

## The Divinatory Dialogue : Theoros and Hermeios

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The analysis of divination is taken forward from its anthropological foundation in Lucien Lévy-Bruhl's *participation mystique* and Barbara Tedlock's cognitive continuum. A hermeneutic approach is proposed, developed from the descriptions of divinatory pre-sentiment and address, and resolving the procedure of divination into a double-consciousness. Drawing on indications from classical and Hellenistic thought, this is expressed in complementary and dialogical terms as a seeking and enacting in the known world of our concern – *theoros* – and a responding from the oracular place which is beyond or unknown – *hermeios*. The interpretation of symbol, characteristic of inductive divination, is suggested to be the task of hermeios.

This part of the study develops a hermeneutics of divination, drawing on indications of an attitude to oracles characteristic of classical Greek and Roman culture. Divination was ubiquitous in this ancient thought-world, just as it would appear to be ubiquitous in every culture known to us (Johnston, 2008, p.3). According to Peter Struck, the historian of divination, we have yet to fully appreciate the implications of the scale of divinatory practice and its place in classical antiquity: 'for most ancient Greeks and Romans divination hardly required explanation. It simply worked' (Struck, 2005, p.1). Even amongst the intellectuals, sceptical voices are the exception, not the rule (Struck, 2005, p.6). In the classical climate of thought, the feasibility of an omen or divinatory showing is culturally secured and firmly established in advance, since it is widely presumed that productions of omens, oracles and divination have the potential to reveal the truth of things beyond their mere contingency. This establishing-in-advance constitutes an essential condition for there to be divination, which condition I have named as its 'presentiment'. I have suggested that divinatory presentiment is a function of *participation mystique*, as described by Lucien Lévy-Bruhl in the context of 'primitive mentality' (Cornelius, 2014). Coupled with *participation* is the experience of divinatory 'address', which constitutes the felt meant-ness of the divination for the one who finds it meaningful (ibid. p.5, quoting Lévy-Bruhl, 1975, p.59).

Divination remains widely diffused in popular culture, suggesting a latent presentiment in the general population, yet the contrast with ancient thought could scarcely be more marked. Divination in our epoch has no institutional form, it has no state observances, and just as tellingly it has no place in-and-for-itself in the academy, and therefore in serious thinking. A modern-day intellectual courts derision by even suggesting that divination may be, for us here-and-now, an opening to truth. Against the grain of modernity, the intention of the current project is the possibility of contemporary debate and the reintroduction of divination to philosophy, since divination shows every likelihood of continuing to be a significant mode by which thoughtful individuals understand the world, themselves, and whatever the divined Other may be.

With this goal in mind, we extend the interpretation of divination through the duo *theoros* and *hermeios*. The use of Greek terms acknowledges a classical imagination vibrant with omens and oracles. While this conceptual approach is not explicit in any analysis that has survived from the past, I suggest that it is consistent with classical Greek and Hellenistic debates on divination. The significance of this pairing is however that it steps beyond any particular historical context to reveal a primordial duality in divinatory intelligence across cultures, ancient and modern. If we consider divination not simply as an act observed as if from the outside, but instead as a process of understanding and enactment, then we may demarcate two related but distinct aspects of its coming into meaning. There is a duality in the appropriation of the oracle, consisting of complementary hermeneutic modes. This dual-unity may be conventionally represented in two individuals, a diviner who interprets the oracle and therefore speaks for it, and an enquirer who seeks an oracle from the diviner and on hearing the interpretation has to decide what to do with it. Describing divination in this way moves its centre of gravity from interpretation as a supposed monologue delivered by the diviner, to interpretation as a reciprocation of complementary understandings, a dialogue of *hermeios* and *theoros*, diviner and enquirer. There is revealed an intersubjective space of double-consciousness. A reciprocal double-consciousness is no less present in one person seeking an oracle for themselves, for instance by taking up Tarot cards or using three coins to consult the texts of *I Ching*. It is a double-consciousness even in the one-person situation because there remains a root distinction between making an interpretation and assenting to it, which means accepting its address and following it through into expectation, choice and action. When divination may be said to 'work' then accepting its address, interpreting, and a consequent expectation and decision to act, form a unity. The double-consciousness may equally be enacted in part or wholly in several or many individuals together, whether they are nominally enquiring or nominally divining.

The notion of double-consciousness suggests that this pairing identifies the *chicane* elsewhere discussed as a modality in primitive divination (Cornelius, 2010); the pair *theoros-hermeios* offers a hermeneutic complement to that analysis. This consideration also brings us back to the anthropological cognitive continuum (ibid., pp.13-14); however, before detailed comparisons are drawn *theoros* and *hermeios* require to be located in their ancient context.

## Theoros and the Presentiment of Ancient Oracles

*Theoros* is the origin of our word 'theory'. In the following description of this early Greek term I have drawn extensively on the work of Ian Rutherford (Rutherford, 2000).<sup>1</sup> In early usage the word referred to a celebrant or participant in a festival, ritual or mystery rite; it also referred to individuals sent to the games or to an oracle centre. These individuals were in the role of ambassadors, watchers of the spectacle on behalf of others who had sent them, perhaps a city-state. They would come back to their community to convey what had happened.

