

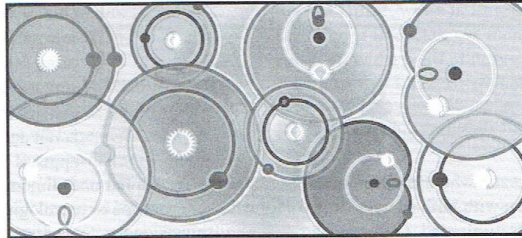
NCGR GEOCOSMIC

JOURNAL

Winter 2017

THE MANY FACES OF
ASTROLOGY

Toward a Multi-Dimensional View of Retrograde Motion



By Gary P. Caton

"The literature on retrograde planets is conflicting... it is necessary to examine what retrogradation is in astronomical terms... much more work needs to be done concerning retrograde planets and their effects." –Robert Hand¹

Although many excellent books on the subject have been published since Rob Hand wrote the words quoted above (most notably, Erin Sullivan's classic work, *Retrograde Planets*²), it may be that we, as astrologers, and as a community, have a collective journey ahead of us if we wish to attain a clear understanding of retrograde motion. From lists of *don't do this or that* to outright *the sky is falling* interpretations, it appears that many, if not most, people retain a view of retrograde motion as essentially malefic in nature. That is, they expect bad or unpleasant things to happen. Given all the trouble the astrology community went through to update much of the old terminology, this seemingly archaic vestige is perplexing.

In recent years, I've personally researched the actual celestial mechanics of retrograde motion. This research often seemed to contradict some of the more modern assumptions underlying the nature of retrograde motion as a phenomenon. My hope is that readers will open their minds to the possibility that if the actual motion is not quite what we had previously thought it was, then perhaps its effects are not quite what we had thought, either. In fact, this process of review, re-working and revision, is probably one of the best possible uses of a retrograde transit.

First, let's briefly describe and conceptualize retrogrades, simply in terms of east/west motion on the ecliptic. The vast majority of planetary motion is direct, or westward, along the ecliptic. This appears as counter-clockwise motion on a flat zodiac wheel or horoscope. The Lights (Sun and Moon) are *never* retrograde; they always move westward through the Zodiac.

Venus and Mars, the two planets closest to Earth, are rarely retrograde since each of them moves eastward less than 10% of the time. Jupiter and Saturn are retrograde about a third of the time (between their trines to the Sun). Direct motion therefore, accounts for approximately 86% of all motion for the visible planets.³ So, if the two brightest objects in the sky are always direct, and the visible planets are direct most of the time, then it seems reasonable to assume that direct motion generally refers to some kind of base truth or consensus reality. That is, direct motion should generally refer to the social construct of *normality*.

If direct motion signifies what is *normal*, then it follows that retrograde motion signifies something that somehow runs counter to, or flies in the face of, one or more norm(s) or socio-cultural expectations. Thus, it makes sense that in medieval astrology, retrograde motion was considered a kind of debility. In medieval times, it was often quite dangerous to go against the flow of consensus reality. While it may not be quite as physically dangerous to flaunt social norms today, there are still some very strong socio-political and psychological pressures to conform. Yet, from a modern Jungian perspective, conformity is considered a death-sentence for true psycho-spiritual growth or individuation. Perhaps, it is to this psychological conundrum that retrograde motion ultimately speaks.

For instance, consider Nicolaus Copernicus, the person whose work eventually popularized the modern Heliocentric model of the universe. Copernicus was born with all of the seven classical planets in direct motion.⁴ This may at first seem odd, considering how revolutionary his theory was, but most people don't know that Copernicus was very reluctant to publish his theory. Despite having it largely worked out by 1532, it wasn't until just before his death 11 years later that he finally relented to pressure and consented to publication.

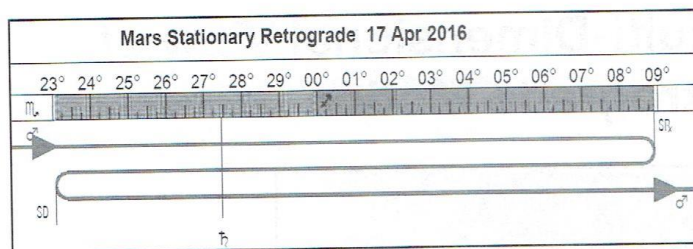


Figure 1. This image is to Retrogrades, as Epicycles were to Ptolemaic Astronomy (that is, demonstrably false and out-dated).

