

TWO

Greek Divination

2.0 DIVINATION AND KNOWLEDGE

Divination forms the first homogeneous area of ancient Greek culture in which it is possible to talk about the use of signs. The term *sēmeion*, which we encounter for the first time in this field, is a generic term which indicates a divinatory sign of any kind, including an oracular response, which is usually a verbal text.¹

In addition to *sēmeion*, various other terms are used to designate specific areas of divination (or, we might say, they serve as specific material manifestations of the expression). Among these, *oiōnós* seems to be etymologically linked to the signs given by the flight of birds; *pháσμα* is used at first to denote omens perceived in weather phenomena but later comes to mean vision in general; *téras* is the equivalent of the Latin *prodigium* and indicates any unusual and in some way monstrous phenomenon which can be taken as the basis for a divinatory interpretation (cf. Bloch, 1963; Benveniste, 1969). In all these cases something stands for something else, or, to put it more precisely, something is taken as the basis for a process of inference.

Even though the practice of divination was of relatively marginal importance in ancient Greece,² the divinatory sign gave rise to a literary and philosophical tradition which places it at the mythic origins of the process of knowledge.

The soothsayer (*mántis*), a person who is able to interpret a sign sent by the gods, is first and foremost someone endowed with wisdom. The wisdom which the soothsayer possesses cannot be identified with any restricted use of the term, such as technical knowledge, but is instead general and far superior to any type of human knowledge, as the very etymology of the term *mántis* implies, linked as it is to the root **men*, which was used to indicate a movement of growth or increase of the soul (cf. Crahay, 1974).

It is in Homer that we meet for the first time the expression which identifies divination as the knowledge "of things that are, of things that will be and of things which have been in the past":

Kalchas, Nestor's son, far the best of the bird interpreters,
who knew all things that were, the things to come and the things past,
(hòs éidē tá t'eónta tá t'essómēna pró t'eónta)

who guided into the land of Ilion the ships of the Achaeans
through the seercraft of his own that Phoibos Apollo gave him.

(*Iliad*, I, 69-72)³

This passage illustrates the general, total nature of the knowledge represented by divination. It is a type of knowledge which can be matched in scope, though very much later, only by philosophical knowledge. The phrase *tā eónta* ("the things that are"), used by Homer to indicate the object of the soothsayer Kalchas' knowledge, appears later in the philosophical tradition, in Heraclitus, Empedocles, Plato and Aristotle, as a technical term used to indicate the object of philosophical knowledge in general.

The sign (which is the instrument through which this knowledge is activated) comes not from the human sphere but from the higher, more numinous, sphere of the divine. The sign is the instrument of mediation between the total knowledge of the gods and the more limited knowledge of humankind. It is also, as Colli (1977, p.379; 1975, p.40) has pointed out, the area in which divine knowledge erupts into the human sphere.

However, the gods do not speak the same language as mortals. The words contained in the oracular response, for example, are human only insofar as they are human sounds, for they fail to produce meaning when the code of human verbal language is applied to them. This lack of equivalence in the expression of knowledge content separates humanity from the gods; however, there is also a more radical difference in the very modality of the knowledge. Gods rule time by means of a simultaneous "sight" of past, present and future; divine omniscience stems precisely from the possession of panoptic vision. Apollo, according to Pindar's expression, has "the glance that knows all things" (*Pyth.*, III, 29).

Mortals, in contrast, can see only the present, while the other dimensions of time remain inaccessible to them, except through the mediation of the gods. Access may be achieved through visions which must then be translated into words, for mortals gain knowledge only through hearing. For example, poets record the memory of the past in their tales, translating the panoptic vision of the Muses (cf. Homer, *Iliad*, II, 484-86). In the same way, soothsayers reveal the future to their fellow mortals by translating into words the "visions" communicated by the god. Nonetheless, the message of the vision becomes blurred in the very process of translation (cf. Lanza, 1979, pp.99-100; Detienne, 1967).

This is why the divinatory sign is enigmatic, obscure and practically incomprehensible. In order to decipher it, an interpreter is needed, someone other than the person within whom the process of communication and transformation of knowledge takes place.

Plato identifies two distinct figures in this divine-human communication: the "mantic individual" (the person who receives the vision) and the "prophet" (the person who interprets the words spoken by the "mantic individual" during divine ecstasy). This distinction is made in a famous

passage of *Timaeus*, which may stand as a short theoretical treatise on divination as it was understood by the Greeks and presents with notable perspicuity the tradition of the divinatory sign as a sign that could not be decoded directly:

A sufficient token that God gave unto humanity's foolishness the gift of divination is that no one achieves true and inspired divination when in their rational mind, but only when the power of their intelligence is fettered in sleep or when it is overcome by disease or by reason of some divine inspiration. But it belongs to an individual when in their right mind to recollect and ponder both the things said (*tà rhēthénta*) in dream or waking vision by the divine and inspired nature, and all the visions (*tà phásmata*) that were seen, and by the means of reasoning to discern about them all how they are significant and for whom they indicate (*sēmaínei*) evil or good in the future, the past, or the present. But it is not the task of the person who has been in a state of frenzy, and still continues so, to judge the apparitions and voices which they saw or uttered; for it was well said of old that to do and to know one's own and one-self belongs only to those who are sound of mind. It is therefore customary to set up the tribe of prophets to pass judgement upon these inspired divinations; and indeed, these are sometimes named "diviners" by those who are wholly ignorant of the truth, that they are but interpreters of the mysterious words pronounced by means of enigmas and of those visions, but by no means diviners. The most just thing is to call them prophets, that is interpreters of what has been divined.

(Plato, *Timaeus*, 71e-72a)

At the conceptual heart of this passage we find the verb *sēmaínō*, which indicates the revelation of the god. It is the god who is seen as the true producer, through the inspired human individual, of the divinatory text. The subject of *sēmaínō* is formed by two terms which stand for the two types of divinatory sign, that is, "the things said" and "the visions seen"; but the force responsible for the production of these signs is "divine and inspired nature", that is, the god who erupts into the human individual by possession (as indicated by the etymology of the second term, which is linked to *theós*). The human individual here is merely a channel of transmission or a mouthpiece. In order for the meaning to reach its intended receiver, a complex procedure of interpretation is required. Thus, if we take the verb *sēmaínō* as a predicate associated with a certain number of roles (or logical cases) and we relate it to a process of communication and to a process of interpretation, we can read the passage from Plato according to Figure 2.1 (a gross simplification in some parts).

