

## **Desire and the Stars**

By Darby Costello

*"Nihil in intellectu quod non prius fuerit in sensu."*

Locke

*"The full meaning of words are flashing, iridescent shapes like flames - ever flickering vestiges of the slowly evolving consciousness beneath them."*

Owen Barfield (from Poetic Diction)

### **Introduction**

In the 1970s I was living in Southern Africa and practising astrology in Johannesburg. The people who called to consult me came with their desires and questions, which I attempted to answer through the medium of their astrological charts, as every astrologer has done since the beginning of time. However, again and again I felt another longing beneath the desires they were voicing when they came to consult me. I found myself listening, as if with an inner ear, while I tried to divine exactly what these deeper longings and desires might be. During those years my life in Johannesburg was balanced with equal time in the African bush. Especially when travelling through deserts and other uninhabited places, deep in starry nights, I wondered what was the unspoken desire contained within the question I was so often asked, "What do the stars say?"

During those years of my apprenticeship to astrology I was fortunate to be working with Adrian Boshier at the Museum of Man and Science in Johannesburg on a project which involved sangomas; the tribal healer-diviners of southern Africa. We travelled all over Africa recording and transcribing the arts and practices of different tribal ways of healing and divining. During the course of this work I became close to one or two of the female sangomas who taught me a great deal about what it was to be a diviner. They saw me as a diviner too, one who "works with the spirits" as they did, but my spirits were different to theirs. Most of the women I got to know used a method of divination which was known as "throwing the bones". The "bones" were all sorts of small objects - bones, stones, shells, beads, engraved pieces of wood or ivory - which were gathered over a period of time and kept in a special bag. When someone arrived for a divination they were taken out and "thrown" on a mat. The subsequent pattern told the sangoma not only why the seeker had come, what they wanted, but all sorts of details about the inner and outer life of the querent.

The sangomas I worked with were highly trained in their art of divination. They never forgot that they were doing the "work of the spirits" and their lives were marked by ongoing rituals of purification; physical and spiritual practices which kept them constantly aware that it was their work to attend not only the physical but the spiritual lives of their patients. The ancestors were the spirits with whom they worked and who, through them, told their patients what rituals or sacrifices were needed to rebalance their inner and outer lives. Once, in a village, late at night under the stars, I was sitting with Dorcas, one of the older sangoma with whom I had a close bond. I said, "Dorcas, when you throw the bones you read what the spirits are saying for your patients. What am I doing when I read the stars?" She said, "Look up Da - look at the stars. You can see that God threw the bones, and it is your work to read them."

The co-incidence of these two lives, town and bush, gave me the foundation for the way I work today. I learned, from these woman, that when I was "working with the spirits" I must take the time and space very seriously. I learned that people came to me, as they did to the sangomas, with their desires and longings around love and health and work and their success and failure, and underneath these questions there were other levels that had to be addressed if any peace or healing was to take place. I learned it was possible to create a private, sacred space in which my clients felt something happen that shifted their attention in such a way that they could see their lives in a different perspective. Spending so much of my time with diviners helped me to find ways to access that space more readily. When the energies were right, it became a space of transformation for both my client and myself, a space in which desire was put to rest for a moment.

By the time I left Africa I knew that doing a chart well was certainly dependent on understanding the mechanics of astrology - but through living so much with those women I had absorbed something of their constant attention to their spirits, and also their attention to keeping the space in which they worked sacred.

## Desire

In the early 1980s I left Africa and came to live in London where I eventually became involved with a group of astrologers translating early astrological texts from Latin into English. The group was set up by Graeme Tobin of The Company of Astrologers. Geoffrey Cornelius and Vernon Wells<sup>s</sup> of the Company, and Dr. Angela Voss, Phillip Weller, Donald Walker and I were devoted members of the group at the time. We met in a small satisfying room at the top of the Artworkers Guild in Queen's Square, London, where the COA had their school during those years. It was a very exciting experience because of the different backgrounds that came together in the group and the shared passion for the work.