On the other hand, Galileo, the person who did the most to actually prove the theory, was born with both social planets (Jupiter and Saturn) conjunct and retrograde.⁵ Galileo was more than willing to defy norms, and did so almost compulsively; but, as a consequence, suffered house arrest for his defiance of the Church. It was not until 1687 and Newton's *Principia*, which unified terrestrial and celestial mechanics, that the heliocentric view became generally accepted. Newton's horoscope also happens to be one with all seven classical planets direct.⁶ It seems somehow both ironic and fitting that the work of these two men, with no natal retrogrades in their horoscopes whatsoever, forms the bedrock of the modern scientific world-view. And yet, has the astrologer's views of retrograde motion really changed that much?

In his now classic work, *Horoscope Symbols*, Robert Hand takes the (heliocentric) view that the problem with retrogrades concerns a planet's proximity to Earth. It is important to remember that from a modern Copernican point of view, retrograde motion is an illusion. Planets never appear retrograde from a heliocentric perspective. The *apparent* backward motion of a planet in the sky (from a geocentric perspective) is mainly due to a difference in relative orbital speed with Earth. Because of its (heliocentric) proximity to Earth, the retrograde planet is either being passed by, or is passing by, Earth. Thus Hand feels that just as a retrograde planet is making its closest approach to Earth, we also are psychologically *too close* to the issues symbolized by retrograde planets.⁷ Like Galileo, we are somehow too deeply, intensely or intimately involved in the process – such that we have no real objectivity.

Indeed, the same thing can be said of astrologers with regard to retrograde motion itself! Despite living in the digital age, as a community we still do not have a proper, astronomically correct view of retrograde motion. Though Sullivan succeeded in partially remedying this situation by giving us a wonderful understanding of a planet's retrograde motion within the context of its larger cycle with the Sun (aka synodic cycle) more than a decade ago⁸, it is nevertheless still

painfully easy to demonstrate that we do not come anywhere near, as yet, to understanding retrograde motion in the same objective manner as astronomers do.

One of the common assumptions about retrograde motion to which astrologers often fall prey is that a retrograde planet is passing across the same section of the sky three times (Figure 1). This is not actually objectively true. It only appears to be true when one is viewing

the sky from a flat one-dimensional perspective. Yet that is what a horoscope or astrological chart is – a flat, top-down, one-dimensional representation of the zodiac, depicted strictly in terms of east/west motion, or celestial longitude. A quick glance at any of the popular astronomy periodicals or websites shows a very different picture. You will see the retrograde motion mapped out against the stars, but more importantly, also from a side-on view and in two dimensions – which creates a completely different picture!

The most recent retrograde of Mars is the only one of Mars' retrogrades (yes, there are at least eight different retrogrades, more on that later!) that bears any astronomical resemblance whatsoever to the usual astrological image. Nevertheless, there are still significant and important differences. Notice in Figure 2 (*below*) that when Mars stationed retrograde in April, it was considerably further North (higher above) than the star Antares, the heart of the Scorpion (located at 250° west longitude or 10° Sagittarius), and again when it passes direct in August. This vertical north/south dimension of the ecliptic is known as celestial latitude, and it is all but forgotten to most modern astrologers. To the experienced stargazer, rather than the sort of flat *squished S* of the previous image,

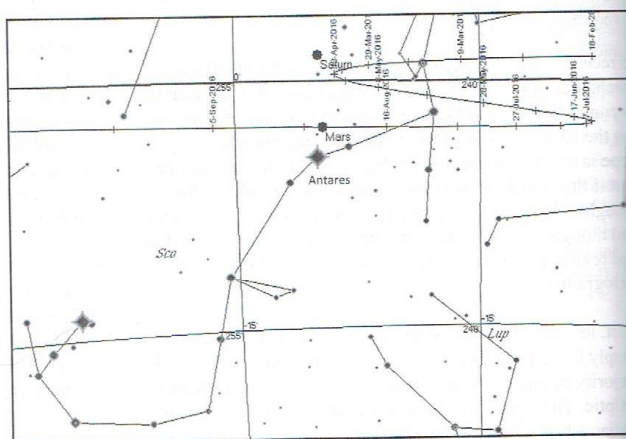


Figure 2. Mars Retrograde in 2016 (drawing created from SkyMap Lite Software)

it is seen that Mars never actually crosses the exact same part of the sky during this retrograde, because it is seen in two dimensions. Mars *does* cross the ecliptic during this particular retrograde (which is rare, actually) and moves several degrees south in latitude as well. If Earth's proximity can be considered as part of what is driving the retrograde experience, then it seems that its visual proximity to stars and/or the ecliptic itself, should be a valid consideration as well.