The verb *sēmaínō* thus does not have the simple meaning of "to mean", in the sense of the establishment of a relationship between a plane of expression and a plane of content within the sign. Instead, it seems rather to refer to the very process of communication which the god activates with respect to humanity. In the passage from *Timaeus*, the verb seems to refer

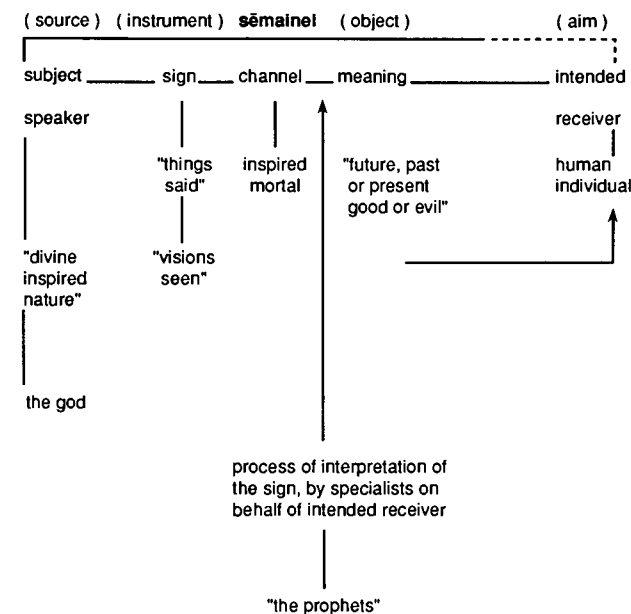


Figure 2.1

to the situation through which the god "indicates by means of (enigmatic) signs" something, as yet unknown, to a human individual.

There is a long tradition going back at least to Heraclitus, in the well-known fragment 93 of the Diels-Kranz edition, which confirms the use of the verb *sēmaínō* in this sense in divinatory contexts. L. Romeo (1976) in particular has drawn attention to this meaning of the verb in his clear yet complex analysis of the fragment. His interpretation is reflected in the following translation:

The lord, who has the oracle in Delphi/neither discloses nor hides his thought,/but indicates it through signs (*sēmaínei*)⁴

This translation challenges a long tradition of interpreting the verbal form *sēmaínei* as "means" or using other expressions which had the effect of rendering the whole fragment contradictory, at best, or, at worst, incomprehensible.

What we have here is an opposition between two antithetical types of language. On one side we have human language, which is characterized by transparency and immediate decipherability (we can hypothesize that this type of language is circumscribed by both the terms of the oppositional pair "disclose [*légō*]" / "hide [*krýptō*]" : human individuals reveal their thoughts completely by using language or hide them completely by not expressing them externally in words). On the other side there is the kind of language

attributed directly to the gods in the Heraclitan fragment (and indirectly in the passage from Plato), which is indicated by the verb *sēmaínō* and which has the opposite characteristics: obscurity and the impossibility of immediate decipherment. The gods do not grant humanity a complete revelation, but neither do they completely deny humanity knowledge; rather, by means of the oracular sign, the gods provide a base for inference on which humanity must work to reach a conclusion. However, this is done without giving any kind of indication as to which path to follow in reasoning out the meaning.

The fact that ancient Greek literary and philosophical culture understood the divinatory sign as being obscure and ambiguous can be explained in two ways. The first explanation derives from Colli's notion of knowledge, according to which the divinatory sign may be seen as the "print" of the divine on a human individual, the indication of a point of contact (by which divine knowledge is communicated to humanity) and at the same time as a *vanishing point*.⁵

The second explanation has been proposed by Vernant (1974) and concerns the particular type of rationality which divination calls into play, both as effective practice and as theory. There is a connection with the differing roles of Fate in the divine and the mortal sphere. For humanity, Fate is conceived of as a linear succession of events (metaphorically embodied by the threads of the Moirai or the Parcae) which are connected to one another yet have no immediately apparent overall, integral meaning. The succession of events acquires meaning only when its end is reached, that is, when Fate is accomplished. It is only at this point that Fate becomes intelligible, and only then is it possible to understand, in the light of ulterior developments, the significance of previous, initially inexplicable, events. Up until this moment of illumination, humanity lives in basic ignorance, and this very ignorance may be taken as a defining characteristic of human existence.

For the gods, however, the Fate of each human is continually perceptible in its totality, for an individual's Fate has been irrevocably set and registered in eternity even before his or her birth. Divination thus comes into being in the gap separating the knowledge of humanity from that of the gods. For oracles (and in fact all other kinds of divinatory sign) were understood to reveal to a human individual, while still alive, the secret meaning of his or her Fate, which otherwise would be available to human perception only after death.

However, if divination were to carry out this prophetic function completely and thereby eliminate the gap separating human knowledge from divine, the result would also be the effective elimination of what distinguished human individuals from gods. This is why the gods do not so much reveal as blur Fate, as Heraclitus describes it. Oracles show a glimpse of Fate, but at the same time they disguise it, for they leave it to be guessed at by showing an obscure and enigmatic sign which is no more compre-

hensible to the enquirers than were the events which led them to consult the oracle in the first place. Divinatory logic therefore allows for the re-introduction at the human level of the "obscurity" of Fate (reduced, if not entirely eliminated, by the very nature of divine omniscience) by means of the ambiguity of the sign.

2.1 TWO TYPES OF DIVINATION

2.1.1 NATURAL DIVINATION

The passage from *Timaeus* and the fragment from Heraclitus both refer to a type of divination which is usually defined as "intuitive" or "inspired". This type of divination forms part of the category of *mantikē átechnos*, that is, divination which operates without the use of any kind of technical device; it is therefore often called "natural divination" (cf. Cicero, *De Divinatione*).