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<sup>1</sup> I here record my thanks to Jean HInson Lall, who originally drew my attention to Rutherford's work and pointed out the significance of ancient *theoria* for the hermeneutics of divination.

Theoros has come into modern philosophical hermeneutics through Hans-Georg Gadamer, where he discusses the temporality of the festival, a discussion with direct relevance for the temporality of oracles: 'the time experience of the festival is ..its *celebration*, a present time sui generis' (Gadamer, 1989, p.123). There is no festival unless it is celebrated by those who are there, and their thereness, although entirely passive (*pathos*), is participatory, since they are 'carried away'. The truth of their participation lies not in their subjectivity but in that which they see (ibid., pp.124-5).

Although it has from antiquity been suggested that the word is related to *theos*, god, Rutherford notes that the consensus of modern scholarship appears to be against this; the term was nevertheless associated with religious rites, and it has as one of its connotations our concept of pilgrimage. Distinct from this wider meaning, 'theoros' was used with the specific sense of *consultant at an oracle*, especially where a city-state delegated its enquiry to a formal mission; it was the task of the delegation to bring back the god's answer to those who had sent them (ibid., p.135).<sup>2</sup> This is my justification for extending the generic term *theoros* to private or collective supplication at an oracle, the act of enquiring in divination.

In the pilgrimage or celebration there is a significant delimiting of function with respect to *theoros*. The word 'seems to be usually confined to the activities of the ordinary pilgrim, whereas for the viewing of the secret sights associated with the Mysteries... we find a special term: *epopteia*' (ibid., p.139).<sup>3</sup> This is the initiate into the mysteries, the one who knows the ropes, the one who is likely to form a comprehension of the role of the officiating priest. We need to keep in mind the idea of initiate-as-peer in many forms of divination, for instance when a thrower of bones looks over the shoulder of a colleague, or when astrologers discuss an interesting horoscope. The initiate occupies an observing role for the tradition, and is responsible in at least equal measure with the officiating priest for its coherence and transmission.

Divination, like celebration and ritual, precedes discursive philosophy. *Theoros* theorises, which makes philosophy a metaphor of *theoria*. The ground is prepared by Socrates. Then in Plato, and conclusively in Aristotle, we observe the transfer of *theoria* to the philosopher, contemplating the source of divinity (ibid., p.140). For Aristotle philosophy becomes 'useless' knowledge, the goal of truth known in its own right; *theoros* no longer returns to the world to enact what has been understood (Nightingale, 2004, pp.187-8). In this sense divinatory *theoria* belongs to the pre-Aristotelian conception of spiritual knowledge.

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<sup>2</sup> Rutherford indicates that the term might have been limited to oracles of state, and not to personal consultation; in this official role 'by the fifth century [theoros] seems to be the *vox propria* for the concept in most sources'.

<sup>3</sup> Rutherford (op.cit. p.39) explains that etymologically both terms indicate 'vision'; *epopteia* and *theorias* are however explicitly distinguished in ancient sources. Where relevant I use the term 'initiate' for the equivalent role in divination.

Rutherford illuminates the theme of *theoria* through the close parallel with the Hindu *darsan*. This is the goal of a pilgrimage in seeing or making physical contact with a spiritual teacher, a temple or a sacred object. *Darsan* means 'sacred vision' where not only does the worshipper gaze upon deity, but deity gazes back in return; as with the Greek tradition this has passed metaphorically over to philosophy, since *darsana* is a name for philosophical schools or systems (Rutherford, 2000, p.145). Just as philosophy is a metaphor of *theoria*, hermeneutics is a metaphor of divination. For current purposes I limit the term 'theoros' to the hermeneutic analysis of divination; this locates the words 'theory' and 'theoretical' in their conventional modern usage, yet it should never be forgotten that for divination to be meaningful the original mystical sense and its conceptual abstraction are always together in play.

## Hermeios

It is not difficult to understand, at least provisionally, what *theoros* is and who can play that role. Even a non-religious person is able to speculate on what a pilgrimage is like for a serious participant, and we can imagine ourselves 'going to the oracle' whether or not we have a clear idea of what is happening behind the scenes. It is more problematic to define what we mean when we speak of 'interpreting the oracle'. With most practices of inductive divination, such as a Tarot reading or a horoscope consultation, the one making the ritual of divination takes on the task of interpretation, or if there is a dialogue with a knowledgeable client, guides the interpretation. The roles of diviner and enquirer are complementary and bound up with each other, but they are necessarily asymmetrical. There is specialised knowledge in play, requiring techniques that have to be learned; these can be quite intricate, as in the case of horoscopic astrology. However, this goes beyond technical or common knowledge, and reinforcing the separateness of the role of diviner is the suggestion of a 'different' or out of the ordinary state of consciousness. This is a mind-space that requires a certain degree of experience; it is therefore not necessarily democratic, easily available, or publicly shared. However slight the transition might often seem to be, the demarcation is definite and well-attested. It has been taken up in modern scholarship by Vernant, in his discussion of the 'divinatory intelligence' (Vernant, 1991, p.303). Different diviners will give widely differing emphasis to this phenomenon, but it is common enough in the discourse within divination, even in such an apparently technical and objective exercise as interpreting horoscopes (Willis and Curry, 2004, pp.10-11).<sup>4</sup> To be a diviner is to open a window of mind and to be a seer, and most diviners will at least nod to the metaphor of some special 'seeing'. Once we posit double-consciousness we have also established the 'ground of divinatory dialogue' (Hyde, 2013,

