

Introduction

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These papers from the conference *The Imaginal Cosmos* explore divination in the context of scholarly debate within the academy. I will begin therefore by posing two questions that must concern us in the study of 'esoteric' subject-areas such as divination, astrology and magic. The first question is what is at stake in our seeking to understand the nature of these practices, for if we are to take them at all seriously, we run the risk of parting company with scholarly evaluation and a rational attitude. The second and related question is to ask how we are to bring genuine scholarship to bear on a mode of sympathizing with the world which may depend in large part on an intuitive realization and a poetic, imaginative 'turning around' from theoretical evaluation and historical survey towards a *participation mystique*. These questions do not have ready answers, but in its variety of perspectives this volume aims to illustrate the spectrum of the historical, phenomenological, psychological and spiritual dimensions of divination in general and astrology in particular, in an attempt to close the divide between speculation and experience, research and operation.

Methodologically, the approach adopted in some of these papers moves away from the more usual etic ('outsider') orientation characteristic of earlier sociology or anthropology, in order to throw light on problematic themes of divination as these are recognised by its *practitioners*. Without knowing with any certainty what destination we may reach, divination is taken seriously on its own terms, that is, as its practitioners might see it. Divination, or that which is attained by virtue of divination, is allowed the possibility of being amongst the gifts of knowledge given to humankind - *dos animae*, a gift or allotment of the soul, in the words of Marsilio Ficino.¹ Our task is to question, however modestly, in what way this might be so. With this orientation in mind, the following discussion brings out certain major themes concerning divination. As these questions come to light, they in turn illuminate approaches and concerns which run through various of the presentations, and serve to gather together as well as to discriminate significant themes of the book as a whole.

There are four main themes which I believe are fundamental for any comprehensive analysis of divination when treated 'on its own terms'. A useful starting point in laying out the scope of the subject, is to ask what *mode of knowing* constitutes divination. We may begin with the distinction of *divination by nature* and *divination by art*, which latter refers to knowledge of hidden things obtained by rational (or pseudo-rational) inference from symbols and omens. Having established the modes of knowing that are understood as divination, the second theme, which is primary in importance, concerns *reality and imagination*. Here we ask about the nature of the 'truth' revealed in divination. The third theme concerns the *cosmos* or world-order implied in divination, and the place of human beings in that order. This an explicit issue for astrology, but it is no less foundational for the whole of divination. The fourth theme is the ultimate question of the *sacred*; how does

¹ Marsilio Ficino, from his Commentary on Plotinus in *Opera Omnia* (2 vols. Basle 1576, facsimile Turin 1959), 1626.

divination relate to religious understanding, and does it necessarily entail the divine?

Nature and art

Divination is traditionally understood as negotiation between human and divine realms; but even if it is a faculty given by the gods, divination is commonly seen as rendering service to the most worldly of motives and concerns. This is especially the case with all forms of what the classical authors knew as *divination by art*, that is involving artifice or making through human skill, learning and reasoning.² These practices may be described as *divination by inference* in that a probable outcome (the matter signified) is inferred from a sign, symbol or omen which is being interpreted. This mode of divination includes astrology, all forms of divination by lot or chance, such as the use of Tarot cards, and the reading of auguries and omens; it is marked by the fact that the diviner is required to exercise a rational and inferential process, weighing and balancing the probabilities of any interpretation. The process has sometimes been termed 'inductive' on the grounds that its primary move depends on a particular observed phenomenon - a sign, a showing, a meaningful coincidence. According to this way of naming the process, deductive reasoning determines a logical or hypothetical connection from universals to other universals or to particulars; the inductive method, as in omen-reading, starts with a unique particular (an eclipse of the sun, the flight of an eagle) and infers a probable meaningful and signficatory connection with other concrete particulars (the king, the kingdom), or with universals (authority, kingship).

In contrast to the inferential reasoning of divination by art, the classical tradition establishes *divination by nature*. We may be initially misled by this term, since it includes manifestations that to us would seem distinctly 'supernatural'; what should be borne in mind is that although these phenomena may be induced, for instance in ritual, they remain *direct knowings* or *visions* that are granted to us without our manipulation, invention, or act of reason. This category includes clairvoyance and spirit-possession. A prophetic dream is 'by nature', although if we standardise the interpretations of dream-images, as in the dream-books which have been popular since antiquity, our endeavour moves away from nature and becomes art.