In the course of our translating we came across the word **desidero** quite often. We simply translated it as desire. Vernon, (with his questing Sagittarius Moon and Gemini Rising), took the word apart and began looking at it. **De - sire** he said, wasn't it extraordinary to never have noticed? Someone had the Langenscheidt Shorter Latin Dictionary and so we looked up **desidero** and found "to long for, desire, wish for, require, ask. . .to miss, lack, lose;" and "to be lost." We noticed that it was constructed from **de** and **sidero**, and realized it must be connected with **sidus**, star or constellation, from which our word sidereal arises.

At that time we were translating some of Marsilio Ficino's astrological texts which had led us to examine Plotinus' text on enchantment and the soul. (Enneads IV). We spent one afternoon exploring a section of Ficino's commentary on Plotinus which examines the idea that soul puts lures in the things to which we will inevitably be drawn. (See Carol Kaske's translation of Ficino's commentary on Plotinus in the Liber de Vita Book 3, Ch. 1, p. 245. ". . .let no man wonder that Soul can be allured (allici) as it were by material forms, since indeed she herself has created baits of this kind suitable to herself, to be allured thereby, and she always and willingly dwells in them.")

This word **desidero** coming into focus at the same time as Plotinus' and Ficino's texts on the enchantment of the soul set my imagination alight. I remembered my discussions with the sangomas and my early sense that people who came to diviners were asking something more than they knew. I felt as though a trail had been opened up in front of me.

And so, at first with the Latin group, and later, on my own, I began another kind of adventure to

my African one. Something had put a lure in the word **desidero** and this lure took me on a journey of several months through all kinds of dictionaries in all kinds of places, but especially in the beautiful British Library in the middle of the British Museum. This quest became a journey I could not have imagined in my early days of practising astrology in Johannesburg, and certainly gave an imaginative answer to my original question.

To begin with I looked in the Shorter Oxford English Dictionary for the definition of desire. It was translated as "...that emotion which is directed to the attainment or possession of some object from which pleasure or satisfaction is expected; longing, craving, a wish. to require."

From there I went to the classical dictionary Lewis & Short which told me that **sidus** was "stars united in a figure, a group of stars, hence a constellation." It was associated with the Sanscrit word **svid** which meant to sweat or melt; the Greek **σιδηρος** [sideros] (molten) iron and then the Latin **sudo**, which had the same meaning as the Sanscrit **svid**. It was contrasted with **stella** which could be used in the singular to denote a single star. And so it had the image of stars melting together to form the constellations: The sky full of stars creating a kind of primal Rorschach at which early desert, mountain and sea people gazed for centuries until certain patterns melted together into shapes that became recognized and shared with each other. Anyone who has spent months under a sky full of stars know what I am talking about. Our passion for seeking patterns seems to be a very old part of our make-up.

The final definition in the listing was somewhat shocking : "to be blasted or palsied by a constellation, to be planet-struck or sun-struck." We know from mythology that when the stars were formed into constellations they were experienced as something more than pictures in the sky. This, however, was something more powerful than I expected. I decided not to track this notion of paralysis for now, but to perhaps follow it at another time.

In the Oxford Latin Dictionary Fascicle V (1976) **sidus - sideris**, n, was "a heavenly body (star, planet, etc; even the sun and moon) or night (when stars shine). the planets, constellations as region, as marking seasons, considered as having direct influence on human affairs." And again, "As causing paralysis."

At this point I looked up the prefix **de** in Lewis & Short and found it was defined as a preposition meaning "as far as" or ". . .the going out, departure, removal, or *separating* of an object from any fixed point." (They said that it held a middle place between **ab**, "away from, which denotes a mere external departure", and **ex** "out of, which signifies from the interior of a thing".) Furthermore, by transference, it indicated "the quarter from which motion proceeds (cf. ab) from, and because motion is so often and naturally downwards, down from. . ."