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<sup>4</sup> Roy Willis gives a description of an altered state of consciousness occurring for an astrologer (Jane Ridder-Patrick) in a consultation: 'She was calmly rational at first, and it seemed to make sense. Then, about two-thirds of the way through the hour-long reading, the atmosphere changed. The relatively mild-mannered Jane became suddenly powerful and authoritative, as though someone or something was speaking urgently through her...'. He describes this as his 'first intimation of transcendence in an astrological setting.' (Willis & Curry, 2004, pp.10-11).

p.123),<sup>5</sup> and it becomes the task of the diviner to engage the enquirer on that ground,

This ground becomes much more strongly demarcated in the case of natural divination; here the image of the seer takes command and consciously articulated technique drops away. We are in the presence of another reality where the god gazes out from within. Something possesses us, the seer is god-filled (literally, *en-theos*, the enthusiast) and under inspiration, perhaps in a trance. Sometimes, as in direct clairvoyant perception, there appears to be no room whatever for interpretation - it is as if there is a direct and unmediated perception. However, a common pattern in natural divination is for an intermediating role between oracle and enquirer. In speaking of the Pythian priestess Plato refers to this functionary as a prophet who is not himself the oracle but who interprets, and the same institutionalised separation of function is referred to in several classical sources (Struck, 2004, p.167). Here is Plato's discussion:

It is not the task of him who has been in a state of frenzy, and still continues therein, to judge the apparitions and voices seen or uttered by himself... Wherefore also it is customary to set the tribe of prophets to pass judgment on these inspired divinations.

(Timaeus 72 a,b)<sup>6</sup>

The ignorant call these interpreters 'diviners', says Plato, but 'the most fitting name would be 'prophets of things divined'. So how do we lay out the process of interpretation when there are two separate people involved? There is in this debate a marked ambiguity; little is known about the actual practices at the great oracle centres and our classical sources remain obscure (Struck, 2004, p.167).<sup>7</sup> This recurrent ambiguity matches the very nature of the oracle, and the difficulty we have in finally pinning down how an interpretation is arrived at. Is the oracle something that is interpreted or is it an act of interpreting, and even of self-interpreting? Guided by the Platonic description, however, we observe that whether the situation requires one person or two there is a *double process* at work. If there is indeed a marked altered state of consciousness - the 'divine frenzy' - then the inspiration must be moderated by ordinary speech if the Pythia is to make herself intelligible - or is to be made fully intelligible - to the

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<sup>5</sup> Maggie Hyde makes an explicit comparison between divinatory and psychoanalytic dialogues.

<sup>6</sup> *Timaeus* (Bury translation.) Plato uses the term *prophetes*, prophet; it is a matter of some dispute as to whether the Pythian priestess composed her own responses or required the intermediating priest to create an intelligible response.

<sup>7</sup> Struck suggests that it is likely that at the time of Socrates divination by lots was in use at Delphi, as well as the method of direct voice by the Pythia (divination by lots = cleromancy; sortilege; *sortes*). This is the far 'bones' end of the spectrum of divination; it could feasibly match Plato's description if the Pythia selecting the lot was in an altered state, and the mediating 'prophets of things divined' remained in a relatively normal state. However, Plato's text does not suggest this possibility.

enquirer. We must not forget that the same ambiguous duality in intermediation, Pythia and interpreter, is constituted equally between oracle and enquirer, because an understanding must pass between them for it to be an oracle.

By holding the double-process in mind we glimpse *hermeios*. The word appeared in Richard Palmer's influential overview of modern philosophical hermeneutics, where he states that '*hermeios* referred to the priest at the Delphic oracle' (Palmer, 1969, p.13). Palmer's own interpretation is much influenced by Gadamer and Heidegger. Although the etymology of the word is obscure, taken together with the related verb *hermeneuein* (to interpret) and noun *hermeneia* (interpretation), an explicit relationship or derivation is revealed with the god Hermes. A closely related word is *hermeneus* (translator or interpreter):

A *hermeneus* is one who communicates, announces and makes known to someone what another 'means', or someone who in turn conveys, reactivates, this communication, this announcement and making known.

(Heidegger, 1999, p.6)

In the ancient sense understood by Plato the function of the interpreter is to be a herald, and what is conveyed is not a theoretical comprehension, neither is it simply facts or information, but a conveying of 'will' and 'wish': 'hermeneutics is the announcement and making known of the being of a being in its being in relation to... (me)' (Heidegger, 1999, p.7).<sup>8</sup> We are directly addressed by some definite 'one' - some being - through their intermediary. In the case of divinatory *hermeios* the being is a god, and the one enquiring has entered a relation with a god and is addressed by the god. The god's will 'in relation to... (me)' is the constituting mode of *address* in the divinatory hermeneutics of antiquity.

