

Divination, participation and the sacred

Selected passages from *The Moment of Astrology*¹ ch.7

On the concept of the *katarche* in ancient astrology

The word [*katarche*] carries several meanings depending on context. The most general of these is 'beginning'. It may also refer to 'primacy, sovereignty, and basis'; 'the part of the sacrificial victim first offered'; and 'to begin the rites of sacrifice'. This last usage appears to be the most ancient, dating back to Homer.² The word 'katarche' thus carries a semantic thread of sacred primacy and authority. Does this have any bearing on the astrological *katarche*? What possible relationship is there between astrological beginnings and ritual? It might appear that any connection is little more than an inconsequential play of language. However, the semantic pattern of two Latin words of related meaning suggests that the connection discussed is essential. The Latin words are more accessible to us, since they have passed into English as 'auspice' and 'augury'. The parallel quality of all three terms is illustrated in the following abstract of principal meanings:

καταρχω

Three terms from Greek and Latin, with derivatives and connected usages

<i>katarche</i>	<i>auspicium</i>	<i>augurium</i> << NOUN
<i>katarchesthai</i>	<i>auspicari</i>	<i>augurari</i> << VERB
– a beginning	[– to begin or undertake a business]	[– to begin]
– to make a beginning (m)*		
– part of (sacrificial) victim first offered	– to seek from omens	– divination
– to begin the rites of sacrifice (m)		[– conjecture, surmise]
<i>hence:</i>		
– to consecrate for sacrifice		– to consecrate
– to sacrifice, slay		
– to celebrate, lead dance in honour of ...		
– primacy, authority, basis	– leading or principal person	
– to rule, govern	– government, authority	

* (m) refers to 'middle voice' in Greek.

¹ Geoffrey Cornelius (1st edn. Penguin/Arkana 199 4; 2nd revised edn. Wessex Astrologer 2003)
² *Odyssey*, III.445.

For the Latin terms, 'beginning' is a metaphorical derivative rather than a primary sense (hence the brackets in the table). However, this derived usage was quite common, especially in the later period of the Roman Empire. Whatever distinctions might be made between primary and metaphorical meanings, all three words state an overall semantic pattern, *linking ritual observance and human initiative*.

For the cultures of the ancient near East, few matters of great consequence would be begun without invocation of the gods and the consultation of auspices. The use of divination 'authorised' a course of action at its inception, by giving it the sanction of the gods. To take an auspice, or to determine an omen of good or bad fortune, was at one and the same time to undertake human initiative under the guidance of the gods. As the necessity for sacred dialogue declined with changed perception and the erosion of belief, the words came to apply simply to the inception of human initiative. An identical historical drift across the semantic spectrum can be traced in the English usage of these terms. The verb 'to inaugurate' in a strict sense suggests the *ritual* inception of a major matter. The word is now commonly used apart from its original meaning, simply to indicate an important beginning, usually of public concern. It is worth reflecting that even in our irreligious age the word never entirely loses its ritual connotation; how much more resonant, therefore, will have been that same connotation in the time of the Roman Empire and before.

'Auspice' is similarly revealing. When we say that some project is under the auspices of some organisation, we are asserting that the venture has *originated* under its *authority*. The word has moved its weight over to these secular meanings; the older divinatory sense of the invocation of sacred authority has passed into the shadows.

Characteristics of ancient divination

In all ancient cultures, the sacrifice of an animal to praise a god or to gain his blessing was a widespread practice. But who are these gods to whom sacrifice must be made? They may be described as autonomous, or partially autonomous entities, imbued with volition, and constituting a numinous realm beyond man's immediate knowledge or control. Although this realm lies 'beyond', at the same time it interpenetrates the cosmos, nature, and man himself, and lies at the deepest core of his concerns. This interpenetration is both sustained and expressed in the celebration of ritual, worship - and divination.

Divination is here to be understood as the interpretation of the will of the divine beings, as the Latin root of this word 'divinus' suggests.³ These divine beings include the *daemones* ('demons'), intelligences between mortals and gods. The gods and *daemones* communicate their will in various ways. They might work directly through inspiration. They might appear in dreams and visions, directly or in disguise, or show themselves in the symbolism of signs and omens, the remarkable occurrences of the natural world. A response could be sought at the famous oracles, such as that of Apollo at Delphi, on one of the holy days assigned for the purpose. At Delphi the supplicant made an animal sacrifice, and the god, entering the priestess, would answer in her utterance.

³ Latin *divinus* for Greek *mantike* is a late usage from Cicero: see *Pagan Priests*, ed. Mary Beard and John North (Duckworth, 1990), p.57.

There is from archaic times a useful distinction between unbidden omens and bidden omens (in Latin, *omina oblativa* and *omina impetrativa* respectively). Unbidden omens are the showing of the god in an unexpected dramatic event, such as a prodigious birth. Bidden omens are those where the god's response is actively sought. There is early evidence of the ritual impetration or bidding of omens in Mesopotamia. In the third millennium BC there existed the practice of examining the entrails of the sacrificial animal to determine the will of the god invoked. Detailed examples of the art of reading the signs on the liver have been found from around 1900 BC. From this time liver reading becomes increasingly codified, and an extensive aphoristic literature develops, together with the careful recording of actual cases.⁴

Other trusted forms of divination included the watching of omens, bidden or unbidden, from the behaviour of birds. This, together with liver-divination, was transmitted to the Etruscans of central Italy. From this people, the art of livers and the wisdom of the birds passed into the observances of the Roman College of Augurs.