The special feature of this type of divination is that the god's knowledge passes through nothing outside the human individual. Divine inspiration reaches the human individual directly through dreams (which are iconic texts) or is communicated through a prophet-mouthpiece who supplies a response (usually a verbal text). To use Romeo's phrase (1976, p.84), it is an endosemiotic type of divination.

The oracle at Delphi, undoubtedly the most famous and most prestigious of the Greek oracles, worked according to the intuitive or natural model.⁶ Here, the Pythia, the priestess of Apollo, supplied a response in the form of a verbal text. However, as we have seen, even inasmuch as this response was formulated in terms belonging to natural language, its meaning was by no means decipherable according to the simple application of the rules of the linguistic code at the denotative level. Later in this chapter we shall examine some instances of responses being misunderstood precisely because of the blind application of this code without taking into consideration more complex rules (such as rhetorical or tropic rules, for example).

2.1.2 ARTIFICIAL DIVINATION

The second type of divination is that known as *mantikē technikē*, which commentators define as "conjectural", "inductive", "deductive" or "artificial". This type of divination was based on the analysis of signs (usually visual or acoustic, but in some way perceptible through the senses) which were produced in the environment external to the human individual; these could be either spontaneous, such as lightning or eclipses, or provoked, such as the throwing of dice or extispicy (the analysis of entrails).⁷

This type of divination was based on a particular type of logic which springs from the hypothesis that there are homologous relations and correspondences between the microcosm, represented by the phenomenon

considered to be a sign, and the macrocosm, or the general order of the universe (cf. J. Vernant, 1948; J.-P. Vernant, 1974).

In this respect, certain properties of space—for example, parts of the sky for astrology or the surface of the liver of a sacrificial animal for hepatoscopy—were apportioned to represent symbolically and mirror the organization of the cosmic order. In these special carefully delimited spaces, it was possible to read the configurations of future events free from the aleatory elements to which real events are subject and which the enquirer hoped to overcome through divination in the first place.

Two series are thus created, the series of structural configurations within the sign-text and the series of events to which these configurations refer. A code of correspondence is established between the two, allowing immediate passage from the sign to its meaning. The following extract from Homer illustrates this passage with a very simple example:

For, I say to you, the son of all-powerful Kronos
promised, on that day when we went in our fast-running vessels,
we of Argos, carrying blood and death to the Trojans.
He flashed lightning on our right, showing signs of favour.

(*Iliad*, II, 350-53)

In this example, the sky becomes the signifying space, a microcosm in which it is possible to read the signs of Fate. The space is organized into a binary structure of two opposing regions, left and right. Each of these regions is linked to a semantic value (|left| → "bad omen", |right| → "good omen"). A more highly organized configuration of meaning can be derived from the circumstances of the appearance of the sign, that is, from its relation to the explicit (or, as in this case, implicit) question which the enquirer is asking the god. In this passage, the circumstances of the appearance of the sign is the setting out of the expedition to Troy, and the implicit question concerns the outcome of the undertaking. Thus the lightning which comes from the right side of the sky is seen to mean "successful outcome of the Greek expedition against Troy". In order to identify the final meaning of a sign, all divinatory systems are based on a more or less stable balance between the formal structures of the code (which allows for a thorough codification of the unusual or momentous event) and the multiplicity of the concrete situations to which the event-sign can refer in specific contexts.

In the present example from Homer, the code is so simple that it has become part of common knowledge and thus no indication is given of the need to refer to a soothsayer to decode the sign. This is not usually the case with artificial divination, the "technical" nature of which stemmed from the fact that in order to interpret a sign it was necessary to consult specialists endowed with the precise knowledge necessary for deciphering the various types of sign.

A soothsayer becomes essential in the only more slightly complex divinatory case which Plutarch records in his *Life of Dion* (24). The example relates to the expedition Dion made against Dionysius of Syracuse in 357 A.D., during which there was an eclipse of the moon. The soothsayer Miltas was called to interpret this sign and declared that it foretold that something which had been resplendent until then would be obscured. This could only mean that the tyrannical rule of Dionysius was destined to be overthrown by Dion's attack.

The two phases in this example are quite clear. The first determines a meaning through the code's matching system, and the second determines the meaning which derives from its application to the actual situation. Miltas also uses another, more sophisticated technique which exploits rhetorical transformations. The relationship between the macrocosm of the moon "observed" by the eclipse and the microcosm of Dionysius' empire which is destined to be overthrown is established by means of the common element (resplendent!), which indicates literally a quality of the moon and metaphorically a quality of Dionysius' rule.

Some codes were already extremely elaborate at the basic level of matching. A case in point is the extispicy code. In this form of divination, the entrails of animals were observed, and particularly the liver (the technique then became known as haruspicy) in which special attention was given to the appearance and position of the lobe, the bladders and the doors.⁸ We do not know precisely how the ancient Greeks established matches between signifying elements and the events to which they referred. However, Luc Brisson (1974), in a very interesting and thorough study of divination in Plato, has drawn attention to a passage in *Timaeus* (71 a-d) which, although not dealing directly with extispicy, describes a phenomenon which has many points in common with it. The passage describes the processes occurring when the rational soul, which resides in the brain, leaves its mark ("as in a mirror") on the liver, where the irrational soul resides: this allows us to see in the liver (in its different and differing aspects) the impressions left by the rational soul.

The "mirroring", however, is only metaphorical: what really happens is a highly developed process of encoding which almost recalls the mechanisms of "biochemical communication". The liver is seen in Plato's text as a sign text from which the irrational soul reads intelligible contents which have become perceptible through a process of codification. It is also a microcosm which reflects, even in a rather odd way, the ordering of the macrocosm of the rational soul.

We can presume that extispicy codes functioned in a way similar to that recorded for the "intra-psychic" communication processes illustrated in *Timaeus*.

Nonetheless, it is Plato himself who provides one of the most scathing condemnations of artificial divination to be found in classical Greek culture. His anathema is contained in two texts: *Timaeus* (72b) and *Phaedrus*

(244 c-d). The former in particular contains a condemnation of hepatoscopy. Plato accepts the possibility of reading signs in the liver when this is still part of a living organism but states firmly that the liver cannot possibly reveal anything of significance when it is no longer living and is no longer under the illuminating effect of the rational soul.