The aspect of this task that I wish to emphasise is the crossing between two realms, the other-worldly and the worldly. This is the basis on which I use *hermeios* as a generic term for the *medium of divinatory interpretation*, the heralding or carrying of otherness, whether this is known as a divinity, a spirit-being, or abstracted intelligence, into communicable form and therefore into common speech. This bringing-across is the act of interpreting, and it is the primary responsibility of the one enacting *hermeios*. This individual is therefore an embodiment of duality, with one foot in either realm. The herald has to have some idea of who he or she comes from, and an idea of who is to be addressed, just as divinatory interpretation is necessarily a translation and mutuality of understanding between two realms.

As distinct from the noun for the interpretation itself (*hermeneia*), *hermeios* stands as the

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<sup>8</sup> This characteristic Heideggerism from his original lecture series of 1923, published for the first time in the collected works of 1988, is foundational for divinatory *hermeios*: 'Hermeneutik ist Kundgabe des Seins eines Seinden in seinem Sein zu-(mir).' - Martin Heidegger *Gesamtausgabe* Band 63 'Hermeneutik der Faktizität' (Frankfurt am Main, Vittorio Klostermann, 1995) p.10.

complement to theoros in the circle of oracle and enquirer, and the naming appropriately embeds our concerns in the study of hermeneutics. The relationship with the chikane already discussed becomes transparent; this is the Hermes gift of the shaman and the witch-doctor (Cornelius, 2010). 'Hermeios' was the word that emerged as appropriate in the formulation of this analytic of divination. However, a surprise awaited at its completion - the word is a neologism, emerging providentially but strictly 'incorrectly' in Richard Palmer's own early studies under Gadamer. I have however stayed with the word because it is a perfect name for what it announces.<sup>9</sup>

## The Dual-Unity of Theoros and Hermeios

Theoros is rooted in the world as given and as pilgrim seeks a divinely inspired understanding in that world; hermeios interprets from the concealed world in order to issue the response to theoros. On hermeios falls the initial burden of interpretation and proclamation; nevertheless it must be borne in mind that this is a dual-unity. Without there being divinatory presentiment and the intention of divinatory seeking then there will not be a divinatory response. This requires a fabric of culture to validate the symbolic exchange, for without it there is no

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<sup>9</sup> Concerning the neologism *hermeios*, it is necessary to give a full account because of its central importance in this discussion. Given an existing interest in the problem of oracles, I was inspired by the idea of hermeios and its connotations in my earliest readings in hermeneutics, on encountering Palmer's study (Palmer 1969). In much later developing my own approach I profess to having been uneasy over a long period in my inability to locate the word in lexicons and texts known to me. At the time I assumed the word may have emerged in obscure 19th century scholarship or existed somewhere in writings of Heidegger. Several scholars with considerable knowledge in classical Greek were consulted, and the word appeared philologically plausible. Eventually, by fortuitous circumstances, I met Dr. Efrosyni Boutsikas, an authority on Greek temple literature, especially that of Delphi. Dr. Boutsikas took the trouble to confirm that she could find no ancient source. With the problem of source now clearly in view, Professor Palmer was unable to locate his source, and kindly made suggestions of where I might trace this. It was presumed to be amongst various writings of Gadamer and Heidegger encountered several decades ago, most likely in German but possibly in English. Gadamer was an early student of Heidegger, fluent in both languages. However the word does not appear in Heidegger's original text (cited above) or in its translation by van Buren (Heidegger, 1999). It does not appear in Hans-Georg Gadamer 'Klassische und philosophische Hermeneutik' (1968) in his *Gesammelte Werke* Band 2 (Tubingen, Mohr, 1986), nor in its revised version in *Gadamer Lesebuch* (Tubingen, Mohr Siebeck, 1997), nor in the translation of this version by Palmer (Gadamer, 2007). My speculation is that early on some slip has occurred in taking lecture notes from Gadamer speaking in German, perhaps involving the similar-sounding word *hermeneus* (translator, interpreter). The one who interprets the Pythia may be described in this way, without it being taken as a formal title. Professor Palmer has confirmed that the word must indeed be 'an accidental neologism' on his part (private communication, 2009). The issue at this point was whether to abandon the word as an error and find a suitable replacement. 'Hermeneus' was a possibility. It would also be possible to follow Plato and use the word 'prophetes' for hermeios (*Timaeus* 72a,b). However, on reflection I concluded that the arrival of hermeios is more than accidental and is to be taken up as a gift of hermeneutics. It is an inspired neologism, in the true nature of the god. By taking it forward I also wish to indicate that this present analysis does not belong to antiquity but is ahistorical, concerning divinatory practice in all times and places, most especially our own.

sustained expectation for the enquirer and no place for the diviner. It is a condition required of the one enacting *theoros* that he or she shall with genuine concern actually apply to the oracle, accepting the address of the oracle, followed by the personal decision on how to act. The oracle must be honoured. Even choosing not then to act is a decision consequent upon taking the oracle.