The Nature of Augury

The attitude demonstrated in Roman state augury exemplifies a fundamental characteristic of ancient divination:

The augural art never provided an answer to the question 'what is going to happen?' but only to that much more religious one, 'are the deities willing that we should do this or that?'⁵

Divination is in our times most frequently described - by practitioners and sceptics alike - as a means of *foretelling the future*. Yet on all the evidence across many cultures, this gives an entirely misleading definition of ancient divination, where a possible prediction is in the majority of cases incidental to the main task, which is to *consult with the gods*. To take one illuminating example, studies on the record of historical responses at the Delphic Oracle after 750 BC have shown that around three quarters of all consultations concerned matters of *res divinae*, broadly 'religious law'. The Greek states and their citizens referred to Apollo for the 'foundation of cults, sacrifices and other worship of gods, daemones, and heroes'.⁶ Other responses concerned matters of public and private concern, mainly asking what *should* be done. Very few are couched in the form of a request for straight 'secular' prediction of the future, and there is no indication that this was seen as a significant function of the Oracle.

Divination was understood to reside in the sacred. Although in developed systems the omens might bear at many points on details of the mundane world, the effect of divination was to bring the matters enquired about, the vital concerns of man, within the guidance of

⁴ For Mesopotamian divination, see the essay by O.R. Gurney in *Divination and Oracles*, ed. M. Loewe and C. Blacker (Allen and Unwin, 1981): early liver-reading, p.148; solar sign, p.161.

⁵ W. Warde Fowler, *The Religious Experience of the Roman People* (Macmillan & Co., 1911), Lecture XIII, p.298.

⁶ Plato, *Republic*, quoted in J.Fontenrose, *The Delphic Oracle* (California University Press, 1978), p.43.

the sacred. Seen in this light, a prediction through divination was none other than the revelation of what the gods willed to come to pass.

It should not be inferred that ancient divination can be described only as religious observance. Self-interest seeks gain by manipulating predictions, and the will of the gods is capable of flexible interpretation along lines of prevailing political exigencies. However, the essentially sacral process described above will have been perpetually affirmed by the whole interwoven fabric of belief and priestly authority within which divination was socially acceptable. It required a general decline in belief in the gods to divorce the outward forms of divination, including astrology, from the realm of the sacred.

It takes real imagination to recover the import of the 'dialogue with the gods'. This attitude is opaque to modern thought. In conveying something of its quality, the following example from the Greek historian Herodotus will serve better than many paragraphs of abstract discussion. There is a possibility that Herodotus's report reflects a legendary inflation of the historical reality, but even if this is the case, it still serves to illustrate a widely held conception of the sacred dialogue in augury. The circumstance was the victory of the awkward alliance of Greek states, including the Tegeans and the Spartans, over the Persians and their Greek allies, in 479 BC. This victory decisively guaranteed the future independence of the Greeks. The Persians were led by Mardonius, the independent Greek states were under Pausanias. According to Herodotus, the outcome of this conflict had already been prophesied at Delphi, but the ambiguity of the oracle allowed Mardonius to ignore or misunderstand it. Both sides were employing similar rites of sacrificial divination. Neither had received good omens for an all-out attack, but Mardonius with the stronger forces decided to ignore his diviner's advice. Now comes the critical moment, the decisive juncture of fate, for Pausanias and the independent Greeks, the Tegeans and Spartans:

Once more as they were about to engage with Mardonius and his men, they performed the ritual of sacrifice. The omens were not favourable, and meanwhile many of their men were killed, and many more wounded, for the Persians had made a barricade of their wicker shields and from the protection of it were shooting arrows in such numbers that the Spartan troops were in serious distress; this, added to the unfavourable results of the sacrifice, at last caused Pausanias to turn his eyes to the temple of Hera and call upon the goddess for her aid, praying her not to allow the Greeks to be robbed of their hope of victory. Then, *while the words were still upon his lips, the Tegeans sprang forward to lead the attack, and a moment later the sacrificial victims promised success.* At this, the Spartans, too, at last moved forward against the enemy...[my italics]⁷

Who gives the Greeks their victory? Notice the change of heart attending the appeal to Hera, followed by the immediate reversal of omens. Despite the inexorable, if paradoxical, fulfilment of major prophecies, nevertheless in the particular circumstances in which men find themselves there can be no guaranteed or absolute destiny beyond human influence, or independent of man's participation. It may change from moment to moment, from omen to omen. Men find courage and invoke the gods: destiny is negotiable. The right attitude in ritual and in divination may itself be part of that initiative.