The next common mistake astrologers make regarding retrograde motion is to assume that all retrogrades are basically the same. For instance, we hear the oft repeated assertion that Mercury's retrograde periods are times "*when we experience communication, travel and information breakdowns.*"⁹ From an objective point of view, this assertion is so ridiculously easy to debunk, that it ought to be either retired or seriously modified. For instance, a *New York Times* article demonstrated that major traffic incidents actually *decreased* and trains were *less likely* to arrive late during some retrograde periods; plus, my Facebook feed is often absolutely replete with anecdotal reports of retrograde foul-ups.¹⁰ How do we explain the difference? It's simply the difference between objective and subjective reality. Confirmation bias is the tendency to interpret new evidence as confirmation of one's existing beliefs or theories. So, if we believe that Mercury retrograde means foul-ups, then *by the Gods* – we are going to find them! Since it feels good to have someone or something to blame when things go wrong, we tend to project our own shortcomings onto an available scapegoat – even a God, it seems, if one is available!

Just as it makes no objective sense that all retrogrades should be experienced in a primarily negative fashion, it also makes no astronomical sense that they should even be experienced similarly. For instance, Robert Blaschke pointed out that there were at least three different kinds of Mercury retrogrades,¹¹ and yet somehow the expectations and predictions of many astrologers were for a repeat of the 2000 presidential chaos in the 2012 election. The idea that all retrogrades are the same, appears to be one-dimensional thinking, and only in terms of east/west longitudinal motion. When viewed in two dimensions, with the addition of north/south celestial latitude, retrogrades are startlingly diverse! Practically speaking, this means that when Mercury is in the first part of its retrograde (nearer the retrograde station) as it was on Election Day in 2012 – it makes a noticeably differently shaped loop than it does when near the last part of the retrograde (nearer the direct station – as in 2000).

As I began to train myself to be a better stargazer, I became intensely fascinated by these curious looping diagrams of the planetary retrogrades found in astronomy publications. There are a confusing variety of shapes that these loops can make, and I wasn't sure if this variety was due to orbital peculiarities between the planets themselves, or something else altogether. My friend and colleague, Adam Gainsburg, shared how Venus makes five different loop shapes for each

of her retrogrades; but upon exploring these further, I noticed how the shapes gradually morphed over long periods of time. It was a confounding mystery, until one day I was introduced to an amazing book, *Tantra Vidya*, which had an appendix that extensively catalogued all the loop shapes for the planet Mars.¹³ Lee Lehman had met the author, astrologer Oscar Marcel Hinze, while in Europe lecturing, and knowing of my interest in cycles, she mentioned it to me. Even though I couldn't read a word of it, because it was written in German, I instinctively knew Hinze could help unravel the mystery of these loops – so I hired my publisher Jenn Zahrt to do a translation of the appendix.

Although upon first examination, there appeared to be seven basic loop shapes, Hinze was insistent that if the readers were to carefully draw them all, they would come to the same conclusion as he – that there are really eight basic shapes. This idea was fascinating to me, because I knew that Mars completed seven synodic cycles with the Sun before his retrogrades returned to nearly the same part of the sky. But shouldn't there then be only seven loops for Mars, as there are five for Venus? Where was this eighth shape coming from? Did it hold the secret to the strange morphing I had seen?

Being an impatient Aries, rather than drawing all the loops as Hinze demanded, I decided to further invest in astronomy software which could draw the loops for me. Quickly, I realized that Hinze was correct. There are eight basic loop shapes, though I have taken the liberty of re-arranging them in Figure 3 (below) according to their north/south latitudinal direction.

Once I had categorized the loops according to their latitudinal properties of N/S, I realized that two of the loops stood out as different, but were also a mirror reflection of each other. The