A further recognition following from this dual-unity is that the distinction 'natural' and 'artificial', valuable though this is as a phenomenological starting-point, obscures a major feature of natural divination. The Pythia requires a sane interpreter, distinct from the enquirer, and all the more she requires this function if she is possessed and out of her normal mind; this is what lies behind the careful distinction offered by Plato. But this shows that an inferential and speculative process of ratiocination is of vital importance in fulfilling many types of natural divination; without it, *theoros* goes away empty-handed. Where it occurs, this interpretive process is not an add-on to the real oracle; it is essential to the process and fulfilment of divination, and as such it is the bridge of *hermeios-theoros*.

It should by now be apparent why an inadequate conception of the process of divination arises if we limit its definition to the simple act of interpreting a divinatory symbol or an oracular utterance. This is to pay attention to a truncated definition of *hermeios* and to forget about *theoros*. Indeed, to understand divination it is as important to reveal *theoros* as it is to know *hermeios*. *Hermeios* has a double role to fulfill, standing in two worlds, and therefore embodies an essential duality; however, its pairing with *theoros* is the very same duality. Even where we interpret in our own oracle, we may locate the complementary principles of interpretation - on the one hand the seeing of the meaning, on the other hand our decision and its consequent enactment. The pair *hermeios-theoros* points to a dialogical form whereby questioning and desire are answered from the place of the concealed. In its cultural context this dual-unity in appropriating the oracle leads to the distinct role of the oracle-expert as opposed to the enquirer of the oracle; these two parties embody the fundamental pattern of divination. Although a category of objectivity and rational decision-making belongs to the enactment of *theoros*, the role remains essentially participatory since by accepting the oracle the enquirer acknowledges *address* - that is, the oracle is understood to be 'for me'. In being accepted, divination is *proved*, by which is meant, its truth is tested by enactment, by being lived.

The idea of divinatory proving carries a factual and concrete empirical sense, much like the biting of a gold coin or the proof strength of the purity of rum, tested by soaking in gunpowder.<sup>10</sup> The force of divination for the one enquiring comes less from proving the oracle true than from proving true what is brought before the oracle. Reciprocally and necessarily the conduct or proposal that has called forth the oracle is itself tested - that is, *proved* and shown

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<sup>10</sup> The softness of gold allows it to be scored or indented by biting. Naval practice in the 18th century proved rum rations by soaking a small quantity of gunpowder in the liquor; if the gunpowder failed to ignite on being lit then the rum was too dilute and 'under-proof'.



true - by the oracle. In this way the divination is good, and the conduct that goes with the divination is good.

In many, if not most, instances of divination the relationship the diviner establishes with the unknown other or the divine carries a certain ambiguity. A degree of indeterminacy, or some puzzling 'extra', is inherent in even the simplest modes of divination, and it is a commonplace of the literary tradition in antiquity to bring out the obscurity of oracles (Struck, 2004, p.170). Only by a combination of intuitive flashes of insight, proved and tested and thought through, do we arrive at knowing and some certainty in judgment, yet nothing is guaranteed. There is no certainty allotted to the diviner in making the crossing, there is no technique that underwrites any form of divination. And yet for the diviner, he or she must judge, for that is the mode of oracles and that is what god and theoros call on the diviner to do: 'the omen or mantic utterance... was understood to *require* interpretation' (Struck, 2004, p.166).

### **Hermeios and Theoros on the Cognitive Continuum**

How does the analysis of theoros-hermeios compare with that of the cognitive continuum? We should first recall its description as a theoretical construct emerging from the concerns of anthropology and cognitive psychology. This concept arose as a means of understanding divinatory practices by locating them within a spectrum from spirit possession to rational modes of interpretation. The latter involve the interpretation of tokens or material objects presented to or manipulated by the diviner, as in the case of the witch-doctor's 'bones'. This type of divination employs a logic of symbolic analogies, patterns, and associations dependent to a greater or lesser extent on predetermined and culturally defined meanings. The greater the dependency on pre-given formulae and assignations of meaning, then the more circumscribed is the form and scope of the diviner's response; this will to a greater or lesser degree be limited to a range of possible interpretations capable of being communicated to, and validated by, other initiates with technical knowledge of the particular divinatory system. Even in highly circumscribed forms of divination, however, there is always the unpredictable possibility of stepping outside of the frame; there necessarily remains for everyone involved some indeterminate capacity for a creative interpretation or reinterpretation.

Spirit-possession is different in form to the bones, since its actual procedure is incommunicable through ordinary sense-perception and it cannot be validated in terms of technical expertise. Yet, as Barbara Tedlock observes, native diviners themselves recognise a categorial identity between spirit-divination and the bones (Tedlock, 2001). All the forms of divination are worked through 'medicine', and from our point of view they all belong to the distinct category of 'divination'.

Locating these different forms on the cognitive continuum is to suggest that they lie on a spectrum from presentation (unmediated or bodily manifestation) to representation (mediated, conceptualised, interpreted, talked-about). This is also a spectrum from full embodiment in a completely altered state of consciousness to a mode of distinct but near-to-ordinary

consciousness easily understood and attained by a non-specialist. Divination may indeed involve a subtle switch of cognitive mode and open a window of mind, but this does not demand an exhibition of wild behaviour, and in ordinary inductive divination the less this is worried about the better. What acts as the initial barrier to the non-specialist in most forms of the 'bones' is not the demand to brave some unknown altered state, but the need for practical knowledge of the symbolism being used.