Phaedrus contains both a more general and a more radical condemnation of artificial divination. In this text, Plato is praising madness, of which he considers divination to be a type, and distinguishes inspired, enthusiastic "mantica" from all other forms of investigation of the future. In this text, the "mantic art" is contrasted with the "oionistic art", or divination through observation of signs given in the flight of birds.

The motive for such a discrimination is clear: in artificial or technical divination, human reason dares to substitute for divine inspiration. In order to show that only a very weak, uncertain level of knowledge may be obtained in this way, Plato invents an etymological link between "oionistica" and *oîēsis* ("opinion"): "So also when they gave a name to the investigation of the future . . . through the observation of birds . . . they called it the oionistic (*oîōnoistike*) art, which in modern times we call *oiōnistic*, making it more high-sounding by introducing the long O" (*Phaedrus*, 244 c). In inspired divination, in contrast, knowledge comes to the human individual by means of divine possession, which is thus a guarantee of truth.

What we have here are the beginnings of an opposition between *sēmaínein* and *tekmaíresthai*, the former indicating, as in the *Timaeus* passage and in Heraclitus, the gift of the expanded knowledge of the god, while the latter indicates specifically human conjecture. This opposition calls to mind Alcmaeon's motto:

Of things invisible, as of mortal things, only the gods have certain knowledge, but for us as mortals, only inference from evidence is possible.

(Diels-Kranz, 24 b 1)

We shall have occasion to return to this motto later.

These passages from *Timaeus* and *Phaedrus* reveal not only Plato's opinions of divination but may be viewed as representative of the general consideration of ancient Greek culture with regard to natural divination. Even though artificial forms of divination were practiced in ancient Greece, natural divination was always given prime importance and esteem, artificial divination being considered of only secondary importance beside oracular divination, which found expression through words rather than things.

This situation must be considered in relation to the fact that ancient Greek civilization was an essentially oral civilization. Writing was not only a fairly late phenomenon but it moreover depended entirely on speech, which it tended to reproduce phonetically. In other civilizations, such as those of Mesopotamia or China, writing was much older and functioned as

an autonomous system with respect to spoken language, presenting in its own way, by means of graphic signs, the situations and events that speech represented in a different way. These writing-based civilizations gave preference to the type of divination diametrically opposed to that which operated in ancient Greece.

2.2 TWO MODELS OF ORACULAR DIVINATION

There are, however, notable differences between the image of oracular divination which is to be found in literary texts and the way in which it was actually practiced in the oracular sanctuaries. J.-P. Vernant (1974) refers to two distinct models.

In classical Greece, divination in practice had only a marginal role to play in the running of the *pólis*. The oracles were used not so much to obtain a prediction of future events but rather to consult them with respect to an already decided upon course of events. This would be proposed in the form of alternatives, and the oracle would be asked whether the way was clear for such a course of action.⁹

In this way, what amounts to a dialogue is set up between the enquirer and the oracle (cf. Crahay, 1974): the oracle replies to the question which has been put in closed form, predicting to the enquirer that she or he will or will not do a certain thing. The enquirer then puts a second question to the oracle, this time in open form, but limited to a ritual condition of success. Basically, the enquirer asks the oracle what obstacles must be removed in order for the undertaking to succeed. It is particularly interesting to note here that the formula normally used by the oracle when giving ritual advice reflects that which was used to record decisions of democratic assemblies. The oracle states "*lôion kai ámeinon éstai*" (it will be convenient and preferable), just as decrees of the Assembly use formulas which place the emphasis on "preference" between opinions rather than on the imposition of a decision. We may see here that in ancient Greek culture the model of civic administration (in this case democratic discussion) is projected onto divination and not *vice versa*, as happened in Mesopotamia.

It is even more interesting to note that in this model of divination there is no trace whatsoever of ambiguous or obscure replies.

Ambiguity and obscurity belong rather to the realm of the other model of oracular divination—the "theoretical" model—which is to be found in the entire range of literature from Herodotus through the tragic playwrights to the philosophers. This model represents how the city culture sees divination. According to this model, the oracle is consulted not in order to receive advice but in order to know Fate directly. This leads to the assumption that the oracle is omniscient in that it has knowledge both of

future developments of events and of the past, where the distant origins of present and future destinies of an individual or a group are to be found.

This model is no longer using a binary model, for it must reduce the infinite range of possible outcomes to a single, specific option.

An ambiguous or obscure response also reintroduces the uncertainty which characterizes the human condition and which the oracle is intended to dispel. Thus, in the oracle episodes of literary texts, the oracle does not seem to have any positive effect with respect to the course of events. The sign remains obscure until the accomplishment of Fate throws light on the matter and unravels—unfortunately by now too late to be of any use—the polysemy of the prophetic text.

2.3 THE PROBLEM OF INTERPRETATION IN LITERARY USES OF ORACLES

There is no doubt that in order to understand how the concept of *sēmeion* was established in ancient Greek culture, reference to the use of *sēmeion* in literary texts is of equal importance to the study of its meaning in practical divination. In this way, we can identify the semantic nucleus of the term which was passed on to the philosophical tradition as meaning "sign."

The problem of interpretation which the oracular sign presents may be seen as a frequent theme in the works of Herodotus and the tragic playwrights. The obscurity of the sign is primarily linked to the difficulty, which then inevitably becomes the impossibility, of solving this problem of interpretation. It must be said, however, that first of all the human individual is blinded by *hýbris* and clearly demonstrates a lack of sensitivity to the words of the prophecy in various ways: by forgetting the prophecy, by not following the directives of the prophecy, by not carrying out the consultation correctly. However, in the final analysis the fundamental error is always that of choosing the wrong term of the alternative interpretations presented by the ambiguous sign.

If the essential failing of humanity is a sin of pride, the resulting human error is in the area of knowledge and has a strictly semiotic nature.

