

Why does divination appear to be a taboo topic for educated modern thought?

“I know of no people, whether they be learned and refined or barbaric and ignorant, that does not consider that future things are indicated by signs, and that it is possible for certain people to recognise those signs and predict what will happen” (Cicero, 1.2, as quoted in Johnston, 2008, p.3).

I open this essay with words taken from Cicero’s refutation of the practice of divination (*On Divination*), because I believe that this statement, taken from a treatise written over two thousand years ago, not only highlights the mentalities of men and women from that time, but is also arguably illustrative of the modes of thought and experiences of many individuals in our contemporary Western society. Whilst it is more likely that in our post-Enlightenment age the practice of divination is carried out in the private realm, nevertheless as Sarah Johnston argues, divination is pervasive in contemporary culture, regardless of whether “[we] believe in it personally” (2008, p.3). Moreover, she claims that the “underlying persistence of desire for divinatory knowledge reflects a basic human need” (Johnston, 2008, p.4). In view of this of bold statement, I would like to consider the question of why the study of this area, which thus appears to be so integral to our human experience, is still perceived as a taboo topic for educated modern thought.

I will begin by exploring the meaning of the term divination, a highly contended question in itself. In his article, *Divination, Synchronicity and Fate*, Stephen Karcher responds to the question of what is divination by blending together “two clusters of meanings” (1998, p.215). He writes: “Divination reveals what is hidden through irrational means. It does this by connecting us with something divine – god, spirit, angel, daimon, or archetype” (Karcher, 1998, p.215). Although the author acknowledges that this is just a starting point for a wider discussion of the meaning of divination (and he is in good company here, for most scholars seem to recognise the difficulty of attempting any “final” definition of this word), implicit in this definition, and what drew me to including it in the first place, is the emphasis placed on connection. Indeed, Geoffrey Cornelius states that the defining

characteristic of divination is the “communication with ... something *other* to the here and now ordinary level of perception” (2019).

A further important distinction can be made between natural divination (such as dreams and visions which represent a direct communication with the gods) and inductive divination, which involves the interpretation of signs or symbols according to a particular set of principles (such as astrology, the reading of omens, Tarot and the *I Ching*). Regardless of the fact that these methods represent highly developed systems of knowledge (which are arguably embedded in our culture), the art of divination, nonetheless remains highly ambiguous. For in moving into an unknown and largely inexplicable space in its participation with something *other* to our “normal” mode of reality, divination necessarily becomes chaotic and nebulous. Indeed, it would seem that by its very nature, divination rests heavily on personal, semi-religious, mysterious experiences that resist neat interpretation and categorisation. This is clearly at odds with the scientific, rational ideology which dominates in the West today and which is mirrored in our academic establishments. Thus, whilst divination may be prevalent in popular culture (some form of divination has been practiced in every culture at every point in our history), as Cornelius writes, “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” (2014, p.1).

Indeed, in the work of Wouter Hanegraaff, a respected academic within the domain of esoteric studies, we can see this attitude quite clearly. He opens his paper on the theme of magic¹ by stating, “magic is a wretched subject ... which always keeps coming back no matter how often one tries to kill it” (2016, p.393).

¹ It is perhaps important here to make a clear distinction between magic and divination. Valerie Flint defines magic as “the exercise of a preternatural control over nature by human beings with the assistance of forces more powerful than they” (1994, p.3). Whilst these two categories should certainly be considered as having very specific functions, divination clearly has a place within our cultural image of magic and as such many parallels can be drawn between the scholarly study of the two subjects.

Thus, even within the field of Western esotericism magic (and one can assume from his reproachful tone, divination) is not perceived as an integral subject of study, rather it is in the words of Hanegraaff, merely a “favourite projection screen for Western hopes and fears” (2016, p.398). In reducing magic to a curious pastime or frivolous pursuit (in an essay quite devoid of personal anecdote I might add), Hanegraaff is reflecting the prevailing attitude of the academy. Equally, for literary professionals the practice of divination, and astrology especially, is perceived at best as absurd and at worst as a dangerous descent into “unenlightened” and irrational thinking, provoking a remarkable level of hostility and contempt. In particular, the liberal newspaper *The Guardian* is quick to criticise the practice of astrology and side with scientists, a case in point being their petition in support of remarks made by Brian Cox and Dara O'Briain that “astrology is a load of rubbish” (Robbins, 2011).