The move from anthropology and cognitive psychology to hermeneutics opens a complementary perspective. We see that the function of hermeios, personified in an individual diviner and enacted as a distinct form of divination, can occupy any part of the cognitive continuum; the diviner may be a trance medium, a partial medium with free association of imagery, a reader of fortuitous and ominous signs, an astrologer, or a manipulator of lots or Tarot cards. At the extreme bones end of the spectrum where imaginative association and technical expertise are virtually absent, then the functions of hermeios and theoros come together in one and the same person. In this divinatory moment the unskilled lay enquirer can be his or her own diviner, as in the case of simple binary (yes-no) divinatory forms or the Azande Poison Oracle, and this narrowing of interpretive scope does not necessarily entail any loss of authority or efficacy of the oracle from the point of view of the enquirer (Cornelius, 2014, p.11). The authority granted to the oracle depends on divinatory presentiment and the social and religious context of the act of divination, and is not a function of the particular divinatory form.

### **Speculative and Real-ised Interpretation**

We recognise that the cognitive continuum describes a range of interpretive movement *within* the role of hermeios and therefore embodied in the diviner; this is the chicane, the move between two hands. The interpretive movement is also where the significant distinction between *speculative* and *realised* interpretation comes into view, for it is the task of hermeios to move securely between the two. Observation of astrology in particular and inductive divination in general over many years led me to posit a similar continuum at work between the two poles or modes of *realised* and *speculative* divinatory-allegorical interpretation:

Real-isation is the mysterious function by which the allegory is seen *as* reality and thereby we *make real* the allegory... it is like a bodily sense, indescribable to one who does not experience it.

(Cornelius, 2003, p.293)

Speculative interpretation involves rational inference employing conventional categories. For the thrower of bones the conventional categories are associations given to the various items thrown and the positions in which they might fall. For the haruspex, they are the conventions of the interpretation of the liver, and what each part of the liver is commonly understood to signify; for the astrologer the categories are recorded in the textbook interpretations of horoscopic factors. The categories are the transmitted language of each divinatory tradition.

Clearly distinguishable is *realised interpretation*, which carries a distinct affectivity or psychic charge. This latter may manifest as a hunch or intuition; astrologers and diviners will talk of it as a 'hit' or feeling 'on'. The category is self-evident to most experienced practitioners of astrology and divination. The spectrum or continuum between these poles forms the stuff of practical interpretation, as the astrologer moves between complementary modes of rational induction and direct intuitive apperception. I describe this as a 'complex process of negotiation... trying this and then that take until we hit upon the 'real' symbolism and we 'see' what this or that factor 'means'. Seen in this way, the cognitive continuum not only serves to differentiate types of divination, it also indicates the fluid intermediate dialogical process involved in any one single divination of the categories described by Sikhumbana as divining with the head and divining with the bones (Cornelius, 2014, pp.13-14). This categorisation therefore includes all developed inductive divinatory forms, of which judicial astrology is a leading example.

'Speculation' refers to a rational-discursive mode, where we identify categories and make logical distinctions between things. Theory, in the modern sense of the word, develops as we think about things, so that theory and speculation go together; much thinking in divination is necessarily theoretical and speculative. This is particularly relevant to complex bones forms such as astrology involving multiple possible combinations of symbolic signifiers. The multiplicity of factors coupled with a rich language of symbolic arrays ensures that diverse worldly events, objects and behaviours are differentiated and uniquely signified. By contrast, 'realisation' is much more directly an experience, and it is on that account non-rational, or prior to rational process. It refers to a moment of symbolic perception where an identity of symbol and thing symbolised is perceived, beyond an abstracted recognition of the likeness of symbol and thing. The distinction between symbol and thing becomes for a moment meaningless.

A comparison with the use of the term speculative in Gadamer's hermeneutics is instructive. We might initially be tempted to locate the word along the lines of the Enlightenment description of 'speculative philosophy'. Then as now this is seen as the attempt to derive a theoretical and a priori overview on large and indeterminate questions; abstraction is a common feature of this endeavour. 'Critical philosophy' after the style of Kant is commonly pitted against its speculative cousin by the concern of the former with analytical and limited precision in its definitions, its leaning to scientific empiricism, and its caution with respect to abstraction. However, Gadamer rescues an older and more fundamental idea of speculation. He radicalises it to indicate an open play of thought characteristic of discourse as speaking-together, unlike the rigid concept formation associated with modern written scientific definition. Gadamer alerts us to a crucial difference between theory as non-participatory rationalisation and *theoria* as celebration. He cites the distinction made by Augustine and Aquinas in differentiating speculation that is 'viewing, as from a watch-tower' (*specula*) and speculation as 'seeing in a mirror' (*speculo*), a self-reflection in the genuine recognition of the

not-I (Gadamer, 1989, p.465ff).<sup>11</sup> This radicalised description returns us to the early philosophical meaning of *theoria* as 'participation in the spectacle of truth'. In the sense understood by Gadamer, speculation is the true role of *theoros*. The difference in the hermeneutic approach I develop here is my suggestion that the unique nature of divinatory interpretation necessitates the further differentiation of the distinct role of *hermeios*, rather than subsuming this within the act of speculation.