Once again we come up against the opposition of "human language" vs. "divine language". The human individual interprets the prophecy according to the human code and fails even to attempt to understand the words of the revelation as being encoded in another language, the language of the god.

In semiotic terms, in all literary episodes of oracular divination, the human individual invariably interprets the text in a *literal mode* when it should have been read in what we may term an *enigmatic mode*.¹⁰

The basic idea presented by literary oracle episodes is that the prophecy always has a secondary meaning and, although this is hidden, it forms the only true meaning of the sign. It is the discovery of this second meaning

and the rejection of the first, literal interpretation that we may call interpretation according to the enigmatic mode. What usually happens, however, is that the individual involved in the interpretation, given the human incapacity for attaining divine knowledge, invariably performs the opposite action, that is, rejects the possibility of a non-literal meaning for the prophecy.

There are, however, different types of interpretation error. The first type proceeds from an inability to find a meaning for the text, or rather to relate it to known, real circumstances. Objects to which the words of the prophecy could refer cannot be discovered, and the text seems wholly absurd. The second type of error consists in taking the words of the prophecy to refer to real, but mistakenly identified, objects. This type of error has two sub-types, depending on whether the error is due to a homonym or to ambiguity created through a play on words. This can be shown in a diagram (Figure 2.2).

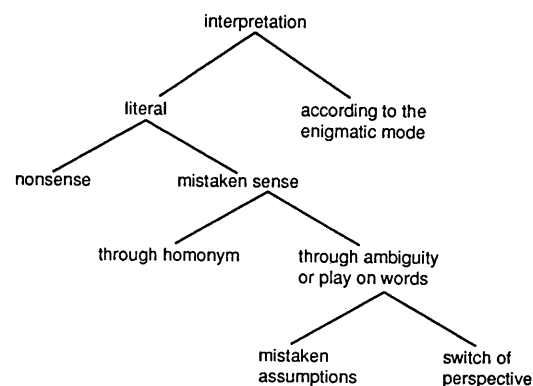


Figure 2.2

Let us now look at some oracle episodes which demonstrate the various types of interpretation error.

The inability to find a meaning for the prophetic text appears in several episodes in which rhetorical devices, some of them metaphorical, are featured. It is obvious that when the metaphoric vehicle is interpreted "literally", an absurdity on the level of meaning is produced, unless of course a possible world is imagined, one different from ours, one in which mules can become king of the Medes and heralds are painted red. The enquirer, who naturally takes into consideration only the real world, has difficulty in finding a meaning and a code of reference for these texts. Let us see what happens in the first of these episodes.

Herodotus tells the story of the inhabitants of the island of Siphnus, who had become extremely prosperous as a result of their gold and silver

mines and who decided to consult the oracle at Delphi to see if their prosperity was destined to continue. The Pythia replied:

"Siphnus, beware of the day when white is thy high prytaneum
White-browed thy mart likewise; right prudent then be thy counsel
Cometh an ambush of wood and a herald red to assail thee."

(Herodotus, *Historiae*, III, 57)

The story goes on to tell of the arrival of a Samian ship and of the embassy to ask for money and of the sacking of the island of Siphnus.

Herodotus underlines the inability of the inhabitants of Siphnus to find a meaning for the text ("They could not understand the oracle"); they found the text, and in particular, it may be assumed, the expressions "ambush of wood" and "red herald", devoid of sense because they remained at a literal level of interpretation. The god is in fact playing with various rhetorical devices: above all with a double enallage.¹¹ *Wood* (= ship) in the ancient world is *red*, as Herodotus explains, and the *herald* (= the ambassadors) organizes the *ambush*; this language is then further complicated through use of metonymy (*wood* for *ship*, the singular *herald* for the plural *ambassadors*).

A second example of lack of understanding of an oracle can be found in an episode of the long, complex "oracular romance" which Herodotus writes about Croesus. When Croesus asks the Delphic oracle if his reign will be long-lasting, the Pythia replies:

"Lydian, beware of the day when a mule is lord of the Medes:
Then with thy delicate feet by the stone-strewn channel of Hermus
Flee for thy life, nor abide, nor blush for the name of a craven."

(Herodotus, *Historiae*, I, 55)

Once again a literal meaning is given to the prophetic text in the interpretation, and Croesus consequently believes that, since the situation referred to in the text cannot occur (i.e., that "a mule is lord of the Medes"), it is equally impossible that his reign will be interrupted.

Apollo himself finally explains the metaphorical trick to Croesus once the events which the prophecy predicted have come to pass and Croesus has fallen under the domination of the Persians. The "mule" is Cyrus, and the connection is made by means of the "mixed blood" element which is shared by both terms in the metaphor (Croesus and the mule) (cf. Figure 2.3). Croesus' blindness seems even greater in light of the fact that this

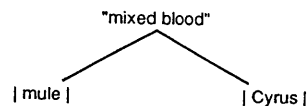


Figure 2.3

common element is doubly exemplified in Cyrus, for Cyrus is both "child of a noble mother and an obscure father" and of "Median mother and Persian father", as the text later unkindly points out.

In all fairness to the unfortunate enquirers of oracles, it is worth noting that the interpretation of the figurative meaning of a prophecy is in reality much more difficult than it may seem *a posteriori*. It depends upon encyclopedic knowledge of local matters as well as knowledge of the rhetorical devices which may be applied to such knowledge. This may be seen even more clearly when we consider the fact that even for the modern reader it is impossible to uncover the interpretation of the prophetic text when the literary text gives us no information on the appropriate sections of the encyclopedia. This occurs, for example, in the oracular episode with Arcesilaus (Herodotus, *Historiae*, IV, 163-64), in which we find, along with the metaphorical switches between "clay pots" and "men" and between "towers" and "ovens", which are explained as the story unfolds, the expression "the bull that is the finest of the herd". This is never explained and thus remains incomprehensible to us, too.

Let us look now at the case in which the text appears to be susceptible to literal interpretation, that is, in which a course of events may be identified as seeming to correspond to the text of the prophecy but which in fact turns out to be not the precise course of events it intends. We shall look first at errors of interpretation due to *homonymy*.