Things were not always this way. Indeed, Johnston comments that in contrast to other religious behaviours, divination “fascinated” ancient Greek and Roman intellectuals (2008, p.4). The most striking question then becomes, why has the attitude towards the practice of divination changed so radically? It seems likely that at the root of the remarkably dismissive contemporary attitude lies those Enlightenment values which in their very essence reject any “mysterious and incalculable forces” (Max Weber, as quoted in Hanegraaff, 2016, p.398). In fact, for Max Weber writing at the beginning of the twentieth century, the rejection of magic was one of the hallmarks of Enlightenment thinking, leading to his conception of what he famously called the “disenchanted world” (1917). Indeed, seventeenth-century and eighteenth-century philosophers and intellectuals had a loathing of superstition and the perceived stupidity of ordinary people and their commonly held beliefs, described by Kant in his Preface to *Dreams of Spirit-Seer* as “old wives’ tales and monastery miracles” (as quoted in Cornelius, 2017, p.14). This intellectual elitism, which does not appear to consider the widespread distribution of magic and divinatory practices amongst the general populace can be still seen in evidence both amongst literary professionals (as in the aforementioned article in *The Guardian*) and in contemporary academia. As the social anthropologist, Stanley Tambiah remarks, however, it is “the thought

categories of the ruling elites and intelligentsia that have constituted the dominant paradigm and legitimating ideology of a society” (1990, p.31). Thus, whilst divinatory practices such as astrology or Tarot would have certainly continued in the private realm post-Enlightenment, they were nevertheless henceforth almost universally absent from the “elite conceptions of the intelligentsia” (Tambiah, 1990, p.31) and as such came to be seen as degenerate and deviant practices, far removed from the “truth” of rational thought.

In his masterly exploration of the development of Western culture, *The Master and his Emissary*, Iain McGilchrist uses the metaphor of the supremacy of the left hemisphere over the right hemisphere of the brain to illustrate the increasing dominance of impersonal, materialistic values over a more subjective and intuitive sense of the world. As such, he describes Enlightenment thought as the “insistence on just one, rectilinear, way of conceiving the world” leading to “unchecked, acquisitive rationalism in science, capitalism and bureaucracy” (McGilchrist, 2009, p.241). In view of this, it is arguable that the right hemisphere function relates to what the anthropologist, Lucien Lévy-Bruhl, characterised as mythopoetic thought, the mode of thought which emphasises the personal over the objective and a fluidity between the individual and the phenomenal world (Frankfort et al., 1949, p.14). As Edith Turner comments, this mythological worldview “included all senses and meaning in one world of ancient tradition in which everything had a ‘soul’ and human life was bathed in it while life lasted” (1992, p10-11).

It arguable then, that it is this gradual loss of pre-modern mythopoeic thought in favour of scientific values that has eroded our sense of connection to both the world around us and to the divine. Indeed, it would seem that at the time of the Enlightenment, the idea of a total image of the cosmos, the interrelatedness of all beings, was lost. McGilchrist writes:

Pervasive rationalistic, technical and bureaucratic ways of thinking have emptied life of meaning by destroying ... meanings reflecting beliefs about life, death, and the world in which we live. The resultant ... loss of all bearing, the demise of any shared structure of values, leads to a sort of existential angst. (2009, p.390).