I will now dwell in more detail on realised interpretation since its theoretical implications are rarely adequately explored, even amongst diviners. It is a defining category in all inductive divination, but it is particularly illuminating in astrology. As a simple example, consider an astrologer identifying a signification for blood and iron. Mars is the pre-given textbook signifier for these two things; in the tradition of astrology it is understood to 'rule' them. Now it could so happen that in an actual situation in which the planet is revealed, the astrologer says 'Mars' in the same breath as saying 'iron' and sees Mars *and not iron* in front of him or her. So the astrologer wishing to consume an iron tablet, without thinking about it for an instant, asks for a 'Mars' tablet *with which it is momentarily identical*. The astrologer catches breath a second after, with a laugh. This mode of momentary realised identity-interpretation carries a marked facticity, so that the symbol is seen in the world with the character of direct sensory perception, brooking no doubt. It is this that justifies the rhetorical device of illustrating the concept by hyphenating the word *real-isation*.

Realisation can be made to sound excitable and even miraculous, but in many cases there is nothing exceptional about it. It becomes more distinct by theorising about it in these pages than it usually is in practice; most of the time diviners are moving indeterminately somewhere between half-speculation and half-realisation. Nevertheless, one does not need to be around symbolism for long to develop a history of memorable realisations, little gems of practice with a potent affectivity. They can be childish in their simplicity or sophisticated and multiple; they may also be spontaneously realised and shared amongst several symbolists without requiring 'theoretical' explanation in order to be experienced.

The little example of Mars and the iron-pill, an actual case observed, is significant only in being made explicit and coming to attention. In this particular case it stopped a conversation in its tracks. In being made explicit, the interpretation is revealed as a distinctive mode of recognition or understanding. But what of it? Identities and differences are realised all the time in our thinking about the world around us, so what is special about symbolic and divinatory instances? I suggest that their special quality is that they transcend the register of the empirical-literal, and they do so in a quite explicit way. That is, they resist location as empirical recognitions of (supposedly literal) connections between things already given in our world; rather, they involve a momentary translation between metaphoric (non-literal) and factual (literal) expressions of the same reality, where the metaphor seizes for itself the

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<sup>11</sup> Aquinas takes up the issue in his discussion of the contemplative life, *Summa Theologica* II:2 Q.180 article 3, reply to objection 2.

facticity and here-nowness of the literal. It is this process that I have earlier suggested is at work in the witch-doctor's healing (Cornelius, 2010).

Lévy-Bruhl's description of *participation mystique* opens out the whole theme for us. One of its expressions is a manifestation of identity, characteristic of primitive omen-reading. Lévy-Bruhl named this in several different ways, as 'momentary identity of substance', consubstantiality, bi-presence and dual-units. He also made the provocative observation that this 'cannot be expressed in our thought, nor even in our languages', and that the identity perceived by the primitive is *not* equivalent to what we would recognise as a 'symbolic relation' (Lévy-Bruhl, 1923). I suggest that this is an important clue; the symbolic relation, as between planet Mars and iron, is grasped, remembered and re-presented theoretically in speculative mode; the momentary identity that planet Mars *is no other than* iron is immediately present in realised mode. Just a few moments later, however, we are left only with a report of our interpretation, a re-presentation when we once again think about what we for a moment had seen. However, we will not forget that we have indeed 'seen'.

There is a realm of experience that is closely related to divination, and where similar phenomena become manifest. This is the realm of poetics, taking this to cover a diversity of narrative expression and theory, including drama and fiction (Struck, 2004, pp.165-70). For our culture the status of symbol and metaphor employed by the poet is continually threatened with erosion, even from within. It becomes representation rather than presentation; it is taken as 'just' an imaginative relation, doubtless illuminating and possibly showing great artistry, yet of secondary and epiphenomenal status to the empirically real. Divination similarly struggles against the grain, and leaves the diviner even more exposed. Against the weight of our culture the omen or divinatory sign retains for the practitioner the status of the fully real - or even of the more-than-real. That places diviners in a seemingly indefensible position, whether they recognise this or not. The disempowerment of poets and diviners is far from being a recent product of the Enlightenment. The dilemma goes back to Greek philosophy and the divide between an Aristotelian definition of rhetoric and poetry and the neo-Platonic privileging of allegory and symbol (Struck, 2004, pp.66-7).<sup>12</sup>

## Layers of the Symbol

The explicit transcending of the empirical-literal in the moment of divinatory interpretation

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<sup>12</sup> Struck discusses the rationalised demystification of poetic language, and the 'de-emphasis of allegorically oriented questions', in Aristotle's *Poetics*. The threat of disempowerment - being seen to be on the same 'merely imaginative' and enigmatic level as the poet - is in my view a motive behind the resistance of astrologers to any suggestion that their craft is allegoric or divinatory, a resistance that has been foundational since the Aristotelian interpretation became the defining mode for Western astrology. It is therefore not surprising that the few exceptions with a strongly allegorical and divinatory attitude are astrologers in the neo-Platonic tradition, notably Marsilio Ficino. Compared with astrology, most other forms of inductive divination are undisguisedly allegorical.