The ambiguity of this **de** is intriguing. **Desidero** denotes a separation, departure from, or, paradoxically a moving out from, down from, the stars. Is this desire, this "longing for something lost" a something that comes from our stars, or is it something that takes us away from our stars?

Next I look up **desidero** in Lewis & Short. It was similar to the Langenscheidt and said "to long for, greatly wish for, to desire something not possessed. . . with predominant idea of lacking, wanting, to miss anything." However Lewis & Short also included the meaning of losing something or to be missing or lost, and finally, and somewhat surprisingly, at the time, "to investigate, examine, discuss" though the latter association was said to be rare.

There were many other words associated with **desidero** which extended the meaning to include a longing for something once possessed, or grief for the loss of something once possessed, that being lost was now felt to have been essential.

So, the word *desire* had its roots in the Latin word which was associated with longing and a sense of loss, or even grief. This sense of loss seemed to be pointing to the stars - or certainly our tendency to melt the stars into constellations.

A note in Lewis & Short said that **desidero** was said to be etymologically associated with **considero**, however they considered this association dubious! I looked up **considero**.

### Consider

The very first bit of information under **considero** was, and I quote "acc. to Corss. Nachtr. pl 49 from sidus prop. to observe the stars..." and I was referred back to **desidero**! Otherwise the meanings attached to **considero** were what one would expect; "to look at closely, attentively, carefully, to inspect, examine." All the other meanings of this word and its associated words were unsurprising and so I do not list them here. But, what a delightful find : "from sidus prop. to observe the stars..."

At this point I was given an old copy of Chamber Etymological Dictionary (the 1947 edition) and it gave the English verb **desiderate** the expected meaning of "longing for or desiring earnestly" something and then added the meaning of "wanting or missing" but they were not shy about their etymological associations: "L. **desidero, desideratum** - from root of Consider."

In the British Library I looked up **desidero** and its associated words in the The Oxford Latin Dictionary Fascicle V and found their definitions similar to those I'd found in Lewis & Short. However under **desidero** they added "to want to know, raise the question." And they were quite clear about the etymological association with **considero**.

Back in our translation group one of the others gave me a slip of paper on which he had written a definition from a dictionary and though he told me the reference at the time, I lost the note and neither of us could remember later. Also I never found the dictionary myself. Hermes had decided to play one of his tricks. However I still have the paper with the definition : "**considerare** - watch the stars, for people by the coast, marine term."

It suddenly seemed so obvious. A marine term. As far as we know early navigators found their way across the seas by the stars. Once they had 'melted' the stars into patterns that could be recognized by others they could then use these patterns, constellations, to communicate their navigational routes. Just as the heavens became a map by which one could navigate the seas, I imagine it was also a map by which desert people navigated their terrain.

A friend showed me her copy of A Short Etymological Dictionary of Modern English by Eric Partridge where I looked up the word Desire again. It told me that "*Desire*, n. comes from OF-MF *desir*, itself from *desirer*, whence 'to desire': and *desirer* comes from L. *desiderare*, (orig in augury) to cease to see, regret the absence of, hence to seek, to

desire. . . *desiderare* was prob suggested by *considerare*." Under Consider I read, "To *consider* derives from OF-F *considerable* and E *considerable*; to examine carefully, prob orig a term in augury and therefore deriving from sidus (o/s *sider-*), mostly in pl *sidera*, the stars: if the s be *sid-*, the i *si-*, the word is perh *Medit: cf Eg siu*." It also told me that this word was from *sidus*, which also generated *Desiderare*, to cease to view, hence to regret the absence of. . .etc:"

This first intimation of a connection with augury was immensely exciting : From navigation by the stars to augury, another kind of navigation.

Soon after that I discovered the French Dictionnaire Etymologique de la Langue Latine. Histoire des Mots in the library. First I looked up **sidus**. It told me that **sidus** was connected to **considerere** and **desidere** from early times and that "Ce sont sans doute d'anciens terms de la langue augurale (ou marine), comme contemplari auquel considere est souvent joint." (literally: These are without doubt from the ancient terms of the language of augury (or marine language) like **contemplari** to which **considerere** is often joined.) According to this reference these words passed into common language and were subsequently lost. They then referred me to **contemplor**.