I have quoted this in full in order to highlight the context in which science has triumphed over religion, divination and myth making to become our primary mode of understanding the world. In my opinion, this change in thinking and its consequences is most poignantly expressed in the poem *Dover Beach* by Matthew Arnold, in which at the dawn of the materialist age, he recognises both the loss of an all containing worldview and the resultant bleakness and alienation of modern man,

The Sea of Faith
Was once, too, at the full, and round earth's shore
Lay like the folds of a bright girdle furled.
But now I only hear
Its melancholy, long, withdrawing roar,
Retreating, to the breath
Of the night-wind, down the vast edges drear
And naked shingles of the world. (1867)

Thus, if we are to take as our premise that we live in Weber's disenchanted, rationalist world, we are faced with a reality in which, "everything in nature can be explained and calculated" (Asprem, 2017, p.28). With this in mind, I think it must be clear that the arts of divination are problematic for modern scholars in the most part due to a reliance on a more poetic or metaphorical understanding of the world. Indeed, as Egil Asprem argues, this means that we no longer consult the stars or perform rituals to make sense of our reality, rather as individuals living in the modern age "[we] reputedly do not believe in magic anymore, so we turn instead to science, technology, and calculation" (2017, p.28).

Moreover, another key strand of Enlightenment thinking is the idea of progress and humanity's combined movement away from an "uncivilised" past to a reality in which phenomena can be explained and categorised. As Tambiah comments, one of the concepts which characterises the modern scientific viewpoint is "the incessant acting upon the world so that it will approximate some idea of imagined unfolding of reason and increasing perfection" (1990, p.18). It should come as no surprise then, that for most educated thinkers, divination, with its emphasis on magical thinking, is perceived as a remnant of an antiquated, narrow-minded belief system that has no place in modern Western culture. As such, most of the comprehensive academic studies of divination have approached the topic from an

anthropological or cultural perspective, in which the practices of divination are understood as part of the culture and society of a particular people. In this way, a necessary distance is created between the subject of study and the personal experience of the scholar and thus the scientific viewpoint is maintained. In contrast to this, however, I would like to argue the importance of taking a phenomenological or experiential approach to this topic, acknowledging as I do that, “it is only by participating in a phenomenon that one can engage with it” (Curry, 2007, p.xi).

Thus, it seems reasonable to expect that I come to this essay with my own experience of these phenomena. Indeed, although I am not formal practitioner of divination, I have since I was a child had an interest in things that are not properly explicable. I am drawn to what is half-seen and half-known, the mysterious workings behind our domesticated cultural forms, and the sense that the nature of reality is not always what our senses give us. The particular incident that I wish to relate was a life-threatening fire which took place in my bedroom a few months after starting the MA in November of last year. This event coincided with my deep immersion in the course subject matter (and in particular with the writing of C.G. Jung and the process of individuation) and it seemed to me then, as it does now, as if the “external reality [had become] the reflection of [my] internal state”(Voss, 2007, p.6). The fire was followed a few weeks later by a further synchronicity in which (owing to burns on my foot) I caught a taxi from the station to my brother’s house. The taxi driver was a deeply religious man of Indian heritage who insisted on telling me about fire’s properties as a powerful purifying agent and also about the need to continue on the spiritual path regardless of any obstacles. In his assessment of the fire (I had lit a candle and then walked away from it), I had somehow called in the gods, only to turn away from them. Months later I came across the following in my own personal reading which seemed to corroborate what the taxi driver had told me: “Fire is the best purifier. There’s nothing greater than fire to burn out all the dust, all the junk” (Swami Satchidananda, 1987).

As a person who is keen to find meaning in the world, I naturally took these powerful incidents as omens, rather than random occurrences. In doing so, I

understand that I am moving against our culture of materialism to a more enchanted worldview, a step that would most likely be considered ridiculous or far-fetched amongst educated thinkers. Ultimately, however, there can be no right or wrong answer to this; I only know that by making this event significant it has become a meaningful part of my conscious imagination. Indeed, as Cornelius states,

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’. (as quoted in Willis & Curry, 2004, p.59)

Clearly then, it is for the individual to take certain events seriously and to create meaning from them if they so choose. For myself, to read the fire as an omen became my act of divination. My main reason for this decision was my sense, both during the fire and later through my chance encounter with the taxi driver, that I had been in contact with some sacred other. As for what was meant or conveyed by this omen, I was never in any doubt that, as a powerful symbol of transformation, the fire was calling me to change. Indeed, I have come to see the fire as a sign of my own inner learning as I undertake the transformative work of this MA, but also as an initiation, an invitation from some higher self or divine other to begin a new cycle. Indeed, the fire precipitated both a descent into melancholy, but also forced me out of that particular room and house (in which I felt a watery, underworld sadness) and into a new life.