brings us fully into the realm of symbol, since in symbolic seeing we encounter both presentation and mystical participation. The concept of the symbol does however present problems because the word is variously employed by authors ancient and modern, sometimes exactly, sometimes loosely, and sometimes with contradictory meanings. Modern semiotics places metaphor in a definite category of transposed meaning but does not distinguish between 'sign' and 'symbol', allowing both terms to stand for literal and non-metaphoric reference (Todorov, 1982, pp.266-7).<sup>13</sup> By contrast in literary, psychological, religious and divinatory usage a symbol is often treated as distinct from the semiotic sign. In this case (as in my use of the terms) symbol suggests that the author intends a heightened and more participatory form of non-literal signification than is ordinarily conveyed by the word 'metaphor'.

To compound our difficulties symbolism commonly fuses together literal and metaphoric usages, while the divinatory showing and the religious 'sign' may be understood as symbolic in a wholly non-literal sense. We find our way through these elusive definitions by keeping a clear view of practical differences in interpretation. To illustrate this, a cross marked on a map is the *sign* (literal reference) for a church-building. The cross also refers to the narrative of Christianity with a literal sign-reference to the wooden cross on which Jesus of Galilee was crucified. But it is also, and more significantly, a *religious sign* of Christ and the life of the Church into which the Christian enters. The religious sign leads into the mystery of the Eucharist, through which the worshipper is brought to *something* whose contemplation - and therefore interpretation - is not contained by any literal expression, nor by any conceivable accumulation of literal expressions. It is in this full sense that we properly speak of the Cross of Christianity as *symbol*. The literal sign-reference may be semantically and historically determined by its symbol-source, perhaps even yielding the objective and limited appearance of a 'symbolic relation' in Lévy-Bruhl's critical interpretation of this phrase, but the reverse is not the case – the symbol is commonly fused with a literal sense, but it does not depend on it. Unaided, the literal interpretation does not reveal the symbolic, just as one uses an Ordnance Survey map to locate a church building, but not to discover Christianity.

The story of the Greek 'symbol' is suggestive of the apparent dilemma in its own interpretation. On the one side it has an early literal development unrelated to figurative language, as a receipt or a tally for business deals - a piece of material such as cloth or pottery or wood would be split into halves and given to both parties to an agreement. When the transaction was fulfilled, the halves brought together verified the closure of the deal. The core of its meaning appears to have been coming-together as 'agreement' (Struck, 2004, p.78ff). It could also serve as an identifying token or pass, sometimes secret, for an individual. A key

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<sup>13</sup> Todorov quotes Saussure, the father of modern semiotics, who refused to give epistemological status to symbol other than as a definite reference deformed or 'judged badly'. Writing on the mythic language of ancient texts he says: 'One might think that a *symbol* was present, whereas there is simply an error in transmission touching on words that originally had a perfectly direct meaning'. This positivistic interpretation has come down through later linguistic philosophy.

feature of this transactional meaning of symbol is that its meaning is social and rooted in convention - the material of the symbol has no further significance beyond its arbitrary choice by parties to the agreement.

In addition to the worldly meaning of commerce, and pointing unequivocally to its future usage, is an arcane dimension of symbol as a phenomenon of divination; this is common very early in Greek literature. It particularly referred to 'ominous chance meetings' as one distinctive possibility in an array of similar unexpected but meaningful occurrences such as an utterance overheard, a sneeze, or an animal cry (ibid., p.91). There is an archetypal illustration of chance meeting as symbol in the *Hymn to Hermes*. Springing from the womb and already intent on stealing Apollo's sacred cattle, Hermes encounters a tortoise as he steps over the threshold:

He exclaims upon the abrupt meeting with the tortoise: 'A chance meeting [*symbolon*] very auspicious for me! I will not slight it'. He then consecrates the meeting by constructing the lyre.<sup>14</sup>

This is a symbol of symbol. Hermes takes up the tortoise - literally and metaphorically - as *for him*. He will not slight it since he allows himself to be *addressed* by the symbol. He real-ises the meaning of the unbidden omen and consecrates it by turning the symbol - literally and metaphorically - to his use. This returns us back to the mystery of Hermes as a god of divination and of interpretation, in his dual role as hermeios and theoros.

Geoffrey Cornelius (2014)

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<sup>14</sup> Struck (2004, p.91). Struck can justify this translation of *symbolon* in the light of its usage with the specific meaning of 'ominous chance meeting' in Aeschylus, Artilochus, Pindar, Aristophanes and Xenophon.(ibid., pp.91-3) As a comparison Charles Boer (1970, p.20) translates *symbolon* as sign: 'What a great sign! What a help this is for me. I won't ignore it.' Struck (ibid., p.92) brings out a similar condensation of divinatory signifier and signified in an ambiguous passage in Aeschylus' *Agammenon*, where the symbols may be read as 'both the divine omen and the actual events they portend'.

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