

**TRACING THE ROUND: THE ASTROLOGICAL
FRAMEWORK OF *MOBY-DICK***

John F. Birk

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The scope and general contents of this study by John F. Birk, a freelance writer who has worked as both a college professor and Hollywood screenwriter and who has so far published another volume on the work of Herman Melville, *Herman Melville's "Billy Budd" and the Cybernetic Imagination*, is indicated in its explicit title. Birk means to reveal to the academic world the innovative design governing Melville's magnum opus and, in search of its covert structure, he turns to astrology and zodiacal symbolism. The book, a lengthy treatise that started taking form in the mid 1980s and that was finally published in 2000 by Minerva Press, was apparently turned down by several publishers who failed to grasp the value of its original proposal. The author's starting point could not be more logical: the knowledge of the skies and the zodiac that sailors had in the nineteenth century—a knowledge and an interest that Melville himself has often shown in letters as well as in his fictional works, *Moby-Dick* among them.

In the light of the many critical works inquiring into the startling structure of *Moby-Dick* and the plethora of astrological references in Melville's fiction, Birk contends that the architectural principle that underlies Melville's novel is the zodiac, or, more precisely, the twelve signs of the zodiac wedded in successive pairs of one-to-one opposition. Furthermore, Birk's astrological framework strives to be comprehensive enough to embrace the common structural and symbolic elements perceived by leading Melvilleans both traditional and current, thus taking into consideration a

vast, and valuably diverse, amount of bibliographical material. Birk makes a great effort to show that his research is grounded on objective detail (paradoxical as it may sound). In his preoccupation with lending credibility to the main contentions of his work, or at least with demonstrating that linking astrology and narrative used to be a common practice, Birk makes reference not only to other well-known works of fiction by Chaucer, Spencer, Marlow, and ever-present Shakespeare where traces of an astrological blueprint may be discerned, but also to the blooming popularity of astrology and astrology almanacs in the 1800s. Birk maintains that, although the fashion for astrology had declined during the eighteenth century in favour of the scientific method, in Melville's time it was not the alien science that it is today. Moreover, navigation and astrology have long been birds of a feather, and the earlier-cited almanacs were well-known and in circulation among seamen.

The main contention of the book is to illustrate that the basic structure of *Moby-Dick* involves a journey through the dozen signs of the zodiac. In the first part of the book, which comprises the first two chapters, the author reviews some of the fundamentals of astrology and gives a summary of its essential tenets for those unfamiliar with astrological thought. With this information in mind, he moves on to examine the correspondences between the zodiac and the novel. Generally speaking, the reader learns that astrology is the study of the influence of celestial bodies on humankind, and the procedure adopted by the author in the ten chapters that comprise the remainder of the study becomes clear: Birk has set out to highlight the parallels between *Moby-Dick*, predominantly its plot development and individual characters, and the hypothetical influences that the constellations were thought to cast upon the earth as it moves around the sun in its annual orbit along the ecliptic. The second part of the volume, aptly entitled "Through the Zodiac", comprises six chapters and constitutes the core of Birk's work. It is devoted to the detailed examination of Melville's novel in the light of Birk's contention that *Moby Dick* follows a carefully prescribed course through the signs of the zodiac. The author has divided the novel into six blocks which in turn he relates to the signs of the zodiac paired in their natural succession. The first block, Chapters 1-25, falls, according to Birk's scheme, under the governance of Aries and Taurus, and it is the properties ascribed to these signs that hold sway over the events in this section of the novel. Similarly, Chapter 26, which displays the *Pequod* at sea, marks the transition to a new block governed by Gemini and Cancer; the third block (71-92) reflects the rule of Virgo and Libra, and so on. Finally, in the third part of the book, "Illumination Inward", Birk proceeds with this same method to illustrate his contention that, in like manner, each prominent character represents one sign of the zodiac.

In short, Birk's analysis is resourceful and well-documented. Yet, he brings to the final text any astrological source or literary interpretation as long as it supports his

original project, and the narrative is heavily laden with quotations and outside references. Not only is the method questionable, but the reading often becomes shadowy and intricate. Besides, the vocabulary employed by Birk rests on a terminology and an understanding of the world that owes as much to esoteric logic as it does to conventional academic criticism, which asks of the reader an intemperate willingness to follow the author on his critical voyage. Moreover, Birk assumes that his difficulties in uncovering this complicated web of relationships between *Moby-Dick* and the different renditions of the zodiac he makes use of, mirror Melville's complex plan, which is difficult to swallow. Astrology, not unlike mythology, was part of everyday life until science ruled it out and, as Birk himself points out, astrological references have been traced in other works. However, this is not the balanced examination of astrological references the reader might be used to from works on Chaucer, Marlow or Shakespeare and, furthermore, they are not synthesized into a reading of the novel, old or new. The exceptional structure of *Moby Dick* might well demand a similarly exceptional critical vocabulary, yet Birk's assault stops short of actually giving a relevant answer.