

SEEING WITH DIFFERENT EYES

ESSAYS ON ASTROLOGY AND DIVINATION

Edited by Angela Voss and Patrick Curry

INTRODUCTION

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Our country from which we came is There... How shall we travel to it, where is our way of escape? We cannot get there on foot; for our feet only carry us everywhere in this world, from one country to another. You must not get ready a carriage, either, or a boat. Let all these things go, and do not look. Shut your eyes and change to and wake another way of seeing, which everyone has but few use.¹

The above quotation from Plotinus, which inspired the title of this volume, points to perhaps its central thread: namely, that divinatory knowledge involves a mode of insight of quite a different order to normal everyday consciousness. Impervious and even alien to our accepted (and acceptable) human discourses, our familiar frames of reference and our habitual ways of seeing and evaluating the world, it requires a shift in perception. To explore this “other way of seeing” posed by the experiences of diviners themselves – and to allow it to lead to a change of conceptualisation – is a relatively new challenge for academic research, and the essays in this collection, through their various “different eyes”, seek to meet it.

There is currently a renaissance of divination studies within the humanities and social sciences, and the papers collected here reflect and will undoubtedly further stimulate this development. Both their scope and depth offer impressive testimony, ranging from ancient Chaldean theurgy (Algis Uzdavinys) through Ben Jonson’s ‘Masque of Augurs’ (Anthony Johnson) to Enochian Chess in the Order of the Golden Dawn (Johann Hasler), not to mention a wholly original treatment of Buddhist theurgy (Garry Phillipson) and a precise description, almost re-enactment, of contemporary Mayan divination (Dennis Tedlock). In this introduction, however, I shall concentrate on trying to outline some of the overall context for the book as a whole, and to draw together some of its most significant common threads.

A key part of context is the contrast between divination and oracles as a universal human phenomenon and their remarkable neglect within the academy.² The reasons for that neglect merit a study in themselves, but they include, to begin with, the diminishing of any human whole that results from its being dismembered and distributed between various effectively exclusive disciplines: in this case, principally history, classics, and anthropology. Second, there is the foundational dominance within the academy as a whole of rationalism, and its consequences for a subject perceived as largely irrational. Even for the less crudely prejudiced, divination – neither ‘rational’ (not even sufficiently proto-scientific) nor entirely ‘magical’ – is too ambiguous for either the acolytes of reason or its intellectual opponents.³ And the same points, with their own particularities, applies to the historiography of the

dominant form of divination in Western culture, equally so perceived and equally ambiguous, namely astrology.⁴

Perhaps even more than historians, anthropologists have shown the most interest in divination, and as practitioners of a discipline itself wrestling with the same problematic legacy just noted, they have gone farther in moving beyond its strictures. Yet there are particular distortions here, too. It may not be oversimplifying to say that the pioneering work of Lévy-Bruhl (still with much to say, as Geoffrey Cornelius reminds us below) fell victim to institutional politics and became unfairly tainted with the charge of ethnocentrism and even racism; while that of Evans-Wentz, while undeniably important, was widely but mistakenly assumed to have exhausted most of the subject's possibilities. As a result, the anthropological study of divination is still largely struggling to move in from the academic margins.⁵

Last, there is the problem of the integral role in divination of the divine, divinities, and divinisation (becoming divine). Secularist by instinct – another result of its rationalist formation – the academy finds it very difficult to take these matters seriously in their own right, as opposed to their being essentially a byproduct of something else (ideology, psychology and/or biology). Yet as Peter Struck, Gregory Shaw, Angela Voss and Cornelius note in this volume, to study something while retaining fundamentally different premises than the people (whether past or contemporary, foreign or domestic) practising it is not a promising way to do them or it justice; not, that is, if the goal is understanding or insight. (Explanation may result, but that will serve little more than to confirm what “we” already “know”.)

In all these ways, albeit perhaps to varying extents, the papers in this collection have set their face against such an approach to divination. To put it positively, the contributors have engaged with their subject, whenever possible and appropriate: (1) in an interdisciplinary way which encourages a reconstitution, insofar as possible, of the wholeness of divinatory experience and all that attends it; (2) with a recognition of the fact that it is only by participating in a phenomenon that one can engage with it, and a refusal to regard this as a ‘problem’ to be putatively overcome, rather than the *via regis* to knowledge of *any* kind; and (3) with an attitude of respect for non-rational human experience in general (which is to say, most of it!) and the spiritual, sacred or divine in particular. The last point can legitimately extend beyond even a principled agnosticism to allowing truth for and of the diviner to touch, and be truth for, the scholar of divination.⁶ In this context, that will almost invariably entail recognizing the truth – imaginal, but none the less for being post-positivist – of more-than-human entities.⁷

However provocative or paradoxical it may seem, such a demand may be required in order to meet the academy's own highest standards. In other words, in order to approach as closely as possible to fulfilling its own remit, *especially* when faced with such recalcitrant material, the academy must take the opportunity to become self-aware and self-critical. As Shaw among others suggests, we must recognise the limits of discursive-analytical thinking – at its extreme, a crypto-faith commitment to disembodied rationalism which is quite unsupportable by reason without question-begging – and relearn the ancient yet completely contemporary modes of intuition, erotics, and relationships with more-than-human worlds which are fundamental to divination. Furthermore, the adjective ‘disembodied’ is apt; a major part of the intellectual and cultural therapy that is required involves recognizing that each of those modes is embodied, and conversely – as Barbara Tedlock elucidates herein – that mind is found “throughout the body”.

