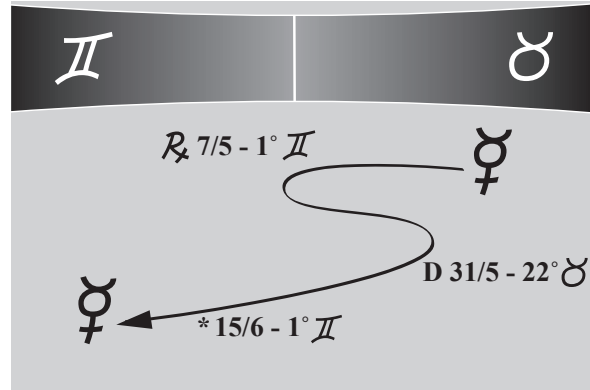


Retrograde Planets

Retrogrades (♁) are an interesting phenomenon – not just in their apparent backwards motion but also in how astrologers perceive and interpret this optical illusion, as seen from the Earth. Much has been written on retrograde cycles (most famously, the Mercury retrograde) and on the importance of retrogrades in horary and electional astrology. Yet relatively little has been written about how they function in the natal horoscope. This is surprising if we consider how much of our art – from the diurnal (daily) cycle to the eternal dance of the Sun, Moon and Earth – stems from observing the heavens from our own viewpoint.

But first things first. When a planet appears to move backwards, we have a celestial ‘second chance’ to revisit old ground and retrace our steps (as the planet does) and to put things back on track. Observing Mercury’s retrograde cycle (for three weeks every 3–4 months, 3–4 times in a twelve-month stretch) teaches us that Mercurial areas of life (and those associated with our own Mercury placement) encounter delays, derailments and detours – often in order to help us rethink our options. We learn to value and practise the prefix ‘re-’: to research, rethink, reconfirm, reorganize and review. It is a time to notice slip-ups, correct mistakes and, where possible, to maintain a healthy distance from ‘conveyor belt’ situations. But, ideally, we should stop short of making firm decisions for the future or taking new action – unless we wish to revise or renegotiate these later. It’s not as though all communications *go wrong* under the retrograde, it’s more that further information is often revealed during this time that shows a situation in a new light.

During Mercury’s retrograde in May 2009, for instance, the UK press revealed the gross misuse of allowances and expense claims by Parliamentary ministers. At that time (see diagram top right), Mercury had crept into Gemini, stationing at 1° (both planet and sign delight in ‘getting away with things’), only to traverse back into Taurus (being ‘called to account’ on monetary matters) and squaring the Jupiter–Neptune conjunction (large-scale scandal/deception) in Aquarius (elected representatives of the people). The news reports resulted in a number of resignations, firings and impromptu retirements from the political scene.



Here’s a quick guide to handling Mercury retrograde, the most notorious and regular optical illusion:

- Rest/reflect/recharge batteries, enjoy mental down time/time out, retreat from urban life and get some space from the professional conveyor belt; stop and smell the roses; avoid buying Mercury-type products.
- Revise opinions, readjust priorities, check and reconfirm, and read the fine print (but sign on the dotted line later!) – make the decisions that you’ve been putting off.
- Check, rearrange, re-explore, reorganize material. Retrograde means ‘second chance’.
- Research, investigate, gather information, re-evaluate, rethink recent decisions and perhaps return to an approach that worked in the past; avoid long-term decisions; review/edit/sharpen work and spot mistakes made.
- Clean up, carry out maintenance/repair work, catch up on filing/emails/writing and reconnect with friends and restore old friendships.
- If you do get thrown for a loop, take a step back and look at the problem objectively (Mercury’s function) and work with it or go with the flow – ‘this too shall pass’.