This particular device, accompanied by continual misunderstandings, characterizes the whole oracular romance of Cambyses. It is a story in which all the signs are linked to one another in a chain of internal associations. The story begins with a dream:

Smerdis having gone to Persia, Cambyses saw in a dream a vision, whereby it seemed to him that a messenger came from Persia and told him that Smerdis had sat on the royal throne with his head reaching heaven. Fearing therefore for himself, lest his brother might slay him and so be king, he sent to Persia Prexaspes, the trustiest of his Persians, to kill Smerdis.

(Herodotus, *Historiae*, III, 30)

After several chapters which relate the extravagance and cruelties of Cambyses, we come to learn of the rebellion of the two Magian brothers in Persia, one of whom, also called Smerdis, has assumed the throne. When Cambyses hears this, he understands the true sense of his dream. However, the story does not end here:

Having wept his fill, in great grief for all his mishap, he (Cambyses) leapt upon his horse, with intent to advance forthwith on Susa against the Magian. As he mounted, the cap slipped off the scabbard of his sword, and the naked blade struck his thigh, wounding him in the same part where he himself had once smitten the Egyptian god Apis; and believing the blow to be mortal, Cambyses

asked the name of the town where he was. They told him it was Agbatana. Now a prophecy had ere this come to him from Buto, that he would end his life at Agbatana; Cambyses supposed this to signify that he would die in old age at the Median Agbatana, his capital city; but as the event proved, the oracle prophesied his death at Agbatana of Syria. So when he now enquired and learnt the name of the town, the shock of his wound, and of the misfortune that came to him from the Magian, brought him to his senses; he understood the prophecy and said: "Here Cambyses son of Cyrus is doomed to die."

(Herodotus, *Historiae*, III, 64)

Rather than events, the Magians' revolt and Cambyses' wound are signs which enable Cambyses to attain knowledge and to understand the oracle at last, free from ambiguities, and to break free from the bonds of word-play. The rebellion allows him to understand the difference between Smerdis his brother and Smerdis Mago; the mortal wound shows him the difference between Agbatana in Media and Agbatana in Syria.

Errors in interpretation can also be caused by *riddles*, which are not necessarily language based and can take various forms.

Perhaps the most famous riddle in oracular literature is that which ensnares Oedipus. Oedipus' suspicions are aroused by the insinuations of a banquet guest as to his paternity, and he therefore decides to consult the god of knowledge (Apollo), who predicts that he will kill his father and marry his mother (Sophocles, *Oedipus Tyrannus*, 787-98). Here the riddle concerns *assumptions of belief*: Oedipus is ignorant of the fact that his real parents are Laius, King of Thebes, and Iocasta, and he believes himself to be the son of Polybus, King of Corinth, and Merope. Because of this (mistaken) belief, and hoping to avoid the events predicted by the oracle, he leaves Corinth and goes to Thebes, where he unwittingly fulfills the very destiny which was predicted for him.

In other cases, the riddle concerns a *switch of perspective*. An emblematic case is provided by Croesus, who consults both the oracle of Delphi and the oracle of Amphiaraus to know whether he should make war on the Persians. Both oracles provide the same response, predicting that "if he should send an army against the Persians he would destroy a great empire" (Herodotus, *Historiae*, I, 53). Croesus interprets this response to mean that the Persian empire will be destroyed while, as he discovers having undertaken the war, the empire referred to is actually his own. Croesus is deflected from the correct interpretation of the oracle by an implied semiotic device: the assumption that, as it is Croesus who is consulting the oracle, the god will assume Croesus' perspective in the response. Obviously, from Croesus' perspective, the empire which will be destroyed can only be the Persian empire.

In this example, more than in the case of Oedipus, we can begin to see a typical aspect of the riddle: when the god gives the enquirer an interpre-

tative problem to solve, the problem carries a strong aggressive charge which is potentially destructive to the human.

A confirmation of this aggression can be found in the analogous episode which recounts how the Delphic oracles predicted that the Spartans would measure the ground of Tegea with ropes (Herodotus, *Historiae*, I, 66). The Spartans interpret the reference to ropes as indicating the act of measuring the ground in order to distribute it to the conquerors (i.e., themselves) and therefore undertake an expedition against Tegea. However, the ropes are, in fact, operating in another *frame* or *script* (cf. Eco, 1984) and will serve the Spartans, reduced to slavery after their defeat, to measure the ground in Tegea which they must work as slaves.

The term given to this kind of response is *kibdēlos*, which in its metaphorical sense means "ambiguous", "false", "deceitful" but which in its original sense refers to the extraneous element which adulterates precious metals. The result is, as with the examples we have just seen, the mixture of two metals, one good and one not, which makes glitter like gold what is not gold at all.

A similar device can be seen at work in the anecdotes recorded by Diodorus Siculus (*Biblioteca*, XVI, 91-92; XX, 29), where it is announced to a general that he will dine and sleep in the city he is besieging. These things do indeed occur, but the perspective is not that which the general assumed (i.e., that he would overcome the city); he in fact performs these activities as a prisoner.

2.4 THE SIGN AS CHALLENGE: DIVINATION AND RIDDLES

We have looked briefly at the aggressive charge which lies behind the obscure sign. This aspect links the divinatory sign to the true riddle, which is also obscure and unsolvable and which is mythologically the expression of the challenge which the gods make to humans.

Colli (1975, p.18) has demonstrated the relationship between divination, riddle and the other—threatening and destructive—side of Apollo.¹² For Apollo is not only the benevolent god who gave the art of divination and medicine to mortals, he is also the god of the bow and arrow. These attributes take on a directly semiotic value when we see that Apollo's arrow and the obscure sign are not at all two different things but two expressions of the same power of this god and that they can have the same function too, as may be inferred from a passage in Pindar (*Olymp*, II, 83-85).

The true target of Apollo's arrows is the human individual as interpreter. Leaving figurative language aside, the human-interpreter takes up a challenge which the god makes with hostile intentions; as we have seen in the examples taken into consideration above, failure to interpret the obscure sign leads to destruction.

