and see it ‘as it really was,’” and so on, by way of reaction (2000: 243) – noble, to be sure, but still missing the essential point that the past is actually *not*, in the objectivist sense, past; so the effort needed is not to overcome its deadness and pastness but to recognise its living presentness. The resonance with Blain (as well as the contrast with Grafton) is plain:

If historical or anthropological consciousness is seen as the work of a rational outlook, it can only ‘objectify’ – and thus deny – the lived relations the observing subject already has with that which he or she identifies as belonging to a historical or ethnographic time and space separate from the ones he or she occupies as the analyst. In other words, the method does not allow the investigating subject to recognize himself or herself as also the figure he or she is investigating. It stops the subject from seeing his or her own present as discontinuous with itself (2000: 239).

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<sup>14</sup> Cf. Veyne again (1988: xi, 113): “instead of speaking of beliefs, one must actually speak of truths.... The plurality of modalities of belief is in reality the plurality of the criteria for truth.”

This is a key passage, particularly the last two sentences. They entail a double hermeneutic which is the substance of my earlier methodological prescription: a recognition (1) that the historian is in the same existential situation of vulnerability and uncertainty, vis-à-vis ‘the truth’, as were his or her subjects; and (2) that for all parties concerned, their situation is characterised by “the plurality that inheres in the ‘now,’ the lack of totality, the constant fragmentariness, that constitutes one’s present” (2000: 243). In both these respects, there is a common *pluralism* – as against a single ‘necessary’ scheme or ordering principle – that demands the reflexive participation I have already foregrounded.

What then of the ‘residues of unresolved positivism’? Secularism is an integral part of the modernist historical programme, cut from the same cloth, with the added twist of having seminally defined itself against ‘magic’, including astrology.<sup>15</sup> When there is a dominant consensus that reason is the ‘highest’ human attribute, and furthermore that scientific reason is its ‘highest’ expression (Platonism lives!), then as Chakrabarty writes, “the life practices we do not approve of – practices that seem superstitious or that ascribe agency to gods and spirits – seem anachronistic if not reactionary...” (2000: 243). And the rationalising efforts of many ambitious astrologers, past and present, to present astrology in terms of a natural science – notwithstanding the fact that those efforts have been overruled by superior hegemonic power – are surely more evidence to that effect.<sup>16</sup> Indeed, they are often contradicted by the same astrologers’ own experiences of the actual “moment of astrology” (Cornelius 2003): what Cardano called “a certain hidden power” (Grafton 1999: 146). Two centuries later, William Oughtred, one of the ablest mathematicians of his generation and a practising astrologer, confessed that

He was not satisfied how it came about that one might foretell by the Starres, but so it was that it fell out true as he did often by his experience find; he did believe that some genius or spirit did help.<sup>17</sup>

Programmatic secularism does have one additional peculiarity. In spirit as well as (to some extent) provenance, the import of much of what I have been setting out can validly be described, as ‘postmodern’, using that term with all the cheerful incoherence it requires, from Lyotard to Foucault and Derrida; and none the worse for that.<sup>18</sup> The twist, however, is that much of the modernist fear and loathing of the magical and spiritual survived the postmodern turn, especially in the academy.<sup>19</sup>

Now as any intelligent ‘relativist’ (including the authors just named) would, or would have, agreed, the argument I am putting forward is not ‘irrationalist’ or ‘anti-reason’.<sup>20</sup> To return to Chakrabarty, the project of ‘provincializing Europe’ is not one of *ressentiment* towards European thought. To “think beyond historicism... is not to

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<sup>15</sup> On the historical roots of the anti-astrology mentality, see Curry 1989, 1991. The same situation can be found in anthropology; Peek (1991: 9) found a “striking... number of British social anthropologists who treated divination with great derision.” (The degree of animus involved is often the giveaway.)

<sup>16</sup> Cf. Curry 1992.

<sup>17</sup> John Aubrey, *Brief Lives...* ed. Andrew Clark (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1898), vol. 2, p. 105.

<sup>18</sup> Grafton’s [1999: 176] well-worn crack about scholars availing themselves of the iron laws of aerodynamics to fly to conferences and denounce realism betrays his misapprehension of these issues. (V. Herrnstein Smith 1988, 1997.)

<sup>19</sup> Witness Richard Rorty’s aggressive programmatic secularism, for example.

<sup>20</sup> Not unless a realist-rationalist definition of reason – the point under discussion – is already assumed *a priori* (v. Herrnstein Smith again); or unless those are simply terms of abuse.

reject reason but to see it as one among many ways of being in the world” (2000: 249).

This is the nub of the matter. As Chakrabarty points out, the ‘objectifying’ mode “is simply one, albeit a globally dominant one at present” (2000: 252). And where our own field is concerned (as in so many others), reason cannot even do its rightful job properly until it is no longer forced – in the name of a grossly distorted, because totalised, version of itself – to do them all. As the late Paul Feyerabend observed, in that way that managed to be simultaneously mild and (it seems) scandalous, “The objection that [a] scenario is ‘real,’ and that we must adapt to it no matter what, has no weight, for it is not the only one: there are many ways of thinking and living” (1995: 164). Astrology too is form of life, a way of being in the world. It is not a flawed or failed version of something else, but fully itself to the same extent, and ultimately in the same way, as being an historian, or scientist, or anything else: fully, in a word, human.

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