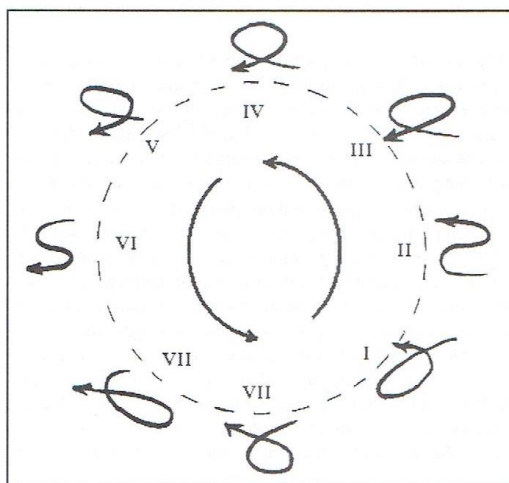
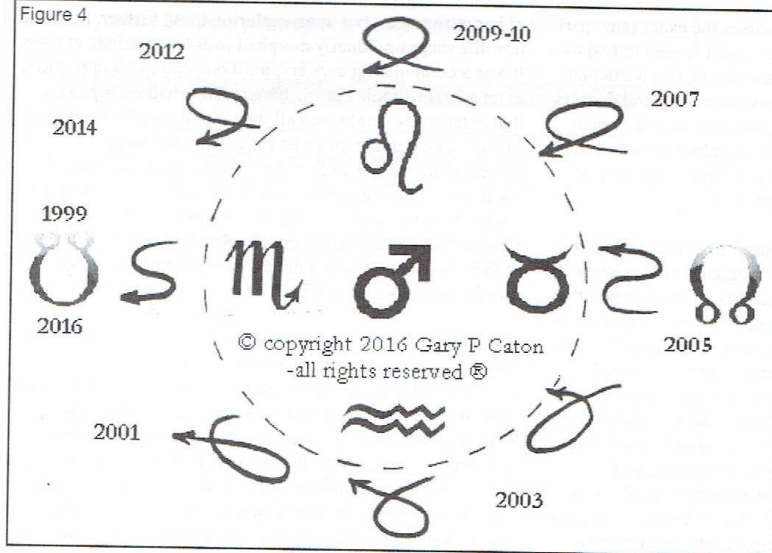


Figure 3. Eight Basic Loop Shapes

Figure 4



difference in appearance of these loops is due to the retrograde movement of the planet in proximity to the location of its heliocentric nodes, i.e., the places where its orbit intersects the orbit of the Earth. Just like the Moon the planets also have nodes, though these planetary nodes move much slower (than even the rate of precession).

For the planets, these nodes mark the two places in the planets latitudinal cycle where they will cross the ecliptic during its retrograde, and make the characteristic Z-shaped loop. At the north or ascending node, the planet will make an upward moving Z loop. At the south or descending node, the planet will make a downward moving Z loop. For Mars, we can then anticipate the shape of his loops to be as shown in Figure 4.

As far as interpretation, what in the world are we supposed to make of these curious loops? This depends a lot on how we interpret celestial latitude. In classical astrology, the main application of latitude was as a kind of minor dignity/debility. The latitude and direction of this latitude were seen to say something about a planet's power and fortitude. For a planet to be in northern latitude and increasing in latitude was seen as a kind of dignity, that is, an augmentation to the power of the planet to do its thing. For a planet to be in southern latitude and decreasing was seen as a kind of debility, that is, a hindrance to its ability to do its thing. For instance, in the old texts we might see a warning saying something to the effect of: "Don't start building your house if the Moon is in Scorpio or Pisces, in south latitude and descending in latitude." The obvious connotation is that to begin building under such auspices would be to assume the role of the proverbial fool in the Bible, who builds their house upon the shifting sands.

If we refer back to Figure 4, we can see that Mars was last in the part of its latitudinal cycle where the retrograde loops are south and descending during the 2001 retrograde loop (in Sagittarius). Was this a foolish time to begin a war? Let's look at a few examples.

Consider the situation in Afghanistan: It took until 2011 to get Osama bin Laden, the supposed mastermind of 9/11; the US and NATO had major ground forces in place until 2014; and portions of the country still remain under control of the Taliban, al-Qaeda, the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant. Now, consider what's been happening with Iraq. The country was invaded in 2003

when Mars was still in south latitude, although no longer descending (Mars was retrograde in Pisces later in 2003). Despite the infamous *mission accomplished* speech by George W. Bush, the US was increasing troop strengths in Iraq as late as 2007 (aka *the surge*) and did not formally withdraw combat troops until 2011. Since 2014, Iraq has remained embroiled in a civil war and the US again has air strike forces there. Finally, consider the fact that US military involvement in Viet Nam began in 1955,¹⁴ also after a Mars retrograde in Pisces! An objective answer to the question posed in the paragraph above is that Mars in the south latitude portion of its retrograde loop cycle does *not* appear to be an optimal time to begin any major military activity – assuming, of course, a long drawn out conflict is not desirable.

I would encourage you to examine your own life for trends during the 2006 to 2015 period when Mars was making northern loops. In my own career, this period marked the time when I was finally able to make astrology a full-time practice. Though I have been an avid astrologer since 1993, it wasn't until 2006 (after two lay-offs in quick succession from jobs in the mental health field) that I decided it was time to take a risk and establish a full-time astrology practice.

At the time, I did not know, but Mars was also crossing a significant threshold – the previous retrograde had been in Taurus, with Mars crossing its north node and thus moving from south to north latitude in its cycle. Ten years as a full time astrologer (and professional networker) has allowed me to devote enough time to begin to decode the meaning of these retrograde loops. Now, as Mars has recently made a retrograde loop across its south node, moving from north to south latitude in its cycle – I find myself with some significant new insights to share.