By now a pattern was forming that made sense to me. **Desidero** was rooted in **sidus** - desire, in the sense of longing for something one had once possessed, was rooted in the stars. This notion seemed beautifully appropriate. We don't even have to look to Platonic and Neo-Platonic thought for this idea, though we could start there. Our group had been reading Ficino who refers to Plotinus and the notion of desire as that which soul uses to draw us to objects and people through which we will learn of the deeper longing for something numinous and eternal. But even on a physical level, science has been telling us for a long time that all the elements of our world come from the explosions of stars; we ourselves do come from the stars in a very real sense.

That **desidero** was naturally connected to **considero** seemed also clearly natural. We come from the stars and we then navigate by them. But now, **considero** and **contemplor**: that took me into a new territory. And it seemed obvious in this new territory I was going to find a temple somewhere. So I began to follow this trail.

### Contemplation

First I looked up **contemplo** in Lewis & Short and found that it was a collat. form of **contemplor** and meant "to survey, behold, observe, consider, contemplate, etc;" And **contemplor** was a deponent verb and was "originally pertaining to the lang. of augury." The entry referred me to M. Terentius Varros' De Lingua Latina written just over 2000 years ago, but it took me some time to get there. Here, in Lewis & Short, **contemplor** had the meanings, not unexpectedly, of "looking at or viewing attentively, surveying and beholding, observing etc;" and finally considering and contemplating. It then said that in classical prose and poetry *contemplate* equaled **considero**.

And so here we were, firmly in the early language of augury. Once again I turned to the Oxford Latin Dictionary Facsimile. **Contemplo** had most of the expected meanings and it stated the obvious : "con + templum." And then, under **contemplum**, it said "a place for observation in augury" but hedged its bets by telling us that this was dubious. By this time I had noticed that the word "dubious" seemed to me to be a trail marker.

Several days later I checked Chambers again. Under *Contemplate* it said "to consider or look at attentively" to meditate on or study: to intend, v.i. to think seriously: to meditate." and they traced it to the Latin **contemplor, contemplatus**, which was "to mark out carefully a **templum** or place for auguries - *con.* sig[nifying] completeness and **templum**." It said to see Consider and Temple.

Under Consider I found the usual definitions of looking at closely or carefully : "to think or deliberate on: to take into account: to attend to: to reward. v.i. to think seriously or carefully: to deliberate." And , to my delight, it said that Consider came through French from the Latin **considero** and was probably "a word borrowed from augury, meaning to mark out the boundaries of a **templum**." and it referred me back to **contemplate** which it associated with the phrase "by the stars" and quoted the Latin **sidus, sideris**, a star."

## Temple

Now the connection between consider and contemplate seemed obvious and it seemed to be everywhere I looked.

I looked up Temple under which it said, "(lit.) 'a small space cut off' or 'marked out' esp. for religious purposes: an edifice erected to a deity or for religious purposes: a place of worship" and then referred to the two inns of court in London which were formerly occupied by the Knights Templars. From the Latin it referred to **templum** and said it was probably for **temulum** "a space marked out" and then said it was a diminutive of **tempus** for which it defined "a piece cut off". (To this date I have not found a listing for **temulum** in any of the dictionaries I have examined.)

There was another listing for Temple which referred to the temples on the side of the head and here Chambers referred to the Old French *temple* and the Latin **tempus** which it defined as "a portion of time, the fit time" and down the listing all words associated with *temporal* had this idea of time and the world as opposed to the eternal and the sacred.

At this point I found another unreferenced note in one of my notebooks: "Contemplation. **ex templo**: augurs used a stick to mark off portion of the sky and stood in the middle of the corresponding spot on earth to connect the two. temple." Where oh where did that come from? The image burst like a flame in my heart.