We should take note of an orientation that is characteristic of the Platonic tradition, whereby divination by nature is given a higher status, as being closer to the gods, than divination by art, which is subject to deception through the fallibility of ordinary human reason. In the same way, the spontaneous irruption of an intuition is treated as more elevated than the laborious artifice of the interpreter of omens or horoscopes. However we might name it, the art/artifice and nature divide endures because it discloses a phenomenological distinction, revealed in obvious differences of practical method and interpretation. A reflection of this divide may be interpreted in two distinct uses of the word divination. In popular usage, the word usually refers to a symbolic system manipulated to generate signs which will be interpreted by the diviner - the laying out of Tarot cards being a typical example.

There is a powerfully contrasting usage, characteristic of the occasional appearance of

² The art and nature distinction is found in Plato, for example in *Phaedrus* 244-5. It is definitively summarised in Cicero *On Divination* XVIII.

the word in a modern philosophical or theological context, where divination refers to a subtle and profound intuition, or a spontaneous inner moment of thought. This is divination 'by nature' carried into metaphysics, as found in the theology of Rudolf Otto and in the philosophical hermeneutics of Schleiermacher. Joseph Milne's paper 'The Cosmic Sense' grounds divination in an ontological and primordial knowing which grants our identity in the ultimate meaning of the cosmos. This move need not negate the lesser forms of divination by art, but demands that divination be seen in its most transcendent mode. In 'Father Time and Orpheus', Angela Voss addresses the theme of the power of music to harmonise the human soul with the cosmos, and thus create the conditions for divinatory revelation. She also emphasises the importance of *kairos* (the 'right time') – in relation to the theurgic invocations of Marsilio Ficino – as a central factor in divinatory and magical ritual. This lifts the theme of divination to its *locus* as divine knowledge and associates it with the 'divinisation' of the soul through artistic creation.

Reality and imagination

The title, *Imaginal Cosmos*, itself suggests that the business and forms of divination may be seen as occupying, or manifesting in, a distinct realm, a realm conceived as that of the Imagination. This world is no doubt identical to the world we daily inhabit, where we live and move and have our being, but it is *that* seen in a different way, by a different vision, not in the manner of the ordinary or the supposedly worldly, and not according to the assumptions of modern rationalism.

This therefore gives form to what is one of the most problematic of our themes, which is the question of the *reality of divination*. We ask, what is the status in truth of the disclosure in divination, and in particular divination by art. Is it a matter of 'figments' of imagination? Are diviners 'imagining things'? The individual scholar's orientation to this question shapes the whole project of describing divination, and determines what type of conclusion will be found. This orientation will also determine whether scholarship keeps this subject matter at a safe distance from the 'really real' or whether it accepts it as *also real* or even super-real. Despite shades of differing opinion, the stance of several of our contributors tends towards the acknowledgment of the reality of the disclosures that may be granted in and through divination.

The use of the term 'imaginal', deriving to the work of Henry Corbin on Islamic prophetic mysticism, is of considerable significance in this respect. The cosmos of the imagination is for Corbin the *mundus imaginalis*. In his studies of the prophetic philosophy of the Sufis he adopts this term specifically in order to shed the literary and cultural baggage that goes with 'imagination'.³ However gifted the art and poetry, however wonderful the mystical cosmology, our culture's predisposition is to tacitly bundle this whole world together in the not-quite or not-really-real, and when pushed to an uncomfortable choice, to reduce it to the 'merely imaginary'. Corbin restores its ontological status as a place of *coincidentia oppositorum*, where the material is spiritualised and the spiritual given 'body', a place where humans may gain access to the immaterial worlds of divine presence through visionary image. Thus the imaginal is perceived beyond the

³ Henry Corbin *Mundus Imaginalis, or the Imaginary and the Imaginal* in Spring (Zurich, 1972; reprinted: Ipswich, Golgonooza Press, 1976). See also relevant discussions in *Spiritual Body and Celestial Earth: from Mazdean Iran to Shi'ite Iran* tr. N.Pearson (London: I.B.Tauris, 1990).

ordinary senses, through Active Imagination, and this brings us to a close relationship of Corbin's work with the psychology of Carl Jung. This is especially relevant to the theme of the psychic mode in which divination operates, as developed in Leon Schlamme's study 'C.G. Jung's Visionary Mysticism', which situates Jung's mode of active imagination within the tradition of western esotericism, based upon Andrew Rawlinson's taxonomy of mystical traditions. Alchemical symbolism is a rich field of the imaginal, with intimate associations with astrology. The study by Liz Greene, 'Love, Alchemy and Planetary Attraction' reveals alchemy as model for the dynamics, conscious and unconscious, at work in human relationships.

A third important source for contemporary theory on the imagination is the philosopher Gaston Bachelard, who differentiated the role of images in scientific thinking from that which is appropriate to poetry, psychology and divination. Jean Lall's paper 'Watering the Roots of Astrological Theory and Practice' explores some implications of Bachelard's work for the philosophy, theory and practice of divination.