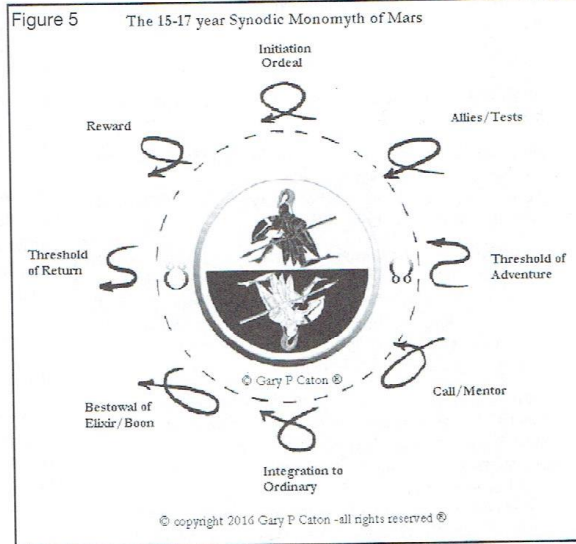
In *Handbook for the Humanistic Astrologer*, Meyer describes planets in north latitude as functioning in the “personalizing aspect” and toward intake of power and personal growth, while planets in south latitude are operative in their social aspect and toward release of power and expansion of consciousness.¹⁵ I take this to mean that, as a cycle, the intake of power and resulting personal growth of the north, ideally results in the growth of consciousness and release of gifts which allows service to the collective in the south. This seems to be modeled after the ideal of the Monomyth or *Hero/ines Journey* of Campbell, wherein the hero/ine’s personal adventure of self discovery/growth leads to the sharing of a boon or elixir upon their return. From these theories and my own experiences, I developed the idea that these eight loops can perhaps be seen and experienced as a series of initiations along the journey of the hero/ine, as shown in Figure 5. I am still in the process of working out basic models, and have other ideas that borrow from Jungian psychology regarding the persona/shadow complexes, but these need to be tested with clients.

Perhaps someone else will find another way altogether to work with these loops, and that would be a good thing! I feel that what is most important is for us to keep refining our craft and moving it forward in order to keep from getting stuck in dogmatic positions that don’t really work or yield good results. On that note, I would like to close with the most important principle that I think these loops illustrate. When examined carefully, it is obvious that both before and after retrograde motion proper, there are often radical north/south latitudinal shifts during direct motion. This is important and meaningful.

Most philosophers believe that, all other things being equal, simpler theories are better. In that sense, rather than using theories about mysterious longitudinally based *shadow* zones, the pre/post retrograde changes often experienced by many people during direct motion, are better attributed to the actual, observable and often radical N/S latitudinal shifts during direct motion. These shifts only become apparent when we understand the retrograde holistically, as a looping kind of circuitous motion.

When retrogrades are visualized as different shaped loops, it becomes obvious that some loops have more pre/post retrograde latitudinal changes than others and that these latitudinal shifts occur in different sectors of the various loops. This could mean that in some loops (especially the Z loops), where the latitudinal change occurs largely during Rx motion proper, the experience of change will be *compressed* and experienced, for the most part, right before and after the stations, as well as during the retrogrades.

In other loops, we find drastic latitudinal shifts during direct motion on one side of the retrograde, but less drastic on the



other. More work needs to be done in order to ascertain if these latitudinal shifts correlate more accurately with objective experience. However, I think that no matter what results ultimately emerge from this research, such work will only serve to enhance our understanding of retrograde motion and our ability to serve as guides for others through those times.

In the professional community, we often hear astrologers saying they yearn for and deserve more acceptance from the wider intelligentsia. In my opinion and experience, banishing one-dimensional theories from our minds and practices, and taking the time to discern, explore, and map out additional dimensions would be a good step toward the realization of that goal.

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Editor's Note: Join Gary P. Caton for his presentation, "Secrets of the Retrograde Loops" at the **NCGR 2017 Conference**. Gary will offer a complete outline of retrograde loops for all the visible planets and in that process will uncover the secret meanings of the individual dances. Date and time: **Saturday, February 18, at 4:15-5:30**

Gary P. Caton

has been an astrologer for two Jupiter cycles and is co-founder of Sky Astrology Conference (SAC), a new type of astrology gathering with immersive experiences out under the night sky. He is looking forward to witnessing the brightest apparition of Mars since 2003 at the next SAC in Moffat, CO, August, 2018. Find out more about bringing the sky back into your chart at www.SkyAstrologyConference.com Website: www.DreamAstrologer.com
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