Back in the British Library the Oxford Latin Dictionary Fascicle V said that **templum** came from the Greek **τεμνω, τεμενος** [temno, temenos]. The definition given was "the area of sky or land defined (in words) by the augur, within which he took the auspices" and "A piece of ground demarcated and consecrated by the augurs for the taking of auspices esp. as the site of a temple, shrine, etc;".

I knew from Greek that **τεμ** [tem] or **ταμ**[tam] was a stem meaning "to cut" and I presumed that all words beginning with 'tem' that came from Greek or Latin had the central idea of something 'cut' from, out of, or off. Looking at Greek as well as Latin dictionaries I found that this was considered true in many, but not all cases, and certainly it was for words that sprung from the Latin, **tempus**, time. The classical Greek dictionary Liddell & Scott told me that **τεμνω** [temno] was Ionian "τεμνω . . .to cut or hew in battle, to wound, maim. of the surgeon, to cut, use the knife - and then of animals, to cut up, cut in pieces, to slaughter, sacrifice since truces, covenants, and the like were solemnized with sacrifices, . . .It referred to all kinds of cutting, - [with pharmakos] cutting up plants for medicinal purposes - drawing a line and ploughing corn - ships "cleaving the waves" and birds "cleaving the air" - and finally "to cut short, bring to a crisis."

As for **τεμενος** [temenos] "a piece of land cut off and allotted for any purpose, a portion of land, esp of corn-land." and then "a piece of land sacred to a god: the precincts of a temple, hence from the worship offered to the Nile, the valley of the Nile is called τεμενος Νειλοιο (Temenos of the Nile)." And finally, under **τεμενοις** "of or in the sacred precincts: φυλλας τεμενια [filas temenia] the grove in the sacred precincts."

Now it was time for Varro, and in his De Lingua Latina (VI: II 3) I found "Time, they say, is an interval in the motion of the world." [Tempus esse dicunt intervallum mundi motus].

I sat there for a long time with the words and their images swirling through my head. When I left the library that night and walked though the street to the tube station everything looked brighter, sharper. These time things, cut from eternity, me, them, us, it. I stopped at a book shop, saw Henri Corbin's Temple and Contemplation on a shelf and couldn't imagine how I had never seen

the connection. I wondered if one could simply stop in the middle of any unconscious flow and mark off the space into a temple, cut it out, and from there take the auspices. I kept thinking "Time is a piece cut out of eternity."

The next week in the library a German dictionary crossed my path. It was the Lateinisches Etymologische Wörterbuch of Alois Walde (Heidelberg, 1940). I saw, under **templum** the sentence "Der vom Augur mit dem Stab am Himmel und auf der Erde abgegrenzte Beobachtungsbezirk, innerhalb dessen der Vogelflug beobachtet werden soll, oder der Aussichtsplatz für die Vogelschau." I don't speak German but I recognized the words "augur" and "vogelflug" and rushed around the library until I found someone who could translate it for me. I was told that it said a **templum** was an area of observation which has been delimited by the augur with his staff in the heaven and on earth, inside of which the flight of birds should be observed - that it was the place for watching the birds.

I checked Lewis & Short again and found that **templum** was a neuter noun of the second declension which was probably from **temulum** (which it did not list anywhere else.) It gave me the Greek root **τεμ** [tem] of **τεμενο** [temeno] saying that **τεμενος** was a sacred enclosure and therefore defining **templum** as "a space marked out: hence in particular, in augury an open place for observation, marked out by the augur with his staff." It then quoted Servius, a fourth century commentator on Virgil "Templum dicitur locus manu auguris designatus in aere, postquam factum illico captantur auguria." A temple was said to have been a place marked out in the air by the augur, after which event, immediately/on that spot the augury was taken (seized/captured)". The image of the augury being 'seized' or 'captured' was a thrilling one. Every astrologer knows the moment when suddenly all the aspects and transits and progressions come together and suddenly the images and words are there, clear and right - the augury is seized - both astrologer and client know it: For as long as it lasts, this moment, cut out of time, is sacred.