I have so far been stressing Greek and Roman attitudes to divination, but it is important

⁷ Herodotus, *Histories*, IX, 61-2. I have used the lively translation of Aubrey de Selincourt (Penguin Classic), p.576.

to recognise the identical participatory and reciprocal relationship between gods and humans in ancient Mesopotamia, at the dawn of our astrology. The benevolent gods of Mesopotamia listened to human beings and responded accordingly:

Deductive divination involved reading *in* events or objects... divine decisions that touched upon the future of the interested party... this future was not a 'real' future, an absolute future which would take place inevitably. It was a future that the gods had decreed *hic et nunc* [here and now], and, just as the ruler was free to revoke his decisions, to give in to requests, and... to put off punishment of someone he had originally condemned, the gods also remained merciful.⁸

The fateful development in astrology of the concept of an unerring heavenly decree has a different original impetus altogether. The whole spirit of augury, the spirit of the *katarche*, denies such a fate.

The Moment of Augury

In what time and place is divination? On what grounds does the diviner refer omen to event? He or she does so within the *templum*, the sacred space created in ritual. The sacred space is that wherein a god may be present. Within the ritual is brought forward man's concern, the worldly matters past, present, or future, in which will be discerned the working of the sacred. The god's response occurs within the sacred space of ritual, spontaneously blessing or touching that which has been ritually presented. The 'time' does not belong to the literal event, but to the sacred moment when an omen is bidden with respect to the event. Where the omen comes unbidden, the gods speak in a space of their choosing, blessing or touching events present with the omen. Such omens are commonly brought together with events by time, in that they occur contemporaneously.

Contemporaneity is an expression of actual perception and not of some abstracted and theoretical 'objective' nexus of space and time. Significance is not first and foremost an event of physical nature, but is a human quality, whether individual or social, and depends upon the human knower. Whatever is significantly in mind, whatever is clouding the horizon, the dominant uncertainty of present attention: it is this that will spontaneously associate with the appearance of an omen. So when omens have not been bidden yet one makes its showing, then the current main concern is the likely locus of reference. If an eclipse is observed while the king is on an expedition, then *prima facie* the king's expedition is the dominant current uncertainty to which the omen refers. If there is no obvious association for some remarkable event recognised as an omen, then that omen itself becomes the centre of current uncertainty. There will then be an expectation for the immediate future, something unknown but just around the corner, to be speculated upon by the diviners. In this case the future and its sign becomes a matter of present concern, demanding human understanding and ritual response.

In developed traditions of divination, there is fine discrimination of detail of the omen, by analogy, similitude or historical precedent. Thus a particular element in current concern may become the locus of association. Alternatively the diviner can seek a specific locus, and in the process improve, confirm, or disconfirm, his original understanding, by the bidding of a further omen in ritual divination. This process can be discerned throughout divinatory

⁸ Jean Bottéro, *Mesopotamia* (University of Chicago Press, 1992), p.33.

practice. An unspecified solar sign seen at the start of the military expedition of King Mursilis II, around 1330 BC, led to fears for both king and expedition. Further consultation by divination relocated the omen as concerning his queen.⁹

Participatory significance in the Omen

Since an omen is only an omen if it is recognised as such, it is clear that its significance is dependent on the participation of those for whom it is present. Its validity does not depend in any way on some general or theoretical law governing the production of omens. Its power comes precisely from its unique appearance 'for us, here, now'. For this reason, the significance derived from omens and embodied in ancient divination may be called *participatory significance*. It is significant *for* someone who perceives it as significant. This notion will help us recognise that great divide between archaic and modern modes of thought. It stands in contrast to the modern non-divinatory attitude which assigns an apparently non-participatory *theoretical significance* to events:

We understand phenomena, not by what makes them peculiar, but by what makes them manifestations of general laws. But a general law cannot do justice to the individual character of each event. And the individual character of the event is precisely what early man experiences most strongly.¹⁰

The passage into Greek thought eventually overlaid participatory significance with theoretical understanding. It thus rendered problematic the original inspiration of astrology as a form of omen-reading. However, vestiges of the older way of understanding remained for long at work in the spiritual and intellectual ferment. Delphi retained traces of its authority after the time of Christ. The priestly practice of liver divination survived the ruin of Babylon, and is recorded at least down to the fifth century AD.¹¹

Spontaneous significance

As we move from an archaic realm of augury into the early development of our classical astrology, we also move from religious rites to secular human experience. But however interpreted, whether as omens of the gods or simply as meaningful coincidences, the katarthic moment keeps its distinctive quality of spontaneity, arising from the immediate concerns and circumstances of the diviner or the inquirer. Its significance is participatory - that is, it is dependent on the participation of the astrologer, or of the one who will press an inquiry upon the astrologer. The moment is thus associated with what moves someone, what makes an impact in their experience.

⁹ O.R.Gurney, in *Divination and Oracles*, op.cit., p.161.

¹⁰ H.A. Frankfort *et al.*, *Before Philosophy* (Pelican Books, 1949), pp. 24-5. Especially in the first chapter on 'Myth and Reality', this work gives a remarkable and lucid insight into the logic of archaic mythopoeic thought, from which astrology ultimately derives.

¹¹ For fifth-century haruspicy, see W. Warde Fowler, op. cit., Lecture XIII, p.309, note 25.