There are some critics who would suggest that in seeking a sign or indeed a meaning from such an event and moreover to act on that supposed meaning is to some extent to refrain from taking responsibility for the course of one’s own life. The subject of free will is a particularly thorny one for modern educated thinkers approaching the topic of divination. The foundation of this criticism would seem to be the Enlightenment preoccupation with “autonomous reason” (Kripal, 2007, p.5), which for Kant was “the ability to think for oneself outside of all external authorities, including and especially religious authorities” (Kripal, 2007, p.5). I think the latter is especially important in our discussion of why divination is still

a taboo topic for educated modern thought seeing as the art of divination relies necessarily on the surrender of the individual to a higher authority or an appeal to the gods in some way. Contrary to its critics, however, this is not a fixed fate, but rather in the words of Patrick Curry, “[it is] ongoing, constantly being recreated and negotiated, and is never complete for any individual until the moment of death” (2007, p.36). Moreover, as many scholars have observed, divination is less about predicting the future and more about (and I think of my own omen) recognising the “truth about a situation” (Morrison, 1981, p.110). Nevertheless, in a contemporary society which would appear to prize individualism and self-determination above all else, it naturally follows that a practice which can be “traditionally understood as negotiation between human and divine realms” is viewed with suspicion by the academy. (Cornelius, 2007, p.ix).

Thus, a further difficulty in addressing such experiences within the academic sphere rests both on the supposed irrationality of divining meaning from an omen, but also, because to do so seems to acknowledge a connection with a spiritual other. Indeed, as Curry writes “divination is understood as a fundamentally ‘religious’ experience” (2007, p.vii), a comment which in my own limited experience I perceive to be true. Indeed, during the fire, at the moment when I was surrounded by flames, I had the strongest impression of being protected and cared for by another presence. Although a terrifying experience, I was left in the days following the event with a deep feeling of peace, as though, as my taxi driver suggested, I had been purified from the inside.

The question of who or what this presence was is problematic, both for myself as the diviner, but also from an objective standpoint. For although we may believe it to be otherwise, religion and in particular the Christian faith, is still the foundation of our Western culture. Moreover, as Robert Merton has argued, the themes of the Protestant Reformation can be seen be in our modern drives towards empiricism and certainty. He comments that “the combination of rationalism and empiricism which is so pronounced in the Puritan ethic forms the essence of the spirit of modern science” (1949, p.333). Thus, although they may not conceive of

themselves as Christians as such, many educated thinkers would reject the study of divination, firstly because to practice divination one must have a belief in some sacred other and seek it out; and secondly because in its very nature it suggests other powers, a middle realm filled with any number of spirits, that is quite anathema to our Christian, monotheistic heritage. At the very root of our culture is the Platonic idea of the One which becomes the basis of Christian monotheism and a God who is transcendent, omnipotent and far removed from the earthly realm. As Asprey has stressed, the notion of an absolute God led to the destruction of all the “others including their images and means of acting in the world” (2017, p.29). With this in mind, it is not difficult to understand why divination, as essentially pluralist, is still such a taboo in our society. Indeed, Patrick Curry calls it “illicit” kind of knowledge, meaning that in the eyes of modern educated thinkers it is fundamentally a “not religion” (2004, p.52).

Furthermore, integral to this understanding of divination as a religious experience, is the concept of *participation mystique*, derived from the work of Lévy-Bruhl. The state of mystical participation (which can be usefully applied to the practice of divination), in which we connect and, in some sense, “commune” with a sacred other, “not only in the ideological, but also in the physical and mystical sense of the word” (Lévy-Bruhl, 1975, p.362). This experience is beautifully described by Roy Willis in his account of his consultation with the astrologer Jane Ridder-Patrick:

She was calmly rational at first, and it seemed to make sense. Then, about two-thirds of the way though ... the atmosphere changed ... She became a priestess, possessed of Spirit, able to make all clear. Evidently, she had moved into an altered state of consciousness in which she was ‘seeing things’ (2004, p11).