There seems no longer to be any room for doubt about the close relationship between the divinatory sign and the riddle. This can be confirmed by a diachronic analysis of the riddle "genre", which originates precisely within the religious sphere of divination with the two self-same characteristics of divine hostility towards mortals and the idea of a challenge to a contest. Gradually the riddle becomes separated from the sacred context and takes up its own evolutionary history, during which it weakens its original characteristics even though it always retains some trace of them. The history of the riddle is the history of interpretation understood as contest until we come to the idea of interpretation as a dialectic confrontation between two opposing opinions.

For our investigation of the divinatory sign as an interpretation-provoking mechanism, it may be useful to look at some of the most important stages in the evolution of the riddle.

The first and most famous example of the appearance of the riddle in a sacred context is the myth of the Sphinx. The monstrous creature sent by Apollo proposed the riddle of the three ages of humankind to the Thebans. The prize in this contest was life itself, for whoever failed to solve the riddle was eaten by the Sphinx; whoever managed to solve the riddle—and only Oedipus was able to do so—caused the Sphinx to plunge into the abyss.

However, in the early evolution of the riddle, still in the archaic period, the contest between a god and a human becomes a contest between two humans. A link with the sacred sphere is maintained in that the two humans are two soothsayers. Strabo's anecdote relating the contest between Calchas and Mopsus illustrates this phase. Calchas asks Mopsus to "guess" how many figs are on a wild fig tree which they encounter along their path. Mopsus gives a highly detailed reply ("They are ten thousand in number, their measure is one medimmus; but there is one over, which you cannot put in the measure." [Geography, VI, 232-35]). Struck by such precision, Calchas is overcome by a "sleep of death".

When compared with the divinely inspired knowledge of the two contestants, the content of the riddle itself seems of minor importance, as shown by the banality of the object which is to be discovered. This kind of content irrelevance was also present in the riddle of the Sphinx, which seemed so disproportionate to the risks of life and death which it involved.

However, in the next stage of its evolution, when the riddle becomes entirely human, the text itself takes on a carefully worked out formal structure which is based on the formulation of a contradiction which, rather than designating nothing (as is usually the case in such situations), designates something real. This form is to be found in the legend of Homer's death:

Homer asked the god who his parents were and where his homeland was; and the god replied: "The Island of Io is the homeland of your mother and there death will take you; but beware of riddles of young men . . .". He came to Io. Here, sitting on the rocks, he saw some fishermen approaching the shore and

he asked them if they had anything. And they, because they had not caught anything, but had been delousing one another for lack of other employment, replied to him in this way: "What we have caught we have thrown in, what we have not caught we are still carrying" alluding in this way by a riddle to the fact that the lice which they had caught they had killed and thrown into the sea, and those that they had not caught they were still carrying in their clothes. Homer was not able to resolve the riddle and died from remorse.

(Aristotle, *On the Poets*, 8)

The elements of the riddle which we have already encountered are still present in this fragment: the challenge with respect to an element of knowledge and the risk of death for the contestant who is not able to solve the riddle; but this fragment also features the form of a contradiction which from now on becomes typical of the genre. More precisely, there are two sets of contradictory pairs here: "we have caught—we have not caught" and "we have thrown back—we are carrying", which can be set out in a square of opposition (Figure 2.4).

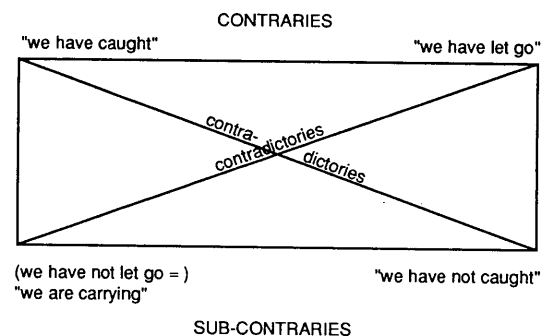


Figure 2.4

Each individual term of the first pair of contradictions ("we have caught"/"we have not caught") is in a linked relationship with a term of the second pair ("we have thrown back"/"we are carrying"), but not in the way we would expect intuitively (i.e., "what we have caught, we are carrying" and "what we have not caught, we have thrown back"). The riddle links the terms which are logically in opposition: "what we have caught, we have thrown back" and "what we have not caught, we are carrying". Nonetheless, as we know, the riddle is not absurd. A contestant in full command of sound reason should be able to unravel this problem.

When the riddle becomes entirely human, it emphasizes the competitive aspect as a contest of knowledge or as a test of intelligence and settles on the form of an apparently unsolvable contradiction.

The next and final stage in the riddle's evolution leads, in Colli's hypothesis (1975), to the birth of dialectic.

2.5 COMPETITION, DIALECTIC, RHETORIC

Dialectic, in the ancient Greek sense of the term, comes into being within the context of competition. It was a discussion between two people on some type of cognitive argument and thereby a contest designed to discover a victor.

The general course of the discussion followed this scheme (Aristotle, *Topics*): the challenger first asks a question in an alternative form, presenting two elements of a contradiction. The adversary chooses one of these and proves its truth. The challenger then has to prove the truth of the other element and thereby confute the adversary's affirmation. The procedure can involve a lengthy and complicated series of successive questions and responses all intended to prove directly, or more often indirectly, one or other of the alternatives.

In its early form, the language of dialectic was limited to a fairly restricted and, to a certain extent, élite environment. Significant changes occurred, however, with cultural developments at Athens and with the definitive adoption of democratic government; the forms of dialectic now entered the public sphere and became firmly linked to the political world. The discussion thus became ever more extended, and dialectic—in a somewhat adulterated form—developed into rhetoric.

Both dialectic and rhetoric are based on a strong spirit of competition. What distinguishes them, however, is that in the former there is no need of a judge to assign the victory to one of the two contenders, for the victory is evident in the discussion itself at the point when one of the contestants is led through the very development of the discussion into contradicting his or her original thesis. In the case of rhetoric, in contrast, the competition is more fiercely direct in that it is the listeners who judge who has made the best speech. Since there is no intrinsic punishment for failure in rhetoric (as there is in dialectic), it has to add a persuasive emotional element.