Patrick Curry's paper 'Divination, Enchantment and the Poverty of Platonism' suggests the feasibility of an alternative and postmodern trajectory into a non-reductive, non-literalist understanding of divination. He criticises the genre of philosophical Idealism, taking up instead Max Weber's theme of the disenchantment of the modern world, and argues that omens and divination perform re-enchantment through concrete magic. This trenchant challenge to the Platonic and neo-Platonic orientation of several contributors produced in turn a post-Conference response in Maggie Hyde's 'The Cock and the Chameleon'. In the editors' view, and with Patrick Curry's generous agreement, it was felt that this unusual paper advanced our debate and was worthy of inclusion here.

Cosmos

The cosmos of our modern age is physically infinite in scale, but in terms of its spiritual dimensions it is a smaller, thinner thing than the cosmos in which divination first arose. Cosmos as anciently understood implies order in the frame of things, including the order in human being, mind and society. Not all contributors to our volume of essays would accept this as an absolute and unifying law, but few would deny that if divination is real and has a certain truth, then it points to some intelligible co-responsibility in things, especially in the things that happen to us or in which we are humanly involved. It is a correspondence of meaningfulness that both permeates and goes beyond the literal and material composition of the world around us.

Astrology is the unrivalled exemplar of cosmological divination - it is divination and cosmos joined indissolubly together, and its material foundation is the observable heavens arrayed before our eyes every day and night of our lives. In her paper 'Rising to the Occasion: Appearance, Emergence, Light and Divination in Hellenistic Astrology' Dorian Greenbaum demonstrates the primary metaphors of early Greek astrology in the risings and settings of planets and the Sun. The cosmos is both symbolically and materially given to us in the four 'roots' or elements of fire, earth, air and water. This is the foundation of the Greek zodiac, and the subject of Gaston Bachelard's union of science and imagination, as discussed by Jean Lall in her paper.

The intellectual form of European civilisation has been shaped by its interpretation of the cosmos, and Charles Burnett follows the transmission of competing neo-Platonic and Aristotelian visions in his 'Astrology in the Cosmos of two Twelfth-century Visionaries: Hermann of Carinthia and Hugo of Santalla'. The Aristotelian prevailed; the course of our

understanding and our institutions of knowledge might have been very different otherwise. Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke, in 'The Weave of Fate: Sixteenth-century Prognostications and Twentieth-century Prediction in the context of Western Esotericism', traces the persistence of an esoteric tradition of cosmic correspondences from Paracelsus and Nostradamus through to the modern reformulations of Kammerer, Jung and Dunne. Frank McGillion, in 'Does Prophecy have a Future?', reviews the efforts of post-Enlightenment scientists to research and theorise possible correlations between celestial and earthly phenomena and to find a physical basis for such phenomena as prophecy, divination and precognition.

Divination and the sacred

Whatever a pious attitude to divination might wish, it is not a straightforward matter to simply locate it as a function of the sacred. Is the casting of every horoscope or the laying out of every Tarot spread properly described as religious observance? Here we encounter a distinction that can be drawn between differing descriptions of divination. This is most clearly seen in the origins of our word *divination*, which derives from the Latin for *deus*, god. It is in the usage of Cicero, that greatest critic of divination, that we find the term developed as a translation of the Greek *mantike*. But this Latin usage arguably overburdens the reality to which it refers. We note that the Greek term does not in itself necessarily suggest communication with a god, even if the frenzy of true prophecy is divine. Even if god-given, much divination is turned to worldly and not spiritual ends. Plato may have been grudging concerning the possibility of divination by non-divine art, but ancient Greek culture certainly was not. We may not be on secure ground, therefore, if we take for granted a simple identification of the sacred with each act of divinatory interpretation.

The fine distinction being drawn here may be less relevant to archaic society which was wholly embedded in ritual and religion. It does however become pressing as we seek to span the millennia and ask what there is in common between ancient piety and a modern secularised understanding of divination, and what if anything we should learn from our forebears.

This consideration brings us finally to the contribution from Gregory Shaw, in his paper on 'The Talisman: magic and true Philosophers'. Following in the tradition of Iamblichus, we are to understand that divination is true, just as philosophy is true, if we are celebrants in its ritual, but this is achieved only as we turn to and are transformed by the divine. Does divination require and intend *divinisation*, a rendering-divine? Is this the telos of divination? This is the most important of questions. If we answer along the lines indicated by several of our contributions, then this is a summation of the themes I have discussed here, just as it would be the summation of divination itself.