This radically different perception of reality, in which people are capable of occupying two distinct spaces at the same can be described as a dual epistemology, and is used by Lévy-Bruhl to describe the two orders of thought which are always present in the world of so-called “primitive”, or mythopoeic man. Similarly, a dual epistemology can be used to explain the two modes of thought (higher and lower) which a diviner must occupy as part of their divining process (Cornelius, 2019). Understood in this way, the diviner is always looking to the higher order, which is

shown through the symbolism of a lower order (Cornelius, 2019). Naturally, this concept of a dual epistemology is quite at odds to Enlightenment thinking; firstly, in its central premise of one mode of knowing (through scientific experiment) and secondly, in its insistence on binaries. Indeed, characteristic of dualistic thinking is the idea that something is either true or false; it cannot be both. In contrast, “mythical thought is not conceptual, it only juxtaposes, it does not classify” (Lévy-Bruhl, 1975, p.57).

This mind/matter, subject/object, heaven/earth split that has dominated Western thought since Plato and Aristotle has, as Curry argues “had momentous consequences for astrology and all such discourses” (2004, p.60). Indeed, as the separation between the human and the divine has become more pronounced, the symbolic imagination has slowly withdrawn from our world, including that intermediary space of soul. James Hillman writes that faced with the division between spirit and body, “we have lost the third middle position which earlier in our tradition, and in others too, was the place of soul: a world of imagination, passion, fantasy, reflection” (1990, 37%). As a primarily symbolic act, that is as a movement of the spirit from the literal to a higher level of consciousness through the power of the symbol, the practice of divination thus becomes “homeless” (Curry, 2004, p.60). Furthermore, the inherent difficulty of describing or “explaining” these necessarily chaotic, symbolic experiences thus becomes a further hindrance to them being taken up by the intellectual elite, particularly as the language of symbolic imagination has gradually receded from view. It is for this reason that thinkers such as C.G. Jung and James Hillman are such a rare occurrence. For in bringing their own experience of mystical events into the academic, professional realm, they thus become bridges between two very different worlds, those of the human and the spiritual.

It would seem that ultimately these two opposing realms are what lies at the heart of why the practice of divination is still perceived as a taboo topic for modern educated thought. For in occupying a thoroughly secular, rational space the intellectual elite are not inclined to cross over into the what is perceived to be the murky territory of divination, a practice which ultimately cannot be “proven”

through empirical testing, but rather rests on another type of knowing. This opposition between the real and the unreal is at the heart of the divide between diviners and scientists and which few (with perhaps the exception of C.G. Jung) attempt to bridge. In view of this, it would seem that in order to move forward with the study of such phenomena it is necessary to acknowledge that human existence is an extraordinary mix of both the ordinary and the mystical, the human and the divine. According to Jeffrey Kripal, this central paradox of our human existence, which he frames as “the Human as Two” (2017, 2%), can be transcended by the gnostic researcher who in fusing together both academic enterprise and transformative experience produces “a distinctly third realm of knowing” (2007, p.13). It is perhaps this rather radical conception of a “new classroom of gnostic epiphany” that can lead modern educated thinkers out of the impasse and into a new era of scholarship on these phenomena (Kripal, 2007, p.23).

Finally, I would like to conclude this essay by briefly returning to my own experience of a powerful omen. I would observe that as a means of understanding my situation and as a sign (both literal and metaphorical) of my need to leave that room, I could have asked for no clearer message. It has also left me with a palpable sense of connectedness and of meaning. And if not ultimately transformative, the incident at least was not “trivial” (Curry, 2007, p.44). As just one story out of all the millions upon millions of stories (for I would argue that everyone receives such an omen at some point in their lives), I would like to stress the need for a renewed interest in these events from scholars. Indeed, it would seem that ultimately as the practices of divination show no sign of going away, despite of and perhaps because of our history of secularisation, it is for the academy to once again embrace these arts as a legitimate means of understanding and reflecting upon the world. One can only speculate on what might happen if we were to open up a space in which we could allow all that is magical, unknowable and extraordinary, to once again take centre stage in our Western culture.

4,362 Words.

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