The Lexicon Totius Latinitatis Tom IV (Mull's edition) gave this definition for **templum**: *Templum trifarium dicitur, a natura in caelo, ab auspicio in terris, a similitudine sub terra.* I translated this as "It is said that a temple is threefold, from nature in the sky, by auspices on the earth, and similarly under the earth." It sent me back to Varro.

This time I discovered that there were many different versions of Varro. I went to the Loeb edition, Kent's version, it was written as: *Templum tribus modis dicitur: ab natura, ab auspiciando, a similitudine: [ab] natura in caelo, ab auspiciis in terra, a similitudine sub terra*" which Kent translated as "Templum 'temple' is used in three ways, of nature, of taking the auspices, from likeness; of nature, in the sky; of taking the auspices, on the earth; from likeness, under the earth." I think I would translate "similitudine" as "by analogy".

I enjoyed that translation for its sublime obscurity and power to light up and, at the same time, confound the imagination. The image of a templum being threefold, nature in the sky, auspices on the earth and by analogy beneath the earth rang bells in my deep memory. In present time it reminded me again of what happens when we do a chart – when everything comes together for both astrologer and client - soul, spirit and body resonate to something numinous. Together we enter sacred space for an interval of time. And even when those moments are few and far between, we who are vocationed to astrology cannot give up our contemplation of the stars. We consider aspects and angles and positions endlessly, always seeking ways by which to navigate our own lives and lives of the people who call on us. Again and again we erect temples in the airy spaces of our minds, within which we contemplate the patterns and take the auspices.

My quest had come to an end for a time. In the Latin translation group we discussed the trail that had opened up through **desidero**. It is always some sort of desire that leads one to an astrologer – it can be a practical thing such as wanting a business deal to work, or wanting to know the right

time to buy or sell something. For the psychologically oriented astrologers it is often the client's desire to better understand themselves in relation to the world they inhabit. Sometimes it is something more naked; something directly related to their spiritual longing; something felt to be missing; sometimes real grief at something gone. We are asked to consider the question, however clear or confused it may be, and to use our contemplative powers to give an answer. "What do the stars say?" is a request for the auspices to be taken.

Our contemplation of the chart with its natal, progressed and transiting planetary configurations, our attention to the question, will lead to a moment, which becomes a temple, a place of sacred space cut out of time, where and in which the auspices can be truly read. For a moment, the three realms are connected: spirit, body and soul – "the sky", "the earth" and "under the earth".

Desire, truly considered, leads naturally to contemplation, and contemplation is always "a space cut out"; it is always sacred space. In sacred space, desire is at rest. In this interval the eternal is present. Or, as Dorcas would have said, "the spirits speak." A moment of healing takes place for both people. The desire, brought by the client to the astrologer and inevitably reflected in the horoscope, constellates a "space marked out" for both of them. The longing, time-deep in each of us, is for a moment returned to the stars from which it, and we, were born.

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No matter how simple the desire may seem people usually come to astrologers for something deeper. Often the question asked is hiding another, deeper question, another deeper longing. If that longing is to be addressed, our contemplation of the chart, its natal configurations and progressed and transiting planets will lead to the creation of a space cut out. Suddenly there will be a moment, which is also a temple, a place of sacred space cut out of time, where and in which the auspices can be read. And if these auspices are to satisfy, they must connect the three realms: spirit, body and soul. When that happens, there is a sense of peace, in mind, body and soul. Desire considered, leads naturally to contemplation, and contemplation is always "a space cut out"; it is always sacred space. In sacred space, desire is at rest. In this interval the eternal is present. Or, as Dorcas would have said, "the spirits speak." A moment of healing takes place, not only for the client but for the astrologer as well. The desire, brought by the client to the astrologer and inevitably reflected in the horoscope, constellates a "space marked out" for both of them. The longing which is time-deep in each of us is, for a moment, returned to the stars from which it, and we, came.