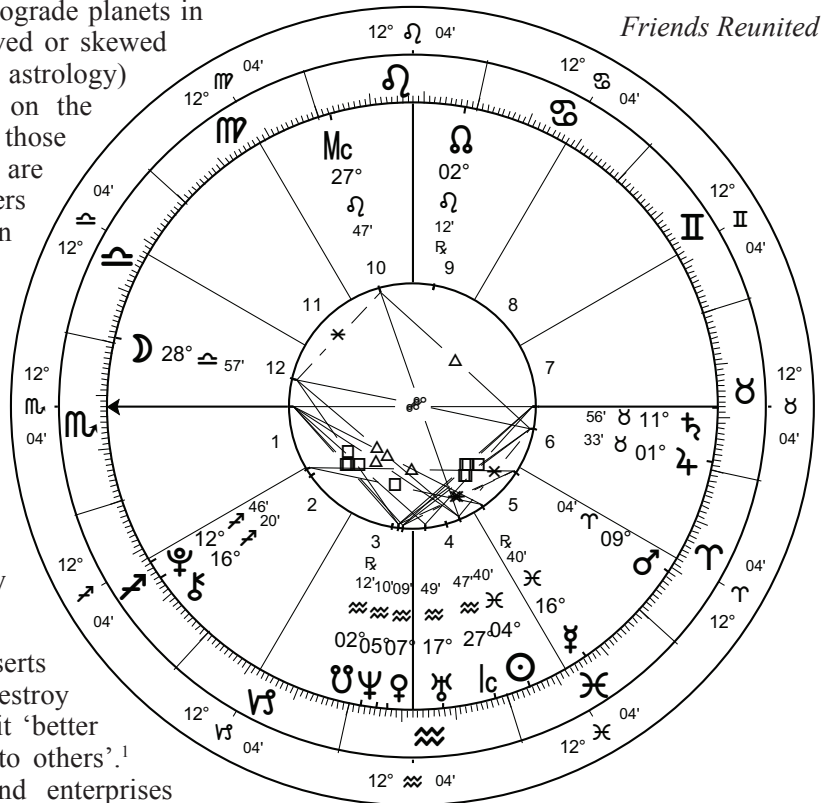
After Mercury moves direct, matters don’t really progress until the planet reaches the degree in the zodiac at which it first went retrograde, and this is usually two to three weeks after it has gone direct (see * on the diagram above).

What is often written about retrograde planets in the natal chart (frequently derived or skewed from horary and electional astrology) can have a deleterious effect on the student astrologer. For example, those born with Mercury retrograde are sometimes labelled as slow learners or even ‘mentally backward’. In historical texts, words such as ‘deception’ and ‘dishonesty’ crop up. My students who have natal Mercury retrograde seem to learn best when approaching a problem from a different angle, accessing and reworking the information visually or laterally. Interestingly, in doing so, they’ve taught me to adapt and teach them in a different way (Mercury).

Astrologer Robert Hand asserts that retrogradation does not destroy a planet’s influence but makes it ‘better suited to some situations than to others’.¹ I’ve found that companies and enterprises born under Mercury retrograde can thrive if they *actively engage* in work linked to the process of retrogradation, and I’m reminded of the chart for the (now-defunct) social networking website, **Friends Reunited** (chart pictured above). Mercury (ruler of the 11th House of social connections) is retrograde in Pisces: the purpose of the site is to get back in touch (Mercury retrograde) with lost (Pisces) friends (11th), exchange information, and, as the website proclaims, ‘never lose touch with your past’.

The more natal charts we study, the more we realize that words such as ‘backward’ don’t assist the client, nor do they do justice to such a placement. The chart of the late Steve Jobs of Apple reminds us of what a retrograde, (almost) unaspected Mercury can accomplish. Mercury is his Chart Ruler and in a very wide square to the ‘malefic’ planet Saturn (reflecting his poor early education rather than any lack of intelligence). With Apple, Jobs created his own ‘language’ and used his Mercury (and other planets) to great effect *in his own, roundabout and particular way*.

Others see natal retrograde planets as areas where the promise is not fully materialized, or potential is withheld until later. Linda Reid writes that



retrogrades ‘remain dormant or grow ready for release at some future time’.²

In my experience, a natal retrograde planet (less so for the outer planets) can be fully engaged early in life – perhaps too early, before the maturity or self-awareness needed to handle it is present – only for this early promise to be put ‘on hold’ while we catch up on other levels. Later, we are given a *second chance* to explore and benefit from the planet’s potential, but on a more secure and grounded basis. The planet pauses, gestates (is subjugated, even) until we are ready to manifest it and work with it in a way that serves us best. In fact, the planet fully blossoms later rather than sooner, perhaps once we’ve recognized our true purpose (the Sun).³ And indeed, astronomically, retrogradation is dependent upon a planet’s relationship to the Sun, as seen from Earth. One of the modern astrologers to have written extensively on the subject of retrogrades in natal charts is acclaimed astrologer Erin Sullivan.⁴

Venus retrograde in the natal chart would suggest some kind of early experience of Venusian principles (e.g. getting married early) but then returning to this theme later in life in a more