2.6 DIVINATION AND PERSUASIVE INTERPRETATION

The evolutionary process which we have examined so far began with the divinatory sign as a god's cognitive challenge to a human individual and ended with the cognitive competition of dialectic and rhetoric. But at this point the circle seems to close on itself with the introduction within divination itself of dialectic and rhetorical methods of debate.

A passage from Herodotus is very revealing in this respect. The passage recounts a sort of conciliation between *divination*, with its characteristic deterministic conception of the world, and *political eloquence*, with its vision of life as leaving everything open to constant discussion and argument. Hero-

dotus tells how the Athenians, threatened by a Persian invasion, sent ambassadors to consult the oracle at Delphi. At first the Pythia presented them with the announcement of tremendous disaster. Worried, but not prepared to submit docilely to this Fate unless absolutely necessary, the Athenians asked for a second consultation and implored the god to give a more favorable response, reinforcing their plea by swearing not to leave the sanctuary until they had received such a response. The Pythia agreed to deliver a second response:

Yet shall a wood-built wall by Zeus all-seeing be granted
Unto the Trito-born (Athena), a stronghold for thee and thy children.
Bide not still in thy place for the host that cometh from landward,
Cometh with horsemen and foot; but rather withdraw at his coming,
Turning thy back to the foe; thou yet shalt meet him in battle.
Salamis, isle divine! 'tis writ that children of women
Thou shalt destroy one day, in the season of seed-time or harvest.
(Herodotus, *Historiae*, VII, 141)

This example shows clearly that the divinatory sign, in the case of the oracular response, is not received fatalistically. The messengers are not satisfied with the first response and in their turn challenge the god, threatening not to leave the sanctuary until they succeed in persuading the god to attenuate his hostile attitude to the city. What is even more interesting in this example is its demonstration that the oracular sign is open to discussion. For once they have obtained the response, the messengers record it and set off again for Athens, where they present it to the Assembly.

The discussion which takes place before the Assembly is in the typical form of dialectic discussion. The obscure sign sets off an interpretative process which offers various possibilities of development. However, dialectically it is basically a dichotomy between two opposing, mutually exclusive solutions: retreat to the Acropolis, which had in earlier times been fortified with a palisade, which the god thus intended by the expression "a wood-built wall" or prepare a fleet of ships, because what the god intended (*sēmainein*) by the enigmatic expression "a wood-built wall" was a barrier of ships.

Each side of the contradiction is upheld by a different group: (i) "some of the elders" (backed by the readers of oracles) support the first solution; (ii) "others" (among whom Themistocles) support the second. Here we are only at the presentation of the problem, the next stage is to develop a proof which will contradict one of the two hypotheses.

The discussion follows the second horn of the dilemma almost as though saying "If we think that the right interpretation is that which suggests we prepare a fleet, what contradiction does this interpretation imply?"

The readers of oracles here point out that accepting the second horn of

the dilemma leads to a contradiction with the portion of the text which predicts that Salamis will be the cause of death to many people. Accepting the validity of the sub-problem posed by the readers of oracles would mean the automatic confutation of the main hypothesis.

However, the thematic level of the discussion has undergone a shift, and now, in order to refute the hypothesis of the readers of oracles, it is sufficient simply to prove that the objection they raise is unfounded.

This is what Themistocles then proceeds to do by denying that the objection from the readers of oracles poses a real contradiction. Here too the argument seems to proceed by absurdities and hinges on a question of perspective. If indeed the readers of oracles were right in saying that Salamis (metonymy for a "battle by sea") would cause the death of many Athenians and if this second part of the prophecy had been directed, like the first, to the Athenians, then the god would not have used the epithet "divine" for the island, but rather "cruel". That is to say, there is a contradiction between the epithet "divine" used for the island of Salamis and the death of Athenians. It therefore follows that this second part of the response, which contains a prediction of death, must be understood to be directed towards the enemy.

It is quite clear here that in this second phase of the discussion the dialectic method is gradually giving way to a more properly rhetorical method.

Themistocles then puts forward as his final argument an interpretation which tends more to the positive proof of his own reasoning than the demonstration of the falsity of the basic premiss of his opponents. The judgement of the listening public is then made and grants victory to one side, using one of the basic elements of rhetorical discourse. The passage states that the Athenians "judged Themistocles to be a better counsellor (*hairetōtera*)" than the readers of oracles. The *discrete* binary logic of the dialectic alternative gives way to the *continuum* of the gradated logic of the preferable.

It could well be that the discussion so far has caused us to lose sight for a moment of the fact that the object in debate is a prophecy of Apollo. This is significant, for the logic applied to the interpretation of the divinatory response is precisely the same as that which governs political assemblies.

It is also extremely significant that in this case the opponents of Themistocles are readers of oracles (that is, specialized interpreters of divine responses) and that they are defeated. This may be seen as the paradigmatic confirmation of the fact that, in the Greece of the *pólis*, divination is subject to the methods of political rationality and not *vice versa*.

The obscure nature attributed to the divinatory sign fitted in very well with the basically oral Greek culture, which tended towards dialectic: it confirmed the sign itself as a mechanism which provokes interpretations, interpretations which must be tested by means of a confrontation between opposing speeches.

The sign refers to a reality beyond itself, a hidden and ambiguous reality which is nonetheless accessible through the confrontation of opposing interpretations. One might think that such a confrontation would be paralyzing, but surprisingly it proves to be both stimulating and productive.

The divinatory sign has thus moved away from two of its basic characteristics, the supremacy of vision and the conception of truth as a revelation—that is, truth as *a-lētheia*, understood as the drawing aside of the veils under which it was hidden (*lanthánō*).¹³

In the passage from Herodotus examined above, it is not the soothsayers with their panoptic vision who reveal the hidden meaning of the sign. Here it is more *conjecture* (which in Herodotus is always expressed by the verb *syμβállō* and its derivatives, an equivalent of the more widely used *tekmaíromai*) which allows the hidden meaning to be revealed.

The adoption of conjecture and the moving away from vision allow the sign to evolve from the field of divination into that of true science.

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Theories of the Sign in Classical Antiquity

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GIOVANNI MANETTI

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