This project is not anti-intellectual. It requires no sacrifice of the mind, only a sacrifice of hubristic and indeed imperialistic fantasies of the mind. It entails reason resuming its proper place in relation to other ways of being, whose overall context implies a return, as Chrystal Addey remarks, to philosophy as a way of life.⁸ This point emerges in several papers here with reference to Socrates, an iconic man of reason and founder-father in the narrative of Western thought, whose career was profoundly rooted in oracular dreams and the voice of his daimon, and whose opinion of human reason unaided by divinity was scathing.

Another recurrent figure in this book is the Neoplatonist philosopher of the late third-early fourth century, Iamblichus, whose emphasis on theurgy ('god work') rather than theology ('god talk') was meant to correct what he perceived as the intellectualist distortion by his Neoplatonist predecessors and contemporaries of Plato's true teachings. Iamblichus too was quite clear that the unaided human intellect could go only so far in participating in – and therefore, by implication, understanding – the *divinisation* that divination entails. His centrality in this book is thus also no coincidence.

As I have already suggested, the issue of participation in a phenomenon in order to understand it, as distinct from putatively standing outside it and analysing it in purely causal terms, is critically important. It has roots at least as far back as the argument between the *Geisteswissenschaften* and *Naturwissenschaften* which we cannot explore here except to note that the argument is far from antiquated, as can be seen in the recent so-called Science Wars.⁹ But there is one aspect which is directly relevant. It emerges in Marilynn Lawrence's paper, in which she notes the increasingly evident untenability of trying to arrive at the truth of anything by objectifying it. (Any truth, that is, which requires human participation in order to be recognized as true, or indeed, as anything at all.) Rather what is indispensable is interpretation, which arises already "within a world of interpretation". This vital point links the religious or spiritual non-objectivism I have already discussed with the ideologically critical stance of Lawrence and Ann Jeffers, which addresses the implication of both astrologers and diviners and their opponents in webs of relationships of power-knowledge, including gender and status, which both parties, in their desire to establish their own authority as non-contingent, have sought and still seek to efface. (This is not minimize the vastly greater success of the opponents, of course.)

In this way, the 'hermeneutics of suspicion' can make a valuable contribution to our understanding, always provided it is practised, as here, reflexively so as to be able to situate contemporary scholars within the same webs. Of course, it could be argued – as it has, impressively, by Paul Ricoeur – that it needs to be supplemented by one of affirmation. In any case, the fundamental point is that divination studies involve a double hermeneutic: the work of the diviner is interpretation, and so is that of the scholar of divination, the latter being, if you will, meta-interpretation. But Ricoeur's emphasis on the mutual implication, rightly understood, of hermeneutics and phenomenology is also apposite.¹⁰ (Phenomenology is a valuable corrective to the 'residues of positivism'¹¹ which still haunt the social sciences, but without hermeneutics it is, to coin a phrase, empty; just as the latter without phenomenology is blind.) And although this point also exceeds what can be addressed here, the two together would seem to open the door to a third partner whose presence is also much-needed: a responsible, because reflexive, critical dimension.

Divination studies and the academy thus have a great deal to offer each other. Divination, in its capacity as the proverbial stone the builders rejected, could become

a cornerstone of renewed and reinvigorated scholarship; and those seeking to understand it could extend and deepen their efforts by building on the best traditions and practices of inquiry. These papers are surely testimony to such promise.

¹ Plotinus, *Enneads* I.6.8

² *Per contra*, in addition to the present volume see the collection from the earlier conference at the University of Kent, referred to in the Preface, and other work by its contributors.

³ See Sarah Iles Johnston, "Introduction: Divining Divination", pp. 1-28 in Sarah Iles Johnston and Peter T. Struck (eds.), *Mantikê: Studies in Ancient Divination* (Leiden: Brill, 2005).

⁴ See Patrick Curry, *Prophecy and Power: Astrology in Early Modern England* (Cambridge: Polity, 1989); "The Historiography of Astrology: A Diagnosis and a Prescription", pp. 261-74 in Günther Oestmann, H. Darrel Rutkin and Kocku von Stuckrad (eds.), *Horoscopes and History* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2005).

⁵ Extant and forthcoming work by Martin Holbraad promises to do much to remedy this situation. See, e.g., his "The Power of Powder: Multiplicity and Motion in the Divinatory Cosmology of Cuban Ifá (or, *mana* again)", pp. 189-225 in Amiria Henare, Martin Holbraad and Sari Wastell (eds.), *Thinking Through Things: Theorising Artefacts Ethnographically* (London: Routledge, 2007).

⁶ See Geoffrey Cornelius, "Verity and the Question of Primary and Secondary Scholarship in Astrology", pp. Nicholas Campion, Patrick Curry and Michael York (eds.), *Astrology and the Academy* (Bristol: Cinnabar Books, 2004).

⁷ 'Imaginal' was coined by Henry Corbin; 'more-than-human' by David Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous* (New York: Vintage, 1997).

⁸ See, e.g., Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995); Michael McGhee, *Transformations of Life: Philosophy as Spiritual Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University press, 2000).

⁹ See, e.g., Jay A. Labinger and Harry Collins (eds.), *The One Culture? A Conversation about Science* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001).

¹⁰ See, e.g., Paul Ricoeur, "Phenomenology and Hermeneutics", pp. 579-600 in Dermot Moran and Timothy Mooney (eds.), *The Phenomenology Reader* (London: Routledge, 2002).

¹¹ Or 'RUP'; Owen Barfield's useful term; see Simon Blaxland-de-Lange, *Owen Barfield: Romanticism Comes of Age: A Biography* (Forest Row: Temple Lodge, 2006).